



## **REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER FOR THE YAMIM NORA'IM**

### **A. The First Principle of Prayer: Hashem Is Involved in Our Personal Lives and World History**

**T**he first Rashi in Chumash notes that the stories of Bereishis and the rest of the Torah are as important as the *mitzvos haTorah*. Hashem commanded us through His mitzvos to do various actions and to abstain from others. These commandments are the mainstay of the Torah. If the Torah is about laws, why are so many stories included in the Torah? We read the stories about Adam, Noach, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, Moshe, and

more. There are many stories in the Torah, sometimes containing more detail than certain mitzvos. Why is this? Rashi explains that the stories teach us that Hashem our God is involved in human events. He is more than just the Creator and Lawgiver; He is actively involved in human life. Hashem is part of our everyday life, on the individual level and on the national level.

I remember *davening* as a child in New York in a *Chassidische shteeble* filled with Hungarian and Polish refugees and wondering, “Who is Hashem?” “He is also a member of the shul,” I told myself. “He is absolutely here in the lives of these people in shul.” Over

the centuries, the Jewish people have been able to both absorb and live this reality.

When we read the stories in the Torah, we see Hashem as a real character, indeed as the prime character, of the stories. He has conversations with Adam, Noach, the Avos, Moshe, and Aharon. He plays a major role. The Torah wants us to make this a living part of ourselves. God is not something abstract. He is not just a lawgiver who gave us a book of do’s and don’ts and a *Shulchan Aruch*. There is a far more important concept of Hashem: as a real, living being, involved in our lives and in the history of the world. He is as

important as presidents and kings, and we have to feel that. Hashem is an important actor in the human story. This concept is the basis of Sefer Bereishis, as Rashi illustrates with his famous first comment.

ומה טעם פתח בבראשית? משום ... שאם יאמרו אומות העולם לישראל: "לסטים אתם שכבשתם ארצות שבעה גוים", הם אומרים להם: "כל הארץ של הקב"ה היא; הוא בראה, ונתנה לאשר ישר בעיניו. ברצונו נתנה להם, וברצונו נטלה מהם ונתנה לנו".

*For what reason does [the Torah] open with Bereishis (when the first mitzvah to the Jewish people comes only much later)? ... For if the nations of the world will tell Israel "You are thieves, for you captured the land of the seven nations [who previously lived there]," they will reply, "All land belongs to God. He created it and gave it to whoever He saw fit. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it from them and gave it to us.*

### **Rashi, Bereishis 1:1**

At different times Hashem plays the roles of coach, judge, reward giver, and punisher. He is involved in whatever we do. This is why the Jewish people get the Land of Israel. Hashem gave it to us through His involvement in human history. He is a participant in the human story.

Prayer is our way of accessing Hashem and influencing His role in our lives and in history. It is a great gift which He has given to us.

## **B. The Second Principle of Prayer: A Precious Gift**

Tefillah, prayer, is Hashem's gift connected with the spiritual level of the soul, the *tzelem Elokim*. The *Shem Mishmuel* (Noach 5674) defines the word "tefillah" based on the *passuk* in Bereishis 30:8, "*Naftulei Elokim*

*niftalti*." Rashi there says that *naftulei* means connection, like the word *pesil*, which is a wick comprised of several strands twisted together. Tefillah therefore means connecting to Hashem, directing our own Godliness toward Him. This is the gift Hashem gave to us in order to express the Godly, spiritual side of ourselves.

This process of connecting to God through prayer is also a unifying process within ourselves. Our biological souls may want to eat, drink and be merry, but our emotional, spiritual selves often say no. Sometimes our emotions want to get angry, but our intellect says no. We experience many internal conflicts. How can we settle the contradictions within ourselves? The *tzelem Elokim*, our inherent Godliness, unifies all the elements of our personality into one. Tefillah addresses these issues by making us aware of our own Godliness and connection to Him, thus enabling our spiritual side to be the arbiter of our inner conflicts.

