

OF TIME AND SPACE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The Talmud in tractate Berachos explains that one of the reasons for praying three times daily is because of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov. Avraham ordained Shachris (morning prayers); Yitzchak ordained Mincha (afternoon prayers); and Yakov ordained Mariv (evening prayers).

In past issues I have explained that the timing of these three prayer sessions in relation to the specific Av (father) reflects a number of important concepts regarding Tefilah (prayer).

The morning is a time of optimism. Awaking from the semi-death of sleep, the light and warmth of day promises rebirth, renewal, and success. Avraham was the epitome of optimism and success. As G-d had promised him, Avraham earned a international reputation. His world acclaimed him as teacher, warrior, and statesman extraordinaire!

Avraham specifically prayed in the morning because his life reflected the life of the Jew as he will enter the Messianic era of awakened passions, determination, and glory. As it says in last week's Parsha, "Avraham woke up in the morning to the place where he had stood."

Yitzchak was a much more private individual than his father. Whereas Avraham had traveled throughout the Middle East and Egypt engaging kings and peasants alike, Yitzchak, as the "almost Korban (offering)," was forbidden to leave the borders of Canaan. At best, Yitzchak interacted with the local inhabitants; otherwise, he kept to himself. Although exceptionally successful in all his endeavors, Yitzchak's focus was introspective and intense. Representing perfection in all aspects of Divine service, Yitzchak left no room in his life for mistakes or compromise. He lived within the strict judicial framework of right and wrong. Yitzchak lived a life of "Din - judgment." Just as he had been judged worthy of being offered on the Mizbeach (alter) so did he live his life in preparation for that moment and in growing beyond it.

Mincha is prayed toward the end of the day. It is the moment when a person should reflect critically on the past day in preparation for being judged that night. We are told that as we close our eyes and leave the conscious world our souls ascend before the heavenly tribunal and are judged whether worthy or not of waking up the next morning. Yitzchak's life reflected that constant assessment, judgment, reflection, and resolve. He represented the perfected Jew in the World To Come - the era following the final judgment and beyond our world of free choice. The end of the day was Yitzchak's moment for prayer. As the verse says in this week's Parsha, "And Yitzchak went out toward evening to meditate."

Yakov is the prototype of Jewish trial, struggle, and survival. Whereas Avraham and Yitzchak engaged their worlds and remained unscathed and untouched by their encounters, Yakov lived a life of tragic separations, animosities, concerns, and exile. Although identified by the Rabbis as the "Chosen of all the Forefathers," Yakov's life was pain-filled and lonely. Maybe he was titled Chosen among the Forefathers because his life was not as "charmed" as his father and grandfathers' lives had been and yet his service and devotion was as unwavering and intense as their own.

Yakov's life reflected the fears of night, the insecurities of darkness, the yearning for redemption, and the first rays of the morning light. Yakov's life is the life of the Jew as he struggles though this world and hopes for the coming of Mashiach. That is why Yakov chose to pray in the evening. As it says in the Parsha after next, "And he encountered the place because the sun had set."

The verse in last week's Parsha detailing Avraham praying in the morning is sandwiched between the destruction of Sodom and the related story of Lot and his two daughters.

The verse in this week's Parsha detailing Yitzchak praying toward evening precedes his first encounter with Rivkah and the record of their love for each other.

The verse detailing Yakov davening at night introduces his first recorded prophecy, the famed vision of Jacob's Ladder.

The three verses quoted were selected by the Talmud as the source for how we know when each of the Forefathers prayed; however, it is not explained why the Torah placed each of the three verses in the specific context where they are found. Allow me to explain.

At first glance, the individual verses are not "out of place." They each fit into their immediate story line. Avraham, having argued unsuccessfully in defense of Sodom and accepting the judiciousness and compassion of G-d's decision to destroy the five city-states, saw the smoke rising from the destruction. As he prepared to pray Shachris he knew that G-d had done as He said He would do.

