

THOUGHTS ABOUT PRAYER BEFORE YOM KIPPUR

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Yom Kippur

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These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes from Tape # 870 -- The Yom Kippur They Did Not Fast. Good Shabbos!

We believe with complete faith that all which will transpire during the coming year - both on a personal level and on a national level - is determined during the period of the Ten Days of Repentance. We are all familiar with the concept "Seek out G-d when He is to be found, call out to Him when he is near" [Yeshaya 55:6]. This is the time of year when the Master of the World is particularly close and therefore the normal obstacles that might exist to making our prayers effective are removed so that our sincere prayers to Him will certainly be heard.

I always tell myself -- and everyone who listens to me -- that we must take advantage of this time of year, like no other ten day period on the calendar. Particularly, regarding prayer and asking for all that we need, this is the time to do it. No matter what your practice is the rest of the year in terms of minyan attendance or in terms of focus (kavanah) during davening or in terms of how quick you daven, that should all be set aside this time of year where each Shachris, Mincha, and Maariv is a unique opportunity for communication with Heaven in a way that is unique to this time of year.

We cannot waste these golden opportunities. Therefore, I think it is worthwhile to spend a few minutes talking about the concept of prayer. Normally, I say over a "dvar Torah", a Torah thought, an insight and then I end with a story. Tonight I am going to begin with a true story that I think is amazing and which has a very important lesson for us.

The story was told and written up by Rabbi Aryeh Lev Ginsberg, a Rav in New York. Rabbi Ginsberg had a congregant, who had a son, who went to learn in Eretz Yisrael. The son became very attached to Eretz Yisrael and decided to enroll in a Hesder Yeshiva which combines Torah study with military service. He became a member of the Israeli army and in fact rose to a position of leadership in the Israeli Defense Forces. In the summer of 2005, the Israeli government decided to give back Gaza to the Arabs. The army had to forcibly remove the Jewish settlers who refused to voluntarily abandon their settlements. The American student was very distraught about the assignment. He felt it was the

wrong thing to do; but as a soldier he followed orders and participated in the forced evacuation.

His unit came to a certain settlement in Gaza. It was his job to see to it that the settlers boarded the buses to be evacuated. He worked with the Rabbi of the settlement. All the settlers gathered in the town's synagogue. The Rabbi spoke, the soldier spoke, they all cried and finally they all filed out of the shul and boarded the bus. After everyone had evacuated the building, this soldier took out a siddur from his backpack. He knelt down on the ground, dug a hole, and buried his siddur. The Rav of the settlement asked him why he did that. The soldier replied that maybe a year from now or 5 years from now or 50 years from now, we will come back to this place, people will rebuild here and maybe they will find this siddur and will realize that we left our hearts and prayers behind in this place.

Fast forward 11 months. It is now the summer of 2006. Gilaad Shalit was captured by Hamas militants in Gaza. Israel decided to invade Gaza in an attempt to find him. The unit of this American soldier was sent back into Gaza to set up a camp as a base of operations. They entered Gaza under the cover of darkness. They did not know exactly where they were, but they stopped at a certain deserted place to set up camp. The next morning, the soldier looked around. He was totally disoriented. He did not recognize anything. All he saw was rubble from the houses and the greenhouses and the buildings that were destroyed. He did not really know where he was. He got a feeling that he should look for his siddur. He knelt down on the ground and started digging. Lo and behold, he found the siddur. There were overwhelming odds against this happening and he was literally shaken by his find. He called his father in America and told him the amazing story and told him to ask his Rabbi to interpret the significance of this find for him.

Rabbi Ginsberg himself was astounded, and could not bring himself to interpret the meaning of the story. However, he arranged a meeting between the soldier and Rav Chaim Kanievsky to allow the soldier to hear the opinion of a great and holy man in Israel regarding the meaning of this incident.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky asked him, "What did you do when you knew you were going to need to evict the settlers from Gaza?" The soldier replied, "I went to my commanding officer and I went up the chain of command trying to convince everyone that it was a mistake and that we should not go ahead with the operation." "What else did you do?" persisted Rav Kanievsky. The soldier added that he prayed to the Master of the World that it should not happen and that He should please show Mercy.

Rav Chaim then asked, "So when it happened, and you had to evict them, so what did you do then?" The soldier responded, "At that point I stopped davening for it to not happen." Rav Chaim Kanievsky said, the Master of the World is telling you: Never stop praying for something! This is why you found your siddur. You buried the siddur because you felt it was futile to daven anymore. G-d caused you to find it so that you will realize that it is never too late to daven for something! "All is lost?" G-d tells you: "No. All is not lost. Get the siddur and start davening again."

This is the lesson we must bear in mind as we approach the High Holidays. "Hope to G-d. Strengthen your heart. And hope to G-d." [Tehillim 27:14]. The Talmud interprets this pasuk to mean that if a person prays and sees that his prayers are not answered, he should pray further. [Brachos 32b] This is one of the great mistakes we make. We think we pray for so many sick individuals who do not get better. We pray for so many miserable situations that do not improve. We pray for so many things and our prayers are apparently not answered. This is a mistake. No prayer ever goes "wasted". It may not help us for a particular time or a particular place but all prayers go up to heaven and at some time and in some place they have an effect. The Talmud says that prayer is one of the things that stand at the peak of the world, yet people treat it lightly [Brachos 6b]. The Baal Shem Tov interprets the reason people treat it lightly is precisely because its effects take place "at the peak of the world" (b'rumo shel olam) and so it may take centuries for the effects to be noticed here on earth. We may pray for ourselves and maybe the prayer will take hold, but only affect a great-great grandchild of ours. We do not see the effects, so sometimes we treat it lightly.

We live in the computer age where we can type our question into a search engine and get an instant answer. We cannot relate to the concept of a prayer that will take three centuries to be answered. We are not used to that and we treat it lightly.

This is the lesson of the story with the Siddur: Do not stop davening. Finally, there is one more thing we must bear in mind. As important and as crucial as these days are to us personally, we dare not forget about the needs of Klal Yisrael and the Jewish people. When we hear leaders of powerful countries, who may one day have nuclear weapons talk about annihilating Israel off the face of the earth, we have to cry bitter and frightened tears to beg for Mercy that our enemies not achieve their aims.

There is a famous pasuk that we read in the HafTorah on Shabbos when Rosh Chodesh comes out on Sunday. "...And Saul said to Yonasan his son, 'Why does the son of Yishai (Dovid) not come - neither yesterday nor today - to the bread (el haLachem)' [Shmuel I 20:27]. Homiletically, this pasuk is interpreted: "Why does the son of Yisahi (the Messiah) not come - neither yesterday nor today?" We keep asking for Moshiach year after year and he does not come. Why not? The answer is "el haLechem" - because we keep asking for bread in our prayers, instead of asking for Moshiach. We are interested in making a living. That is the focus of our prayers. So our prayers are answered and we make a living. However, we do not sufficiently pray for the coming of Moshiach. Were we to do so, those prayers would have been answered by now as well.

We need to pray, not just for our personal needs, but we need a macro perspective as well. We must keep in mind that the Jewish people are in danger. It does not take imagination on our part to wonder "what might go wrong?", "what might happen to the Jewish people?" Just read the paper. Listen to the news. Look at what they are saying in Iran and in the other Arab countries. If we are only interested in "el haLechem" [our needs of earning bread], this is the reason that "the son of Yishai" has not yet come.

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