

פ' ואתחנן תשפ"ג

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CONSTANT ELEVATION

I entreated Hashem at that time. (3:23)

Chazal say (*Medrash Tanno'im, Devorim 3:23*) that Moshe prayed 515 prayers asking Hashem for permission to enter *Eretz Yisroel*, and the Vilna Gaon says that each prayer was accompanied by a different reason justifying Moshe's request. Moshe knew that if he could enter *Eretz Yisroel* he would be able to feel a closeness to Hashem that was greater than anything he could attain in *chutz lo'Oretz*.

Even though he had already attained immense levels, and he knew that an enormous reward awaited him in the eternal world, he was not satisfied with all of that, and did his utmost to attempt to achieve even further spiritual qualities by seeing *Eretz Yisroel*.

This teaches us that we should never forgo the opportunity of climbing the rungs of *avodas Hashem*. We should not be satisfied with our achievements, but constantly continue to look for further ways of elevating ourselves, even if they involve much effort.

Only in this world can a person create his *Olom Habo*; only whatever he manages to achieve in this world will remain for all eternity (unless his sons or students continue in his path following his death, in which case they add merits for him in the World to Come, and his position there improves). That is why Moshe did not give up so easily.

IMBIBING THE SACTITY OF ERETZ YISROEL

Moshe's prayer ("Please let me cross over and see the good land": 3:25) consisted of two requests: to see the land and to enter it. Hashem replied that although he could not enter it he could see it ("Go up to the top of the hill and lift up your eyes...and see with your eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan": 3:27).

Moshe yearned to connect to *Eretz Yisroel*. Eventually Hashem told Moshe, "It is enough for you; speak to Me no more regarding this matter. Go up to the top of the hill and lift up your eyes" (3:26–27). Once Hashem promised Moshe that by seeing *Eretz Yisroel* spiritually he would attain the same superior levels and sanctity as if he were physically inside *Eretz Yisroel*, he relaxed. By seeing it, he indeed managed to imbibe its holiness and had the merit of becoming sanctified with its *kedusha* without actually entering it.

Rav Dessler's students recall him saying, "What takes me two months' of toil to understand in *chutz lo'oretz* takes me two weeks to grasp in *Eretz Yisroel*".

However, someone who comes to live in *Eretz Yisroel* without endeavoring to feel its sanctity will not merit its superior qualities. Moreover, its residents have to be especially careful not to sin there because the blemish caused by sins committed in *Eretz Yisroel* is far greater than that of sins committed in *chutz lo'oretz*, as befits the punishment for transgressors in the palace of the King. On the other hand, the potential for good deriving from any *mitzvah* performed in Hashem's palace is also much greater.

NO PRAYER IN VAIN

So Moshe's prayers were not in vain, and, in fact, every prayer is accepted by Hashem. Sometimes our requests are granted completely in this world, and, at other times, they help for other matters without our being aware of it.

Prayer is not only a means for achieving requests, but primarily an end in its own right, as it causes us to become subservient to Hashem, and internalize our faith that everything is from Him, and that our salvation is not to be found anywhere else. An immense reward awaits us for the very act of prayer, irrespective of whether Hashem palpably grants all our requests.

Sometimes a person prays many months or even years without being answered. The above episode teaches us never to despair. Even though Moshe's prayers to enter *Eretz Yisroel* were not answered, his prayers were not wasted. As the Yerushalmi says (*Brochos* 4:4), "If only a person would pray all day long, because no prayer is lost". Sometimes prayers are only answered after a long time, and sometimes they are effective for other things, such as being saved from judgements or punishment in the Afterlife.

Therefore, a person should never despair of divine mercy, and remember that each and every prayer acts for his benefit in this world and the next.

PRAYERS FOR THE SICK

Alternatively, it may be suggested that the reason Moshe continued to beseech Hashem, even after so many prayers were not answered, is that the purpose of prayer is to accept the divine yoke upon ourselves, and to feel when praying that there is none beside Him, that everything is in Hashem's hands, and that is why he is pleading with Hashem for salvation. Therefore, even if a person sees that Hashem is not answering his prayer, Hashem still wants that person to continue to pray, because through that prayer his merits are increased, and he may merit salvation due to the very fact that he accepts the divine yoke upon himself in his prayer.

