

# MOSHE'S PRAYERS (AND OURS)

by Shlomo Katz

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**Va'etchanan: Moshe's Prayers (and Ours)**

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Today's Learning:

Avot 6:5-6

Orach Chaim 690:12-14 Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Batra 122 Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bikkurim 10

As our parashah opens, Moshe relates to the Jewish people that he implored Hashem to be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. The Midrash relates that Moshe argued as follows:

"You have written in the Torah (Shmot 21:5-6), 'If the slave shall say, "I love my master, my wife, and my children -- I shall not go free." Then . . . he shall serve him forever.' You, G-d, are my Master. The Torah is my wife. The Jewish people are my children. I love them all. I do not wish to go free - in the sense of the verse (Tehilim 88:6), 'The dead are free [of mitzvot].' Therefore, let me serve You forever."

What did Hashem answer? "Rav lach" / "It is too much for you!" (Devarim 3:26). How was this an appropriate response to Moshe's argument?

Our Sages teach that when the Torah says that the slave who refuses to go free should work "forever," it does not mean this literally. Rather, it means that the slave should remain with his master until the next yovel / jubilee year, i.e., for up to 50 more years. Moshe prayed: "Let me enter Eretz

Yisrael and live there for 50 years."

Hashem answered, "Rav lach" / "It is too much for you!" The standard span of man's life is 70 years, as Moshe himself said in Tehilim (Chapter 90 - "A prayer by Moshe"): "The days of our years among them are seventy years." But you, Moshe, are already 120 years old (i.e., 70+50). Any more would be too much for you. (Quoted without attribution in Otzar Tzaddikei U'geonei Ha'dorot).

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*"I implored Hashem at that time . . ." (3:23)*

R' Chaim Meir Hager z"l (the Vizhnitzer Rebbe; died 1972) offers the following suggestions for improving the quality of our prayers:

1. One should demand of himself during his prayers not to look to his sides and not to hear anything that is going on around him.
2. One should make a supreme effort with all his strength to focus on the words. One should imagine that the entire world is desolate and nothing exists besides himself and the words of the prayers.
3. One should pray with joy and great enthusiasm, and with love and awe for G-d. One should not allow thoughts of his past sins to interfere with his prayers, for such thoughts are the work of the yetzer hara.
4. One should reflect on the fact that angels must wait until their appointed times to praise G-d [see Rashi to Bereishit 32:27], while lowly man can praise G-d at any time. [This indicates how much G-d values man's prayers.]
5. One should pray from a siddur, for this drives away foreign thoughts.
6. If one has recited part of the prayers without the proper kavanah / focus, he should not lose heart. He should simply start to focus from that point onward.
7. One should pray with the congregation, not come late and "jump on the moving train" at Yehi Khavod and jump off at U'va Le'tziyon.
8. One should not speak from the beginning of the prayers until the end. One must remember that he is standing before the Great and Awesome G-d!

(Quoted in Chaim Me'irim, 8 Nissan 5762, p. 56)

**On the same subject, R' Hager related the following story:**

A chassid once came to R' Chaim Hager of Kossov z"l (1795-1854; known as the "Torat Chaim") and complained that he was bothered by "foreign thoughts" during his prayers. R' Chaim told him:

"If a Jew wakes up, washes his hands in the manner of G-d- fearing people, recites Birchot Ha'Torah as required, immerses in the mikveh, studies Mishnah or Gemara or Zohar, or recites Tehilim (each

person according to his own level), and then goes to pray, and even so, he is bothered by mundane thoughts - those can be called 'foreign thoughts.'

"However, if a person wakes up, balances his checkbook or reviews other business matters, and then goes to pray with no preparation, the mundane thoughts that enter his head are not 'foreign' - they are that person's own thoughts!"

(Ibid. p. 70)

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*"Anochi Hashem / I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery." (5:6)*

*"Shma Yisrael / Hear, O Israel -- Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only." (6:4)*

These two verses from our parashah are recognized as two of the most important expressions of our faith. But what message do they really convey? Some say that these verses command us to believe that there is a Creator, but this, writes R' Yaakov Emden z"l (1697-1776) cannot be. Nobody with any sense [R' Emden's words] can fail to recognize that there is a Creator. Obviously, a world that operates in such an orderly way could not have arisen by chance!

Rather, these verses command us to know G-d by His Four Letter Name ("Y-K-V-K", which we pronounce "Hashem".) R' Emden explains: All of G-d's other names are adjectives that describe His deeds, while the Four Letter Name is His name. Of course, this abstract concept is not something that the average person can understand. Thus, a natural extension of this mitzvah is that we grow spiritually to the point where we can delve into these matters.