Yitzchak, having spent the previous three years immersed in the study of Torah while mourning the death of his mother, happened to be praying Mincha as Rivkah appeared in his life for the first time. Her arrival and their subsequent marriage completed their individual stages and prepared them for the next stage of Jewish history.

Yakov, fleeing from his brother Eisav, leaving the protection and inherent sanctity of the Promised Land, and journeying into the unknown dangers of his uncle Lavan's influence and power, decided that it was timely to pray to G-d on top of Mt. Mariah for continued protection and success.

However, I believe there is more to the placement of each verse and their relationship to prayer than the literary convenience of the storyline.

The story of Sodom and its destruction is preceded by G-d "sharing" His intentions with Avraham. G-d states, "I must first tell Avraham that which I am about to do because Avraham will teach his

children to follow My ways to do righteousness and justice."

Righteousness and justice must stand upon the bedrock of absolute adherence and subjugation to the word of G-d. Any other criteria render righteousness and justice as arbitrary, reflecting the time bound perspective of human limitations rather than the absolute truths of Divine timelessness. This distinction between human and divine arbitrary and absolute was the vast yet subtle difference between Avraham as a "Prophet of G-d" and Avimelech's noble but failed attempt at creating a society where "there was no fear of G-d." Avraham's truths could be trusted to protect and enhance human nobility and greatness because they were founded upon subjugation to the word of G-d. Avimelech's relative truths could not be trusted, and if not for Divine intervention would have disastrously degraded Sarah, the noblest of all those created in G-d's image.

Sodom represented the worst in human failure. They were an evil that could not be refined and therefore were "removed from the midst of humanity."

G-d offered Avraham insight into "His ways of justice" by giving him the chance to defend them. Avraham attempted to find righteousness within the five doomed cities but in the end was told by G-d Himself that only evil remained. The human beasts of Sodom and Gomorrah had consumed all vestiges of goodness and justice. Repentance and rehabilitation were impossible and they had to be destroyed.

The next morning Avraham awoke with a heavy heart. He knew that within eyesight of his tent G-d's justice would have been done; however, he also knew that the destruction was the essence of justice and righteousness. He knew that left up to his own limited perspective and knowledge Sodom would have been mistakenly and tragically spared; instead, he trusted that "all the ways of G-d are straight and ultimately pleasant" and accepted G-d's decree. He understood that his regular morning prayers at the place and time when he would "stand with G-d" would be profoundly more meaningful. He had been catapulted into a greater degree of humility, trust, and acceptance of G-d's justice. He was now ready to become the father of a son that would attain perfection of service to G-d within the Divine framework of righteousness and justice. Avraham's failure at saving Sodom was actually his greatest victory.

Following the Akeidah (binding of Isaac), Yitzchak entered the second phase of his life. His mother was gone. She had accomplished the mission of her creation by raising a son to be the "perfect offering." At 127 Sarah merited perfection of being and completion of purpose.

Yitzchak found himself alone in all of history. No one else had attained his level of profundity in service to G-d; therefore, there was only one thing he could do. He had to immerse himself in the unlimited depth and vastness of Torah study and exploration.

Entering the academy of Shem and Ever (Noach's son and great-great-grandson), Yitzchak discovered the next level of his humility and service. He realized that personal perfection was only a preparatory stage to sharing his life with another. "It is not good for the human to be alone." He

realized that he had to marry.

Yitzchak emerged from the cocoon of Torah study to see the sun setting on his aloneness. He "went out into the field to meditate" on the ways of G-d with the resolve of sharing his life with another in search of further perfection. The first stage (day) of his development had ended. He had been judged worthy of being the progenitor of the next Jewish generation. The evening (beginning of his new day) would soon approach with greater discoveries and awareness than ever before. He was ready to be completed as an individual and as a servant of G-d. It was time to close out the past and begin the future. It was time for him to meet and marry Rivkah.

Emotions of loneliness and love are among the signposts along the pathway to G-d. With newfound humility and understanding Yitzchak poured out his heart to G-d in "the field and at the time" that he usually stood with G-d. As he prayed, Rivkah crested the horizon to see a living angel framed by the setting sun. She knew that her life was about to begin and Yitzchak knew that his prayers had been answered. "He brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, loved her, and was comforted."

