

ALL THE WORLD'S A TORAH STAGE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

If you listen to my commandments that I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.^[2]

Our *pasuk* has a double pedigree. Not only is it part of the Shma, but it is the source of the mitzvah to pray.^[3] The service of the heart, say Chazal, is *tefillah*^[4].

It might surprise us that prayer, which is central not only to us but to quite a few faiths, is not dealt with more extensively in Chumash. What is lacking in the Torah, however, is compensated for in Neviim and Kesuvim.

Shlomoh gave us one of the longest prayers in Tanach at the time of the dedication of the *beis hamikdash* that he built. We will gain much by taking a closer look at what Shlomoh left for us.

He refers at the beginning to two forms of prayer. "May You turn to the *rinah* of Your servant, and to his *tefillah* that Your servant prays before you today." Along the way, he introduces a third term:

"From Heaven may You hear their *tefillah* and their *techinah*."^[5] He concludes with this third prayer-word exclusively: "May your eyes be open to the *techinah* of your servant and the *techinah* of Your people Yisroel."^[6]

Our tradition speaks of many different forms of prayer, but we can identify three primary postures. First is that of the *tzadik* living a pleasant life. The focus of his prayer is not requesting or beseeching what he lacks, because he does not see himself as lacking anything. He is, however, aware of how much he has received from Hashem. His prayer gives voice to his gratitude and appreciation; it consists primarily of *song* and praise of G-d. We call this *rinah*, which means song.

A second posture is assumed by the *tzadik* for whom life is not going so well. He has many words to present to the King. His prayer is petitionary. Undergirding it, however, is a justice-claim. He knows that he has faithfully observed Hashem's mitzvos. While no human can plumb the depths of Hashem's plan for the world – or for an individual, the *tzadik* enters the conversation at least with a bargaining chip in hand. He attempts to convince Hashem of the justice of his request. A good word to describe this form of prayer is *tefillah*, which is related to the word *pelilim*,^[7] or litigation and judgment. It implies a give-and-take of arguments and counter-arguments, as the *tzadik* tries to make his best case for a favorable response.

Very different is the prayer of the person who is far from being a *tzadik*, and yet comes with many requests. He is conscious of his vulnerability, of the lack of deservedness in his entreaties. He has nothing to offer; he can only throw himself on Hashem's mercy, which has no limits. His prayer is *tachanunim*, unvarnished supplication.

Shlomoh begins his long, beautiful, prayer with a request to be heard. "May You turn to the *rinah* of Your servant and to his *tefillah* that Your servant prays before you today." Standing at a moment of spiritual elevation as the nation inaugurates a Temple that waited centuries to be built ("...before you today"), his prayer knows only *rinah* and *tefillah*, the voices of pure praise and justified requests.

Shlomoh, however, predicts a tomorrow beyond his today. There will be times that his Temple will be a refuge for the less deserving, when the guilty will present themselves in shame and defeat, begging for the mercy of a loving Father. They will come in the third voice, knowing nothing but supplication, "the *techinah* of Your people Yisroel."

Of course, the acknowledged master of prayer was Shlomoh's father. We will look at just one passage in his work, a line that we ready ourselves to repeat many times in the season of *teshuvah* that is fast upon us.

"One thing I asked of Hashem, that shall I seek: Would that I dwell in Hashem's house all the days of my life, to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to visit in His sanctuary."^[8] We are initially confused. Which is it? Does he wish to "dwell" – which implies constancy and permanence – or to "visit" – which is temporary, episodic?

Chazal^[9] formulated a kind of emergency preparedness package for communities beset by the major challenge of a lack of rainfall. As the situation grew more dire, the intensity of the fast days and prayer grew concomitantly. In the last set of such public fasts, the community would remove the ark that housed its Torah scrolls to the town square. Ashes were placed on the heads of the people, and even on the *sifrei Torah*. The gemara^[10] explains that the removal of the Torah scrolls dramatized their guilt, as if to say, "We had a private vessel, which has been degraded and publicly exposed through our sins."

Rashi calls this a *vidui*, a confession. What does he mean by this? The removal of the Torah scrolls is a dramatization of their desperation, and an expression of their pain. What does he add by calling it a confession?

Let's consider the difference between our places of prayer and the worship centers of some other faiths. In some cases, the temple is the single place where G-d is meaningfully addressed. The Divine service is squeezed into a particular place, and a particular time. That is where G-d is done, so to speak.

Our shuls also incorporate participatory ceremony, just as they do. We adorn our *sefer Torah*, and we

take our turns kissing it. But we are conscious of the fact that our service is not in the honor we accord the *sefer Torah*, but in how well we uphold what is written in it! The shul is not the place where serving Hashem takes place, as much as the point from which that service emanates and spreads outward! Our *avodah* cannot be compacted into a neat structure. It is aimed outward – at the town square!

This is what Rashi meant by a confession. “We had a private vessel.” It is not designed to stay private! **We are supposed to take it to the town square**, at least by applying its content to all facets of life. Our job is to take the *kedushah* of the *beis Hashem* and bring it to all places. Instead, we limited and curtailed our *avodah*. In missing our mission, we even fell into transgression. And now we ironically take the Torah out to the town square in the literal sense, carrying a private vessel outside while it is adorned by ashes.

This is also what Dovid meant. Physically, we cannot spend all our time in the sanctuary. We can only visit at times. But from those visits, we should be able to take away instruction, inspiration and purpose. We should exit Hashem's special sanctuary with the commitment to take the Torah's message to all corners of the world and all moments of life. When we live that way, we never leave. We spend all the days of our lives in His house.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh, Ekev, by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Devarim 11:13
3. Taanis 2A
4. Melachim1 8:28
5. Melachim1 8:45
6. Melachim1 8:52
7. See Sanhedrin 44A
8. Tehillim 27:4
9. Taanis 15B
10. Taanis 16A