

Prayer & Foul Shot Discipline Rabbi Maury Grebenau

The Gemara (Brachot 26b) tell us that at least one option for the construct that the institution of prayer was patterned after is the actions of the Avot (forefathers). The three forefathers are matched up with the three daily services and verses are given that demonstrate each of the forefathers praying. If we explore these verses more carefully we notice that in the case of Avraham and Yaakov the fact that they prayed is less explicit. For Avraham it is the word “stood” that is connected to his previous conversation with Hashem about Sedom.

“And Abraham rose early in the morning to the place where he had **stood** before the Lord” ([Genesis 19:27](#))¹

Yaakov, as well is less than clear from the simple reading of the verse. Yaakov sets down to sleep and the word “encountered” is understood as an oblique reference to prayer.

“And he **encountered** [*vayifga*] the place and he slept there for the sun had set” ([Genesis 28:11](#))

However, the case of Yitzchak stands out as one that in our parsha seems far closer to the simple explanation of the pasuk. The scene is Rivka being brought back to her future in-law’s home for the first time by Eliezer. Yitzchak is described as going out to “speak in the field” and Rivka reacts to the scene.

“And Isaac went out **to converse** [*lasuah*] in the field toward evening and, looking up, he saw camels approaching. Raising her eyes, Rebekah saw Isaac. She alighted from the camel” ([Genesis 24:63-64](#)).

We can also see this distinction in the approach of Rashi. The commentaries that explain the Torah in the tradition of “pshat” (the simple understanding of the verses), such as the Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, do not understand any of these three examples as languages of prayer. In the case of Yitzchak, they translate the word siach as relating to planting and explain that Yitzchak was in the field to oversee agricultural work². However, in looking at Rashi’s commentary the fact that Yitzchak’s instance of prayer is closer to the simple explanation emerges. When it comes to Avraham, Rashi makes no comment at all. For Yaakov, Rashi first offers a simple explanation

¹ All translations courtesy of Sefaria

² It is notable that for the most part they do not even comment on the other examples (Rashbam does seem bothered by the word choice in the case of Yaakov) but do feel the need to explain siach. This also points to the fact that Yitzchak’s case seems to be more suggestive that the midrashic explanation of prayer is more needed.

and only brings the Midrashic explanation that the verse refers to prayer, as a second approach. In contrast, when Rashi comments on Yitzchak, the only explanation offered is that Yitzchak was praying. A potential explanation for this illuminates a basic truth of prayer.

Avrohom and Yitzchak represent very different approaches to religious life. Avrohom symbolizes *chessed* and a creative approach. Avrohom was the trailblazer. Yitzchak was the approach of discipline, *din*. Yitzchak did everything that Avrohom did, he didn't introduce new things, he did what was already done again and again, perfecting it. I sometimes refer to this quality as "foul shot discipline." Some basketball players have an incredible foul shot and they rarely miss. The foul shot is not creative, it is not a major athletic feat. There isn't much glory there – you don't see replays of foul shots in the highlight reel. What it does require is the discipline to practice shooting again and again and again.

The central quality necessary for Tefilla is discipline. It is the consistency of engaging three times every day in the words of prayer – the same words every day – perfecting our conversation with Hashem. Perhaps this is why the instance of Tefilla for Yitzchak seems clearer than the other forefathers. It is Yitzchak's quality that is the base of prayer. We must reach down and embrace that sense of foul shot discipline to truly engage in prayer.

Of course, the quality of foul-shot discipline needs to be tempered with Avrohom's creativity in order to bring consistent new life to our prayers. Although having the quality of foul-shot discipline is a significant feat, it is rather dry on its own. After all, even the best foul shooters would probably not be very interested in the game if it was just foul shots (I imagine there would also be less spectators). In the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (2:13), Rabbi Shimon warns us not to make our prayers established (*keva*). I believe this is exactly the warning the Mishna intends. The Mishna is recognizing the danger of having Tefilla be a rote experience. Since the main quality needed for prayer is foul-shot discipline, we then run the risk of perfecting this quality and ending up with prayers that are as exciting and fulfilling as a full game of foul shooting. So, says the Mishna, do not make your prayer *keva* – make sure to temper your discipline with the creativity of Avrohom. If we can work to perfect our discipline towards prayer, the *lasuach basadeh* of Yitzchak, and temper it with the creativity and freshness of Avrohom we can hope to truly nurture our relationship with Hashem.