

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF PRAYER

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Noach

Never Underestimate the Power of Prayer

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 653, The Temple Mount in Halacha and Habayis. Good Shabbos!

The Haftorah for Parshas Noach is from Perek [Chapter] 54 of Isaiah. (This also happens to be the Haftorah of Parshas Ki Tseitzei.) The connection to Parshas Noach is related to a two-word reference in the Haftorah in pasukim [verses] 8-g: "For with a slight wrath have I concealed My countenance from you for a moment, but with eternal kindness shall I show you mercy, said your Redeemer, Hashem. For like the waters of Noach shall this be to Me: as I have sworn never again to pass the waters of Noach over the earth, so have I sworn not to be wrathful with you, or rebuke you."

Why is the flood in Parshas Noach considered to be "the waters of Noach"? Why is it not called the waters of the generation of Noach? In what sense is it Noach's flood? The Zohar chastises Noach for not asking for mercy for his generation. The Zohar says that the flood is called by Noach's name because he did not sufficiently pray for his contemporaries.

A case can be made that Noach should not be faulted for this. G-d came to Noach and announced that the people of the earth were wicked and that He was going to destroy them. Scripture elaborates on the perversion and the wickedness of that generation. G-d commanded Noach to build an ark to save his family and selected mates from each species. Why should Noach question G-d's Judgment and pray to Him to suspend His plans? There is no reason to suspect that such a prayer would have reversed the Divine determination to end the corruption that had gone on for years and years.

This is another example of the incredible power of prayer. This implicitly tells us that yes indeed, had Noach davened he could have prevented the flood. He did not have sufficient faith in the power of his own prayers and therefore the flood came and was even called by his name - Mei Noach.

The proof that Noach's prayers could have helped is the pasukim that we read after the end of the

flood: "Then Noach built an altar to Hashem and took of every pure animal and of every pure bird, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. Hashem smelled the pleasing aroma, and Hashem said in His heart: 'I will not continue to curse again the ground because of man... Nor will I again continue to smite every living being as I have done.'" [Bereishis 8:20-21]. Noach's prayers are accepted and G-d concedes that Noach is right. "Never again will I bring a flood!" We see that the prayer did work. Conceivably, had Noach built such an altar and offered such a prayer before the flood, it might never have happened.

The Talmud states [Rosh Hashana 18a]: Rabbi Meir used to say two people who took ill with the same illness or two criminals convicted of the same crime, it is possible for one to get better and the other one not to get better, one to be ultimately acquitted and one not be acquitted. One will live and one will die. Why is this so? One prayed and his prayers were answered, the other prayed and his prayers were not answered. The Gemara elaborates - the one who prayed a "complete prayer" was answered and the one who did not pray a "complete prayer" was not answered.

What is the definition of a "complete prayer" versus an "incomplete prayer"? It is unlikely that the difference is one of kavannah [intent]. It is unlikely for a person's mind to wander when he is on his deathbed. The Gemara does not mean that one of them "spaced out" while praying and the other one did not.

Rav Elya Lopian explains that a "complete prayer" (tefillah shleimah) indicates that the person believed in the power of his prayer. He believed in the Power of the Almighty and the power of his own prayers and he was therefore answered. One person believed in the power of his prayer, however, the other person did not have confidence that his prayer would be answered.

The Kotzker Rebbe's sister was once sick and nothing helped her. She went to her brother, the Rebbe, and asked that he daven for her. He looked at her and said, "There is nothing I can do for you" and then slammed the door in her face. His sister then started crying, "Master of the Universe, my own brother won't help me. You must help me!" The Kotzker Rebbe then opened the door and said, "This is what I wanted to hear. It is not the Kotzker Rebbe who can help you or the doctors who can help you, it is only the Almighty that can help you. I just wanted to bring you to that realization. Once you have come to that realization, then you will be fine." This is the definition of a "complete prayer".

The Baal Shem Tov says that prayers are matters "that stand at the heights of the world," yet people treat them lightly. Many times, we pray and our prayers have cosmic impact, even though we do not recognize that fact and even though we may think that our prayers have gone unanswered. We do not see the results, becomes sometimes the effect is not felt until generations later. We think that when we pray for OUR sick family member that the prayers have to help OUR sick family member. That is understandable. But we do not know the power of prayer. Many times, even though the specific person in critical condition may pass on, our prayers for him or her may have impact to save many other lives.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Noach are provided below:

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