

A PARADIGM FOR TEFILAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

A Paradigm For Tefilah¹

In Yehudah's plaintive plea before the mysterious figure who turns out to be Yosef, the Zohar finds a paradigm for effective davening. Indeed, Yehudah's words are laden with allusions to proper prayer.

The Mishna² instructs us to daven in a mood of gravity and seriousness, of *koved rosh*. The Magid of Mezerich explicated this phrase somewhat unconventionally, seeing in the word *rosh*/ chief a reference to Hashem Himself. Optimally, we should daven not for our self-interest, but for the bit of the Divine that is resident in each of us, the fulfillment of the promise "I will be with him in distress."³ *Koved rosh*, seen this way, means the weightiness, the burden of pain borne by the *Rosh*, by Hashem Himself, when He feels the pain of the person who, as it were, hosts His presence. Yehudah's words allude to this. "*Bee adonee*" - or my Lord is *bee*, within me.

Toldos Yaakov Yosef spoke of a king who, in a moment of great joy, guaranteed that all requests made to him would be granted. The results were as expected. Some asked for power and honor; others for wealth. Each person's wish was granted, exactly as he asked. One wise man, however, offered that nothing meant more to him than the privilege of being able to speak personally with the king three times a day. The king was exceedingly pleased with this request, and ordered not only that the wise man should have the access to him that he wished, but that the royal treasure house be opened for him, so that he might take all he wanted. We can see this too in Yehudah's words: "May your servant please speak a word in the ears of my lord," i.e. what I ask is simply that I be able to turn to You in prayer, that my mind and heart be opened so that I can pour out my heart in Your presence.

"Do not be angry with Your servant." The Zohar amplifies upon a verse in Vayikra⁴ "And his sin becomes known to him." How does sin become known, asks the Zohar? Through His *din*. The suffering that ensues from Divine judgment raises our consciousness of our misdeeds. Rav Yosi, however, offers a different view, continues the Zohar. The Torah makes sin known. When a person attempts to learn, and fails to feel the supernal Light of the Torah; when a person does not get to feel the Light of davening or his general service of Hashem, he comprehends that something within him is amiss, and this blocks him from feeling what he so desperately seeks. Rav Yosi's option seems more palatable to us, and it too is reflected in Yehudah's words, "Do not be angry." In other words, if

You need to wake us up, let it not be through the manifestation of your displeasure with us through pain and suffering, but through the gentler modality of cues we detect while learning Your Torah.

The *Bais Avrohom* further elaborates on the thought we mentioned earlier, that by right a person ought to daven for the portion of the Divine within us. He taught - and he groaned and trembled when he did so - that there is good advice for the person whose prayers are not being answered. The advice, however, is extremely difficult to implement. It calls for a person ridding himself of his entire personal stake and agenda, and davening instead entirely for the Divine Presence within.

Such an approach is clearly the province of very great people, and not of ordinary ones. Yet, from the fact that our *parshah* here is taken as a template for prayer in general, we are forced to conclude that somehow this method applies to every Jew, in all sorts of backgrounds and conditions. We can apply the words of the *Bais Avrohom*, wringing yet another level of meaning from the aforementioned *pasuk* in Tehilim. "He will call upon Me and I will answer him; I am with him in distress; I will release him and bring him honor." The word "call" here implies calling from a distance, from afar. When a person calls to Hashem as if He were distant, then all Hashem does is answer him. Should that person fully feel that "I am with him in distress," that Hashem is never really distant from him, then Hashem pledges far more: to release him from his oppressive bonds, and bring him honor in their place. The common, ordinary person can indeed relate to this. But if he cannot let go of all of his own concerns and feelings in favor of focusing on the pain of the Shechinah, he can at least include this concern in his prayer, alongside all his other concerns. (Similarly, we make our prayer less egocentric by routinely including the needs of all other Jewish brethren. While we are not on a spiritual plane lofty enough to set aside all our personally-felt neediness, we still manage to elevate our prayer by joining the needs of others with our own. We can learn to do the same for the portion of the Divine within us, by including it in our thoughts instead of ignoring it altogether.

The meaning of the continuation of Yehudah's monologue becomes clearer. "My lord asked his servant saying, do you have a father or a brother?" He alludes here to two distinct stances of prayer. We can pray on a level that can be called "father," i.e. davening exclusively for the pain, *kivayachol*, of our Father. Alternatively, our prayer can be brotherly, feeling the needs of our brethren as much as our own.

The Ari z"l taught that it was important, before each prayer, to formally accept upon ourselves the mitzvah of loving all Jews as ourselves. This turns our davening into a very different kind of experience. We no longer are the selfish petitioners, clamoring for our own interests while offering nothing in return. We ask instead for a more noble cause. Additionally, the Heavenly prosecutorial forces can interpose themselves between prayers offered for ourselves in the narrow sense - but they have no relevance to the community as a whole.

The Noam Elimelech's son R' Elazar once attended the table of R' Baruch of Mezhbozh. At some point, R' Elazar spontaneously exclaimed, "Oy, Tateh (Father)!" R' Baruch responded sharply to him.

"And what if He is not your Father?" The words affected him greatly. Relating them to his earthly father, the Noam Elimelech told him, "You should have answered, ??Ask of your Father!,"⁵ because even when a Jew does not merit these lofty levels, he can at least "borrow" them⁶. When a Jew toils to achieve these levels, Hashem as it were "lends" them to him artificially, even though they are beyond his reach to acquire them by himself.

Yehudah says, "And we said to my lord, ??We have an old father..." In truth, these levels are already deeply seated within us, already seasoned and aged within our souls. Within its precincts, all spiritual levels lie tantalizingly close and attainable. Minimally, we can ask for an "advance" on them, even when we have not fully actualized them and made them fully our own. In the process, our prayer becomes much more meaningful and acceptable.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 277-279

² Berachos 30B

³ Tehilim 91:15 He takes this to mean that the *chelek aloka milemaalah*, the portion of G-d from Above, does not depart a person in his distress, so that *kivayachol*, the Shechinah feels the pain as well

⁴ Vayikra 4:23

⁵ Devarim 32:7

⁶ The word *sha-al* means both "ask" and "borrow."