

MOSHE'S LESSON OF ACCEPTANCE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

We all believe in the power of prayer. There have been controversial but yet seemingly proven studies that have shown that somehow prayer and being prayed for are of definite physical help to the sick, the bereaved and the troubled. Yet prayer oftentimes leaves us unfulfilled and unanswered. Prayer does not seemingly avert disasters, sadness and even tragedies.

All of us face the challenge of unanswered prayer, when our hopes and requests are apparently ignored and refused by Heaven. Many times this fact of life causes a crisis of faith and belief within a person. King David in his Psalms reflects on this issue many times. The book of Iyov deals with it as well. And to a certain extent it is the main issue raised in this week's parsha.

Moshe's prayers are not answered. In fact the Lord instructs him to stop raising the issue of his entry into the Land of Israel with Heaven. There is a finality to Heaven's refusal to answer or even deal with Moshe's prayers any longer. Moshe's prayers, which have saved his people, his brother and sister and others from Heavenly wrath, are now of no effect regarding his own personal request.

The rabbis of the Talmud phrased it succinctly: "The prisoner himself cannot free himself, by himself, from his own confinement." Moshe will not lead his beloved people into the promised Land of Israel. His time has ended and his prayer will forever remain unanswered. There is therefore a note of inevitable sadness that hovers over this parsha.

Over the millennia of Jewish commentary and exposition of the Torah many reasons have been advanced as to why Moshe's prayer was so finally and flatly rebuffed. Among the ideas advanced is that the time for Yehoshua's leadership had arrived and that "the dominion of one ruler cannot overlap the dominion of his successor even by a hair's breadth."

Another thought advanced is that Moshe's generation would not enter the Land of Israel so it would be an apparent unseemly favoritism for Moshe alone to be able to do so. A third idea is that Moshe would appear to the new generation entering the Land of Israel as a supernatural figure, a type of god in a world of pagan belief that regularly deified humans, especially national leaders. Therefore, for the sake of Israel itself, he could not be allowed to lead them into the Land of Israel.

As valid as all of these ideas are, the blunt truth is that we cannot read God's mind, so to speak. Living human beings, the finite, can never grasp the Infinite One. So we must be satisfied to remain unsatisfied in our search for the reasons for unanswered prayers.

Our true refuge lies in faith and acceptance of the unknowable. This in no way weakens the resolve and necessity to continue praying. It merely lowers our levels of expectation and tempers our hubris that somehow Heaven must follow our wishes and dictates. Moshe accepts the fact that his prayers will now go unanswered. His example serves as a lesson for all of us.

Shabat shalom.

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