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The Path to Follow

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THE GREATNESS OF PRAYER IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

"I beseeched Hashem at that time, saying: '...Let me now cross and see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan, this good mountain and the Lebanon'" (Devarim 3:23-25).

The words of our Sages are well known in this regard: The term "I beseeched [va'etchanan]" has a numerical value of 515, and it alludes to the 515 supplications that Moshe addressed to G-d in the hope of allowing him to enter the land of Israel. Yet G-d answered him: "Enough! Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter!" (v.26).

Such abundant prayers allow us to understand just how important it was to Moshe that G-d forgive his sin and allow him to enter the Holy Land. Why was it so important to him? Actually Moshe, the faithful shepherd, fervently yearned to fulfill the mitzvot connected to Eretz Israel: Allowing the land to lie fallow, tithes and offerings, the crowning of a king over Israel, etc. It is because these mitzvot are achievable only in Israel that Moshe insisted so greatly and beseeched G-d to grant his request. Moshe's goal was in fact to reach a state of perfection, which was only possible by fulfilling the mitzvot commanded by G-d. Whoever does not practice all the mitzvot of the Torah cannot attain this ideal state. Hence each of us must constantly strive to give ourselves the means of reaching this level by always carrying out ever more mitzvot. We now have a better understanding of why Moshe beseeched G-d so much to let him enter the land of Israel.

This is why Jews living elsewhere turn towards the land of Israel to pray – to create a connection with the land chosen by G-d. Prayers go towards Eretz Israel, reach the Kotel, and then rise directly to G-d, as our Patriarch Jacob said: "This is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of the heavens" (Bereshith 28:17). However Moshe did not want to attain perfection via an intermediary. He wanted to establish a direct link with G-d and hoped to see his prayer rise to the heavens starting from Eretz Israel, without taking any detours.

Yet in our days, to our great regret, the Jewish people are in exile and we must connect ourselves to G-d through the mitzvot that remain available to us. Obviously, it is incumbent on each of us to ask for peace to reign over our land. We must abundantly pray for Hashem to send His blessing, bring peace to the kingdom of the house of David, and rebuild the Temple. Mourning the loss of our Temple is a way of showing Hashem that its loss is painful to us, something that may cause Him to hasten the Final Redemption, quickly and in our days.

By the Great Love of His Children

During the times of the Temple, the prayers of the

Jewish people rose directly to the heavens and had an effect, without any obstacles or accusers in the way. Yet nowadays, since its destruction, we must insist that our prayers be granted. A son who requests a favor from his father cannot be compared to one who requests a favor from his stepfather. The former will have his request easily and generously granted, whereas the latter's request will not necessarily be granted. Even if the request is ultimately answered, it will only be after much petitioning, since the stepfather does not feel any obligation towards a boy who is not his own flesh and blood. He simply has a duty towards the woman he married. The same applies to the Jewish people: As long as the Temple was firmly established, the Children of Israel merited the answering of their prayers naturally and easily. Yet since the Temple's destruction, we must pray abundantly before being heard because the Attribute of Justice is more active and accusers are at work.

Moshe insisted so greatly because he wanted to recite at least one prayer from the Holy Land. Yet G-d refused because He knew that if Moshe entered Israel and asked that the Temple not be destroyed, it would have been enough to save it. In fact Hashem knew that the Children of Israel would later arouse His anger, and He did not want to pour out His anger on the people and wipe them out. He preferred to pour it out on wood and stone. Had Moshe's prayer from the Holy Land been granted, G-d would not have destroyed the Temple, but instead would have been constrained to punish the Jewish people. And yet He loves His people! This is why G-d arranged things in such a way that Moshe could not enter the land. At the same time, He did not want the fate of the Temple to depend on Moshe's prayer alone, for in that case the people would have exempted themselves from this responsibility and not have felt compelled to fulfill it. They would have believed that only Moshe's prayer in the land of Israel had the power to sustain the Temple. Since Hashem wants every Jew to feel personally responsible for sustaining the Temple and to act accordingly, He prevented Moshe from entering Israel.

Whoever meditates on these words will discern a fundamental principle that stresses the great importance of prayer from the land of Israel. Indeed, Moshe addressed 515 prayers to G-d in order to enter the land, and yet his request was not granted! On the other hand, a single prayer originating from the land of Israel – a prayer for the Temple not to be destroyed – would have been immediately answered. That is why G-d did not allow Moshe to enter the land. All this demonstrates the tremendous power of prayer in the land of Israel. As a result, we are obligated and should take advantage of this opportunity to pray for the Final Redemption.



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Wouldn't G-d Know How to Provide You with the Simplest Thing?

It is written, "Beware lest you forget Hashem, Who took you out of the land of Egypt" (Devarim 6:12).

