

Parashat Vaetchanan, 5771, 2011:

The Power of Prayer

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* begins with the sole instance in *Tanach* of the term “*Vaetchanan*” (“and I entreated”). The halachic Midrash to *Sefer Devarim*, entitled “the *Sifrei*,” explains that this is an expression of *tefilah* (prayer): “*Tefilah* is also called *techina* (to plea, beseech, entreat). As the Torah states [*Sefer Devarim* 3:23]: ‘I [Moshe] entreated the L-rd at that time, saying....’” Rashi (1040-1105) follows this approach in his second explanation of our word: “This is one of the ten expressions that are called prayer that are found in the *Sifrei*.”

Even though prayer is found throughout *Tanach* and Rabbinic literature, its efficacy is 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! (Translation my own)

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, he suggested, 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 behavioral 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, Yitzhak, and Yaakov originally stood. We, therefore, became different in kind and degree from what the Patriarchs had been. As a result, Hashem stopped looking upon us as the recipients of our forefathers' extended merit.

This, then, 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 brit avot lo tamah.*" This means even though *zechut avot* has ceased, we will always have *brit avot* (the Promise and Covenant of the Patriarchs). What, however, does the term "*brit avot*" actually mean?

The Italian rabbi, Bible commentator, philosopher and physician, Rabbi Ovadiah ben Yaakov Sforno (approximately 1475-1550), explained the nature of *brit avot* in the following fashion:

The three-fold thread of Avraham, his son [Yitzhak], and his grandson [Yaakov] enabled the entire world to be filled with Hashem's glory as a result of their calling upon His name. Based upon their actions, they found favor in His eyes, and G-d established a *brit* (covenant) with them to be their G-d, and their children's G-d, for all eternity. Included

within this covenant is a place for their future offspring, for the time when they will become a nation. It is a place that is sufficient for the ingathering [of all their heirs], and therein, they will become a singular nation to serve Him shoulder to shoulder [i.e. with one heart and mind]. (*Introduction to Sefer Bereishit, Sepere shlishit*, translation and brackets my own)

Allow me to outline the main points of this singularly significant passage:

1. Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov essentially introduced G-d's presence to the entire world.
2. Subsequently, the Patriarchs found favor in the Al-mighty's eyes and were rewarded with a unique covenant.
3. The covenant stated that G-d would be the G-d of the Patriarchs and their offspring for all eternity, and that He would bestow His land to them (Israel) when they would become a nation, so that they could serve him in loyalty and heartfelt service.

Clearly, according to Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno and those who follow in his footsteps, the *brit avot*, unlike *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 that He would always relate to us in a manner that reflected the terms of this original contract – no matter how far we might stray. *Brit avot*, therefore, is the unbreakable and immutable agreement to which *B'nai Yisrael* and Hashem are both party. Hashem obligated Himself to treat us for evermore as *Knesset Yisrael*, the mystical and grand trans-historical entity that began with our forefathers in the lonely and desolate deserts of *Eretz Yisrael*. Since each of us is an indispensable component of *Knesset Yisrael*, He listens to each of our prayers when they are uttered in an earnest and sincere fashion. In a word, the *brit 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 L-rd is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinnot*, pages 51-56)

With this in mind, we now have a new appreciation of what it really 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, indeed, Hashem will hear our prayers; He will hearken to our voice – for this is the essence of the *brit avot*. This thought is at once spiritually comforting and existentially uplifting. This may well be the basis, as well, for *Dovid Hamelech's* assurance in Psalms that Hashem would always hear our *tefilot* when uttered in the proper manner: “The L-rd is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*).

May our prayers ever be a call to Hashem from the depths of our beings, and may we continuously feel His Divine presence in our lives. Moreover, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our Righteous Messiah) that will culminate in the complete fulfillment of the *brit avot* and the rebuilding of the Third *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple), soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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