

CHAPTER FIVE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

It's almost official. The scientists are finally working on proving what we have known for thousands of years. Soon it will be receiving the seal of approval from those fellows in white lab coats. In two separate studies, scientists are working to determine how much prayer helps those in need. They are going to try to substantiate if praying helps those who are ill and, furthermore, if long-distance praying is effective.

To the Torah Yid, this sounds foolish. After all these years of saying Tehillim, we are well aware of its positive effects. Be that as it may, let the scientists have their fun. Perhaps at least some of them will come to realize how a heartwarming kapitel can lift one's spirits.

In another development on the scientific front, a recent study has shown that people who pray live longer have lower blood pressure, suffer less heart disease, are less likely to be depressed and have a better life expectancy. Not bad for us Tehillim zuggers, eh? The study took place in America and included forty-two different research programs with a total of 126,000 people living in all parts of the country.

Without going into details of the report, the bottom line was: prayer is good for you. However, it came along with two important caveats. It seems your prayers need to be recited with others, as in a quorum, and you have to understand what you are saying. The conclusion was that a shared religious lifestyle does wonders for one's health, and meaningful prayer gives support to one's positive emotions.

I found the part about understanding what you are saying particularly intriguing. Certain passages of Tehillim seem to roll off the tongue without most of us having an inkling of their import, and many are the tales of how people found salvation through the pages of their Tehillim despite their lack of understanding. Although generations of holy Jews have given every letter a poignancy that creates its own holiness, people seeking connection with the holy words definitely find certain chapters difficult. Their message seems beyond our sphere of experience, and we are left wondering where we can find ourselves within the words written.

The fifth kapitel is one such chapter. It speaks on two levels. David describes one who is loyal to the Torah and cries out, *When I can speak, Hashem, listen, and even when I can't verbalize my concerns, understand them.* He then goes on to speak of those who are insincere in their Torah adherence and prays that Hashem drive them away: *Condemn spokesmen of disillusion to oblivion. Hashem abhors*

bloodthirsty and deceptive people.

Here is a king who is suffering due to the machinations of a group of rebels who act in public as if they are devoted to doing Hashem's will, but who in truth seek the blood of Hashem's anointed one. *Hashem, guide me on the paths of Your righteousness and smooth the way for me, because my enemies are watching my every step. Their talk is insincere within is treachery.*

While this is all moving, it presents the Tehillim zugger who understands the words with a problem. When does a small insignificant Yid ever come across such world-class evil people that he can identify with King David's plea?

Reb Nachman of Breslov was a great exponent of saying Tehillim regularly. He tells us: "The essence of the recital of Tehillim is to say all the psalms about yourself and find yourself in each and every kapitel. For the psalms were made for all of Klal Yisrael in general and each individual in particular. The war that every person has with his evil inclination and everything that takes place in his life are present in Tehillim and explained there. Indeed, the whole sefer Tehillim was recited and established only in order to fight the war against the evil inclination and its minions, which are the chief enemies and adversaries of a man. This is what David really prayed to Hashem about that He save him from them."

So although I may not come across men who seek to kill me, I can surely relate to the devils that live within myself.

David couched his pleas with words that spoke of external enemies, but his message was for all generations. That message is clear: One must beg Hashem for help in overcoming the wily acts of our own homegrown urges.

This is no simple matter. It is all too human to deny that such forces live and thrive within our good selves. No one wants to look in the mirror in the morning and accept the fact that he isn't the charitable, loving tzaddik he likes others to think he is. In truth, we allow ourselves to be fooled into a false sense of righteousness, thinking, After all, look at all the bad that seems to thrive all around us. I'm certainly not like that.

Thus David calls out to our inner self: *And all those who take refuge in You will be happy, singing joyously forever....* If you want to find real joy, you must strive to take refuge in Hashem. This can be done only when you take command of the battle you must wage against your own internal enemies.

True, the whole of one's life is traversed with skirmishes and battles that seem unending, but this is the majesty of Tehillim. It speaks to every level and every time. The pintele of our souls, that inner spark, knows from whence David cries. Yes, the battle must be waged, and the first step is to acknowledge the enemy's presence.

Yet we need not despair. The kapitel concludes, *All this will happen when You, Hashem, bless the righteous, Your favor crowning him with protective armor.*

These words tell us that one who stands on the battlefield of his inner landscape and strives against his evil inclinations can be assured that Hashem will envelop him with Divine favor, which will totally shield him from the forces raging against him.

Reb Nachman of Breslov once said, "If you believe that things can be ruined, you should believe that things can be repaired." There is no room for despair, because David has given us the hope to overcome our adversaries. We need but open up his cherished gift and speak to our hearts with his unique words.

The Torah tells us, "And you shall seek Hashem from there, and you shall find Him" (Devarim 4:29), and the Kotzker Rebbe would remark, "The seeking is the finding." Some will despair when considering the difficulties that abound in striving for closeness with Hashem. The Kotzker tells us differently. He says that the act of seeking is in itself the means of finding.

Those scientists speak of a longer and healthier life for those who pray. I don't know about such things. The last time I looked, such matters were in Hashem's hands. I do, however, believe that one thing is certain: The time we have on this earth can be, and should be, a positive life spent in growing closer to our holy Source through battles fought and hopefully won. And the resulting glory of having experienced a searching for Hashem that was itself a finding will hopefully lead to Hashem's enveloping us with favor like protective armor.

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