

Parashat Vaetchanan, 5772, 2012:

*Understanding the Power of Prayer*

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, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

Our *parasha* begins with the sole instance in *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible) of the exact term “*Vaetchanan*” (“and I beseeched”). Rashi (1040-1105), in his second explanation of this word, somewhat cryptically notes: “This is one of the ten expressions that are called prayer that are found in the *Sifri* [the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*].” He, however, does not mention the other terms found in *Tanach* that are discussed in the *Sifri* [note our version of this Midrash has 12]:

1. *Zaaka* = to cry out
2. *Naakah* = cry
3. *Shavah* = sigh
4. *Batzar* = distress
5. *Rinah* = to call out
6. *P'giah* = entreat
7. *Nipul* = to fall down in supplication
8. *Pilul* = to metaphorically wrestle with Hashem
9. *Atirah* = implore
10. *Amidah* = standing
11. *Chilui* = to plead
12. *Techina* = to plead, beseech, entreat

Even though the concept of prayer is found throughout *Tanach* and Rabbinic literature, its efficacy is, in some ways, a true mystery. The problem is straightforward: How can finite man communicate with the ineffable and infinite Creator? This difficulty is alluded to in *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot* 1:9:

Levi said: “The distance from the earth until the firmament would take 500 years for a man to traverse. The distance from each firmament to the next [of which there are seven] is 500 years as well. Moreover, the thickness of each firmament is a five hundred year journey and so, too, for each and every firmament.” Look how removed Hashem is from His world and [nonetheless] a man enters the synagogue, stands behind the prayer stand, silently prays and Hashem listens to his prayer!

Why does Hashem listen to our *tefilah*? This question speaks to the very heart of our relationship with Hashem. In some ways, therefore, it may be one of the most spiritually significant questions that we can ask.

My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), wrestled with this question on numerous occasions. At first glance, one might think that Hashem hears our prayers today because of *zechut avot* (the merit of our Patriarchs). The Rav notes, however, based upon *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 55a, that during the time of the prophet Yechezkel (sixth century BCE), *zechut avot* actually ceased to exist as a causal behavior factor between Hashem and ourselves. In his view, the merit of our Patriarchs could only extend so far. After many generations, we radically strayed and distanced ourselves from that for which Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov originally stood; we became different in kind, and degree, from what the Patriarchs had been. As a result, Hashem ceased looking upon us as the recipients of their extended merit.

The above analysis forces the question once again: Why does Hashem listen to our *tefilah*? Rav Soloveitchik responded to this query by citing Rabbeinu Tam’s (1100-1171)

cogent comment (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 55a, s.v. u-Shmuel*): “*Zechut avot tamah, aval berit avot lo tamah.*” This means even though *zechut avot* has ceased, we will always have *berit avot* (the Promise and Covenant of the Patriarchs). *Berit avot*, in contradistinction to *zechut avot*, is not contingent upon our behavior. Instead, Rav Soloveitchik suggests, it is an unconditional juridical agreement that can never be abrogated. Hashem absolutely promised us that He would always deal with us in a manner that reflected the terms of this original contract – no matter how far we might stray. *Berit avot* is the unbreakable and immutable agreement to which *b’nai Yisrael* and Hashem are both party. Hashem “must” deal with us as *Knesset Yisrael*, the mystical and grand trans-historical entity that began with our forefathers in the lonely deserts of *Eretz Yisrael*. Since each of us is an essential component of *Knesset Yisrael*, He listens to each of our prayers when they are uttered in an earnest and heartfelt fashion. In a word, the *berit avot* is *leolam voed* (forever). It is our assurance that we will always have a voice that will be heard. (Based upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s posthumous work, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish’ah be-Av Kinnot*, pages 51-56)

With the above in mind, we now have a new appreciation of what it means when we say “*Shema koleinu Hashem Elokeinu*” (“Hear our voice Hashem our G-d”) when we pray the *Shmoneh Esrei* (*Amidah* or the Silent Prayer). This new understanding allows us to utter these words with a fresh sense of confidence and inspiration. Now, we can rest assured that Hashem will hear our prayers; He will hearken to our voice – for this is the essence of the *berit avot*. This thought is at once comforting and existentially uplifting. This may well be the reason, as well, why *Dovid Hamelech* declared in Psalms: “The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18,

translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) He, too, knew that Hashem would always hear our *tefilot* (prayers).

May Hashem always “remember” the *berit avot*, and thereby hear our prayers for evermore. In addition, may we always be near to Him and be among those “who call Him with sincerity.” *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

\*\*\* I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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