

What We Can Do To Help  
Our Brothers and Sisters  
In Eretz Yisrael

Based on the Thought of  
Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz

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## Introduction

These essays (excepting the post-script) are an almost verbatim translation of the last six chapters of R. Chaim Shmulevitz' *Sichos Mussar*. These chapters contain ethical discourses delivered during the Yom Kippur war.

The newspapers and magazines have extensive coverage of the current conflict in Gaza, but relatively little has circulated with thought-provoking, inspirational content suitable for those who want to act, but who need inspiration.

There are many deeds that we can and do perform to concretely help our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael. These include donating generously to their defense and relief, letting our government representatives know how much we care about the situation, and organizing support for families of children in the line of fire. But opportunities for such deeds are finite. So we seek something more, something more elevated, that we can do. R. Chaim Shmulevitz directs us and inspires us towards those elevated deeds.

Mesilas Yesharim writes that we need to be reminded constantly even of things that we know and appreciate. Personally, I used R. Chaim's *Sichos* to remind myself and to inspire myself to a higher level of service, for the merit of my brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael. I thought that other members of the English-speaking public might also appreciate these discourses, and I therefore embarked on this translation.

May the current conflict speedily and successfully conclude, and may true peace reign in our time, with “the kingdom of evil whisked from the face of the earth.”

Ephraim Meth

*Erev Tisha b'Av*, 5774



## Chapter 1

### The Power of Torah

The Talmud (Berachos 63b) tells us that “whoever weakens himself from Torah will not be able to stand in a time of oppression.” This teaches us that the power to stand in times of oppression derives from strengthening our study of Torah. This obligation is especially incumbent upon Yeshiva students. And, when the time of oppression occurs during *bein haZemanim*, during a time when Torah study is customarily weak, we need extra commitment to strengthening our Torah study.

If strengthening Torah study is difficult for single students, it is doubly difficult for married ones. Nobody should shoulder extra study without his wife’s consent. However, married students may remind their wives that Chazal (Berachos 17a, Sotah 21a) asked, “What merit do women have?” Chazal asked this even though they knew that women usually have tremendous merits, such as fulfillment of *mitzvos* and performance of good deeds. Yet Chazal were troubled, because everyone needs the merit of Torah study, in particular, in order to survive. This is true in ordinary times, and it is even more true in these times of oppression.

Chazal respond to their question: women *do* have the merit of Torah study. They have this merit even if they do not study Torah themselves. They have this merit because of the selfless patience they display while their

husbands' learn in Beis Medrash, and because of the selflessness they display by bringing their children to Yeshiva to study Torah. So married students may remind their wives that they receive tremendous merit vicariously, through the Torah study of their husbands, especially in times of oppression such as these.

Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 28,6) said that when Haman found Mordechai studying the Torah's laws of the Omer offering with his students, he said to Mordechai, "your [studying about the] Omer pushed aside my 10,000 shekels." We see from this that even the wicked Haman recognized that the Jews' salvation comes from Torah study.

The Talmud (Eirubin 63b) relates that when the angel with a drawn sword in hand (i.e. an angel prepared to mete out punishment) appeared to Yehoshua, Yehoshua asked him for what sin he had come. Had he come to punish for neglect of Torah study, or for neglect of the Tamid offering that had not been brought the previous afternoon. The angel answered, "I have come *now*," alluding that he had come because Torah study was being neglected *now*. He had not come to punish the Jews for neglecting the Tamid, an event that had taken place the previous afternoon. Rashi explains that the Jews had been engaged in battle the whole day, and had not had an opportunity to study Torah except at night. So Yehoshua immediately "spent the night in the midst of the deep," and R. Yochanan explains, "this teaches us

he spent the night in the deepness of halakhah.” Because of this, the angel’s outstretched sword was left unused, and the threatened punishment never materialized. It was not ordinary Torah study, but rather the deeps of the Torah, “the deepness of halakhah,” that saved them from the angel’s outstretched sword, that prevented the punishment from materializing.

This is the first counsel we must take in this time of oppression.

### **The Power of Prayer**

The second counsel is prayer. When the Jews went to battle Midyan, the Torah (Bamidbar 31,4) repeats the expression “one thousand [warriors] per tribe, one thousand [warriors] per tribe.” Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 22,3) teach that one thousand men from each tribe went to battle, and a second thousand from each tribe was for prayer. We see that a one-to-one ratio is necessary, one prayer-soldier for each fighting-soldier. This is a great, heretofore unrecognized idea about the obligation to pray under these circumstances.

