

PARSHAS VAYECHI - CHOOSING YOUR TEFILLAH WEAPONRY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Choosing Your Tefillah Weaponry¹

I have given you Shechem - one portion greater than your brothers. I took it from the possession of the Emori with my sword and bow.

The sword and bow might easily refer to the military prowess of Machir ben Menasheh, who wrested control of the land of Gilad from the Emori[2]. Success in battle was not assured through his demonstrable skill in battle[3]; it relied upon the merit of Yaakov. Therefore, Yaakov was justified in calling them his sword and bow.

Chazal[4], however, saw a different skill set operating here. Both the sword and bow are metaphorical. They refer to "tefillah and bakashah" / prayer and request.

Our first reaction is to assume that Chazal are telling us about the potency of Yaakov's davening. His weapons of choice were not chosen from an arsenal, but from a prayer book. If this were so, however, what distinguishes the sword from the bow?

Rather, Chazal here offer a strategy to make our own prayer more effective. The committed Jew knows of two different davening experiences. He or she davens at set times of day, following a prescribed order. The set times of prayer never replace the urge to throw oneself on the mercy of HKBH, asking Him for special assistance in times of extraordinary need. Chazal refer to the former as "prayer," meaning the fixed service of regular davening that has been in place since the time of the Avos. The latter, they call "request."

Chazal have a very definite idea of how these two forms of conversation with G-d ought to relate to each other. Excepting unusual emergency circumstances, they tell us not to separate the two, but to combine them. We should save our bakashah for the times of regular davening, and then implant it in the midst of our set prayer. Those times are occasions of Divine grace, making it more likely that our requests will be received favorably.

This appears to be the intention of the gemara[5] : "It might be thought that a person should first ask Hashem for his needs, and afterwards pray. It has already been clarified that this is not so, for it is stated[6] 'To listen to rinah and to prayer.' 'Rinah' means tefillah; 'tefillah' of this verse means

bakashah." Now Rashi understands these two options to refer to different section of the Amidah: bakashah being the middle, supplicatory, section, while tefillah means the praise of Hashem with which we acknowledge His power and beneficence. According to Rashi, the gemara in effect determines from the verse in the navi that the Amidah must begin with the three standard, opening berachos before we present our list of request to Hashem.

It is likely that Rashi resisted explaining the gemara this way, because he wished it to remain uncontested and non-controversial. Rashi knew that there is actually a dispute elsewhere^[7] as to whether extraordinary requests should be voiced before or after set prayer. One opinion is that a person should be able to unburden himself of his special, weighty issues before offering his regular service. Rashi preferred the explanation that he offered, because it does not run afoul either of the two opinions in Avodah Zarah. The Targum Yerushalmi on the pasuk in Melachim, however, sees rinah and tefillah as the same two forms of prayer that are represented by the sword and bow of Yaakov's statement in our parshah. This would seem to be the intention of the gemara in Berachos - a person should always daven the regular davening first, and roll any special requests into it.

We still ought to explain why the two forms of davening are likened to a sword and a bow. The conduct of old military campaigns will help us understand. It was customary for the king or a leading general to be present at a battlefield, albeit far from the actual front. He would wait in relative safety, surrounded by many protecting soldiers.

The opposing army could demoralize the enemy troops by killing or capturing the enemy's leader. To do so, they had to get past all of his surrounding protection. This required close, up-front, hand-to-hand combat, like that done with a sword. Once the defenders were eliminated, the leader could be eliminated through weapons effective from a distance - like the bow.

Our prayers proceed along a similar course. We would like every word to hit its mark, so to speak. But there are barriers between our words of supplication and the King. Our tefillos have to get past whatever blocks their effectiveness, whether that be the demands of din/ judgment to dilute the rachamim/ compassion we seek, or our own inadequacies in the art of prayer.

That is the function of our fixed davening. It prepares us, and prepares the way for our tefillos to have an unimpeded path to their destination. Once the highway is open, we can add our special personal requests, with the hope that the journey will be a smoother one.

-
1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Bereishis 48:22, and Harchev Davar 18:22
 2. Bamidbar 32:39
 3. Yehoshua 17:1
 4. Bava Basra 123A

- 5. Berachos 31A
 - 6. Melachim I 8:28
 - 7. Avodah Zarah 7B
-