

DECEITFUL PRAYER

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**Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
Edited by Shlomo Katz**

Shoftim

Vol. X, No. 42 (479)

First appeared: 2 Elul 5756, August 17, 1996

Siddur Avodat Yisrael writes that there is a chapter of Tehilim which corresponds to each parashah -
- this week, psalm 17.

The psalm opens, "Hear, Hashem, what is righteous," and closes (verse 15), "In righteousness I shall behold Your face." Thus it alludes to one of the best known verses in the parashah (16:20), "Righteousness, righteousness shall you pursue."

This week's parashah teaches many of the special laws that apply to the king. Verse 2 of this psalm, "May my judgment come from You," alludes to another law of the king, as Midrash Shocher Tov explains: David said, "The halachah is that a king cannot be judged by his subjects; therefore, let me be judged by You." Perhaps one reason for this law is the command in our parashah that we be in awe of our king (see 17:15).

[Incidentally, this midrash appears to argue with the gemara (Sanhedrin 19a) which holds that legitimate kings from the House of David can be judged. It is only other Jewish kings who cannot be judged, because, not being as righteous, they may take revenge. (See Margalioth Hayam)]

The verses and commentaries on this page relate to the chapter of Tehilim associated with our parashah (see page 1).

"Give ear to my prayer from lips without deceit. May my judgment be dismissed from before You, Your eyes behold directly." (17:1)

Rav Mendel Hager (the "Vishuva Rav") z"l explains: Chazal teach (Megillah 29a) that shuls and batei midrash/study halls in the diaspora will one day be transplanted to the Land of Israel. Chazal also teach that our prayers ascend to Heaven through Eretz Yisrael. It follows, therefore, that one who prays in a synagogue will have his prayers accepted more readily than one who does not, for the former is in a place which has some connection (even now) to the Holy Land.

However, Rav Hager continues, this is true only if one does not engage in idle conversation in shul. Otherwise, he is like those about whom Chazal said (Ketubot 110b), "One who lives in the diaspora is like a godless person." This means: "One who lives in the diaspora -- even when he is in shul -- is like a godless person."

This was David's prayer: Let my prayer come from lips without deceit, i.e., that are not engaged in other activities in the middle of prayer. Then, at the time when You judge me, may my judgment be dismissed from before You, because Your eyes will behold me directly, as if I had prayed in Eretz Yisrael. (She'erit Menachem)

"May my judgment come from You . . ." (17:2)

Hashem can judge man Himself or through a messenger, explains Rav Yosef Yaavetz Hadoresh z"l. To be judged by a messenger means that an angel is told what the law is and what a fitting punishment is, and he is sent out to execute that punishment wherever he find that law broken.

Thus, only when one merits to be judged by Hashem is repentance possible, for the messenger cannot deviate from his appointed task. This is why David prayed, "May my judgment come from You." (Peirush Al Tehilim)

"Do not deviate from the word which they will tell you, right or left." (17:11)

Rav Meir Simcha Hakohen of Dvinsk z"l writes: The Torah desired that -- aside from our keeping the Torah, which is eternal -- the sages should create stringencies as the need arises from time to time, using the wisdom which has been handed down to them. And, if a later bet din exceeds their wisdom, it can nullify the decree.

However, lest every individual claim this right for himself, the Torah commands, "Do not deviate . . ., right or left." Indeed, says Rav Meir Simcha, it is possible that an earlier bet din erred in making a certain decree, but we cannot have every man making his own Torah. (Meshech Chochmah)

"You shall separate three cities for yourselves in the midst of your Land . . ." (19:2)

The mitzvah of setting aside arei miklat/cities of refuge to which manslaughterers can flee is mentioned several times in the Torah. In Shmot 21:12 we read: "One who had not lain in ambush and G-d had caused it to come to his hand, I shall provide you with a place to which he shall flee." Why, asks Rav Eliezer Zusia Portugal (the "Skulener Rebbe") z"l, does the Torah say, as if to Moshe, "I shall provide you with a place . . ."?

Every Jew contains a little spark of Moshe's soul, Rav Portugal explains. All of the Torah we learn and all of the mitzvot we do are because Moshe taught us the Torah. And, when the manslaughterer escapes those who would avenge the victim and lives to serve G-d for another day, that spark of Moshe's soul benefits. Thus, it is as if the soul of Moshe himself is fleeing to the ir miklat. (Noam Eliezer: Parashat Mishpatim)

[In Parashat Va'etchanan (4:41) we read that Moshe set aside the three cities of refuge on the eastern bank of the Jordan. Although they would not become "operational" until the western bank was captured decades later (and Moshe would not live to see that day), Moshe said, "That which I can do, let me do." (Rashi)]

Moshe's action teaches us an important lesson, but why did he choose the mitzvah of ir miklat to teach us this? In light of the Skulener Rebbe's idea, we can understand Moshe's actions on a deeper level.]

Rav Eliezer Zusia Portugal z"l Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan 5658 (1898) - 29 Menachem Av 5742 (1982)

Rav Eliezer Zusia, the "Skulener Rebbe," was not a chassidic rebbe at all until well into his sixties. His first "career" was as Rabbi of the town of Skulyany (Skulen), in Bessarabia. His focus there was on increasing the spiritual level of his town-folk, including writing booklets in Yiddish specifically tailored to the spiritual needs of his neighbors. When the Sadigorer Rebbe visited Skulen and saw Rav Eliezer Zusia's accomplishments, he urged him to move to Czernowitz, where he could serve a larger community. Rav Eliezer Zusia complied, and before long was chosen as chief rabbi of that city. (The wisdom of the Sadigorer Rebbe was demonstrated soon after, when Bessarabia was invaded by the Russian communists, under whom the Jews suffered terribly.)

Czernowitz, too, changed hands several times during World War II, eventually ending up in the Soviet Union. A new chapter in Rav Eliezer Zusia's life opened after the war, when he became the father of hundreds of war orphans, even formally adopting scores of them. (Rav Eliezer Zusia had one natural son--today, the Skulener Rebbe in Brooklyn.) Later Rav Eliezer Zusia smuggled his "family" into Rumania and settled in Bucharest where he adopted even more children. In his will, Rav Eliezer Zusia would ask that his "children" show their appreciation by remaining loyal to Judaism and

studying Torah at every possible moment.

In 1959, Rav Eliezer Zusia was jailed for five months on the charge of being a spy for Israel and the U.S. Finally, in the spring of 1960, he was able to settle in the United States. He chose the U.S. over Israel so he could better help those who remained in Rumania. He was encouraged to open a yeshiva, but he said, "What would my yeshiva add to all the others? A person who wants to do a mitzvah must ask how he can give the most 'pleasure' to G-d." Instead, he founded the "Chessed L'Avraham" network of schools to compete with leftist schools in Israel for the children of immigrants to that country.

In 1961, Rav Eliezer Zusia visited Israel for the first time. One of his side-trips was to a leftist kibbutz to forgive a Rumanian socialist who had been one of his fiercest opponents years before. (That man's descendants later became observant.)

Rav Eliezer Zusia left several works. An excerpt appears above.

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