The great flood is twice described as “the waters of Noach.” (Yeshayah 54,9) The flood is named after Noach, as if he had been the one to bring it, or at least the one to cause it. Chazal (Zohar, Parshas Noach) explain that this is because he did not pray for his generation. If Chazal said this about one person’s failure to pray, and for a generation that was entirely corrupt, how much more so does this apply to the failure of an

entire Yeshiva to pray properly (for great is the power of collective prayer), and for a more meritorious generation.

Moshe Rabbeinu was upset at the Jews because they did not pray for him to survive to lead them into Eretz Yisrael. (Devarim Rabbah 3,11) We see that the power of the Jews' collective prayers is greater than the power of Moshe's 515 prayers, for Moshe's prayers did not help him, yet the Jews' prayers, collectively, could have helped him.

### **The Reward for Risking One's Life**

There are two important points to mention at the conclusion of this chapter. First, Chazal tell us that nobody can come near the martyrs of Lod in the world to come, so great is their reward. This is because they gave their lives to save Jews. The same is true of all those nowadays who risk their lives to save Jews, to save us; nobody can come near them, so great is their reward. We are obligated to pray for them without limits. Chazal say that one is beholden even to someone who holds the door for him or her. How much more so - beyond words, unlimited - is one beholden to those who risk their lives for his or her sake!

### **The Danger of Fear**

Second, we cannot be afraid. This is the greatest danger of war. For this reason, the Torah many times repeatedly forbids us to feel fear in times of war. Chazal (Sotah 44b) say, "flight (i.e. fear and fright) is the beginning of fall." Indeed, only when David told King

Shaul that he was not afraid of Golyas the Palestinian did Shaul permit him to fight against him.

Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 32,8) write that Yaakov Avinu was wrong for fearing Esav. “Esav was going about his business, and you sent him a message, ‘so says *your servant* Yaakov.’ One who gets involved in someone else’s quarrel is like one who grabs the ears of a dog.” Amazing! Even though Esav was travelling to wage war on Yaakov, even though he was travelling with four hundred men (and Chazal say that each of those four hundred was an officer over four hundred, bringing the total of Esav’s warriors to 160,000), Chazal write that Yaakov should not have feared, that he should have viewed Esav merely as one “going about his business,” and that one who fears him is like one who grabs the ears of a passing dog, a move that gives the dog power to bite.

There is a condition for fearlessness, though. As the famous *ba'al teshuvah* wrote (Hoshea 14,4): “Assyria will not save us [in our circumstances, this refers to the USA], we will not ride to victory on horses [in our circumstances, this means that fighter jets will not save us], so let us no longer worship the work of our hands [this refers to the army], for in You will the orphan find mercy.” He had no support; only Hashem can save us.

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## Chapter 2

### The Power of Empathy

Esther said to Mordechai: “Go, gather all the Jews and fast for me, neither eat nor drink, for three days, night and day.” (Esther 4,16) This public fast that lasted for three nights and days pushed aside the obligation to eat on holidays and the obligation to eat *matzah* on Pesach. (Megillah 15a) This leads to the inescapable conclusion that fasting was a natural means of bringing about salvation, since any supernatural means would not have superseded the obligation to eat *matzah*.<sup>1</sup>

In chapter one, we mentioned that the great flood was named after Noach. Even though he displayed tremendous self-sacrifice for those creatures who accompanied him on the ark, he was blamed for the flood because he did not pray for his generation. But that is not all. Noach’s generation did not even have ten righteous individuals. Had Noach prayed, his prayers would not have saved them. After all, did not Avraham learn from Noach to desist from praying once Hashem informed him that there were fewer than ten righteous people in Sodom?<sup>2</sup> Avraham saw that the nine righteous people in Noach’s generation were insufficient to save that generation. If Noach’s prayer would have anyhow been ineffective, why was Noach blamed for his failure to pray?

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<sup>1</sup> See Rambam, Peirush haMishnayos, Yoma 83a.

<sup>2</sup> See Bereishis Rabbah 49,13 and Rashi to Bereishis 18,32.