We live at a time of conflict — between people, and between nations. Individuals experience conflict within themselves. A person has many goals, which often conflict. The goal of financial success, for example, drives a person to spend a lot of time working. But we also want to spend time at home. People want power, but power produces enemies. Then enter alienation and anxiety. How can we synthesize our conflicting drives? Prayer connects us with Hashem, and helps us put our competing values in perspective.

When we connect to Hashem, He stretches out a hand, caresses us, consoles us, and tells us to put things into perspective. He shares a bit of His Divine perspective with us

through the power of prayer. Our bodies shake back and forth, our souls sing in emotional rapture, our minds contemplate the greatness of the Almighty and how He can help us. All levels of our personality are involved in one act of connection with Hashem together with our own unified, single soul.

Let us always be strong in tefillah. This is the solution for concerns of health, wealth, peace, and security. Prayer connects us to Hashem and He helps us with our needs. It places *tzelem Elokim* as the prime mover of all the levels within ourselves, instead of conflicting levels of *guf*, *nefesh* and *seichel* (body, soul and mind).

Especially on the Yamim Nora'im, prayer becomes the main focus, enabling us to achieve internal unity as well as unity between all of the Jewish people. Indeed, prayer on Yamim Nora'im enables us to achieve unity with the whole world and of course with Hashem.

## **C. The Third Principle of Prayer: Using Emotion and Intellect to Serve Hashem**

In Parshas Vayigash, the Torah describes the confrontation between Yehuda and Yosef. These two great *tzaddikim*, founders of the Jewish people, are not just models for their respective *shevatim*, but for each and every Jew. In Chassidus, Yehuda represents the heart of the Jew and Yosef represents the mind of the Jew. Every person must possess and develop a combination of a logical, intellectual mind with a warm heart filled with feeling.

There are two great expressions of serving Hashem and keeping His Torah. These two expressions are

Torah study and prayer. “*Talmud Torah keneged kulam*” — Torah study is the most important of all mitzvos a human being can ever do (*Pei’ah* 1:1).” This is primarily an intellectual endeavor. The second method of expressing fealty to God is by praying to Hashem. This is accomplished through arousal and experience of feelings. “...*Le’ahava es Hashem elokeichem ule’ovdo bechol levavchem uve’chol nafshechem*. ...To love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul (*Devarim* 10:12).” The Gemara (*Taanis* 2a) asks, how does one serve God with his heart? The Gemara gives a short and profound answer — with emotional prayers. Prayer is not meant to be primarily an intellectual exercise. It should emotionally move us! Just saying the words of prayer is not enough. We must feel the words. We must emotionally beg Hashem for the things that we desire, and thank and praise Him with all of our heartfelt emotions.

We need to see more emotional prayer among us. Too often prayer has become an intellectual exercise, as if going through a checklist, to say this chapter and recite this prayer. Prayer must include emotion! Before you pray, think of yourself as talking to Hashem. Then pray and speak emotionally of your needs and ask for help. “I am your child. I need your help. I am suffering. My family needs your help. My people need your help. Come help us Abba!” How do you serve Hashem with all of your heart? With prayer! We must also sing songs

of joy and praise, including Hallel. Our hearts serve our Creator, Who is our best friend and our father in heaven. Prayer is a service of the heart, *avodah shebalev*.

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Torah, however, is in the mind — the cool, collected intellect, logically analyzing, unswayed by emotion. When learning Torah, we must be sharp and to the point. Prejudices and preconceptions have no place in Torah study. We should not take the Torah where we want it to go. We must follow the Torah’s logic to where it tells us to go. This is the only real way to learn Torah, *Torah lishmah, la’amita shel Torah*, no matter where it takes us. In talmud Torah, the heart cannot be our guide; the mind must be the master.

