

A POOR MAN'S PRAYER

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As an epilogue to the terrifying prophecy in last week's parashah, our parashah begins: "You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem." This is intended to console us: "Whatever terrible events may befall you, you still stand before Hashem." Furthermore, says R' Avraham Shaag z"l (Hungary, Eretz Yisrael; died 1873) all of our suffering is for the purpose specified in the continuation of the parashah: "For you to pass into the covenant of Hashem . . . in order to establish you as a people to Him."

The Midrash Rabbah (Shmot 21:4) says that when Bnei Yisrael stood in fear on the banks of the Yam Suf, Hashem told Moshe that his prayer was not wanted (see Shmot 14:15). "Why do you pray to Me? My children have already prayed and I have heard them." R' Shaag explains this as follows:

There are two kinds of prayer. There is a prayer which follows the proper formula - first, praise of Hashem, then, a request, and finally, an expression of thanks. Then there is the prayer of a person who is suffering. He is not capable of following a formula; rather, he cries out in his pain and begs for salvation. The former is referred to in the midrash as "Tefilah l'Moshe" / "Moshe's prayer," while the latter is called, "Tefilah le'ani" / "A poor man's prayer."

When one understands that his suffering is for the best, it becomes impossible to beseech Hashem to end that suffering. Moshe had such an understanding, and he, therefore, did not pray the way a

poor man prays. Hashem's greatness is that He heard and accepted the disorganized cry of the Jewish people, their tefilah le'ani, even before Moshe had a chance to finish his "proper" prayer.

Do not think that the poor man's prayer reflects a lack of belief in Hashem, says R' Shaag. No, He understands that it is man's pain which causes him to call out so and not to reflect on the reason for, and the benefits of, his suffering. Nevertheless, at this time of year, as we prepare to lay our prayers before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah, the opening verses of Parashat Nitzavim invite us to reflect on the fact that suffering is merely a cleansing before entering into Hashem's covenant. (Derashot Ha'Rosh No. 46)

"See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil." (30:15)

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l comments on the use of the word "today" in this verse. The significance of this word, he explains, is that each and every day, a person must choose between the two paths that lay in front of him: the way of good (learning Torah and doing mitzvot) and the way of evil (forsaking the Torah and mitzvot). If he has not been going in the ways of Torah and mitzvot until now, he must start from now on to choose the correct path.

Moreover, even a person who has been going in the ways of Hashem until now should not rest, thinking that he will automatically and effortlessly continue in the way that he has been going. One should not trust in himself to continue as he has been. Therefore, "today" - every single day - a person must choose between the good and the bad that are before him. (Darash Moshe)

"The hidden are for Hashem, our God, but the revealed are for us and our children forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah." (29:28)

R' Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer z"l (died 1872) explains this verse as follows: The Torah contains mitzvot duties that man owes to Hashem and duties that man owes to his fellow man. Generally, the mitzvot between man and his fellow man are the mitzvot that seem to "make sense"; even if the Torah had not told us to do them, we would have done so. These include, for example, the prohibitions on murder and adultery. On the other hand, the mitzvot between man and Hashem are mitzvot for which we can not seem to find a logical reason.

Because we understand the importance of the inter-personal mitzvot, there is little risk that we will attribute to them a time or a place. The need for them is obvious and they will be observed forever. On the other hand, the mitzvot between man and Hashem, because they cannot be understood, tempt man to try to limit their application. (Man thinks he understands their reasons, and therefore, their limits.) Thus the Torah warns: "The hidden are for Hashem, our God" - referring to the mitzvot between man and the Creator - "but the revealed are for us and our children" - referring to the mitzvot between man and his fellow man. Both sets of mitzvot are: "forever, to carry out all the words of this Torah." (Ketav Sofer Al HaTorah)

Selichot

Beginning from Rosh Chodesh Elul, it is customary to arise in the early morning hours to recite selichot/penitential. (The custom of Ashkenazim is not to begin from Rosh Chodesh but from the Motza'ei Shabbat/Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah.) (Shulchan Aruch: O.C. 521, para. 1, with parenthetical comments by R' Moshe Isserless z"l)

Rabbenu Nissim z"l (Spain; 1290-1375) explains the origin of this custom. He asks first: Why is man judged on Rosh Hashanah? The midrash explains that the world was created on the 25th of Elul, which was the first day of the week. Adam was created five days later, on the sixth day of that week, and on that day he sinned and was judged. G-d said, "Just as you were judged on this day and you left the court with your head held high [because you were forgiven], so, too, your descendants will be judged on this day and will leave the court with their heads held high." This is why man is judged five days after the 25th of Elul.