Noach did not cry out on behalf of his generation. This showed that his generation's plight did not sufficiently pain him, for one who is in pain cries out from the depths of his suffering even though he knows his cries will not help him at all. This is why the flood is named after Noach. In contrast, Avraham had already cried out a lot. Had prayer been able to help without ten righteous people, he would have cried out even more. All he learned from Noach, after he had already cried out, is that prayer for fewer than ten righteous people would not help.

Iyov was struck with suffering - the suffering of Iyov - because he was silent when Pharaoh plotted to enslave the Jews. (Sotah 11a) Even though his protests would not have helped, as we see from Yisro, who did not protest Pharaoh's plans, but fled, Iyov still neglected to feel proper pain for the Jews' plight. For this, tit for tat, he was punished with suffering, to show him that one who suffers, who experiences pain, cries out, even though his cries will not help him.

Certainly, if all of us cry out, if we all empathize with our brothers and sisters, our prayers and our pain will inspire divine mercy. Thus, a great obligation is incumbent upon us.

Alternately, we can explain based on the fact that Hashem is "perfect in His deeds, all His ways are just, He is faithful, without iniquity." R. Yitzchak Blazer (Kochvei Ohr, ch. 3) asks: "all His ways are just ...

without iniquity” – but are not we, too, obligated to judge justly, without iniquity? Where, then, is the uniqueness of Hashem’s justice?

The answer is that when humans judge, only the defendant stands in judgment. If the defendant is guilty, we punish him, even if other people besides the defendant will suffer for his punishment. But Hashem’s justice takes everyone into account. If someone else (e.g. a friend or a relative), who does not deserve to suffer, will suffer because the defendant is punished, Hashem will save the defendant. This is the perfection of Hashem’s deeds.

Thus, there are two dimensions to prayer. First, we are obligated to pray because prayer helps. Of this obligation, Chazal (Berachos 12b) said, “one who could have prayed, but did not, is called a sinner.” Second, though, we must pray because we feel our brothers’ and sisters’ agony, because our experiencing pain from their suffering could save them - and we *must* do everything we can, including sharpening our empathy, to save them.

Let us return to the contrast between Avraham and Noach. Avraham knew that prayer for fewer than ten righteous men would not save Sodom. This, however, was only *vis-à-vis* the simple dimension of prayer. The empathic dimension of prayer might have salvific capacity even absent ten righteous men. Noach did not work properly on feeling empathy with his co-generationists, and he was therefore blamed for the



flood. Avraham, in contrast, felt proper empathy for Sodom's inhabitants, and therefore discharged his obligation both vis-à-vis prayer's simply dimension and vis-à-vis its empathic dimension.

So, in addition to praying because prayer brings salvation, we should also strive to feel empathy with our brothers and sisters, to share their pain and oppression, and in that merit Hashem will surely favor them.

### **The Power of Character Refinement**

After the three days of fasting, Esther "dressed in royalty." Chazal (Megillah 14b-15b) explained that "she dressed in *ruach haKodesh*, in divine inspiration, prior to entering the king's chamber." She did this because "perhaps Hashem will sense this and perform a miracle."

What did Esther hope Hashem would sense? Rashi explains that she hoped Hashem would sense "how I have to flatter those whom I despise and how I have to cheapen my dignity, to lower my self-esteem." We can learn two things from this comment. First, at times it is possible for one literally to dress in robes of divine inspiration, just as one would dress in real robes. It is impossible to find favor in a king's eyes after three days of fasting; the fast would totally ruin one's appearance! Esther was compelled by the situation's gravity to rise to the occasion and dress in divine inspiration. This is the first thing we can learn.

Second, we can learn how great the power of one individual, breaking a single character trait, can be. She

invited Haman to her feast, she compromised on her self-esteem, and in this merit, the Jews were saved.

In a bomb shelter during the six-day war, with rockets falling all around, was an *agunah*. She said, “Master of the Universe, I forgive my husband, who abandoned me many years ago and left me an *agunah*. I forgive him now for all the great shame and pain he caused me all this time! You, too, Merciful Father, forgive us!

This *agunah*'s ability to break a negative trait saved everyone in the shelter, even more than the prayers of an entire Yeshiva. Certainly, the Yeshiva's prayers were no small matter, but an individual's overcoming a negative trait is even greater, as we learn from Esther's invitation to Haman.