This is also the reason why one should pray for a sick person even when it seems far-fetched that he will recover, and even when doctors have despaired of saving his life. We do not say that all hope is lost, and that the divine decree has been signed. On the contrary, prayer creates new merits for the sick person, and in the merit that those praying on his behalf accept upon themselves the divine yoke - especially in light of the fact that according to the natural course of events, his chances of recovery seem so slight - he may merit salvation. Through the very act of prayer we acknowledge the fundamental item of faith that for the Creator there is no distinction between nature and miracles, and this recognition itself can grant the sick person the merit to be saved, because he has been instrumental in merits being increased, especially since his recovery would result in a sanctification of the Divine name, with everybody recognizing the power of prayer.

Rav Sternbuch recalls a meeting between the *Seridei Eish*, Rav Yaakov Yechiel Weinberg and Rav Yechezkel Sarna, Rosh Yeshiva of Chevron. Rav Weinberg said in the name of the Kotzker Rebbe that when Chazal said, "Even if a sharp sword is resting upon one's neck, one should not despair from requesting mercy" (*Brochos* 10a), that is only if the sword rests "on the neck", but not when it is "inside the neck", meaning that when the sick person is terminally ill and the doctors have despaired of saving his life, one should not pray that he will live. Rav Yechezkel Sarna responded that it is heretical to make such a statement, and the Kotzker Rebbe certainly never said such a thing, but in reality one should pray for every sick person, even if the doctors have despaired of his life.

According to what we said above, even if according to the natural course of events the situation seems lost, the sick person and his relatives should increase their prayers, in order to increase merits, beseeching Hashem for salvation, and through accepting the divine yoke they are able to merit witnessing Hashem salvation (see also *Teshuvos Vehanhogos* vol. 5 section 399 for an explanation of the Ran's statement in *Nedorim* 40a that sometimes one should pray for mercy that a sick person will die).

Parenthetically, on the topic of faith in Hashem in the most dire circumstances, it is of interest to note that Rav Weinberg, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, told Rav Sternbuch that some people in the Warsaw Ghetto claimed that the honorable thing to do would be to commit suicide rather than meet death at the hands of the Nazis. Not many people were alive any more by that stage, but there were still three *Rabbonim* left, and their response was as follows: “Our enemies can kill our bodies, but they cannot take away our souls. Our holy Torah forbids us to commit suicide, and someone who does so will not have a share in the World to Come. So let no one give in to the temptation to commit this terrible act!”

The vast majority, imbued with complete faith in Hashem and his *tzaddikim*, withstood the test and did not commit suicide. Rav Weinberg also told Rav Sternbuch that it was a common phenomenon in the Warsaw Ghetto for people to get married in the afternoon, in the full knowledge that they might be taken to their deaths before the day was over. They refused to let their circumstances deter them from performing *mitzvos* in the best way that their circumstances allowed for.

HALACHIC PRAYER

The above *possuk* does not include a commandment or request to others, so why does it say, “I entreated Hashem at that time *saying*”?

Moshe *rabbenu* was paving the way for future generations. He was addressing them, so to speak, and demonstrating that prayer has to be by way of entreaty, an act of submission, and with the realization that one is making a request from the King to be gracious towards him. Furthermore, one should not pray merely in order to discharge an obligation.

The *Yad Hamelech* (grandson of the *Noda Biyehudo*) writes (intro. to *Hilchos Tefila*) that the main component of prayer is concentrating on what one is saying, and without that one has not fulfilled the positive commandment of prayer. He adds that if one does not become emotionally affected by praying, then that does not amount to prayer, but rather mere chatter.