The maggid Rabbi Reuven Karlenstein tells the following story, which had taken place a few generations earlier: Every month, the chassidim of a certain village went to visit their Rebbe in the neighboring large town. A Jewish wagon driver drove them to his house, but never went inside to see the Rebbe. He stayed in a small inn and prayed in a simple synagogue. One Friday before Shabbat, upon their arrival in town, the chassidim pointed this out to him: "We leave our families behind and undertake this long voyage all so we can spend Shabbat in the shadow of the Rebbe and bask in his presence. Why don't you come inside with us, at least once a year? It's well worth it! Since you're already here, it would be a shame not to take advantage of the opportunity." However the wagon driver refused their suggestion: "What can the Rebbe do for my wretched life, for my sick wife, or for my hungry children? He'll place his hand on my head – that's what he'll do! Will that save me from my troubles?" Hence he didn't go in.

Yet one time, after much insistence by the chassidim, he agreed to meet with the Rebbe. Although he was with the Rebbe for a long time, nobody asked him about it when he left.

Upon returning to the wagon, the chassidim had a discussion among themselves. One said that he really benefitted from the Seuda Shelishit, while another said that the words of Torah which he heard on Friday night had profoundly affected him. The wagon driver then chimed in: "I'm the one who benefitted the most from this visit. Listen closely."

The wagon driver explained: "When I was with the Rebbe, he asked me to describe my daily routine. I told him that it all depended on the work that was available to me each day: 'On a day without work, I wake up in the morning, go pray with a minyan, and then participate in a Mishnah class and remain in the Beit HaMidrash afterwards to read tehillim. I then return home to have breakfast and rest a little. In the afternoon, I take a class on Ein Yaakov before praying Mincha and Arvit. That's how my day passes.

"On days when I have work, I get up early in the morning and grease the wheels of my wagon to prevent any accident, G-d forbid, on my route. Then precisely at 6:30 am, I wait for my client in front of his home. If I have a chance on the way there, I stop by the side of the road to put on tefillin and recite Shema. And if I don't have a chance, I pray once I drop off my client."

"The Rebbe then asked me: 'Why don't you pray with a minyan before picking up your client, which you can do around 7:30 am, after the morning service? Even if a client asks you on the night before to pick him up early, you can tell him that you want to pray beforehand.'

"But then I would have less clients,' I replied with a sigh. The Rebbe then raised his eyes towards the heavens and said: 'Let me tell you a little story:

"A certain wagon driver who worked hard to earn a living, and who constantly found himself on the road, kept about a dozen rubles in his pocket. He also had a moneybag filled with gold coins, a wallet with silver coins, and another wallet with numerous copper coins. One day, as this wagon driver was on the road, Shabbat was fast approaching and he realized that he would not return home on time. He therefore stopped in a small Jewish village and asked to stay with the local rav, who welcomed him with joy. As the final preparations for Shabbat were being made, the wagon driver suddenly remembered that he still had money in his pockets. He therefore ran up to the rav, who was already making his way to the synagogue, and asked him where he could put his money. The rav turned back, took and counted the money, and then hid it away. At that point they both went to synagogue.

"During Kabbalat Shabbat, fear started to arise in the heart of the wagon driver: 'What have I done? I entrusted my money to a stranger! That was my entire salary! My money...my money!' his heart cried out, but there was nothing he could do. He was tormented throughout Arvit, and during the Friday night meal he sat down with a feeling of dread, having lost his appetite. Fish was served, but he refused to eat it, claiming: 'I'm not allowed to eat fish.' He was then asked if he preferred a dairy dish, but he replied: 'No thank you, I'm not feeling well. In fact I'm not hungry.' All of Shabbat proceeded in the same way, with fear and worry.

"At the end of Shabbat, he ran to the rav and said: 'My money, please!'

"One minute. We'll speak about your money after Arvit," said the rav.

"After Arvit he anxiously, yet tactfully, asked the rav: 'May I please have my money?'

"Patience. Let's say Havdalah first," replied the rav.

"He was close to losing his mind. After Havdalah, the rav took out the moneybag with gold coins and counted them on the table. 'Here's everything that you entrusted me with.'

"He then brought in the wallet with silver coins and gave it to him. The wagon driver poured its contents out on the table [to verify that the rav hadn't taken anything], and was filled with joy after counting. Nothing was missing from here either.

"The rav finally took out the wallet with copper pieces. Yet when the wagon driver emptied it to count its contents as well, the rav exclaimed: 'Enough is enough! Don't you have anything in your head? If I had the opportunity to steal your gold and silver coins, but didn't, do you think that I'm likely to steal your ordinary copper coins?'

