

Parashat Chayeh Sarah, 5780, 2019:

*Yitzchak Avinu and Tefilah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The concluding section of our *parasha* presents the first narrative of the Yitzchak and Rivka story. In the midst of these *pasukim*, we encounter a verse that conceals far more than it reveals: “Isaac went out *lasuach ba’sadeh lifnot erev* — to meditate in the field toward evening. He raised his eyes, and saw camels approaching.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 24:63, translation, *The Living Torah*, Rav Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*) We are immediately struck by the phrase, “*lasuach ba’sadeh lifnot erev*,” as its meaning is quite obscure. Fortunately, *Talmud Bavli*, *Berachot* 26b explains it in the following manner: “It has been taught in accordance with R. Jose b. Hanina, ...Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it says, ‘Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening,’ and “meditation” — *lasuach* — means only prayer...” (Translation with my emendations, *The Soncino Talmud*)

Rashi (1040-1105) embraces the Talmud’s analysis of *lasuach*, and interprets the beginning of our *pasuk* as, “And Isaac went forth to pray in the field towards evening.” (Translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The Chasidic master, Rabbi Ya’akov Yoseph of Polonne *zatzal* (1710-184), follows Rashi’s lead regarding *lasuach* and connects it directly to the words, “*lifnot erev*.”

In addition, he looks beyond the straightforward meaning of *lifnot erev* (toward evening), and suggests a kabbalistically-infused interpretation of the term:

Prior to praying, Yitzchak was punctilious in his efforts to remove and distance himself from all manner of “*erev*.” *Erev* refers to negative and extraneous thoughts [that can prevent a person from being able to pray effectively and meaningfully]. Yitzchak achieved this to the point that his prayer was as pure as Heaven itself and reached the highest level of utmost purity. (*Toldot Ya’akov Yoseph, Sefer Bereishit*, Parashat Vayishlach, s.v. *v’nireh li b’biur*, translation my own)

Rabbi Ya’akov Yoseph’s statement regarding the purity Yitzchak achieved in his *tefilah* is highly reminiscent of a crucial formulation in the *Iggeret HaRamban*, wherein the Ramban (1194-1270) discusses the notion of removing “negative and extraneous thoughts” in order to achieve a meaningful prayer experience: “Remove all worldly concerns from your mind during prayer. Prepare your mind before the Omnipresent One, may He be blessed, purify your thoughts and deeply focus upon about the words [of prayer] before you utter them.” (Translation my own)

The message from our sources is clear: *Taharut b’tefilah* — purity in prayer — requires *hachanah l’tefilah* — preparation for prayer. In particular, the Ramban teaches us three steps of *hachanah l’tefilah* that will enable us to approach the level of *taharut b’tefilah*:

- Prepare your mind before the Omnipresent One, may He be blessed
- Purify your thoughts
- Deeply focus upon about the words [of prayer] before you utter them

The first step in preparing our minds to stand before the Almighty prior to embarking upon the prayer experience is given voice in a phrase found above many an *aron kodesh*, “*Da lifnei Mi atah omeid* — Know before Whom you stand.” In other words, we must have a powerful sense that we are in the presence of the Almighty when we attempt to encounter Him during *tefilah*. Next, we

must do everything in our power to “remove all worldly concerns from our minds during prayer” in order to purify our thoughts and prepare ourselves to engage the Almighty. While this is surely a difficult task, the reward is equal to the effort. Finally, we need to understand the words that we are about to say to Hashem in order to focus upon them and pray with *kavavah* — intention; for only then will they convey our deepest and innermost thoughts to our Creator.

With Hashem’s help and our most fervent desire, may our *tefilot* ever ascend to the *kisa hakavode* — Throne of Glory, and may they be answered *b’chane v’chesed u’b’rachamim* — with favor, kindness and mercy. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [\*\*http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd\*\*](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd)

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