This has halachic ramifications, because the *Shulchan Oruch* rules (*O.C.* 98:3) that a person must “pray by way of entreaty, like a poor man making his request at the entrance, calmly, and so that it should not appear to be a burden which one is seeking to discharge”. The *Beiur Halocho* (*ibid*) brings several *poskim* who rule that this level of concentration is mandatory even *bedi’eved*, meaning that if it is lacking, one has to repeat that prayer. In practice, the custom is to be lenient in accordance with the view of those *poskim* who say that such a level of concentration is not mandatory for the purpose of fulfilling one’s basic obligation.

Rav Yonason Eibenschutz writes that “it is tried and tested that if someone prays *Shacharis* and *Kerias Shema* with concentration, he will merit *mitzvos* and will succeed in his business during that day. Even if for the time being he thinks that it will not happen, in the end he will see that it does, and it goes without saying that he will succeed in Torah during that day. One *mitzvah* brings another one in its wake, and vice versa. Woe unto me for my misfortune, when I do not pray with due concentration, the whole day my Torah learning is not focused, and I don sackcloth. On the other hand, when I cry out to Hashem from the depths of my heart in prayer to grant me wisdom, He has mercy on me and enlightens my eyes with His Torah”.

HOLY LAND

This good mountain and the Lebanon (3:25). “*This good*” refers to Torah, as it says, “*For I gave you good doctrine, do not forsake My teaching*” [*Mishlei* 4:2] (*Sifri Zuto* 10,32)

The whole purpose of entering *Eretz Yisroel* was to keep *mitzvos* there and lead a Torah lifestyle. Hence, when Moshe *Rabbenu* was asking to enter *Eretz Yisroel* he was by definition also asking to merit higher levels of Torah.

A few years ago the Israeli government passed a Basic Law called the Nationality Law. It defines the purpose of Jewish settlement in *Eretz Yisroel* to be as “realizing the aspiration of the Jewish nation to

self-determination based on its cultural and historical heritage". The Israeli flag and anthem are mentioned as national symbols, as are secular holidays, but Hashem is not mentioned at all. Even the nations of the world mention the Creator in their constitutions and Basic Laws. This piece of legislation created a terrible *chilul Hashem*.

This week the Israeli Prime Minister reassured the nation that Israel will not become a state governed by Halocho and will continue to safeguard individual rights for all. These rights include the protection and legalization (through Supreme Court decisions) of *to'eva* behaviour, which incur Hashem's wrath and cause Jews to be exiled from *Eretz Yisroel* (see *Vayikro* 18:27 and *Devorim* 32:16). To our great shame, American Democrats last week lauded Israel for being an oasis of tolerance in an area of the world that is intolerant of such conduct. Woe unto us for such praises.

Our duty is to protest loudly and clearly that the Holy Land on which Hashem sets His Eyes from the beginning of the year until the end, is not a place for the realization of nationalistic Zionist aspirations to make us a nation like any other *r"l*, but rather a place for keeping *mitzvos* and serving Hashem.

SPACE SHUTTLE

"Do not add to the word which I command you, nor detract from it, to observe the commandments of Hashem your G-d which I command you" (4:2)

Rav Sternbuch heard from Dayan Abramsky that this *possuk* is alluding to those who wish to detract from the Torah supposedly for the sake of observing it, such as the Reform movement (when it first started) which argued that since circumstances were such that the public would not observe the entire Torah, it was preferable to do away with part of it in order not to make life difficult for people, and then they would at least observe part of the Torah. Thus, the Torah says: "do not detract from the commandments of Hashem even for the purpose of observing the Torah, since we do not own the Torah, and therefore we cannot trade in it, doing away with parts of it so that other parts will be observed".

Even one screw missing in a space shuttle can have catastrophic consequences. The shuttle is composed of myriad components, and yet the lack of even the smallest detail affects the efficiency of the entire product. Similarly, although the Torah contains many *mitzvos*, each *mitzvah* has its unique task in creating our link to the Creator, and He constructed the Torah edifice in such a way that only by observing all the *halochos* can we cleave completely to Him.

TU BE'AV

But you who cleave to Hashem your G-d are alive, all of you, this day (4:4)

Since the source of the soul's vitality is from Hashem, if a person's soul does not cleave to Hashem, he is not considered to be alive.