Rabbenu Nissim adds: This is why it is customary in Barcelona to arise early on the 25th day of Elul to recite selichot/penitential prayers. Of course, this makes sense only according to the Tanna/sage of the Mishnah Rabbi Eliezer, who says that the world was created in Tishrei [actually on the 25th of Tishrei]. However, according to the Tanna Rabbi Yehoshua, who says that the world was created in Nissan [actually on the 25th of Adar], there is no reason to begin selichot on the 25th of Elul. Indeed, according to Rabbi Yehoshua, an explanation is required as to why Rosh Hashanah should be a day of judgment (since according to R' Yehoshua, Adam was judged in Nissan, not Tishrei).

The answer is that Yom Kippur has been a day of forgiveness since the time that Bnei Yisrael were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf. It was on Yom Kippur that Moshe brought down the second Luchot/Tablets, thus confirming that G-d had forgiven them. And, since Moshe had ascended to Har Sinai forty days before Yom Kippur, that entire 40 day period has been designated as a time of repentance and forgiveness. As for the significance of Rosh Hashanah within this 40 day period, it is possible, Rabbenu Nissim speculates, that Hashem chose to judge man ten days before Yom Kippur in order to allow him time (i.e., ten days) for a second chance. Alternatively, it is possible that Rosh Hashanah was the day on which Hashem began to give in to Moshe's prayers.

Since Rabbi Yehoshua's view attributes no significance to the 25th of Elul, some communities do not arise for selichot on that day. There are, however, some communities that arise for selichot beginning on Rosh Chodesh Elul. (Commentary to Rosh Hashanah 16a)

The Vilna Gaon explains further: We begin reciting selichot on Motza'ei Shabbat rather than on the 25th of Elul because the 25th of Elul can fall on different days of the week and people can easily forget the date. In contrast, it is easier to remember to begin on Motza'ei Shabbat.

As for the difference between the communities that start on Rosh Chodesh and those that start on Motza'ei Shabbat, it appears that the former adopt the view of Rabbi Yehoshua and the latter adopt

the view of Rabbi Eliezer. (Be'ur Ha'Gra: O.C. 521)

Letters from our Sages

R' Moshe Rosenstein z"l (1880-1941) was mashgiach ruchani (dean and guidance counselor) of the Lomza Yeshiva in Poland in the 1920s and '30s. In this week's letter, written to a student 66 years ago this week, we see a snapshot of R' Rosenstein's life.

Greetings with a love that is not forgotten. I received your dear letter this week and we rejoiced at the good news that a son was born to you with mazal tov. May his parents merit to raise and educate him to Torah, marriage and good deeds, and may he be a loyal son to our nation and our holy Torah, and may he find that his heart is loyal to Hashem, as was said about our Patriarch Avraham. May your honor and your honorable wife merit to raise him in the Holy Land, as you wish, and may I also merit to see your honor's countenance in the Holy Land.

I began writing this letter on Erev Shabbat and was delayed until Monday. We were occupied until today by the bad news that came to us on Erev Shabbat that the crown of our glory, the spirit of our lives and the joy of our hearts, our master, the Chafetz Chaim z"l, was taken from us. This news made a terrifying impression upon us; our hearts were broken, and our spirits were crushed, and the spirit could not arise again within us as we reflected upon the fact that the apple of our eye, the Chafetz Chaim is no longer in this world . . .

The wedding [apparently, of one of R' Rosenstein's children] is scheduled to be, with mazal tov and in a good and propitious time, on Friday of Parashat Lech Lecha, on the seventh of the month of Marcheshvan. [Ed. note: It was customary to hold the wedding ceremony on Friday afternoon and the wedding meal on Friday night, perhaps to save the cost of an extra meat meal.] Although things are very difficult for me right now and I presently have no means of paying for a wedding, nevertheless, I cannot postpone it any longer. I will hope that the G-d of my salvation will not leave me.

Regarding my book, I do not know whether it should be published or not. In truth, I am embarrassed to put upon myself the mantle of an author, and I also do not know whether my book is worthy of being printed. Therefore, your distinguished honor should do as you see fit. I hope that whatever leaves your hands will be properly done, and may merit come to those who are meritorious . . .

I have no further news. Let us hope that Hashem will have mercy upon His nation and raise the glory of His nation, and may our Rosh Hashanah prayers be fulfilled through us: "So, too, Hashem, grant honor to Your people, praise to those who revere You, good hope to those who seek You, and eloquent speech to those who hope to You." May we merit to hear good tidings and consolation, and may I merit to hear from your honor and his family, may they live, only good news.

From me, who loves you and hopes to see good for you, Moshe Rosenstein, who blesses you for a ktivah va'chatimah tovah, a year that is good and sweet, a year of life and peace.

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