

PRAYER - SAME TIME, SAME PLACE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Vayeira contains the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gemorah, despite Avraham's well-intentioned prayers for their salvation. Avraham goes through a lengthy process of negotiations with the Almighty, the basic result of which is that, assuming Sodom has a minimum of 10 tzaddikim (righteous individuals), it will be saved. Evidently, it did not. The next morning Avraham gets up, sees from a distance that Sodom was burning, and returns "to the very place where he had stood before Hashem" the day before when he prayed (19:27). What is the significance of the fact that Avraham returned to the same place?

Anyone who sets aside a steady place for his prayer, the G-d of Avraham will help him. Furthermore, when he dies, it is said about him, "What a righteous man! What a humble man!" How do we know that Avraham set aside a place for his prayer? As it is written, "And Avraham arose early in the morning, [returning] to the place where he had stood before Hashem." [Talmud, Berachos 6b]

The Gemara advocates setting aside a steady place from where to pray. (I guess that kind of puts a damper on Shteibel-hopping!) The fact that one who does so will merit the help of the G-d of Avraham, who teaches us its importance, is readily understood. But why is such a person called, "A righteous man - a humble man?" While the element of permanence in prayer is certainly praiseworthy, in what way is it humble? Furthermore, it seems somewhat strange that the Gemara derives from this passage that "the G-d of Avraham will help him," seeing that Avraham's plea for the saving of Sodom was ultimately rejected!

The story of Balak and Bila'am is well known. Balak, king of Moab, hires Bila'am to curse the Jews on his behalf. They travel from one spot to another in the desert, in each spot erecting an Altar and offering sacrifices, in the hope that Hashem will accept their "prayers." After each failure, Balak remarks to Bila'am, "Let us go to another place - perhaps from there you will be able to curse them. (See, for instance, Bamidbar/Numbers 23:13; 23:27)" For Bila'am and Balak to accept the fact that perhaps their prayers were not worthy of being answered was not a consideration. If their prayers weren't being answered, there must be some external factor that was preventing their acceptance. Perhaps by going somewhere else, their evil incantations would somehow press the right buttons and make the right connections, thereby enabling their curses to take effect. If, instead of running around in the desert, they would have taken the time to consider what they were doing, they might have come to the obvious conclusion that it was not the place from where they prayed that was deficient, but the people doing the praying, and the objective of their prayers.

In their extreme arrogance, they simply couldn't fathom that perhaps their entire mission was flawed from the get-go. "We will succeed! It's only a matter of pushing the right buttons, and finding the right place, and then everything will begin to go just as planned." The best they could do was to keep trying different places until they hit the jackpot.

Avraham likewise experienced failure in prayer. He had pleaded desperately for the people of Sodom, yet it was to no avail. With the exception of the family of his nephew Lot, who were saved in his merit, the city was decimated. What went wrong? Where had he failed? "Perhaps," Avraham thought, "I simply did not have the merit that my prayers should be accepted. Am I so righteous and meritorious that an entire city should be saved on my say-so?" Perhaps, too, Avraham understood that despite all his well-meant petitions, it simply was not meant to be. There was nothing that could be done for the people of Sodom, and no prayer, no matter how meritorious, was going to change that.

One thing was for sure: Avraham certainly wasn't going to place any blame on the place from where he prayed, as if to say that had he prayed somewhere else, maybe things would have turned out differently. Instead of looking for exterior reasons for his failure, as did Bila'am and Balak, Avraham focused within. "Either there's something wrong with me, or there's something wrong with my prayer." In order to make this crystal clear, Avraham returns to the same place he had stood the day before. He prays once again for whatever that day's needs were. In doing so, Avraham taught us the correct attitude towards prayer: Always return to the same place. If there's something missing and your prayers are going unanswered, don't look for external answers like we are so prone to do. Look within; you might find what's missing is really in you.

This is why, regarding one who sets aside a place for his prayers, following the patriarchal example, it is said, "What a righteous man! What a humble man!" His humility lies in his ability to "take the blame." [Sha'arei Orah] Instead of pointing a finger at his environment or his surroundings, the righteous man realizes that not always will he merit that his prayers be answered, and not always will he pray for the right thing. He feels not the least bit slighted or snubbed, and returns time and time again to pray before Hashem, despite past failures.

Prayer is an expression of our hope that what we perceive to be good should come to pass. We recognize, however, that our very perception of good may at times be flawed. In such instances, we ask that Hashem not answer our prayers, but should rather do what only He can know is truly the best thing. Avraham's prayers regarding Sodom were answered. With the exception of his nephew, the answer was "No." He had done all he could to attain what he thought was the best thing; in this case he was wrong, which is perfectly okay, as he had no way of knowing so. By setting aside a place (and time!) for our prayer, we too merit the help of the Hashem, G-d of Avraham. May He always answer our prayers in the way He sees fit!

Have a good Shabbos.

This week's publication is sponsored by Mr. Myer Laufer of Brooklyn, N.Y.

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