Anyone who wants to cleave to Hashem has to conduct a daily account to examine his actions during the day in terms of Torah and good deeds. A *din v'cheshbon* takes place not only after 120 years, but a separate examination is made of our deeds on a daily basis. Each night, the *neshomo* ascends heavenwards and is judged. The *Zohar* encourages each person to be a *mara d'chushbena* (master of accounts) by conducting his own account of his deeds during the day before going to sleep, and, where necessary, repenting them, thereby preempting the *neshomo*'s nightly heavenly judgment which takes place while he is sleeping.

Rav Sternbuch heard from someone who was very close to Rav Chaim Brisker that Rav Chaim told this person, "In the morning when I get up, I make an account of what I should do that day, and how many *blatt* I should learn (sometimes he calculated that he should learn thirty *blatt* that day!), and at night when I go to sleep I make an account of whether I have met my obligation for that day." This is the way to grow and become a genuine *ben aliyah*.

Clearly not everyone is on the level of Rav Chaim Brisker, but it is up to everybody to maximize his own specific potential. Rav Aharon Kotler explained the phrase we say in *Mussaf* of Rosh Hashono that

Hashem judges “*ish u'fekudoso*” — Hashem examines the deeds of a person performed during the year that has elapsed to determine whether he has fulfilled his specific task and potential.

The *possuk* says (10:12), “*what (“ma”) does Hashem your G-d, demand of you? Only to fear Hashem*”. Rav Sternbuch heard from one *godol* that “*ma*” (which has the numerical value of 45) is an admonition to start the process of repentance on *Tu B’Av*, 45 days before Rosh Hashono. By performing a proper account of one’s actions during that period one will have the merit - with divine assistance - of coming in a prepared state to the Day of Judgement and receiving a favorable judgement.

CLEAVING TO HASHEM

But you who cleave to Hashem your G-d are alive, all of you, this day (4:4)

The *gemoro* (*Kesubos* 111b) derives from this *possuk* the duty to cleave to *talmidei chachomim*, and thereby cleave to the *Shechinah*. This is achieved by marrying one’s daughter off to a *talmid chachom*, and benefiting a *talmid chochom* with one’s assets.

The Rambam says that it is a duty to cleave “to the *chachomim* and their students”. It would appear from his wording that this *mitzvah* applies not only to complete *talmidei chachomim*, but also to their students, even those who have not yet become *talmidei chachomim*.

A *baal habos*, in particular, who has not merited to become a *talmid chochom* himself, has an obligation to benefit a *talmid chochom* with his monetary assets, so that he can thereby fulfil the *mitzvah* of cleaving to Hashem.

PRACTICING WHAT WE KNOW

“And you shall keep [the commandments] and do [them] for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the nations” (4:6)

When Aristotle was found to be behaving immorally, and contrary to his own moral directives, he responded by saying, “Now I am not Aristotle”. No more than that is expected of even the wisest of the nations.

Hence, the above *possuk* may be interpreted as follows: the fact that you keep the commandments, that itself is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations, because the wise men of the nations do not act in accordance with their wisdom, whereas the wisdom of Jewish leaders is apparent from their conduct and way of life. The very fact that you keep the laws of the Torah so meticulously demonstrates to the nations the greatness of the wisdom of the Torah, since they behold with amazement how that wisdom has such an influence on your deeds.

GO-BETWEENS SUPERFLUOUS

“For what great nation is there that has Hashem so near to it, as Hashem our G-d is at all times that we call upon Him?” (4:7)

The Chofetz Chaim was once visiting Grodna and was asked to give *brochos*. He responded: “Why do you need me to act as a “go-between” to plead on your behalf before our Father in Heaven? Every father prefers it if his son appears before him to make his requests, instead of sending his brother on his behalf. Similarly, our Father in Heaven wants you yourself to pray to Him and not send me to plead on your behalf. You may be worried that He is cross with you, but do not imagine this, and I promise you that Hashem loves you and yearns to hear the voice of your prayers, and He will save you. Hence, dear brothers, cry out yourselves to Hashem, and He will surely answer you”.

