

How to Daven like Abraham
Drasha for Parshat Vayeira 5781
Bais Abraham Congregation

The talmud in Tractate Berakhot records that the practice of davening three times a day goes back to the biblical patriarchs: Avraham established the morning prayer, Yitzhak the afternoon prayer, and Yaakov the evening prayer. The proof text that Avraham established the morning prayer is found in our parasha. The Torah interrupts the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and its aftermath, to inform us (Ber. 19:27-28) “And Avraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord: and he looked toward Sedom and ‘Amora, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up like the smoke of a furnace.”

The Talmud explains that in this verse, standing refers to prayer. Avraham went early in the morning to the place where he was accustomed to standing before G-d in prayer. From this, we can learn that Avraham was in the habit of praying early in the morning. However, I think there is more to be learned from this example than simply a time of day for prayer.

The context here is the morning after the day on which G-d informed him that He was about to destroy the city of S'dom because of its great wickedness, unless ten righteous men could be found within it. On that morning, Avraham would have woken up not knowing what had befallen his nephew, whom he had treated as a son, bringing him along on his journey to the promised land. Avraham must have been wondering not only whether Lot was alive or dead, but also whether or not Lot had become gone astray, and become as the people of S'dom, doomed to share their fate. In that state of anxiety over the physical as well as the spiritual well being of his nephew, Avraham went and stood before G-d.

We know from last week's parsha that when Lot was in trouble, taken captive in war, Avraham wasn't afraid to go do something about it, but this time, instead of rushing into the fray, he

went to pray instead. Avraham understood that when the trouble was human in origin, there was something he could do, but that if Lot's troubles came from the Judge of the Earth, the only thing to do was to pray to G-d to have mercy on him. But at this point, Avraham wouldn't have even known for sure whether or not Lot had been included in the destruction of S'dom, and so his prayer was more than about simply asking for mercy. It was an inquiry, and in that moment of prayer, Avraham looked down and received at least a partial answer to his question, in the form of the smoking plains of S'dom.

By linking our practice of morning prayer to Avraham, the Sages are telling us to treat Avraham as a model for our own prayers. First, that prayer should be something we approach with urgency, just as Avraham urgently sought to see what had become of his nephew. Our practice of praying a fixed liturgy at fixed times carries with it the danger that we will come to pray by rote, out of a sense of obligation more than anything else. By linking our fixed prayers to Avraham's example, the Sages are reminding us that fixed prayer need not be rote or stale, but can and must be infused with the urgency of the moment.

This week, I've talked to so many people who speak about how they stay awake all night watching the news of the election results, or refreshing their news feed every five minutes. In some ways we are motivated by the same urgent desire to learn what judgment has been handed down that motivated Avraham to go stand in prayer. If only we could all run to stand before G-d first thing in the morning with the same urgency with which we check to see the latest vote tally!

Avraham went to pray in a state of concern for the fate of Lot and S'dom, and he was able to see what had become of S'dom. From this we learn that prayer is also not just about reciting a laundry list of our desires before G-d. Prayer can be an inquiry, an investigation, and if we approach it right, we may even find the answers to our questions in prayer. Prayer is sometimes described as *Sicha*, conversation. A good conversation doesn't involve one person talking and one listening. To be a good conversationalist, we have to be as good at listening as we are at talking. Perhaps this is why we are

supposed to stand in silence for a few moments after we finish reciting our prayers before returning to our place: perhaps we are supposed to use this time to listen for G-d's reply. If we can approach prayer as a chance to listen deeply to what G-d is saying to us, even more than it is a chance to articulate our needs, desires, hopes and fears, then prayer can be a chance to learn something as well.

Of course we may not always get an answer we like. Avraham went out to find out what was happening to Sedom and was greeted by a smoky, burnt landscape, proof that his nephew, whom he'd raised like a son had thrown his lot in with people so wicked that G-d could not allow them to continue on the face of the earth. Listening for the voice of G-d in our prayers requires us to be open to the truth of what that voice might tell us, even if its a truth we would rather not hear. The more we can shed the pretences and the comforting lies we tell ourselves, or the habitual refrains of self-recrimination, and approach prayer open to simply listening and learning from the experience, the more we will be able to see and to learn.

Now getting up to pray, is not the only time Avraham gets up early. Two other times in this week's parsha, Avraham gets up early. Each of those times, he gets up early, not specifically to pray, but to do something. When G-d tells Avraham to listen to Sarah and send Hagar and Yishmael away, he gets up early to do so. When G-d tells Avraham to bring is son to Mt. Moriah as a sacrifice, Avraham gets up early to do so. In both of those cases, there was a clear instruction from G-d of what to do, and Avraham got up early, wasting no time in carrying out G-d's command, however much he might have wanted not to. In our case, however, there was no clear instruction about what Avraham should be doing. Perhaps that's why Avraham prayed—because he felt a powerful need to do something to help the situation but didn't know what that should be. And so he prayed.

Prayer is both what we do when we don't know what else we ca do, but prayer is also a chance to practice getting up early, and being alacritous to stand before G-d. Perhaps the reason Avraham was able to rise to the challenges G-d set him was that the practice of getting up early to pray

had prepared him. A practice of regular, sincere, urgent, heartfelt and introspective prayer prepared Avraham for to do what G-d called on him to do when the moment came. Prayer then is not just something to do when we don't know what else to do. It is a preparation for doing something when the time comes.

Every morning presents us with an opportunity. The shulchan arukh opens with the halakh that we should wake up like a lion, roaring to do G-d's will. Some of us wake up like a lion roaring to check our smartphones and read the latest news or social media posts. What if we took the eagerness that we feel to check our phones and channeled into checking in with G-d? What if we were to take the energy we put into finding out what has happened in the world, and we put it into doing things, taking action change the world.

On his deathbed, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, famously blessed his students that their fear of heaven should be equal to their fear of their fellow human beings. When his students questioned why he wouldn't bless them that their fear of heaven should be greater than that of human beings, he responded "if only people had the same fear of G-d that they have for their fellow humans!" Most people commit a transgression and worry about whether any one else will see, not thinking or caring about the One who sees all and knows all. And so Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai said "if ONLY you had the kind of fear of heaven that you have of your fellow man." I would like to add a modern corollary—if only our relationship with G-d were as precious to us as our connections to our smartphones..

May we all be blessed to find within ourselves the same eagerness and enthusiasm to pray and to do good deeds that we have for checking our email and the news. May we learn to look to G-d with the same hope and trepidation with which we greet the latest headlines. And in that merit, may we like Avraham, be blessed with everything, and may we become a blessing to those around us.

Shabbat Shalom!