Yehuda was an emotional person, and he was the antagonist of Yosef. He originally had hatred and jealousy

for Yosef. He was almost ready to kill him. Yehuda then instigated the sale of Yosef. This was the downside of his emotional nature. Later, in the story of Yehuda and Tamar, Yehuda repents. Even though Yehuda was the leader of the brothers, he courageously admitted his guilt. Tamar, a young woman, was able to show how terribly he had acted. Yehuda was about to commit the worst of crimes, murder, but he didn’t. “She is right,” announced Yehuda, “and I am wrong.” He succeeded in directing his emotions the other way.

Emotions can be very damaging. Bad emotions can really hurt others and even the person who experiences them. Emotions, though, can be wonderful, especially in terms of changing a person for the good. Positive emotions include the emotions of love and yearning for something better, the emotions of shame and regret, of a desire to do good, the emotions of excitement to do the right thing. These are great emotions and are at the core of repentance.

The Yamim Nora’im are days of repentance. We must be able to say that we have made a mistake. The mind sees things one way. If a person analyzed a situation and concluded that a certain behavior was fitting, the mind will normally maintain that conclusion. The heart, though, can cry and see the pain that one has caused others. The heart has the ability to change.

Change is so important for us! We must be brave enough to admit that we have made mistakes and that



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we can learn from them. From our experience of life we learn that we can and do make mistakes. We can even be happy to grow through our mistakes, and do *teshuvah*, repentance. These emotions encourage a person to experience the catharsis of change. This is the *lev* of a Jew. This is Yehuda.

Yosef is the mind. The mind is very important. When it discovers the truth, the mind knows what it is and will not budge from that truth. If you know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , the whole world could oppose you but you would still know that it is the truth. You would surely insist that it is so. We know as truth that Hashem gave us the Torah. No one can budge us from this truth. No matter how much our enemies try to distort history, they cannot succeed, because our minds will not be swayed.

Similarly, no amount of misrepresentation and deceit can ever change the truth that we are the founders of the holy city of Jerusalem and that we had two temples there. No matter how many bulldozers come to the Temple Mount to destroy remnants of our Holy Temple that stood there, they cannot change our awareness of the reality of our history. No one can change the truth for us.

The mind of the Jew knows the truth and will not leave the truth — *Moshe ve'soraso emes* — Moshe and his Torah are true (*Sanhedrin* 110a). This is logical and historical fact.

No amount of pressure has ever been able to change us as a nation. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were burned at the stake in the Middle Ages, but we did not abandon the truth of our faith. The Holocaust did not make us abandon our faith that we are the chosen people, the people of Israel and that the Land of Israel is ours. The terrorist attacks of today will not change our awareness of this truth. All of Israel is ours, and Jerusalem is ours. We know this truth, no matter how much they may attack us. We may become frightened by our enemy's attempts to hurt us, but we will never relinquish our recognition of the truth. What our parents taught us is true, and what our teachers taught us is true. We are the chosen people of God, and he gave us the Torah that guides us to this day.

Yosef was the true Jew. Chazal say he was the same Yosef in his father's house, in the house of Potifar, in jail, and then in the palace of Egypt. His steadfastness was rooted in the power of his mind to know the truth and to

remain absolutely committed to his values in all circumstances, whether they were pleasant or horrible.

Yehuda was the first Jewish king. As such he represented the heart of Israel. The Rambam writes in *Hilchos Melachim* (3:6) that the king's heart is the very heart of Israel. As the heart of his people, Yehuda was ready to sacrifice his own freedom, and even his very life for the benefit of Israel. This is why he offered himself as a slave in place of Binyamin. He wanted to preserve Yaakov's life and the burgeoning family-nation of Israel. Self-sacrifice and absolute dedication to the nation of Israel is the very heart of our people.

Thus the reconciliation of Yosef and Yehuda ensured Jewish leadership forever, to have the optimal combination of thought and feelings, to use the thinking Jewish mind and the feeling Jewish heart for the benefit of all Jews. This is the model of King David, and of the King Mashiach who will ultimately lead our holy people at the time of the final redemption. This is the model that we should try to emulate during the Yamim Nora'im when we go through the process of *teshuvah* — which involves our total intellect and heart.

