

PARSHAS VAESCHANAN

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Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Va'eschanan, 5631 & 5639

This parsha begins with Moshe Rabbeinu davening to HaShem. So it comes as no surprise that the first paragraph of Medrash Rabba on the parsha focuses on the subject of tefila (prayer). So, too, the Sfas Emes also concentrates today on the topic of prayer.

The Medrash begins by quoting a statement of R. Yochanan. He tells us that "The Torah uses ten different words to refer to prayer." These ten synonyms include "hischanen" (pleading), "tze'aka" (crying out), and eight others. R. Yochanan's statement seems totally straightforward; and a person might be tempted to skip ahead to more innovative material. Fortunately, the Sfas Emes did not skip ahead, but instead, gave the matter some thought. His cogitation led the Sfas Emes to ask a basic (and startling) question. The Hebrew word most often used to refer to prayer is 'tefila'. But, notes the Sfas Emes, the word tefila is not included in R. Yochanan's list of ten synonyms for prayer!

Not only does the Sfas Emes pose a fundamental question on R'Yochanan's statement, but thoughtfully, he also provides an answer. In true Sfas Emes fashion, his answer leads him -- and us -- to a paradox. That apparent inconsistency, in turn, leads him -- and us -- to a radical new insight. And not to just any insight, but to an insight that can help us in our avoda, our service to HaShem.

The Sfas Emes tells us that the key feature of prayer is not prayer itself, but rather preparing oneself for prayer. In that vein, the Sfas Emes reads the ten terms that the Medrash lists not as referring to prayer itself, but rather to "hachanos" (preparations) for prayer. Thus, the Sfas Emes explains, the ten terms listed refer to ten avenues and suggested aids ("derachim v'eitzos") conducive to reaching a state in which one is truly in contact with HaShem. In that perspective, the Sfas Emes reads our parsha's first pasuk as: "Va'eschanan" [I prepared myself for prayer] ... "laymor" [and then I prayed].

If the hachanos for prayer are more important than prayer itself, the implication for our avoda is clear. Prayer is not about presenting our wish list to HaShem. Prayer is about focusing our attention on our relationship with Him. As we concentrate our thoughts on that relationship, we can achieve a sense of awe (yir'ah) and perhaps of love (ahava) for HaShem.

How does a person prepare for prayer? Getting into the right mindset requires both one's own efforts and -- perhaps surprisingly -- help from HaShem. On the latter point, the Sfas Emes quotes a pasuk in Tehillim (10:17): "Tach'in li'bam; tak'shiv ahz'necha" (ArtScroll: "Guide their hearts; let Your ear be attentive.") But a person's own efforts to open a channel are also crucial. Thus, the Sfas Emes tells

us that a person may even use merrirus (bitterness) as his avenue to real tefila.

Real tefila is an outpouring of one's heart to be in contact with HaShem. A person who is davening in earnest recognizes his total dependence on HaShem. Rashi (following the Sifri on the parsha's first pasuk) makes an important observation in this context. He notes that even though tzadikim have many good deeds to their credit, when they daven, they do not rely on those credentials. On the contrary, they petition HaShem for "matnas chinam" (a pure gift -- one for which nothing is given in exchange).

Why so? Because of the basic fact of life just noted: that true tefila entails recognizing one's total dependence on HaShem. In such a one-way relationship, there is no place for a quid pro quo, (a "this for that") deal negotiated with HaShem.

The Sfas Emes takes us further in his examination of prayer. He reports a comment of the Kotzker Rebbe which essentially raises the question of "Why pray? The Kotzker prefaced his comment with a quote from Iyov (41: 3): "Mi hik'dimami va'ashaleim". In the present context, this pasuk translates roughly as HaShem saying to Iyov: "Don't I always pay my debts on time? And since my books are always up-to-date, what scope is open for tefila to change events?" Phrased more sharply, the Kotzker said: the fact that a person has to approach HaShem to ask for something implies that the person does not deserve that something. For, if the person truly deserved that something, he would not have to pray for it.

The Sfas Emes addresses the Kotzker's question by taking us back to the word "Va'eschanan". Working "bederech remez" (allusion) he notes that the letters of the word "va'eschanan" can be rearranged to make two key words: "hachana" (preparation) and "chinam" (a free gift). The Sfas Emes uses both of these resonating words to bring home his earlier remarks about prayer. As we have seen, a person must approach prayer with hachana. In that hachana, a person recognizes how little HaShem owes him and; hence, how much would fulfilling his request be in the nature of matnas chinam.

The Sfas Emes sees the prayer situation as follows. Realistically speaking, a person starts his davening with a bakasha (a personal request). But as the person gets into his/ her davening, the person can be swept away into a deeper conversation with HaShem. . Tefila can initiate interaction with HaShem in which He takes over, and the person can let go, becoming a passive participant in the prayer dynamic. The Sfas Emes gives us a meta-pshat to help us absorb what he is saying. He views the word "Va'eschanan" as a nif'al (passive--probably an Aramaic Ispa'el) construction. This lets us read "Va'eschanan" as : "I was prayed." Surely, this is the ultimate in prayer as total dependence on HaShem

Indeed, a person can be so swept away that he forgets about his bakasha ! His tefila becomes so much leSheim Shamayim (focused only on the glory of HaShem) that HaShem has to remind the person what he came to request . Thus, we end with a unique perspective, in which we rely on

HaShem to put the right words in our mouths. And lest you think that this perspective is "extreme " or too Chassidische, the Sfas Emes quotes a pasuk in Mishlei (16: 1): 'Le'ahdam me'archei lev; u'mei HaShem ma'aneh lashon". That is: "A person has his thoughts about what to say; but what he actually says comes from HaShem." Truly what the Sfas Emes has been telling us.

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