"Speaking to me, the Rebbe concluded: 'My dear wagon driver! You are a Jewish man. G-d takes your soul for the night and returns it to you intact in the morning. Your eyes open, your legs walk, your hands move – and yet you still think that G-d can't provide you with such a simple thing [sustenance]?' "

Men of Faith

Like a Cooing Dove

As we know, Rabbi Haim Pinto was the student of the tzaddik Rabbi Yaakov Bibas, from whom he inherited the duties of teacher and Rav after the latter's passing. In regards to this subject, it is said that Rabbi Haim once faced an important obstacle in his service of Hashem.

Because he was a man of great concentration, he could perceive the slightest lack of holiness in the things around him, something that disrupted his concentration while learning Torah.

He shared his concerns with Rabbi Yehuda Rosso, who immediately took him to the grave of his teacher, the tzaddik Rabbi Yaakov Bibas. Upon their arrival, something like a white dove emerged from the grave and disappeared. Rabbi Yehuda told Rabbi Haim what this meant:

"Apparently a dibuk and a spirit of impurity were hindering your service of Hashem. The dibuk, 'created' by your own personal Torah interpretations, was trying to weaken your powers in Torah. The merit of your teacher sustained you, however, and the dibuk left you by this grave under the guise of a white dove so you wouldn't be frightened."

Why was the dove white?

"I don't know," replied Rabbi David Hanania Pinto. "I could perhaps recount what I heard the tzaddik Rabbi Meir Pinto say a few weeks before his death: On the one hand, the people of Israel are compared to a dove. On the other hand, white symbolizes holiness. When the Jewish people connect themselves to G-d, they are like a cooing dove. Perhaps the dove coos when a Jew is the victim of a dibuk, and it turns white when the dibuk leaves him. And if it doesn't leave, the Jewish people remain in sorrow."

Do Not Delay

It is written, “Observe the mitzvot of Hashem your G-d” (Devarim 4:2).

The term mitzvot is always written in the Torah with only one vav. Why?

Just as it is forbidden to allow the dough of the matzah to rest, lest it ferments, likewise it is forbidden to delay in fulfilling a mitzvah that presents itself. [Hence the term mitzvot, like matzot, is written with only one vav.]

– Midrash Chaserot VeYeterot

A Right to Live

It is written, “But you who cleave to Hashem your G-d – you are all alive today” (Devarim 4:4).

Is it possible to “cleave” to the Shechinah, concerning which Scripture states: “For Hashem your G-d is a devouring fire” [Devarim 4:24]?

However [the meaning is this:] Any man who marries his daughter to a Torah scholar, or carries on a trade on behalf of Torah scholars, or lets Torah scholars benefit from his estate is regarded by Scripture as if he had cleaved to the Shechinah. – Ketubot 111b

With a Pleasant Face

It is written, “As Hashem my G-d commanded me” (Devarim 4:5).

What is the meaning of “commanded me”?

Rabbi Yitzchak said: “If somebody knows Torah, he should not deprive other Jews of it. Rather, he should teach them with a pleasant face. Indeed, Moshe said: “See, I have taught you decrees and ordinances, as Hashem my G-d commanded me.” What does “commanded me” mean? Just as He taught me, likewise I will teach you. As such, you will also teach others.

– Midrash Chadash

They are Close and Establish the Festivals

It is written, “For which is a great nation that has a G-d Who is close to it?” (Devarim 4:7).

Why is the term *krovim* (“close”) written in the plural form? Rabbi Yochanan said, “When the ministering angels assemble before G-d and ask, ‘When is Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?’ G-d says to them: ‘Why do you ask Me? You and I, let us all go to the earthly court [i.e., the Beit Din].’ From where [is this inferred]? It is written, ‘that has a G-d Who is close to it.’ Scripture does not say: ‘That has a people so close to Him,’ but rather, ‘that has a G-d Who is close to it’ – meaning He and all His hosts.”

Rabbi Yochanan said, “G-d said to Israel: ‘Before you became My people, the festivals were “Hashem’s appointed festivals” [Vayikra 23:2], but henceforth they shall be festivals which you shall establish.’”

– Devarim Rabba 2:14

Reuven First

It is written, “Bezer in the desert, in the land of the plain, of the Reuvenite” (Devarim 4:43).

Why did Moshe establish cities of refuge in Reuven’s territory first?

Scripture states, “A man shall be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth” (Mishlei 12:14). Rabbi Simlai taught, “Reuven was the first to try and save a life, as it is written: ‘Reuven said to them: “Shed no blood”’ [Bereshith 37:22]. Hence they established cities of refuge in the territory of Reuven first, as it is written: ‘Bezer in the desert, in the land of the plain, of the Reuvenite.’”

– Devarim Rabba

Avoiding the Tricks of the Evil Inclination

It is written, “Bind them for a sign upon your arm, and let them be totafot between your eyes” (Devarim 6:8).