(Migdal Oz: Otzar Hatov)

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*"Safeguard the Sabbath day to sanctify it, as Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you." (5:12)*

*"Honor your father and your mother, as Hashem, your G-d, has commanded you." (5:16)*

Do we not know that these commandments came from Hashem? R' Shraga Feivish Schneebalg (mid-20th century rabbi in London) explains: These verses are teaching us how to observe mitzvot. Do them "as Hashem has commanded you." Just as He had no ulterior motive for giving us the mitzvot - after all, He gets nothing out of it - so we should perform the mitzvot with no ulterior motives.

(Pitcha Zuta: Kuntreis Shraga Ha'meir La'Torah)

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*"You shall speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you lay down, and when you arise." (6:7)*

The Gemara (Berachot 10b) records a dispute between the sages of Bet Hillel and the sages of Bet Shammai regarding the proper position for reciting Kriat Shema. The latter group of sages derives from the above verse that one should recite the morning Kriat Shema standing (as it is written, "when you arise") and the evening Kriat Shema leaning over (as it is written, "when you lay down"). The sages of Bet Hillel disagree and state that both recitations of Kriat Shema may be done in any position in which one finds himself when the time for Shema arrives -- sitting, standing, even lying down.

The Gemara and the later halachic authorities state very emphatically that the halachah follows Bet Hillel's view. The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 63:3) states that if one is already sitting and he stands up to recite the morning Kriat Shema, he is called a "sinner." One reason for this is the general principle that: "The views of Bet Shammai do not count in the face of the views of Bet Hillel." However, R' Amram Gaon z"l (Babylonia; died 876) suggests that there is another reason why one should sit, not stand, when reciting Kriat Shema:

The Midrash teaches: The verses of Shema are the King's (i.e., Hashem's) proclamation. It is usual when a mortal king's proclamation is read that all of the king's subjects drop what they are doing and stand in the town square to hear the king's words. Not so with Hashem's proclamation, says the Midrash. Hashem says, "I do not trouble you to stand in the town square. Read it `while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you lay down, and when you arise'." We see, writes R' Amram Gaon, that Hashem takes pride, so-to-speak, in not troubling us to stand for Him. How then can a person attempt to be "pious" and stand for Shema!?

(Seder R' Amram Gaon)

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R' Simcha Zissel Ziv z"l (The "Alter of Kelm") born 5584 (1824) - died 8 Av 5658 (1898)

Of the three leading students of R' Yisrael Salanter, founder of the mussar movement, R' Simcha Zissel was the one who R' Yisrael expected to carry on the movement. R' Simcha Zissel devoted his entire adult life to R' Yisrael's teachings. Though he never held any official position -- when he was offered the rabbinate of St. Petersburg, he recommended his friend R' Yitzchak Blazer instead -- his students included many of the mussar greats of the next generation: R' Nosson Zvi Finkel of Slobodka, R' Yosef Yoizel Horowitz of Novhardok, R' Aharon Bakst, R' Reuven Dessler (whose son authored the classic *Michtav M'Eliyahu*), R' Nachum Ziv, and R' Hirsch Broida.

The historian, R' Dov Katz, summarized R' Simcha Zissel's approach to mussar / character improvement as consisting of three guiding principles: (1) one should become emotionally involved in his studies, whether joyful or sad; (2) one should ask himself after everything he learns, "What did I think before, and what do I know differently now?"; and (3) one's study should always include stripping away the veneer and getting to the essence of the topic.

R' Simcha Zissel taught that the whole world is a classroom where one can learn to improve his

character and increase his belief in G-d. Such study was not limited to books or to Torah sources. Of course, worthwhile lessons do not come merely from observation. Rather, intense reflection is required. Also, one must realize that this study never ends. This is why Torah scholars are called, "talmidei chachamim" / "students of wise men." R' Simcha Zissel used to quote Socrates, who said that true wisdom is knowing that one doesn't know.

R' Simcha Zissel was very sickly his whole life. Therefore, much of his teaching was through letters that he wrote to his students, rather than in person. (He also encouraged his followers to establish groups to strengthen each other and review his teachings.) Only a small portion of his written legacy has been published (Based on Tnuat Hamussar).

[Ed. note: This biography is dedicated to Mr. Bert King - R' Simcha Zissel's great-great-grandson, a distinguished member of the Silver Spring, Maryland community, and a dear friend of Hamaayan - who will be making aliyah in the coming weeks iy"h.]

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