

Rabbi Yaakov Glasser

Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo: Embracing the Greatness and Aspiration of Jewish Holidays

The congregation is approaching the sacred silence that will characterize the recitation of the *Amidah*, the central prayer of our liturgy. As it moves from *Shema*, the declaration of faith, towards the private moments of dialogue with God, each participant in the service rises to collect their thoughts and focus inward, preparing to share a moment of deep connection with the Divine. The atmosphere of spiritual reflection gains momentum as each individual supplicant reaches the crescendo of the pre-*Amidah* prayers. Suddenly, the symmetry and focus of the moment is interrupted – Bang! Bang-Bang! Bang! From all over the synagogue – self-appointed monitors hit their hands on the tables, reminding the congregation that today is no ordinary day, but it is a day of accentuated sanctity, one that enjoys the halakhic requirement of reciting *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo*. Lest anyone forget to add this required addendum, tradition has embraced an interruptive reminder to include this text. Indeed, if one omits the addition, the *Shemoneh Esrei* must be repeated, and so its inclusion is understood to be core to the substance and tone that comprise our *tefillah*.

What is the meaning of this prayer? Why is its inclusion so central to the *tefillah* experience? What is the thematic and liturgical connection between the substance of the prayer, and the days upon which it is recited?

The Talmud in *Shabbat* 24a describes when we are obligated to recite *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo*:

On days that a *musaf* offering is brought such as Rosh Chodesh and Chol Ha-Mo'ed, one recites *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo* in the *Arvit*, *Shacharit*, and *Minchah* prayers.

On days which we recite the *tefillah* of *Musaf*, we are required to include *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo*. The *gemara* tells us that one of the origins of our obligation to pray daily is the sacrifices brought in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The *korban musaf* was an additional sacrifice brought on days of elevated sanctity that embody a special *kedushat ha-yom*. There is an underlying holiness of each holiday that is manifest in particular commandments unique to that day and an additional configuration of sacrificial service. The *korban musaf* punctuates the unique identity of the *chag* within the context of the Temple service. The *gemara* explains that on days which enjoy an obligation for a *korban musaf*, we are required to add the *tefillah* of *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo* to the liturgy throughout the standard prayers of that day.

Rashi, in his commentary to the *gemara* in *Shabbat*, provides us with an insight for the reasoning behind this enactment:

To beseech mercy on Israel and on Jerusalem, to restore the service to its proper place, and to offer sacrifices nowadays.

Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo is the liturgical formulation that embeds the identity of the *chag* within our *tefillah*. Interestingly, as Rashi explains, it does so by encapsulating that identity within a broader aspiration for a redeemed world that would more fully express all the elements of the *chag* experience. The connection between these two ideals projects the duality of contemporary holiday observance. We celebrate the ideals promoted by each individual *chag*, while simultaneously affirming the limitations of exile in fully experiencing the essence of the holiday experience. The *chag* should saturate our religious life with meaning and purpose and yet also serve to accentuate our unfulfilled destiny of national redemption.

The text of *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo* opens with a rhythmic ascent of aspirational desire to reach the world of the *Mikdash*. The culmination of the text, as emphasized in the cantillation of the prayer, is the identification of the *chag* itself. Then the prayer transitions to an appeal for salvation rooted in affirming our commitment as a people devoted to God. There is a drastic difference in tone between the two halves of the prayer. The first half places the Jewish people as the subject of an ambitious reach of prophetic reality. It is all in the future tense, “let our prayers arise, let our prayers come...” The second component of the text positions the Jewish people as a helpless nation – begging for the benevolence and redemption of God.

The Vilna Ga'on comments that the eight terms of ascent formulated at the outset of the prayer correspond to our goal of penetrating the seven levels of heaven, ultimately reaching God at the eighth. The first half of the *tefillah* is intended to elevate us from the complacency that characterizes our normative spiritual life. It provides us with a vision for greatness and recognition of the journey necessary for its achievement. The language rejects an absolutist aspiration to catapult from the world of the mundane to the sanctity of *kodesh*. Rather, it portrays an incremental path of reaching higher and higher, piercing each layer of resistance and ultimately reaching the Divine. Subsequent to reaching the climax of internalizing and declaring the unique identity of the holiday, we appeal to God to provide the Divine intervention necessary in transforming this dream into a reality.

The observance and celebration of Jewish holidays has cultural, religious, and spiritual components. There is a script to each *chag* which provides the halakhic guidance for its observance. However, the *chagim* are intended to be more than an experience. Each holiday emphasizes a central dimension of our values and ideals. Therefore, there is a process of internalization that must take place. It is an existential journey of development, where one emerges from the experience – spiritually invigorated and transformed. The *tefillah* of *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo* provides more than a "mention." It transforms – not replaces – the standard prayers into a context for focus and devotion to the ideas and lessons of our sacred holidays.

Indeed, the interruptive "klapping" upon the *bimah* to remind all of the recitation of *Ya'aleh Ve-Yavo* is indicative of the *tefillah's* very purpose – to interrupt the momentum of daily familiar prayers with a dramatic aspiration for greatness through the prism of recreating the Temple era moments of spirituality that defined our *chagim*.