### **The Power of Faith**

R. Ami said, “Rain only comes in the merit of faith ... The power of faith is great. We learn this from a weasel and a pit. (Someone once made a commitment, and made a weasel and a pit the guarantors. Ultimately, when he forgot his commitment, he suffered strange tragedies at the hands of a weasel and a pit. Then, he remembered his earlier commitment. This teaches us that even the forces of nature are inclined to fulfill the faith we place in them.) How much more so is Hashem inclined to fulfill the faith we place in Him!” When humans place their faith in Hashem, it gives Hashem the power, so to speak, to do good things for His creatures. Therefore, we conclude this chapter by noting that faith in Hashem will save us.

## Chapter 3

### The Danger of Rote

The Talmud (Shabbos 31b) writes: “Is it not enough for the wicked that they are neither afraid nor saddened by the day of death, that they strengthen their hearts like a reinforced building?” The Talmud is commenting on an astonishing phenomenon. If one were to witness, for the first time, the death of a man, it would surely make a massive impression on him, and inspire him to change his ways. Yet the wicked witness death on a daily basis, and it makes no impact on them!

The Talmud continues, and explains how this comes about. “The wicked know that they walk towards death, but they have fat on their innards. Do not say that they easily forget about death (and that is why they are not afraid of it, and that one could therefore rectify the situation by reminding them about death), for it says, ‘they mention their end in their mouths.’” This is the tragedy of the situation. Since they constantly mention their end, it makes no impact on them. Just as undertakers and gravediggers, who are constantly occupied with the dead, must struggle to be impacted by the sight of death, these wicked people, by constantly mentioning death, lose their ability to be inspired by thinking of death.

We can bring two proofs for this. First, Rashbam (Shemos 16,22-23) writes that even though Hashem told Moshe on Sunday that no manna would fall on Shabbos,

Moshe did not tell this to the Jews until they witnessed with their own eyes how a double portion of manna fell on Friday, the first portion for Friday and the second portion for Shabbos. He did this so that he could harness the power of their astonishment to help them appreciate the importance of Shabbos. This, in spite of the fact that a prophet is not permitted to refrain from relaying his prophecy. Moshe did not want, by letting the Jews live for an entire week with awareness that the double portion was coming, to weaken the impression that would be made on them by sudden discovery of the double portion.

Second, we can prove the danger of acclimatization from Chushim b. Dan. When Chushim was told that Esav was delaying Yaakov's burial in the *Me'aras haMachpeilah* until Naftali returned from Egypt, Chushim said, "Should my grandfather lie in shame until Naftali returns from Egypt?" So Chushim took an implement and smashed Esav's head and killed him. (Sotah 13a)

We have to understand how it was possible for Yaakov's sons to tolerate such a situation. Why did they, like Chushim, not react viscerally to the shame their father was experiencing at Esav's hands? Why was Chushim, a grandson, the only one incapable of reconciling himself to the situation? The answer is, Yaakov's sons had already begun negotiating with Esav, they had already begun to think, "in only a moment we will win this dispute, in only a moment we will be able to

bury our father.” This thought allowed them to grow accustomed, slowly but surely, to the situation, to the point that they were able to tolerate an unconscionable shame to their father. Only Chushim, who was hard of hearing and did not participate in the discussions, was incapable of bearing Yaakov’s disgrace, when, all of a sudden, he became aware of it.

This is our situation, now. Over the past days and weeks, we have grown accustomed to this war, it has become easier for us to bear, and the situation no longer makes as awesome an impression upon us as it should.

### **The Power of Participation**

Mordechai did not argue with Esther at all when she initially protested that she could not help her people. Instead, he sent her a message: “do not imagine that you can escape the Jews’ fate just because you live in the king’s palace.” In other words, he chided her that she failed to properly perceive and engage with the Jews’ situation because she perceived herself immune to the threat that faced them.

In chapter four, we will mention how even Moshe Rabbeinu needed to go out amongst the Jews, from Pharaoh’s palace where he had been raised, and participate in their activities, in order to see and feel and share their pain.

Moreover, even the thousand prayer-soldiers whom we mentioned in chapter one, had to go to the battlefield

to properly pray for the fighting-soldiers. One cannot participate properly from afar. One cannot pray a complete prayer unless he is in the line of fire.

Thank God, we can sit and learn in peace. Yet from afar, we cannot properly participate and grasp how dire the situation is. We must therefore do everything we can to feel and appreciate and understand and internalize what our brothers and sisters are going through. May Hashem have mercy and do good for them and for us.

