

# The Value of Prayer

Va'Etchanan 5780

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“Rabbi Goldberg” was on a cruise ship, which was struck by a vicious storm and began sinking. The captain turned to the people on the boat and asked, “does anyone here know how to pray?”

So Goldberg says he can pray. Said the captain: “Ok, Rabbi, you pray. Everyone else will get a life jacket. We are short by one.”

The opening words of this week’s Parsha are, “Va’etchanan el Hashem...” Moshe, in his final address to his beloved nation, is explaining that he had begged Hashem permission to enter Eretz Yisrael.

We are famously told by the Midrash that the Gematriya of the word “Va’etchanan” is 515- and that indeed, Moshe prayed precisely that many times to gain access to the Land.

The Gemara in Masechet Brachos 32A and Ramban (Hilchos Tefillah 1:2) claim that we learn an important lesson on the structure of tefilla from Moshe. First he said words of praise (“You, whose powerful deeds can be matched by no other god in heaven or on earth!”) and only after did he put forth his request (“I pray, let me cross over and see the good land...”). This is the format we follow in our davening, wherein we first spell out the praises of G-d, and only thereafter do we make our requests.

Much earlier in the Torah we read about Avraham, after he was informed of the impending destruction of Sedom. The Pasuk states “Vayashkem Avraham Baboker” – that Avraham arose early in the morning - to pray for the welfare of the residents of Sedom. We learn from this incident how important it is to pray first thing in the morning.

So we see that from the Torah’s descriptions of the tefillos of both Avraham Avinu and Moshe Rabenu, we learn a few important laws relating to how we are to conduct our prayers.

But there’s an interesting anomaly here that we must not overlook – in BOTH of these examples, the prayer was not answered! Sedom was indeed destroyed, and Moshe was not granted entry to Eretz Yisrael. So why would we learn some very important halachos of davening from tefillos that seemed to be ineffective?

One thing that’s important to bear in mind is that davening is not a shopping list: I need this, I need that, etc. etc.

Rather, it is a chance for us; people who are finite, limited, and imperfect- to have a dialogue and a relationship with G-d - who is infinite, unlimited, and perfect. This, of course, represents an incredible opportunity.

When Shlomo was saying his tefilla after completing the Beit Hamikdash, (See Melachim Alef, Perek Chet) he says to Hashem:

“When a Jew comes to pray here;

וְנִתַּתְּ לְאִישׁ כְּכֹל־דְרָכָיו אֲשֶׁר יִדְעֶ אֶת־לְבָבוֹ כִּי־אֶתָּה יִדְעַתְּ לְבַדְךָ אֶת־לִבְּךָ כֹּל־בְּנֵי הָאָדָם

“give to every man **according to his ways**, whose heart You know, for **You, alone, know the hearts of all the children of men.**” In other words, “Give him what’s coming to him, or what her deserves.”

But if a non-Jew comes to pray here;

וְעָשִׂיתָ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֵלֶיךָ הַנָּכְרִי

“and do according to all that the stranger calls You for.” Give him whatever he wants. No questions asked.

Rashi comments;

*And by the [request of] the Jew he says (v. 39), “and give to every man according to his ways” [indicating that he may occasionally be refused,] that is because the Jew recognizes and accepts God, the Holy One, may He be blessed, and he knows that He has the ability in His power to respond [favorably to his request, if God so wished;] and if his prayers will not be heard [and fulfilled], he will blame the matter on himself and his sins. But [if] the non-Jew would [experience the same frustrations he would] say, “A house whose name and fame reaches to the ends of the world, and I have exhausted myself [traveling] on many roads, and I [finally] came [to this house] and prayed in it and I find no substance [nor significance] in it, just as there is no substance in idol worshipping.”*

We Jews uniquely understand that Hashem knows what is best for us, accept His Mastery of the Universe, and will hopefully not complain if the answer to our prayers is “No”.

Moshe, as well as Avraham, understood this. They made their requests in prayer, repeatedly so, and were told “No.” But that doesn’t mean that their tefillot were any less effective or accepted by Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Effective tefilla cannot be only defined as “A prayer to which the request is granted.” Hashem has a “cheshbon” for what will or will not occur which we cannot, and never will, fully understand. Even Moshe Rabeinu, who achieved the highest level of a “face-to-face-relationship” with Hashem, could not be granted the ability to fully understand the ways of G-d.

It is cliché at this point to state that we are going through and most challenging and uncertain period of time. And there have been so many tefillot offered on behalf of those who suddenly became sick, or unemployed, or depressed. We may well wonder, “What happened to all these prayers? How many funerals have there been? How many widows, widowers, and orphans are suddenly everywhere? How many people don’t know how they will pay their bills and meet their obligations?”

King Solomon, in his wisdom, reminds us that our prayers are indeed heard, and are effective as well.

G-d is, somehow, giving us what we need, and we are told to accept it lovingly, even though we cannot possibly understand it. And yes, I personally find it difficult to always do so, and need to strengthen myself in this area as much as anybody else, if not more so. Like Moshe, we need to continue to pray, hundreds of times if necessary, and know that what G-d is doing is somehow for the best.

And of course, let’s continue to fulfill the commandment quoted in this week’s Parsha of **וּנְשַׂמְרְתֶם מֵאֵד לְנַפְשֵׁיכֶם**, of guarding our health and well-being to the greatest extent possible. Prayer alone, without taking simple, common-sense precautions, would be like jumping off a sinking ship without a life-jacket.

Wishing one and all a Shabbat Shalom.