

Va'Etchanan: Prayer and Divine Grace

The Divine rejection of Moshe Rabbenu's petition to enter the Land of Israel must be evaluated at a number of distinctive planes. First, as Chazal queried, מפני מה נתאוה משה רבינו להיכנס, לארץ ישראל, what exactly was so important to Moshe Rabbeinu regarding entry in the first place. Second, why did the Ribbono shel Olam repudiate this petition, at least as far as entry to the Land was concerned?

And yet, for all of the importance of these two lines of inquiry, there is a third issue which arises from the specific way in which Moshe Rabbenu was informed that he would not enter the Land. On the one hand, the rejection was not complete, as there was a Divine concession, that Moshe would be allowed to see the land, עלה ראש הפסגה ושא עיניך ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה וראה בעיניך. On the other hand, the rejection was far more sweeping than simply being told that he could not enter. In fact, Moshe was told something else, more shocking, perhaps, than the Merciful One's repudiation of the petition altogether: Moshe was told that he did not have permission to continue to daven regarding this subject, רב לך, אל תוסף דבר אלי עוד בדבר הזה.

II.

It would appear that within this dimension of the encounter we discover a fundamental halakhic principle regarding tefillah. The very fact that Moshe is denied permission to daven regarding this specific subject, by definition, underscores that the very right to daven is not to be taken as an entitlement. In halakhic terms, it ought to require a profound *matir*, a permission structure.

In part, this is achieved by the words of praise that we are careful to recite prior to petitioning the Almighty, לעולם יסדר אדם שבחו של מקום ואחר כך יתפלל, a halakha which, it should be emphasized, is derived specifically from this particular prayer encounter of Moshe Rabbenu.

And yet, this alone is not sufficient. The dimension of *shevach*, of praise, which Rambam understood to be part of the Torah framework of tefillah, is perhaps best understood as a *matir* with respect to the *bakasha*, petition, which follows. However, it does not represent a *matir* with respect to the fundamental act of approaching מלך מלכי המלכים in Tefillah. After all, it is far from the course of even purely human events that any commoner should have an audience with a mortal King, let alone, on demand, as indicated by the verse in Tehillim, קרוב ה' לכל קראיו לכל אשר יקראוהו באמת. What is the source of this most unusual permission structure?

III.

In his celebrated critique of Rambam's position that daily prayer is a Torah level obligation, Ramban reframes the entire institution of prayer: אבל הוא ממדת חסד לא ודאי כל ענין התפלה אינו חובה כלל. הבורא יתברך עלינו ששומע ועונה בכל קראנו אליו.

For Ramban, daily prayer is not in any way a fundamental requirement. On the contrary, it is an institution which itself reflects Divine grace, ממדת חסד הבורא יתברך עלינו. There is, apparently, no *matir* which we perform that makes prayer possible. This is purely a manifestation of the benevolence of He who listens to all prayer, and makes himself available to humans who seek succor and sustenance in His presence. The limited withdrawal of this permission structure from Moshe Rabbenu is indeed the exception which proves the rule. A merciful G-d, who grants the privilege of prayer, in this instance, removed it, and therefore, Moshe was unable to engage in the act any further.

Indeed, if one would feel a sense of privilege having even a solitary opportunity to have a private audience with a mortal monarch, the full depth of the gratitude which we are meant to feel regarding the opportunity to engage with the Divine King on an ongoing basis, כל ולוואי שיתפלל אדם, is beyond expression.

IV.

Aspects of this Divine grace are certainly universal in scope, as evidence by Shlomo's reference to the gentile in the context of the inauguration of the Mikdash,

וְגַם אֶל-הַנִּכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא-מֵעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא וְבָא מֵאֶרֶץ רְחוֹקָה לְמַעַן שְׁמֹךְ: כִּי יִשְׁמְעוּן
אֶת-שְׁמֹךְ הַגָּדוֹל וְאֶת-זֶדְדְּךָ הַחֲזָקָה וְזִרְעֶךָ הַנְּטוּיָה וּבָא וְהִתְפַּלֵּל אֶל-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה: אֲתָה
תִּשְׁמַע הַשָּׁמַיִם מִכּוֹן שְׁבִתֶּךָ וְעָשִׂיתָ כְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-יִקְרָא אֵלֶיךָ הַנִּכְרִי לְמַעַן יִדְעוּן כָּל-עַמֵּי
הָאָרֶץ אֶת-שְׁמֹךְ לִירְאָה אֲתָךְ כְּעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלִדְעַת כִּי-שְׁמֹךְ נִקְרָא עַל-הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר
בָּנִיתִי: (מלכים א: ח: מא-מג)

And yet, even as the Mikdash certainly is, as Yeshayahu would later describe it, בית תפילה יקרא, Ramban's formulation in describing prayer as a result of Divine grace highlights the particular bond this reflects with the Jewish people, אבל הוא ממדת חסד הבורא יתברך עלינו ששומע ועונה בכל, קראנו אליו.

Ramban's reference is direct, and it emerges from our *sedra*. When the nations of the world recognize the distinctive qualities of the Jewish people, that which makes them a גוי גדול, it is this unique closeness, the Divine grace, which affords them the opportunity to reach out to the Almighty in prayer, ומי גוי גדול אשר לו אלוקים קרובים אליו כה' אלוקינו בכל קראנו אליו. One of the most profound gifts which Ribbono shel Olam has given the Jewish people, then, is His attention, His willingness to hear their prayers, irrespective of whether specific petitions are granted or not.

Whether or not one accepts Reb Chaim's assertion that even Ramban would concede that prayer, while not obligated, represents a דאורייתא קיום, the basic thrust of Ramban's approach compels us to reframe our understanding of prayer as a constant manifestation of Divine grace and intimacy with His people.

Especially as we emerge, on an annual basis, from Tisha B'Av, when the capacity for prayer was lost, שתם תפילתי, our appreciation for His immanence and accessibility is that much greater.