## Chapter 4

### **The Power of First-hand Experience**

What happened to our inspired prayers? Why does the situation not awaken us to greater acts of valor? Why do we not invest greater energy in our Torah study? How can we sleep in peace, as we used to before this situation beset us?

When Hagar saw how her son was deathly ill, and how the flask of water – his only cure – was empty, she threw the boy beneath a bush and sat an arrow's shot away, lest she witness his death. Her pain lightened when she moved away from him. The Torah (Bereishis 21,15-16) writes twice that she moved away from the boy, and Rashi explains that each time his throes intensified, she moved further away. Even the massive pain that a mother feels as her son marches towards death, G-d forbid, is lessened by distance and by obstruction of sight.

The Ibn Ezra (Shemos 2,3) explains that for this reason, Yocheved abandoned the baby Moshe in the river, because she could not bear to witness his death. This, even though she knew Moshe's stature, even though she knew that her house filled with light when he was born.

Rashi (Bereishis 48,7) writes that Yaakov apologized to Yosef for burying Rachel on the road to Efrat. Yaakov explained that Hashem had instructed him to bury her there, so that she could assist her descendants when Nevuzaradan drove them down that road on their path to exile. Rashi writes that Rachel left her grave and cried and begged for mercy for them, until Hashem answered her, "hold your voice back from crying, and your eyes from tears. You will see reward for your efforts ... your sons will return to their land." Even a holy soul like Rachel's, after death, would not have been able to cry so hard had she not been buried literally at the side of the road that her descendants traversed. Had she been buried merely nearby, she could not have cried like she did.

The wisest man said (Mishlei 24,30-32): "I passed the field of a lazy man, the vineyard of a thoughtless person." Even the wisest man *had to pass by* in order to "see and set my heart on the matter." Only sight allows one to truly contemplate. The verse mentions "I saw," twice, because after one begins to think about something, he must take a second look. After that, he

writes “I took a lesson from it,” because, even after seeing and contemplating and seeing again, one must still think about what one has seen and seek lessons from it. To be properly impressed by an experience or an occurrence, one must see and think about it multiple times.

Moshe, also, “went out to his brothers and saw what they bore.” Rashi (Shemos 2,11) explains that he set his eyes and heart upon them, that he *needed* to set his eyes and heart upon them in order to feel pain for them. Chazal (Shemos Rabbah 1,27) further describe how Moshe put his shoulders underneath each of their burdens, and said, “would that I could die in your stead.” Only after all this, after inspiring oneself via concrete actions, can one feel someone else’s pain.

We have proved from many sources that one cannot properly contemplate a situation from afar. Therefore, we must be aware that even though the soldiers who are falling in battle are our sons, we do not properly feel their pain. Anyone who claims that he can flee to America, yet pray properly for our precious brothers, is a liar. From afar, you cannot properly feel the situation, and you cannot pray for us at all.

Chazal (Ta’anis 11a) say that anyone who separates himself from the community and does not participate in its pain will not see its comfort. But anyone who pains himself together with the community will merit seeing its



comfort. The Pri Megadim (Orach Chaim 574) is correct in writing that anyone who could have helped by praying *together with the community*, but neglects to do so, is included in this statement.

## Chapter 5

### Doing Our Part

Chazal (Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel 163) write: “Four kings – David, Asa, Yehoshafat, and Chizkiyah – each made a different request. David asked, ‘let me chase my enemies and catch them, and not return until I destroy them.’ Hashem said, ‘I will do this for you,’ as it says, ‘David chased them from the morn...’” We see that Chazal understood that even our ability to chase our enemies comes from Hashem, since David had to pray for the ability to chase them.

Even more importantly, we see that there is no direct cause-and-effect. We do what we ought to do, and Hashem responds. Our actions do not directly generate the effect. Rather, we inspire Hashem to do His part by doing our part. As long as we do what we are supposed to do, Hashem will do His part, no matter how unlikely the connection between our actions and Hashem’s response appears to the empirical observer.

This is what happened when Hashem told Moshe to count the Levites, from the one month old babies and older. Moshe protested: “how can I enter their tents to

count the little babies?” Hashem answered: “you do your part, and I will do Mine.” Moshe went and stood at the doorway of each tent, and Hashem’s presence went before him, and a *bas kol* came out of the tent and announced, “such and such a number of babies are in this tent.” This is the meaning of the verse, “Moshe counted them *al pi Hashem* (lit. by Hashem’s mouth).”