Yakov was 77 years old when he left the academy of Shem and Ever. For 14 years he hid from Eisav within the confines of the Bais Medresh (study hall). It was time to continue his journey. Yakov's journey would be very different than Yitzchak's or Avraham's.

Avraham's journey was external. His mission was to perfect the external Jew, the social Jew, and bring "blessing to all the families of the land." It was Avraham who was to become a "light unto the nations." He was the foretelling of the messianic era when all Jews will interact with the other nations as teachers and guides. He was the embodiment of the national mandate to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

For 75 years Avraham extended his Chesed (kindness) within the social paganism of Ur Kasdim by proclaiming the goodness of the single Creator of heaven and earth. Refined in the furnaces of Mesopotamia, Avraham could mingle with "This World" and remain untouched by its base animalism. After accomplishing the "souls that he had made in Charan," G-d sent Avraham to take possession of the Promised Land where His presence is most manifest and realized. Mostly, it was because of Yitzchak that Avraham and Sara had to go to the land of Canaan.

Yitzchak's journey, on the other hand, was internal. Yitzchak's job was to perfect the internal Jew. The internal Jew is the Jew who sanctifies the physical body in service to the soul. In so doing he renders the physical as secondary and eventually irrelevant. The internal Jew is the Jew who one day will loose all vestiges of his outer shell and release his inner divinity into the spiritual eternity of "The World To Come."

The internal Jew is also able to fully enjoy the physical world because it remains pure in its service to G-d. That is why it is Yitzchak and Rivkah who will be described in next week's Parsha as "playing and laughing" with each other. That is why Yitzchak will insist that Eisav first hunt and prepare a meal, "as he loves." For the "blind" Yitzchak the physical world had returned to the pristine state of

Gan Eden. Wherever he was he could smell the fragrance of Paradise. That is why Yitzchak could never leave Canaan. No other place on earth could support Yitzchak's internal perfection. He truly lived life as "a reflection of the World To Come."

Yakov's journey was to be exiled from the Promised Land and not only remain the same Jew he was for the first 77 years of his life, but continue to grow and develop and become even greater as a person and as a nation. In that way he would infuse in his children the ability to do more than survive. He would gift them the ability to grow and eventually return.

In every regard the success of Avraham's and Yitzchak's missions was dependent on Yakov's success. If he failed, the entire nation failed, if he succeeded they all succeeded. To succeed, Yakov required 77 years studying G-d's Torah day and night, "never slumbering and never sleeping". In the being of Yakov had to be fused the generosity, compassion, and kindness of Avraham with the strength and discipline of Yitzchak. He had to integrate the external Jew with the internal Jew, the Chesed (kindness) of Avraham with the Gevurah (strength) of Yitzchak. Yakov had to become the embodiment of Emes - truth. He had to have clarity of purpose, belief in self, awareness of social falsehood, and the strength to survive and grow. He had to become the Chosen One among the Forefathers because he had to give birth to the Chosen People.

Arriving at the summit of Mt. Mariah, the eventual site of the Bais Hamikdash (Temple), Yakov looked back on his 77 years of devoted study and personal development knowing that the day had ended. The past had been a foretelling of the distant future when G-d's children would assume their rightful place among the family of man. At that time they would awaken the soul of humanity to their spiritual greatness and prepare for that world "that is only good." However, his immediate future was long and dark. He was about to enter the nighttime of human history. He was about to leave the Promised Land in order to insure that his children could return whole and without blemish to the house of his father.

"And he encountered the Place because the sun had set." Yakov turned to G-d with the fused strengths of Avraham and Sara, Yitzchak and Rivkah, and prayed that his mission, the mission of G-d's chosen children, the mission of humanity and the purpose of creation, would be realized. "And behold a ladder with its head reaching the heavens, and angels of G-d leaving and returning - going up and going down." His dream was of exile and return, challenge and perfection.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