LOOKING AFTER OUR HEALTH

But beware and watch yourself very well (literally: *beware and watch your soul very well*) (4:9)

The *gemoro* (*Brochos* 32b) derives from these words the obligation to avoid anything that poses a physical danger to our bodies. The *gemoro* there also derives the same point from the *possuk* below (4:15): “*And you shall watch yourselves very well*” (literally: “*And you shall watch your souls very well*”).

In both cases the *gemoro* derives the obligation to look after our physical wellbeing from *pessukim* that instruct us to look after the *nefesh*, the soul. This is because the body is not an end in itself, and we are only obligated to look after it so that it can remain an appropriate host for the soul, thus enabling us to continue to serve Hashem properly in this world. If the body becomes weak or does not function properly, that has a negative impact on a person's ability to serve Hashem. Since this has such serious repercussions for a person's *ruchniyus*, we have to do whatever we can to look after our health, and make sure that the body remains strong and healthy.

Since people tend to belittle this commandment the Torah stresses that we have to watch our health *very well*, and as Rav Yisroel Salanter said, "Just like the *yetzer horo* entices us to sin, it also entices us to transgress the commandment of looking after our physical wellbeing".

Rav Sternbuch noticed that Rav Mordechai Pogromansky was even more careful about matters to do with health during the *aseres yemei teshuva* than he was during the rest of the year. He told Rav Sternbuch that this was because he wanted to make sure not to transgress the admonition, "*And you shall watch your souls very well*".

SHEMA

Hear, Yisroel: Hashem is our God, Hashem is one. (6:4)

In his responsa (Vol. V, Resp. 55) the Rashbo writes that "*Shema*" does not only mean "listen," but also that these thoughts must be absorbed by the heart.

Similarly, the *ba'alei mussar* explain that the content of the *mitzvah* of *Kerias Shema* is not only faith in the unity of Hashem, but also acceptance of the yoke of Heaven and performance of all the *mitzvos bishleimus* based on that faith (see also *Teshuvos V'Hanhagos*, vol. 3, sec. 25).

SPREADING TORAH

And you shall love Hashem, your G-d. (6:5)

The Rambam in *Sefer HaMitzvos (Mitzvah 3)* writes that just like when someone loves another person, he tends to praise him and encourage others to love him, so too does the *mitzvah* of loving Hashem mandate us to cause others to serve Him. In other words, by bringing people closer to the way of the Torah we are fulfilling the positive commandment to love Hashem.

Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer told Rav Sternbuch that in bygone days the proper fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Hashem* was restricted to select individuals who were capable of sanctifying their thoughts and actions properly, but, nowadays, when so many people are far removed from the truth, we are obligated to engage in outreach work, and anyone doing so fulfills the *mitzvah* of *ahavas Hashem*.

On the other hand, someone who learns with great diligence in the *Beis Hamedrash*, has exemplary character traits and acts the way a *ben Torah* should in all his interpersonal dealings, can also draw people closer to Torah just by his personal example, since people will desire to emulate him and adopt his way of life.

THE REAL BATTLEFRONT

"And you shall know this day and consider it in your heart, that Hashem is G-d in heaven above, and upon the earth below; there is none else" (4:39)

Rav Sternbuch was once visiting the Brisker Rov when an American visitor told the Brisker Rov that the problem with American Jews was that they were too materialistic, and if only Hashem would show them open miracles, they would all repent straight away. The Brisker Rov disagreed, stating that if someone does not repent by strengthening his faith, intensifying his Torah and prayer and working on his character traits, then even revealed miracles will not change him, steeped as he is in his desires.

Our very existence here in *Eretz Yisroel* is miraculous, surrounded as we are by bloodthirsty enemies. The Israelis take pride in the might of their own hands, the army, the Iron Dome etc. However, our duty is to "consider it in your heart" to contemplate Hashem's Divine providence protecting us all the time. As the Brisker Rov noted, the real battlefront takes place in Heaven, and therefore the only way to prevent wars and troubles from our enemies is by increasing Torah and prayer.