“Asa said, ‘I will chase and You will do,’ and Hashem responded, ‘I will do this.’” Even though Asa knew that ultimately, Hashem would miraculously kill his enemies, he still had to chase them, just like Moshe still had to go and stand at the door of each tent in order for Hashem to do His part.

“Yehoshafat stood and said, ‘I have neither the power to kill, nor the power to chase. Let me sing praise, and You do.’ Hashem responded, ‘I will do this.’” This means that Yehoshafat was, at least, able to appreciate the magnitude of the miracle Hashem would perform for him, to see Hashem’s salvation and to praise Him for it.

“Chizkiyah stood and said, ‘I have neither the power to kill, not the power to chase, nor the power to sing praise. I will sleep in my bed, and You do.’ Hashem said, ‘I will do this.’” This was our state during the Yom Kippur war. We were not even able to grasp the magnitude of the miracle. The maximum we could do was trust that, whatever the situation was, Hashem would save us.

We must do as the famous *ba'al teshuvah* wrote (Hoshea 14,4): “Assyria will not save us [in our circumstances, this means we cannot rely primarily on the USA], we will not ride to victory on horses [in our circumstances, this means that we cannot rely on fighter jets], so let us no longer worship the work of our hands [this means we cannot rely only on the army], for in You will the orphan find mercy.” He had no support; only Hashem can save us. This is exactly what King Chizkiyah was expressing; he was so weak, all he could do was trust Hashem. And because he did that, and because he did all he was able to do, Hashem brought about his salvation. And so, we should pray King Chizkiyah’s prayer.<sup>3</sup>

Do not say that you have already prayed. Moshe prayed 515 prayers, and he would have prayed more had Hashem permitted him. Perhaps, had he prayed more, his prayers would have been heeded. Moshe also asked the Jews accusingly why they did not pray for him, since the community’s prayers can be more helpful than 515 prayers of Moshe.

## Chapter 6

### Fulfilling Oppression’s Purpose

It is written (Shir haShirim 2,14), “let Me hear your voice.” R. Yeruchem Levovitz explains that oppression is a means of evoking prayer, since Hashem desires and

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<sup>3</sup> See 2 Melachim 19,15-19.

looks forwards to the prayers of the righteous. “Let Me hear your voice” means “let Me hear you acknowledge that I can save you and that no one else can save you.” Indeed, Chazal (Shemos Rabbah 21,5) ask why Hashem surrounded the Jews with dangers on three sides - with the sea and the enemies and the desert - immediately after they left Egypt. Hashem did not want them to be surrounded simply for the sake of surrounding them; Chazal understood that there is a deeper purpose for their being surrounded. And Chazal answer that Hashem desired their prayers, He desired to hear their voice, as it says, “My dove is in the cleft of the rock ... let Me hear your voice.” In our situation, we have to know this, and then our prayers will be entirely different.<sup>4</sup>

This is what Chazal (Bereishis Rabbah 45,4) meant by asking, “why were the matriarchs barren, when most women conceive easily?” They answered, “because Hashem desired their prayers.”

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<sup>4</sup> This seems like a novel approach to the classical question of theodicy, “why do bad things happen to good people.” This approach suggests that Hashem visits suffering on good people because He loves them, and His love for them fills Him with desire to hear them call out to Him. Just as a wife might pretend to not have heard a compliment in order to get her husband to repeat it, Hashem may make life difficult for the righteous in order to get them to call out to Him. Obviously, though, there is a vast difference between the inconvenience of repeating a compliment and the suffering that Hashem sometimes visits on the righteous. For a full treatment of this question, see Ramban, *Toras haAdam*, Sha’ar haGemul, and R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Derech Hashem*, part II.

This is the meaning of the verse (Tehillim 81,11), “I brought you out of Egypt” - you should acknowledge that only I can save you, like you witnessed in Egypt. “*Harchev picha*,” open your mouth, i.e. ask me for something you are missing, and then the purpose of your missing it will be fulfilled, and you will no longer need to miss it, “*vaAmal’eihu*,” and I will fill it.

This is what Hashem meant when he told Moshe (Shemos 14,10-15), “why are you crying to me?” The Jews have already prayed, the purpose of their present plight has been fulfilled, so “speak to the Jews and let them travel.”

