

Parashat Va'etchanan 5782, 2022:

Va'etchanan: Entreating the Almighty

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, 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, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* is a continuation of Moshe's farewell address to the Jewish people. It begins with the words, "*Va'etchanan* (and I entreated) Hashem at that time..." (*Sefer Devarim* 3:23, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations) As noted in *Midrash Sifrei Devarim* on our *pasuk*, *va'etchanan* is one of the expressions of *tefilah* in Tanach. Though this, and countless other acts of *tefilah* are found throughout Tanach, the efficacy of prayer, in general, remains an authentic mystery. The problem is straightforward: How can finite man communicate with the 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 the Almighty listen to our *tefilot*? This is one of the most spiritually significant questions we can ask, as it speaks to the essence of our relationship with Hashem. My rebbi and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, wrestled with this issue on numerous occasions. Initially, one might think that Hashem listens to our prayers because of *zechut Avot* (the merit of the Patriarchs). Based on *Talmud Bavli*,

Shabbat 55a, however, the Rav notes that during the time of Yechezkel the prophet (sixth century BCE), *zechut Avot* ceased to exist. In his view, the merit of the *Avot* could extend only so far, since, after many generations, we had radically distanced ourselves from the standards of behavior established by Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. As a result, Hashem no longer viewed us as fitting recipients of their extended merit. (This, and the following material, based upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's posthumous work, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tisha be-Av Kinot*, pages 51-56.)

If we no longer have *zechut Avot*, why does Hashem continue to listen to our *tefilot*? The Rav responded to this question by citing Rabbeinu Tam's (1100-1171) seminal comment: "*Zechut Avot tamah, aval brit Avot lo tamah*" (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 55a*, s.v. *u-Shmuel*), meaning, even though *zechut Avot* is no longer operable, we will always have *brit Avot* (the Covenant of the Patriarchs). In contradistinction to *zechut Avot*, *brit Avot* is not contingent upon our actions. Instead, the Rav asserts, it is an unconditional legal agreement that cannot be annulled. It represents Hashem's promise to us that, no matter how far we may stray, we are forever the heirs of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. For Hashem, we will always be *Knesset Yisrael*, the mystical trans-historical entity that began with our forebears at Mount Sinai. Therefore, since each of us is an essential component of *Knesset Yisrael*, we can be assured the Almighty will listen to our prayers when they are uttered in an earnest and heartfelt fashion. As we say in *Ashrei*, "Hashem is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him with sincerity" (*Sefer Tehillim 145:18*).

The Rav's analysis enables us to better appreciate the *Shemoneh Esrai's* phrase, "*Shema koleinu Hashem Elokeinu*" ("Hear our voice Hashem our G-d"). Understanding that the *brit Avot* guarantees our *tefilot* will be heard *le'olam vo'ed* (for all eternity), allows us to utter these words

with new confidence. May this promise inspire us to encounter the Almighty through our *tefilot* as we strive to move closer to Him. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:
<http://tinurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)