

Living On A Prayer

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Most people who visit Buffalo, New York go to see the majestic and awe inspiring Niagara Falls, to see the world-class Albright Knox Art Gallery or the Buffalo Philharmonic, to take in the Buffalo Bills (if they keep it together this season) and the Sabres or eat the famous wings at the Anchor Bar. There is another site, though, that is only known to an extremely niche market.

Rav Eliyahu Yosef Rabinowitz, the Linitz-Sokolivka Rebbe, was the first Chassidishe Rebbe ever to reside permanently in the United States. He was a member of an illustrious family: he was the great grandson of Rav Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz, one of the foremost disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, and he was the brother in law of Rav Mordechai Dov Twersky of Hornosteipel. He arrived in 1899, initially making his home on the Lower East Side. Nine years later, a group of Sokolivka *landsleit* living in Buffalo invited Rav Rabinowitz to serve as the Rabbi of their shul, Congregation Sons of Israel, also known as the Jefferson Street Shul. On the 13th of Marcheshvan 5671 (November 15, 1910), Rav Rabinowitz passed away, sadly leaving no children. He was buried in the Ahavas Shalom Cemetery in nearby Cheektowaga, and a mausoleum was built over his gravesite. For nine decades, his gravesite went more or less unnoticed, but In 1999, Rabbi Yonah Landau of Kiryas Joel spearheaded a

campaign to raise awareness of the great unknown Rabbis and righteous people buried in the United States. That year, two groups came to visit and pray at Rav Rabinowitz's grave- and then it happened. Stories began to circulate about people who traveled to Buffalo in need of some kind of salvation, and were answered. There was a wrinkle, though- those who came to the grave promised to return afterward to give thanks. The grave of the Linitz Sokolivka Rebbe is now a full-fledged pilgrimage site, especially around his yahrtzeit, which was observed last week. It is not uncommon to see newlywed couples return to the Rebbe's gravesite with the partner they yearned for, or parents with newborn children whose birth they ascribe to the Rebbe's merit.

One person prays and is answered- and others want to pray in the same location. This is the way the Rebbe's grave was "discovered," but it has ample precedent in the Torah, too.

The Torah sets the stage for the fateful meeting between Rivka and Yitzchak. As she draws closer astride a camel, accompanied by Eliezer, Yitzchak is coming from a different direction.

Bereishit 24:64

וַיֵּצֵקֵל בָּא מִבֹּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּאֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב:

Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negev.

Why is it important for us to know the direction from which Yitzchak was arriving?

Lehavdil, the author Bill Bryson, in his hilarious book *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, describes how people from his native Iowa tell a story. “Well, Bob, he was running as fast as possible and wearing a Superman outfit, coming from the Southwest.” “Actually, Fred, I think he was coming from the Northwest...” The direction Yitzchak was arriving from is not the point of the story, is it?

Rav Ovadia Seforno explains that it is actually of great significance. Yitzchak went to the place where Hagar’s prayers were answered so many years earlier, thinking it would be a propitious location for his own prayers to be answered-and answered they were. Even before he had begun praying, Rivka, the answer to his prayers, was on her way to meet him.

The Seforno’s explanation is quite puzzling. Hagar was a source of endless trouble for Yitzchak. Her son, Yishmael, tormented him and she humiliated his mother. In seeking a place to pray, why would he choose the place where *she* was answered? I

think Yitzchak recognized that the power of prayer is such that it works by association- with places and with people, and not even people we like or particularly care for. When our own reservoir runs dry, when we don't feel like praying or emotionally cannot bring ourselves to do so, we can connect ourselves to the prayers of others. I think many of us may be feeling this way after a challenging week. A monologue on national television that normalized anti-Semitic rhetoric; a brutal terror attack in Israel, cutting short the lives of three fathers, an event that barely registered because it has become depressingly regular. In Jewish Dallas, three people- Neil Herson, Chara Ravitsky and David Genecov-who were beloved to their families, communities, and professions were taken from us too early. No doubt many of us are feeling bereft, filled with questions, and maybe davening is challenging. So what do we do? Rav Dov Zinger, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Mekor Chaim Yeshiva High School in Kfar Etzion, is one of today's most sensitive and innovative educators, especially in the realm of Tefillah education. Last year, he published a book called תכּוּן תּפִּילָה, a collection of meditations and practices to help prepare for and transform the Tefillah experience. Listen to his suggestion for an exercise before a Tefillah session:

Everyone sits in a circle. Each person is given a piece of paper on which to write what they are praying for. They place the note back in the center of the circle.

Everyone then picks a piece of paper at random from the center of the circle, and reads what is on it. Some will receive the ones they put in, others will receive those

of others. Whatever is written on the piece of paper- that is what the recipient focuses on. Eventually, someone else's request, which may initially seem so foreign, uncovers a new desire, new energy, within ourselves. The knowledge that there is someone in this room who is davening for me, while I daven for someone else, binds everyone in the room together, and can change our tefillah.

We are already seated in a semicircle, but we can't write down our requests on Shabbos. In fact, Shabbos is not the time for personal requests anyway.

Nevertheless, we can still connect to the energy of each other's Tefillot. This is why it is so important to pray with a *tzibbur*, in public- so that we can all tap into each other's prayers, and think about their needs. It is also why halachic sources speak at length about the necessity of a community hiring a professional Chazzan, who can elevate and carry the prayers of a community and who can create a Tefillah atmosphere that is conducive to connection. It is why we have made the Tefillah experience such a priority at Shaare, with frequent Ruach Kabbalat Shabbat and family davening experiences on Friday nights, with an emphasis on dignity and decorum during davening, and why we are bringing guest Chazzanim like Shulem Lemmer and the Yedidim Choir whom we are fortunate to host this weekend and who are most worthy *shlichei tzibbur*. By creating exciting Tefillah events, we have the ability- even on regular weeks without a guest Chazzan- to create the kind of tefillah that no one wants to miss and that everyone wants to experience in its

entirety. Let us keep using Tefillah as a source of inspiration, consolation and connection- and may we always return with good news.