

PARSHAT VAESCHANAN 5778

Familiarity can often lead to oversight. The unfurling of a spring leaf from a dry winter's twig is often taken for granted; lacking appreciation of the marvels which Hashem has woven into the bria. Similarly, His laying out the mechanism of cause and effect, is simply assumed as a "given". Seldom do we pause fully to investigate what is really going on, or appreciate the complexity of the Divine stage upon which we act out our respective roles.

So stop. We have reached sedra Va'eschanan. We see prayers answered, observance rewarded, failures threatened with punishment, and are provided with the fundamentals of our faith. The climactic significance of the Shema makes its appearance. Each prayer and mitzvah has consequences. But how do they play out?

Of course, if every prayer were to be immediately granted; and every time we went against Hashem's laws, a punishment were immediately inflicted, we would lose all freewill, and the world would have an entirely different construct. It is appropriate, at times, to have to wait, in order to build our bitachon. We understand that Hashem delays punishment for infractions, in order to demonstrate His patience and to grant opportunities for teshuva. And would it be right if a prayer intoned simply out of rote is answered in the same way as one uttered from a tear-filled heart? "Cause and effect" becomes increasingly sophisticated.

Approaching prayer

In the words of Rav Aryeh Carmell ztl "prayer is not so much a commandment as a privilege and an opportunity". This temporary withdrawal from the whirl of life replenishes one's spiritual power; allows the Divine will to affect our inner self, and reinforces our recognition of the Almighty as the true Source of our life and welfare.

Repetition

Moshe explains that not every prayer is granted the desired outcome. Chazal tell us that Moshe attempted by 515 different tefillos to be allowed to enter the Holy Land. He only desisted when Hashem said "rav lecho". There are many ways to understand the "rav lecho". One was to admonish Moshe for using this phrase ("rav lachem" in the plural) when dismissing the Bnei Levi who sided with Korach. Certainly they were wrong and wholly misguided; but they had spiritual aspirations – so a rechannelling of their energies might have been more appropriate than a dismissal. By this slight nuance of language, Hashem shows to Moshe how every word counts. An intriguing alternative view is that Moshe was ordered to desist – as any further prayers would have had to be met with a concession; and the Divine plan was not to be changed.

The effect of prayers

Rav Dovid Hoffman (in Torah Tavlin) poses basic questions. Knowing that Hashem will do what is best, why do we pray? And what will we accomplish? He answers that Moshe is

teaching us the act of prayer is not confined to securing our requests. Its ultimate purpose is to enhance our connection to Hashem. When we pour out our hearts to the Almighty, the unbreakable bond which is created brings about a closeness which far exceeds anything we might request.

But, on a more prosaic level, can it ever be correct to claim that prayers are equivalent to paying regular insurance premiums in the hope that nothing catastrophic will happen? No! This misses the cumulative impact of our davening. Every further prayer adds – so to speak – a stone, a brick, or some mortar to the metaphorical stairway ascending to the world of the spirit. Sometimes a giant leap; sometimes an imperceptible few centimetres – but the connection achieved is beyond value.

Will raising our own avodat Hashem merit a positive response? Just as it is possible to rain on one side of a street and not the other; if we find opportunities to move ourselves spiritually, then we are assured of a more favourable outcome. Finite man, with our limited perspective, can never begin to understand the determinations of the Infinite and Unlimited Hashem. Yet just as the sea did not split until Nachshon ben Aminodov was almost submerged, we are assured that if we do all we can, Hashem will respond. It will be in such a way as He deems best – and we hope we will be able to fathom out at least some of His ways.

Chazal explain that Yitzchok and Rivka prayed for many years before they were blessed with children. A reason given; Hashem desires the prayers of the righteous. But perhaps it is more than that. The impact upon those around them – observing (or, to some extent, being aware of) their devotion and prayers – must surely have been a powerful Kiddush Hashem.

The Shema

The opening of the Shema is described by Rav Aryeh Carmell as the "rallying cry of the invincible Jewish spirit". From the first prayer taught to an infant to the final words on a deathbed, it is welded into the structure of a Jewish life. Beyond simply declaring Hashem is one, recognised by Israel as our G-d; we assert that one day this realisation will reach all mankind. Rav Carmell explains this embodies the universal mission of the people of Israel. The concluding prayer of our davening – the Aleynu (quoting Zechariah) underlines this high note: "Then Hashem will be king over all the world, on that day will Hashem be one and His Name one"

But prayer alone is surely not enough. There is a further cause and effect which must be recognised. The sedra tell us how performance of the chukim and mishpotim *in the eyes of the nations* will lead them to exclaim (ch4; v6): "Surely what a wise and understanding people is this great nation". We must play our part. And then Hashem (at the appropriate time) will bring us to that much longed-for day.