

The Most Powerful Prayer
Vaethchanan, 5781
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Rav Shimshon Pincus was known for his brilliant Torah teachings and especially for his belief in the spiritual power of prayer. Tragically, he and his wife, Chaya Mindel, and their 18-year-old daughter, Miriam, were killed in a terrible car accident in Israel in 2001. He was 56 years old when he died.

After he died, Rav Shimshon's father told the story that even as a young boy, little Shimshon, already believed in the power of prayer. One time, when Shimshon was only seven, he asked his father to let him accompany him to shul. However, his father was unwilling to take him and therefore he didn't fulfill Shimshon's request. As his father was walking to shul, he had a change of heart and decided to turn around to bring Shimshon. As he got home, he found Shimshon waiting for him at the front door. He said to Shimshon, "What are you doing here?" Shimshon responded, "I prayed with all my heart that I would be allowed to go to shul and, I just knew that you would come back to get me" (story cited in *Vekarata Leshabbat Oneg*, volume 2, 398).

In light of Rav Pincus' devotion to prayer and piety, how can we possibly understand the terrible tragedy that took his life? Here was a man who believed deeply in prayer and, yet, his daily prayers seem to have gone unanswered.

Our portion, Vaetchanan, is about the importance of prayer and also about the proper perspective we should have towards the efficacy of our prayers.

With the first words of our parasha, Moshe says:

"Vaetchanan el Hashem, I cried out Hashem at that time saying" (3:23).

Vaetchanan means Moshe prayed to Hashem to be allowed to cross over the Jordan and enter into the Land of Canaan. The midrash says he prayed 515 times. This is based upon the fact that numerical value (*gematria*) of the word *vaetchanan* equals 515, and it also equals the *gematria* of the word *tefillah* (prayer).

Here are the words that Moshe's prayed:

"O Lord GOD, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon" (3:24-25).

This is apparently the ideal way to pray, as the Talmud notes that we learn from Moshe's words the proper form that a prayer should take—first we praise Hashem and then we make our requests.

Based on Moses' prayers, Rabbi Simlai taught: One should always set forth praise of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and then pray for his own needs. From where do we derive that one should conduct himself in this manner? From Moses, as it is written in his prayer: "And I beseeched the Lord at that time" (Deuteronomy 3:23). And immediately afterward in his prayer, it is written: "Lord, God, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, for what God is there in the heavens or on earth who can perform deeds such as Yours and Your might" (Deuteronomy 3:24)? Here, Moses began with praise of God, and it is only thereafter that it is written: "Please, let me pass over and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon" (Deuteronomy 3:25). Only after his praise did Moses make his personal request (Berachot, 32a).

Rambam in his Mishneh Torah codifies that everyone is obligated to pray in this manner every day:

The obligation in this precept is that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer; first uttering praises of God, then, with humble supplication and petition ask for all that he needs, and finally offer praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure (Laws of Prayer, 1:2).

So too, Torah Temima explains that this describes the format of our daily Amidah. With the first three blessings we begin with praises of Hashem and then we move on to blessings that are actually requests from Hashem (Devarim, 3:24:5).

The difficulty with learning lessons from the manner in which Moshe prayed is that not only did Hashem apparently not listen to Moshe's prayer, but Hashem also told Moshe to stop praying. The *pasuk* states: "But the LORD was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. The LORD said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again" (3:26).

This begs the question: Since the manner in which Moshe prayed is our most basic template for praying to Hashem (i.e. praise and then a request), why are choosing a failed prayer as our model? Moshe's prayer was unsuccessful. After all, he did not enter the land. Shouldn't we have modeled our prayers after a successful prayer?

There are several answers to this question.

One answer is given by Rashi.

After Moshe is told by Hashem to stop praying, the next *pasuk* states:

“Go up to the summit of Pisgah and **gaze** about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. **Look at it well**, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan” (3:27).

Rashi comments on the fact that Hashem tells Moshe to see the land: “You requested of Me, (v. 25) “Let me see the good land”; I will let you see the whole of it (not the good territory alone), as it is said, (Deuteronomy 34:1) “And the Lord showed him all the land” (3:27).

Rashi’s point is that Moshe’s prayer was actually answered. Most readers focus on the fact that Moshe asks to cross over the Jordan in order to see the “good of the land.” While it is true that Moshe doesn’t actually cross over the Jordan, he does however see the land. Moshe, indeed, sees more than he had asked for. He sees the whole land.

Rashi’s insight into prayer is that we often think our prayers have not been answered, but when we look closely –when we have the fuller perspective that Moshe had when standing on the mountain top—we will see that Hashem actually has answered our prayers.

