

OF PRAYER AND SLEEP

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

In the Talmud (Megillah 10b) we find that a number of the Sages prefaced their discourses on Megillas Esther, the story of the miracle of Purim, which is read on Purim. These prefaces varied from Sage to Sage. Rav Gedalia Schorr explained that each one of the Sages wanted to accentuate specific points of importance in the Megillah. The preface acted as a key of sorts with which the students could comprehend the lessons contained in the Megillah and the nature of the miracle.

We find (Megillah 11a) that Rav Masna used to preface his words on the Megillah with the verse in the Torah (Devarim 4:7) "For which is a great nation that has a G-d who is close to it, as is Hashem, our G-d, whenever we call to Him?" Rav Schorr notes that this preface served to focus attention on the aspect of the miracle of Purim that we must publicize. Rav Masna was explaining that G-d accepts our prayers in our moments of despair. He wants to hear from us when we are distressed, so that He can aid us in our plight. G-d is close to His people, and our prayers are the way He desires communication. The Megillah serves as a prime example of this concept. The Jewish nation seemed doomed. They were to be eradicated. Under the leadership and advice of Mordechai and Esther, they fasted and poured their hearts out to G-d in prayer. Salvation then came soon after. When we read the Megillah, Rav Masna says, we are to remember how lucky we are to have an open line to G-d, via prayer. We are to remember that this direct communication with G-d exists because we are close with Him and He is close to us. The story contained in the Megillah is a manifestation of the verse in Devarim.

When Haman decided to present his plan to destroy the Jews to Achashverosh, he began by portraying the Jewish nation in a most unflattering light. He said (Esther 3:8) "There is a certain people scattered abroad...their laws are different from every other peoples'..." The Hebrew expression for "there is a certain people" is "yeshno am echad." Our Sages explain that Haman was alluding to something very important when this expression was used. The word for sleeping, "yashen," is very similar to the word for "there is a," "yeshno." Haman was saying that the G-d of these people was sleeping, He is not visibly acting on behalf of His people. For this reason, Haman felt that the Jewish nation was particularly vulnerable to attack.

Rav Schorr explained that Hashem's "sleep" is what we might term "letting nature take its course." We people see nothing particularly out of the ordinary happening. No miracles are apparent. We seem to be going with the flow. G-d appears to be sleeping only when we, His people, are behaving in similar manner. We may be performing Mitzvos and keeping G-d's word. However, if we are acting

as if we are doing these deeds in our sleep, without any thought, life, feeling, or care, G-d acts towards us in a similar manner.

In the Megillah we find that the fortune of the Jews began to turn because someone could not sleep. Achashverosh was restless at night, and his servants read him the section of his chronicles which dealt with Mordechai's actions to thwart an assassination of the king. When the king was informed Mordechai had not been rewarded for this, he knew the situation had to be rectified. What resulted from this was the downfall of Haman, the rise of Mordechai, and ultimately the salvation of the Jews. Why did Achashverosh find himself the victim of insomnia that night? Because the Jews woke up. They started to pray with fervor and feeling to G-d; after all, their lives were at stake. Once the Jews woke up, so too did G-d, and therefore Achashverosh had to as well.

The Megillah, as Rav Masna points out, illustrates how our prayers play a special role in our relationship with G-d. G-d is always close to us. When we distance ourselves, G-d may appear to be hidden or sleeping, but He is truly there looking out for us. He eagerly awaits our vibrant prayers, so outward displays of His affection are called for. Praying, as it is done on a daily basis, may become hackneyed. We may pray on auto-pilot, without much thought as to what we are doing. On Purim, we are presented with an opportunity to "wake up and smell the coffee." We read the Megillah and see what prayer can do. This "caffeine jolt" should carry us through the remainder of the year, so that our prayers are imbued with life, and G-d's miraculous ways are very evident.

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