

# FOCUSING OUR PRAYERS

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

After a month of preparation, Rosh Hashanah is finally upon us. As we sit in our shuls, shteibelach, and synagogues, our minds are occupied with the task at hand. Two days - and a whole year. Our coming year, to a large extent, depends on these next two days. So much to ask for; so much to bear in mind. Health, wealth, success, fulfillment, harmony... The list goes on and on. Maybe we should forget trying to think of everything, and just sum it all up: Hashem - give us everything we need in the coming year! There, that was easy enough.

Then again, David HaMelech (King David) asked for but one thing:

"One thing I asked of Hashem, [only] this will I request: That I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold Hashem's pleasantness, and to contemplate in His Sanctuary..."  
[Tehillim/Psalms 27:4]

Why indeed did King David insist on asking for but one thing? [The following answer, based on the words of the holy Rebbe R' Shlomo of Radomsk zt"l (Tiferes Shlomo, Moadim), is moderately complex, but well worth the effort.]

A very interesting and unusual case is discussed in the Gemara (Bava Metzia 105b-106a). If one leases a field, and its crop was subsequently devoured by locusts, or destroyed by winds, is the tenant entitled to be reimbursed his rental fees? It depends: If the locusts or winds were a general calamity, affecting most surrounding fields, then he may reclaim his rent. If, however, this was the only field affected, the landowner can claim that it was the farmer's ill-fortune (bad mazal) that is to blame for the loss. (This is based on the assumption that crop-loss does not happen by chance.)

The Gemara then qualifies its ruling: If the owner told the tenant-farmer to plant the field with wheat, yet he went and planted it with barley, then even if most of the fields in the area were destroyed (by winds or locusts), the tenant-farmer is not entitled to reimbursement. Why? Because the owner can claim: I was praying all along that your wheat crop should be successful - and perhaps my prayers would have been answered (notwithstanding the widespread calamity) - but, of course, you didn't plant wheat, so how would you like my prayers to have been answered?! [Imagine trying to explain such a ruling in a secular court!]

What if a widespread calamity occurred, yet the farmer-tenant had failed to plant the field at all? Can he claim that even were he to have planted the field, it would surely have been destroyed, or perhaps the owner can claim that had the farmer planted the field, the owner's prayers for a

successful crop might have been answered, and he might succeeded in having a crop despite the widespread calamity? After substantial give and take, the Gemara appears to hold that in such a case, the tenant is right, and is entitled to reimbursement.

Tosafos questions this: Why is it that in the first case, when the farmer's barley crop was destroyed, we side with the owner based on the fact that his prayers for wheat might have been answered, yet in this case, when the farmer failed to plant, we side with the farmer, despite the owner's prayers? Are the owner's prayers reason to assume that the crop might have been successful or not??

He answers that in the first case, where the owner prayed specifically for a successful wheat crop, it is likely that Hashem would have answered his prayers, since they were for a defined need. But in the second case, the owner did not tell the farmer what to plant (remember, the farmer, in the end, planted nothing), and therefore the owner's prayers must have been just a general request for success, which would likely not have been answered!!

Although this Gemara has legal implications, a critical principle emerges from it which has significance to all of our prayers:

Ask for everything, and you will likely get nothing - Ask for one thing, and your chances are far greater!

So if we're only given one wish, what, ponders the Tiferes Shlomo should we ask for? Simple. Ask for the one blessing that holds the key to health, wealth, and fulfillment! What's that? To fear G-d and love Him, to serve Him and come close to Him.

"Fear Hashem, O you, His holy [servants], for those who revere Him will never go lacking! Lions may go hungry, yet those who seek Hashem will not lack any good! (Tehillim 34:10-11)" "Praiseworthy is the man who fears Hashem, who walks in His ways. You will eat the labor of your hands; you are praiseworthy, and all is good for you. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine... your children will be like olive shoots surrounding your table. Behold; so is blessed the man who fears Hashem! (Tehillim 128:1-4)"

There is a custom at this time of year to bless one's fellow, "May you be inscribed be-Sifran shel Tzaddikim (in the 'Book' of the Righteous)." This blessing takes on new meaning when we realize that the Sifran shel Tzaddikim also serves as the book of life, wealth, health, and good fortune!

This was the wisdom of King David. He knew the secret of "ask for everything - get nothing." His request was but one: "One thing I asked of Hashem, [only] this will I request: That I dwell in the House of Hashem all the days of my life, to behold Hashem's pleasantness, and to contemplate in His Sanctuary." If Hashem will grant me this, I will lack nothing.

We wish all our readers a good Shabbos, a good Yom Tov, and a kesiva ve-chasima tova. May we all be inscribed be-Sifran shel Tzaddikim.

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