Sometimes when we pray, we ourselves don’t even realize what we are asking for. However, subconsciously we will often say what we really want and need. In this case, Hashem answered Moshe’s prayer and then some. Moshe asked to see the land and Hashem in an act of merciful kindness showed Moshe the entirety of the land.

This speaks to another way in which Moshe’s prayer was answered. Sometimes when we pray, we hope that Hashem will answer our prayers in exactly the manner in which we pose the request. But as we look back on life, we often see that with the perspective of time what we thought was the right path was really a wrong path, and what we thought was the wrong path was really the best path.

Why did Moshe want to go into the land? Presumably he wanted to fulfill his dream of leading the people to the promised land. Moshe was unable to do this. Instead, Hashem urged Moshe to strengthen his devoted student, Yehoshua:

“Give Yehoshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he shall allot to them the land that you may only see” (3:28).

One way to look at this response of Hashem is to see it as a rejection of Moshe’s prayer; i.e. you, Moshe, may not enter the land. But another approach is to see it as a granting of Moshe’s request by allowing Moshe’s student to enter in his place.

The Talmud states: “A person is jealous of everyone except for his son and his student” (Sanhedrin, 105b).

We should assume that Hashem appointing Joshua in Moshe's place, would not have disappointed Moshe. It would have raised his spirits and filled him with tremendous pride in his student's success.

These two approaches to understanding Hashem's response to Moshe's prayer, show that Moshe's prayer really was answered. He was able to see the land and his student was able to cross the Jordan. However, most traditional approaches to the text view Moshe's prayer as being unsuccessful. According to these approaches, we are left with the question as to why Moshe's prayer is our template for prayer?

Rav Joseph Soloveitchik's commentary on these verses helps us with this question.

Rav Soloveitchik argues that the formula in which Moshe prayed was not the problem. The problem with the prayer was the subject.

Rav Soloveitchik points out that in parashat Vaetchanan, Moshe is told by Hashem to stop praying, while, in contrast, in Sefer Shemot, Hashem encouraged Moshe to pray. Vayechal Moshe. The midrash says that Hashem grabbed Moshe by the garment and urged him to pray.

The difference between the two prayers is the subject of the prayers. In Shemot, Moshe was praying on behalf of the entirety of *benei yisrael*, he was trying to save them from annihilation. For this reason, Hashem urged him to pray. On the other hand, in Vaetchanan, Moshe was praying on behalf of himself. If one prays only on their own behalf, then no matter how beautiful the words, no matter how perfect the formulation, the prayer will be defective.

The words of Moshe's prayer were beautifully delivered. However, he was missing one ingredient which doomed his prayer: he wasn't praying on behalf of others (cited in Nefesh Harav).

A prayer without a community is a defective prayer.

This leads us to recognize the most fundamental point of prayer. The purpose of prayer is more about discovering who we are than about making a request from Hashem. The point of our prayers is to remind us of who we are and what our values are.

This week in our daf yomi studies we came across the following text:

Rabbi Elazar said: Why are the prayers of the righteous likened to a pitchfork [eter]? It is written: "And Isaac entreated [vayetar] the Lord for his wife, because she was barren" (Genesis 25:21), to say to you: Just as this pitchfork overturns the grain on the threshing floor from place to place, so too, the prayers of the righteous overturn the mind of the Holy One, Blessed be He, from the attribute of cruelty to the attribute of mercy, and He accepts their prayers (Sukkah, 14a).

How can this be that the prayers of the righteous can cause Hashem's decrees to be overturned? Hashem's ways are perfect. Can the words of a mere mortal cause Hashem to change?

Rav Yitzchak Albo explains that Hashem's decrees don't change as a result of prayer. Rather it is we who change as a result.

Gd doesn't change. We change.

By praying with focus and intensity we reaffirm who we are and what we believe in. We become a new person and thus the heavenly decree no longer applies to us. In this manner we are able to avert the decree.

The point of prayer is not to change Hashem. It is to change us.

This is why a prayer without a community is a defective prayer. Such a prayer is too self-centered and not outward looking.

The great Chassidic masters teach that in order for a prayer to be successful we first must pray for others and only then may we pray for ourselves.

In order to pray properly we must look deep into our own souls and recognize that we can heal ourselves by helping others. A true prayer is a prayer that looks inward and then soars outward.

This is what we can learn from Moshe's prayer.

First, we recognize the greatness of Gd and only then do we make our requests. If we truly recognize Gd's greatness, then our requests will be different. They will be pure and holy. They will be selfless and generous.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:

<https://youtu.be/RHNw0wUBzjs>