

# THE POWER OF PRAYER

*by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

## Parshas Korach

### The Power of Prayer

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah CDs on the weekly portion: CD #862 - Preventative Medicine To Avoid Chilul Shabbos. Good Shabbos!

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Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon were challenged by Korach and his followers. Moshe set up a test to determine who was the Divinely chosen High Priest authorized to do Hashem's service in the Mishkan. Moshe challenged Korach and his 250 followers to compete with Aharon in eliciting Divine response to their individual Ketores offerings before Hashem. However, before suggesting this competition, Moshe Rabbeinu first prayed to Hashem that He not accept the Ketores offerings of Korach and his followers: "...Do not turn to their gift offering..." [Bamidbar 16:15].

The Ramban adds that Moshe did not only pray that the Ketores offering of this group not be accepted, he also prayed that even their prayers and supplications should be ignored.

We can really wonder - was that really necessary? Was it really important for Moshe Rabbeinu to beseech the Almighty NOT to listen to their prayers? Would we assume that had they in fact prayed to Hashem to support them in their rebellion against Moshe and Aharon that G-d would have listened to their prayers?

After all, this was already a "done deal" from the original six days of creation. The Mishna states [Avos 5:6] that the "mouth of the earth" destined to swallow up Korach and his followers was one of ten items created at dusk on the first Erev Shabbos of Creation. This thing was "in the bag" from time immemorial. There was no way that they were going to win their argument with Moshe and Aharon. So why in the world did Moshe need to pray to the Almighty "Don't listen to their prayers"?

Rav Simcha Zissel of Kelm says we see from over here that we should never underestimate the power of prayer no matter who it comes from. This is an idea we have stressed many times over the years. In spite of the fact that creation was pre-programmed to have "a mouth" ready to swallow

Korach and his followers, the prayers of these people - had they been sincere - could have been effective. Such is the power of prayer that even when offered by people who are wicked, when the prayers flow sincerely from the depths of their soul, they have power. Knowing that, Moshe Rabbeinu felt compelled to daven: "Don't listen to their prayers!"

The same concept is seen even more dramatically from a famous Mishna in Tractate Makkos [2:6]. The Talmud teaches that one who killed unintentionally must confine himself to the City of Refuge until the Kohen Gadol dies. We thus can imagine that we would have the entire community of the City of Refuge praying on a daily basis that the Kohen Gadol should drop dead. Only in that way would all the unintentional killers residing there be able to achieve their freedom. In order to prevent such prayers, the Mishna teaches that the mothers of the High Priests used to prepare packages of goodies - food and clothing -- for these murderers so that they have mercy on them and their sons and not pray that the High Priest should die.

The Gemara there asks, "So what if we have a full community of murderers getting up every day and cursing the Kohen Gadol? Why should such an unjustified prayer be accepted?" The Talmud Bavli gives one answer. However the Talmud Yerushalmi gives a different answer. The Yerushalmi distinguishes between a curse and a prayer. A worthless curse will not be effective; however a sincere prayer is not to be dismissed. Even a Tefilla from a murderer against a High Priest can be effective. Such is the power of prayer.

With this approach, Rav Meir Bergman, answers a question we discussed recently. The Talmud [Brachos 10a] relates that a group of gangsters was harassing Rav Meir and he prayed that they should die. Rav Meir's wife, Beruria, advised him that rather than pray that they die, he should instead pray that they repent and not hassle him anymore. The Talmud concludes that he prayed that they repent and in fact they did repent.

The Maharsha asks a fundamental question on this Gemara. How could Rav Meir pray that someone else repent? Teshuva is dependent on a person's free will (Bechira Chofshis)! It is dependent totally on a person's own initiative such that prayers for Divine intervention to bring about Teshuva should be completely inapplicable. Various answers have been given to this question. Rav Bergman shares an amazing idea: Tefilla trumps Bechira. Prayer wins out over the principle of Freedom of Choice. The power of prayer is so strong that in spite of the fact that most of the time, the world operates on the principle of Bechira Chofshis, Tefilla is such a force that it can even overwhelm the concept of Free Choice.

With this premise, Rav Bergman explains a famous Gemara [Moed Katan 18b]. The Gemara says that a person is allowed to become engaged to a woman even during the Nine Days, when we are supposed to restrict joyous celebrations. The Talmud justifies this leniency by citing the fear "lest someone else get engaged to her first." The Talmud then questions this fear based on the well-established principle of 'basherte': The Talmud teaches that "forty days before the formation of an

embryo, a Heavenly Voice goes forth and proclaims, 'the daughter of so and so will be married to so and so'." In other words, it is predestined who a person is going to marry. So how is it possible if I am destined to become married to such and such a girl that someone else will be able to beat me to the punch and get engaged to her first? The Talmud answers "Lest someone else get engaged to her first through mercy (b'Rachamim)". In other words, the other person will daven and his prayers will be answered and they will overturn the Heavenly Decree that had predetermined this girl was destined for someone else!

This is the same idea as expressed above. The power of prayer can work against a Tzadik! The power of prayer can work to overwhelm something that was preprogrammed from the Six Days of Creation! The power of prayer can work against Bechira Chofshis! The power of prayer can work against 'basherte'! Such is the power of sincere prayer.

## **Why Did Elazar Get The Assignment Of Making The Fire Pan Memorial?**

The challenge of Korach and his followers to the choice of Aharon as High Priest ended in disaster. The Ketores offering competition culminated with a fire that came out from Heaven consuming the 250 individuals who were challenging Aharon's designation as Kohen Gadol [Bamidbar 16:35].

What happened to their fire pans? G-d told Moshe to command Elazar, son of Aharon the Kohen, to take the fire pans and make them into thinned-out sheets as a covering for the Altar. The Me'am Loez asks why it was specifically Elazar who was given this task. After all, the challenge was to the Kehunah of Aharon. The logical thing would have been to have Aharon himself -- who emerged victorious in this struggle with the 250 challengers -- take the fire pans and make the appropriate adornment for the Altar. Why was Elazar given this job?

The Me'am Loez quotes a commentary called Kesef Mezuken, who makes a very sensitive observation here: Had Aharon been given this commandment, the first thing that would have come to mind when he picked up the burnt fire pans was that his two eldest sons - Nadav and Avihu - also tragically died in a very similar fashion, when they offered the Ketores on a fire pan. He might be troubled by the dichotomy. Why was it that their fire pans were not used to become part of the Beis HaMikdash? Why was a memorial being created for future generations with the fire pans of these wicked men and no such memorial was created with the fire pans of his sons?

The answer is that the fire pans of Nadav and Avihu were totally sinful. They were not commanded at all to offer Ketores ("...and they offered before Hashem a foreign fire that He did not command them" [Vayikra 10:1]). In the case of the fire pans of the 250 supporters of Korach, they were at least commanded by G-d to bring them (as a means of being able to Divinely designate the true Kohen Gadol).

Aharon would have had to relive the entire pain of what happened to his sons and be reminded that his sons acted totally without Divine license to offer the Ketores and consequently their fire pans were discarded. To save Aharon that pain, G-d said "Let Elazar do this, rather than Aharon." Such is the sensitivity of the Ribono shel Olam.

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