

WHEN PRAYER IS NOT ENOUGH

Toldot 5779

I.

I MENTIONED LAST WEEK the verse used by *Chazal* to claim that Yitzchak created Mincha:

וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לָשׂוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לַפְּנּוֹת עָרֵב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים:

And Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching (Gen. 24:63).

But this is a confusing choice for the source of prayer. Because, if I were a member of *Chazal* and looking for a verse as evidence that Yitzchak prayed, I would choose the verse we read right at the beginning of today's *leining*:

וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לַיהוָה לְנִכְחַ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עָקְרָה הִוא וַיַּעֲתֵר לֹא ה' וַתִּהְיֶה רִבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ:

Isaac pleaded with the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived (25:21).

Rivkah is unable to conceive and so Yitzchak pleads with God, which, the Torah tells us, is answered. This is the clearest indication possible that Yitzchak prayed! It's the most obvious instance of prayer that we find among the *Avot*. Yet *Chazal* don't use it. It makes no sense! If you want to tell me that Yitzchak prayed, don't tell me that the scene in which he is walking in the fields is the proof when you have a clear, unequivocal example of actual, bona fide prayer taking place!

There has to be a reason why *Chazal* reject Yitzchak's actual prayer as the source of *tefillah* and choose a more abstract verse. And I believe it's rooted in the words used to describe the acts of prayer taking place.

II.

This idea was suggested to me by Rabbi Nasanyl Braun, the rabbi of Ruthy's parent's shul in Deal, NJ. The terms used to describe Yitzchak's prayer – *siach* and *ye'tar* – mean very different things. In the *gemara* in *Sukkah* (14a), Rabbi Elazar notes that the word used this morning, *ye'tar*, is very similar to the word *'etar*, a pitchfork. Why?

מה עתר זה מהפך את התבואה בגורן ממקום למקום אף תפלתן של צדיקים מהפכת דעתו של הקב"ה ממדת אכזריות למדת רחמנות:

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.

Just as pitchforks overturn grain, *tefillot* overturn God's decree. This is what Yitzchak is doing: Rivkah is unable to conceive and he is asking God to overturn His decree, to change His mind. This is what is meant by וַיִּעַתֶּר וַיִּצְחַק לְהו'י. In contrast, *siach* means conversation. When Yitzchak goes out לְשׂוּחָה בְּשָׂדֵה לְפָנוֹת עֵרֶב there is no specific request on his mind, he's just talking to God because that's what he does – he has a relationship with God and so it's natural for him to just speak to Him.

III.

I think it's clear why *Chazal* reject Yitzchak's actual prayer as the basis of *tefillah*. *This isn't how we should think of prayer*. At my *proba* I emphasized the idea that we shouldn't see God as a vending machine. He's not there for us to only turn to when we need something – and we don't *daven* only when we have a request – the point of our *tefillah* is to forge and strengthen our relationship with God. It's supposed to be *siach*, conversation.

The difference between *siach* and *ye'tar* is the difference between seeing God as a close friend or loved one versus an acquaintance. I have many acquaintances, but I only ever speak to them if I need something or they need something from me. We've all been in situations where we get a call, text, or email from an acquaintance we've not spoken to for a long time and we know that eventually the conversation will turn to a request.

But we also have loved ones or friends who we talk to just for the sake of talking. Ruthy and I routinely exchange texts throughout the day “How's work going?” “Good, you?” “Good” because all we want is *siach*. I have a really good friend who, likewise, I'll just randomly check in with or vice versa several times during the week – there's no intention behind it other than *siach*. When you have a close relationship with someone you talk for the sake of talking, you share for the sake of sharing. But, when someone is distant from you, you only approach them when you have a need – and there's nothing wrong with that, but it's a fundamentally different, and weaker, relationship.

IV.

Chazal ignore Yitzchak's actual prayer because they want us to see God as a friend and not as an acquaintance. We're not supposed to only come to shul when we feel compelled, we're supposed to come to shul and *daven* three times a day just to check in. Even the formulaic nature of prayer fits this model. With friends and loved ones, you go through the same conversational routines each time – “How's work going?” “Good, you?” “Good” – and even though it very often turns into a deeper conversation, even when it doesn't it serves its purpose: sustaining the relationship. Many times, our *tefillot* turn into something more meaningful but even when they don't – even when they're just a rushed I-don't-really-have-time-for-this-but-I-just-wanted-to-check-in – they serve their purpose: sustaining our relationship with *Hakadosh Barukh Hu*.

This is the purpose of davening. This is what we should be doing three times a day every day. This is why we come here.

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Now that we're davening Mincha early, I plan on using the five minutes beforehand to explore some of our *tefillot*. My hope is that, by doing so, you'll gain a greater appreciation of our *tefillot* and realize how they continue to sustain our relationship with God.

The most striking thing about Yitzchak's prayer this morning is that *Chazal* reject it as a model for us. Because we aren't supposed to be praying to God, we're supposed to be talking with Him. As we begin *Mussaf*, see it not as *ye'tar* but *siach*. An opportunity to just check-in and talk with God.