### **Imperfect Fulfillment is Still Fulfillment**

Even though they fulfilled the purpose of their plight, even though they cried out to Hashem, confusion still reigned, because man is often in a state of mind composed of both enlightenment and benightedness. This is why, after they prayed, they still complained to Moshe, “Are there not enough graves in Egypt, that you took us to die in the desert?” Yet, despite the fact that the Jews remained confused, since they prayed the minimum prayer expected of them at that time, the purpose of their travails was fulfilled, and their oppression was lifted.

This also occurred during the battle of Amalek. The Talmud tells us that “when Moshe lifted his hands, the Jews gained the upper hand.’ Moshe’s hands did not dictate the battle’s ebb and flow. Rather, when the Jews

looked upwards and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they would be victorious. When they forgot to subjugate their hearts, they would fall.” All this, faith and forgetfulness, occurred on a single day. Light and darkness reigned in a chaotic mixture. Still, since they heeded Hashem’s voice, the purpose of the battle was fulfilled, and they were able to emerge victorious.

This is the power of the community’s prayer.

## **Post Script**

### **Thoughts About Prayer**

The Rambam (Ta’aniyos 1,1) writes that there are two types of prayer: formal prayer, and informal prayer. Formal prayer is recited each day, using predetermined words. Informal prayer is recited in response to an upwelling of emotion from the heart’s depths, and is recited with whatever words are necessary to express the heart’s feelings. Informal prayer is the unburdening of our troubles to Hashem. And Hashem understands every person’s language.

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 106a) also writes that prayers for specific things (i.e. prayers for a wheat crop to sprout) are more powerful than prayers for general things (i.e. prayers for success in business). For this reason, we pray by name for individuals who are ill. Applied to the present situation, this suggests that when we clearly envision the threats we wish to be saved from, or the form of victory we desire, our prayers will be more powerful.

### **Thoughts About Empathy**

What should one do if he has difficulty empathizing with what transpires on the front lines of battle, or in the cramped bomb shelters? To an extent, this difficulty can be alleviated by reading or hearing accounts of other people's experiences. But, as long as the experiences remain in the domain of the other, true empathy cannot be achieved. A person can take ownership of his brothers' and sisters' suffering; if only he harnesses his imagination, he can make it his own. R. Elimelech of Lizensk suggested, during recitation of Shema, imagining oneself jumping into a fire to sanctify Hashem's name. Similarly, if we imagine ourselves in Eretz Yisrael, in bomb shelters or on battlefields, with their attendant anxiety or grisly detail, we can better empathize with our brothers' and sisters' suffering.

### **Mindfulness and Discipline**

Chazal (Rosh haShanah 28b) write that mitzvos need *kavannah*, they need to be performed in a mindful way. If they are not, they may lose their unique spiritual quality. When we listen or talk about the war, we are often motivated by idle curiosity. We thereby squander a tremendous opportunity. By listening and by talking, we could be fulfilling the mitzvah to empathize with our brothers' and sisters' plight, the mitzvah to love them as we love ourselves.

The lack of mindfulness that tends to accompany discussions about the war has a second negative

consequence. In wartime, even we, the prayer-soldiers, must act with military discipline. We must identify what our duties are at a given moment, and then we must carry out those duties. Do we ask ourselves, before getting involved in war conversations, whether participating in these conversations is our duty at this moment? Do we ask ourselves: if this conversation is our present duty, for how long will it remain our duty? Do we ask ourselves: at what point will it be my duty to terminate my involvement in this conversation if civility permits?

### **Gratitude**

Now, we are praying intensely. But what will happen when the conflict terminates? Will we thank Hashem with as much intensity as we are now beseeching Him? Chazal (Sanhedrin 94a) teach us that Chizkiyah could have been the Moshiach, had he only properly praised Hashem for his miraculous victory over Sancheriv. Please, let us not be guilty once more of this same failure.

Sometimes, failure to properly praise Hashem in victory's wake is a consequence of failure to perceive victory as such. Hindsight helps us realize all our mistakes, and this tempts us to think of our efforts, and of their results, as failures. This is a dangerous mindset. The Torah instructs us to treat Egyptians favorably, because we were strangers in their land. This, despite the fact that they oppressed us terribly. We can appreciate



every single good thing we experience for what it is, regardless of failures that accompany it. How much more so is this applicable to us, when the successes so massively outweigh the failures! True, retrospective analysis is part of our duty, because it will help us improve our performance in the future. Yet we cannot allow that analysis to detract from our appreciation of the magnitude of Hashem's kindness towards us, as manifest from the salvation we experience.