

What was Isaac Doing in the Field?

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Many people are aware that we Jews have the tradition of reciting three prayer services each and every day: **Shaharit**, **Minchah** and **Maariv**. Shaharit is recited in the morning, Minchah in the afternoon, and Maariv in the evening. Each and every day of the year, rain or shine.

I'm reminded of a joke that goes back to the early 1960s, soon after John Glenn became the first American astronaut to circumnavigate the globe. The story goes that the government decided to send up a rabbi, a minister and a priest into outer space so that they could share their impressions. They went up into space, and came down, and then they were interviewed about their experience. The priest said, "It was incredible to see God's glory on display in the heavens." The minister said, "It was extraordinary to see all of humanity before us on the planet earth. When they asked the rabbi his impressions, he replied, "Oy! It was exhausting: shaharit, minchah, maariv; shaharit, minchah, maariv, shaharit, minchah, maariv"

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So, where did the idea of praying at those three times -- morning, afternoon and evening -- come from?

Two opinions are given in the Talmud about this. (Berachot 26b) One opinion tells us that it arose from what used to take place when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. As described in the Bible, every morning at dawn they would offer one sacrificial animal; they'd offer another one as the sun was setting in the late afternoon, and in



the evening, they would rake the coals and tidy up the altar. Once the Temple was destroyed, the practice arose to pray at each of these three times, to remind us of what had been lost.

The other opinion gives us a different answer. It tells us that the practice of thrice daily prayer goes back to the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's they who established the three regular daily services. Abraham established the practice of praying in the **morning**, Isaac established the practice of praying in the **afternoon**, and Jacob established the practice of praying in the **evening**.

What do the rabbis rely on in saying that? They point to Biblical verses that they interpret to demonstrate that Abraham stood before God in the morning; Isaac prayed in the afternoon, and Jacob prayed in the evening.

The verse that they rely on to demonstrate that Isaac created the Minchah service is found in today's torah portion, in the third aliyah that we read this morning.

It's an interesting verse from which we can learn something very important about Isaac, something important about the Bible, and something important about prayer itself. So let's take a look at it:

"And Isaac went out to ... (to do something) ... in the field toward evening."
(Genesis 24:63)

The Hebrew word is **"la-suach"**. Note that I haven't translated it. I haven't filled in what exactly it was that Isaac went out to do. And the reason for that is that no one knows for sure what that word means in this particular place. It is a word that appears in this form only here. And so it's given rise to various interpretations.

One of those interpretations is that it means, "to pray," and since the text says that this took place in the late afternoon, *"lifnot erev,"* it's natural to understand why the rabbis understood this verse to mean that Isaac prayed in the late afternoon, and was in fact the originator of the Minchah service.

But there are other interpretations, and I want to share them with you at this time.

One interpretation is that Isaac went out **to take a stroll**. As you can see on the sheet, there is an Arabic cognate, a parallel word in Arabic, that means that. And so, many interpreters, including the modern translators Everett Fox and Robert Alter, translate it this way.

Another interpretation is that it means, **“to converse.”** In Hebrew, the word “*sichah*” means “a conversation.” Nachmanides or Ramban -- the twelfth century medieval commentator -- says that Isaac went out to converse with his companions and his friends. That also makes sense.

Third, the word “*siach*” is juxtaposed with the word “*ha-sadeh*” earlier in Genesis. It means a shrub of the field. So Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, says that perhaps this means that Isaac went out **to work the land**. To tend to the shrubs and vegetation.

Finally, Rashi, the eleventh century French commentator, brings the interpretation I’ve already mentioned. He focuses on the fact that, relying on the Talmud, “*siach*” can mean “a plea,” and concludes that Isaac went out **to pray to God**.

Now, one’s first response to this ambiguity might be frustration. Wouldn’t it be nice if we knew exactly what the word “*la-suach*” means in this context? Wouldn’t it be nice if we knew exactly what the text is telling us about Isaac, who is so passive throughout Genesis?

But that teaches us something important about the Bible. It is in many places and in many ways an ambiguous text. That is part of its appeal. Rather than seeing it, as some do, as a work that is exceedingly clear, Jewish tradition holds that it can and does lend itself to multiple interpretations. The ambiguity revolving around the word “*la-suach*” is just one example out of many.

Rabbi Jason Rogoff recently wrote a beautiful reflection on this ambiguity that I want to share with you. He reminds us that Isaac had recently undergone two traumatic experiences: At the end of last week’s *parashah*, we read of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. You’ll recall that Abraham took Isaac up to the top of the

mountain and came very close to sacrificing him. It was only at the last minute that God told him to sacrifice a ram instead.

And then, at the beginning of this week's parashah, Isaac's mother, Sarah, dies. We know that this was traumatic for him, because the text tells us explicitly that it was only after he married Rebekah that he found consolation.

How do people recover from trauma? How can people help themselves to move through it and beyond it?

(1) Rabbi Rogoff reminds us that, echoing the four interpretations of the word "*la-suach*," some people respond with solitude. "At times, seclusion from others allows us to be in touch with our innermost feelings and reflect on our own needs." (Rogoff). Perhaps Isaac took a stroll in the field because he needed to get away from it all.

(2) Some people gain a lot not from solitude but from talking with others about their challenges, their struggles, their pain. Understanding "*la-suach*" to mean, "to converse," gives us that model of response.

(3) Some people find that connecting with Nature can help bring themselves out of their difficult state. Tilling the soil, pruning shrubs, and planting bulbs, can be remarkably therapeutic.

(4) And finally, some people find that prayer is the answer. That by focusing on expressing their needs, their wants, their wonder or their appreciation, people can achieve serenity and focus.

There's a lesson for us, then, in **NOT** knowing what exactly Isaac did, which is that each of us must choose the individual path that is appropriate for us. What works for one person may not work for another.

That's one lesson. Another is that, as important as prayer -- liturgical prayer, such as reciting the minchah service as it has developed in our tradition -- is, it is but

one of several different ways of responding to and coping with the vicissitudes of life.

This point is actually already made by Maimonides. He recognizes, of course, the obligation to recite the three daily services -- as do I. Davening in a minyan, hearing the responses of one's fellow daveners, being a part of a caring community -- these are irreplaceable. But Maimonides points out that *prior* to them, even higher in priority than the obligation to recite those services, is the duty to pray in the purest sense: to pray without words, at no particular time or place with no particular agenda: praying that does not demand a minyan or really anything external; praying that requires only that one be focused on standing before God.

It was while Isaac was doing whatever he was doing out in the field that he caught his first glimpse of Rebecca. And as we know, it was love at first sight -- or, at least, marriage at first sight, and love following immediately thereafter.

Perhaps the text is telling us that Isaac's experience in the field prepared him for this encounter, allowing him to be open to loving another.

Let's hope that we too -- when we find ourselves grieving a loss or experiencing trauma of one kind or another -- can find what we are looking for through whatever spiritual path works for us, whether it be:

-- a solitary walking meditation;

-- talking with others; or

-- engaging with nature;

as well as, yes, *tefillah*, prayer, Jewish prayer -- whether in the morning like Abraham, in the afternoon like Isaac, or in the evening, like Jacob.

Shabbat shalom.