

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Eska *bas* Hillel *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Learning About Prayer... from the Worm

PARSHAS VA’ESCHANAN 5776

The efficacy of prayer is displayed right from the start in this week’s *parshah*. Moshe made a final plea to be allowed to enter the Land: אָעֲבֹרָהּנָא וְאֶרְאֶה... אָמַר... אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן... – “And I entreated Hashem at that time, saying: ... ‘Please, may I cross into and see the good land that is on the other side of the Yarden (River)...’” (*Devarim* 3:23,25). However, Hashem responded that the decree was final: וַיֹּאמֶר דְּאֵלֵי רַב־לֶךְךָ... – “And Hashem said to me: ‘It is enough for you! Do not continue to speak to Me further of this matter...’” (*ibid.* v. 26).

Yes, Moshe’s initial request was denied. But the P’nei Yehoshua (*Berachos* 32b) makes the point that it was necessary for Moshe to be instructed to refrain from further prayer – for had he continued, it is quite likely that the decree would indeed have been annulled. Thus, from the fact that Moshe was told “Do not continue...” we get a sense of the potential potency of *tefillah*. As stated explicitly and unequivocally later in the *parshah*: כִּי מִיגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשֶׁר־לוֹ... – “For who else is a great nation that has a G-d that is close to it, as is Hashem our G-d, in all instances of our calling out to Him?” (*Devarim* 4:7).

Never Too Much, Never Too Late

Commenting on the aforementioned *passuk*, the *medrash* (*Shocher Tov*, ch. 4) illustrates the idea by comparing the responsiveness of Hashem to that of man:

“If a person has a friend, as long as that friend continually appeals for help and assistance, his benefactor will (eventually) come to despise and distance him. But Hashem does not conduct Himself in this way. (On the contrary,) as long as a person continually appeals for help and assistance, he becomes dearer and dearer to Him...”

If a person has a close friend who visits him constantly, the first time, the host places his visitor on an elegant couch. When he arrives the second time, he is placed on a chair; the third time, on a bench; the fourth time, the host declares: ‘What a tiresome burden this one places upon me!’ But Hashem does not conduct Himself in this way. (On the contrary,) the more that Yisrael press and come to the house of prayer, it elicits great joy from before Him. Thus it states: ‘... as Hashem our G-d, in all of the instances of our calling out to Him.’”

If one maintains this consistency, then – as the P’nei Yehoshua remarks – prayer can be remarkably effective in overturning even those decrees that appear completely intractable. This notion is highlighted most dramatically by the episode regarding the failing health of the great sage and leader Rabbi (R’ Yehudah Hanasi), redactor of the Mishnah. The Gemara (*Kesubos* 104a) relates that the rabbinical leaders at the time issued a most interesting directive: they forbade anyone to make mention of Rabbi’s passing. “Whosoever shall say that Rabbi is deceased,” they declared, “shall be pierced by the sword.” Why, indeed, were

they so adamant in suppressing this information? Quoting Rashi, the *Shitah Mekubetzes* (*ibid.*) clarifies their intent. With Rebbi on his deathbed, the masses were engaged in fervent prayer and supplication. The rabbis feared that should news of his demise be revealed, the people would become discouraged and halt their prayers. In other words, the leaders desired that the prayers continue *even after Rebbi's passing* – for in this way, there was still a chance that the sage could be returned to life.

Out of View

Of course, while consistency in prayer is necessary and praiseworthy, there is a certain danger that human nature might interfere. That is, when people accustom themselves to repetitive behavior, they tend to relate to the endeavor as if by rote. In connection with our daily prayers, Chazal exhort us to overcome this tendency, as they state in the Mishnah (*Avos 2:13*):

וְכַשְׁאַתָּה מִתְפַּלֵּל, אַל תַּעַשׂ תְּפִלָּתְךָ קִבְעָה, אֲלֵא רַחֲמִים וְתַחֲנוּנִים לְפָנֵי הַמְּקוֹם בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר כִּי חַנוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֲרָךְ אַפְּסִים וְרַב חַסֵּד וְנָחָם עַל הָרָעָה.

“And when you pray, do not treat the prayer as a fixed burden, but rather as an (appeal for) mercy and graciousness before the Omnipresent One, Blessed is He. As it states (*Yo'el 2:13*): ‘For He is gracious and merciful, long-suffering and abundant in kindness and rescinds evil (decrees).’”

Now, there is another challenge that people often face with respect to consistent prayer over a prolonged period. There is, of course, the difficulty alluded to above of confronting discouragement. How, indeed, does one maintain hope and faith in the efficacy of prayer in such instances? He could be praying and praying for salvation in a certain area but does not seem to detect much improvement.

It is helpful to bear in mind the words of the Medrash Tanchuma (*parshas Beshalach*), which offers a most illuminating teaching in this regard. The *medrash* comments on the fact that Yisrael is referred to as “*Tola'as Ya'akov* (the worm of Ya'akov)” in the *passuk* in Yeshayah (*41:14*). The *medrash* states:

“Why is Yisrael likened to a worm? This tells you: Just as a worm strikes the cedars only with its mouth, and it constitutes a delicate entity striking a formidable one – so it is with Yisrael, whose only recourse is prayer.”

R' Yechiel Michel Stern explains the significance: It is actually quite remarkable to consider the abilities of the worm in contrast with other creatures. Of course, there are so many animals much stronger and more impressive than the worm. Nonetheless, when it comes to the cedar – one of the stoutest, most sturdy of trees – even a lion or elephant cannot knock it down. *But a worm can.* And how does it do so? Using little more than its tiny mouth, it eats its way through the body of the tree. Of course, this doesn't happen in a single moment. But slowly but surely, day by day, the worm nibbles through another miniscule amount. And so it is that after a prolonged period, enough of the tree is bored through that it eventually collapses.

And so it is with Yisrael, who utilize their mouths to utter prayers to Hashem. We may not see the salvation right away. Nonetheless, if we keep at it day by day – as an appeal for *rachamim v'sachanunim* – each prayer does its part in bringing the deliverance that much closer (*Middos V'hanhagos Tovos*, pp. 546, 559, 560).