Discussing the donning of tefillin, the Tur writes: “Our intention in donning tefillin is that the Creator has commanded us to place these four passages – which contain the oneness of His Name and the exodus from Egypt – on the arm and on the head opposite the brain. This is in order for us to remember the exodus from Egypt, along with the miracles and wonders that He performed for us, and to demonstrate His oneness, the fact that He is unique in His universe and that He has the power and ability, among celestial and terrestrial beings, to do with them as He pleases” (Tur, Orach Chaim 25).

In the Gemara our Sages say that the evil inclination is like a fly that dwells between the two entrances of the heart (Berachot 61a). The Sages also say, “But I will remove the northern one [tzafon] far away from you [Joel 2:20] refers to the evil inclination, which is constantly hidden [tzafun] in the heart of man. Why is the evil inclination called tzafun? Because it enters the heart of man little by little, for it cannot directly tell a person: “This is the service of Hashem, but you must go and serve an idol.” If it were to say this, no one would listen to it. Likewise it cannot come to a person and encourage him to commit grave sins, for he would certainly not listen to it. Hence it suggests trivial things at first, until finally it tells a person: “Go serve an idol.” The Sages have said, “He who tears his garments in anger, he who breaks his vessels in anger, and he who scatters his money in anger, regard him as an idolater, for such are the tricks of the tempter. Today it tells him, ‘Do this,’ while tomorrow it tells him, ‘Do that,’ until finally it tells him: ‘Go and serve idols’ – and he goes and serves” (Shabbat 105b).

So that people may be saved from the tricks of evil inclination, the Holy One, blessed be He, told the Children of Israel: “I command you to perform an easy mitzvah, on account of which you will be saved from the evil inclination, which is found in your heart.” Which mitzvah was He referring to? To the mitzvah of tefillin. We place one on the arm, facing the heart, in order to subdue the evil inclination located in the heart. We place the other on the head, to prevent the evil inclination from entering the head and encouraging us to commit grave sins. However it first enters the heart in order to encourage man to do things that seem trivial, hiding its true intentions from man. It tells a person to overlook mitzvot only: Today it tells him, “Overlook this mitzvah”, tomorrow it tells him, “Overlook that mitzvah”, until finally it tells him: “Go and commit all the sins that the Torah forbids.”

This is why the first section of the Shema is written in Parsha Va’etchanan, for the term va’etchanan has the same numerical value as rosh yad (“head arm”). This teaches us that a person is only saved from the evil inclination when he asks Hashem to deliver him from it. As the Sages say, “Prayer is more effective than even good deeds, for none was greater in good deeds than Moshe Rabbeinu, and yet he was answered only after prayer” (Berachot 32b). The Sages also tell us that the inhabitants of Alexandria asked Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hanania what a person must do to become wise. He said, “Let him engage much in [Torah] study and little in business.” They replied, “Did not many people do this, but it did not help? Rather, let them pray for mercy from Him to Whom wisdom belongs” (Niddah 70b).

This extraordinary story was told by a pious man who certainly played a small role in its outcome. This man found out that his colleague's son from the kollel had been diagnosed with a serious illness: "I was very affected by the news, because the sick child wasn't even 10 years old, and his father studied very hard right up until the terrible news. Yet afterwards, he couldn't continue on account of his grief. I sat for a little while and reflected: How can I help this family, which has been affected by such misfortune? Am I a doctor? No. Do I have the means to financially help them with the heavy expenses related to his recovery? No again. But do I have the right to just fold my arms and do nothing? No, that's also impossible for me to do!

"So what exactly can I do? Pray for them from the bottom of my heart – that I can certainly do, and it's even a mitzvah. Before embarking on the long road of praying for the child to get better, I tried to brush up on the subject of prayer in general. I constantly told myself that, as everyone knows, prayer is never useless. It always has an effect, and obviously we're not allowed to lose hope.

"After this, and for several months afterward, I continued to pray with great intensity. I cried out and begged G-d to have pity on my friend, this great scholar, and to cure his son.

"Day after day I prayed like this. While on vacation, I went to visit the graves of the tzaddikim in the north of the country to pour out my heart before the Holy One, blessed be He.

"So what happened? One day my friend posted a card on the bulletin board at the kollel. He was inviting us to a meal that he was organizing to express his gratitude to G-d for having healed his son. In this card, he extolled and honored Hashem for having helped him escape the terrible misfortune that had affected his family.

"I attended the meal and heard what my friend said, and forcefully repeated, namely that his son's initial diagnosis showed that there was no hope of remission, and certainly no hope for such a quick recovery. The boy's improvement was a miracle sent by Heaven. So I thought: Who knows? Who knows? It's true that, on the one hand, a person should never attribute deliverance to his own prayers. On the other hand, however, I clearly knew that I had prayed for the child with a pure heart and honest intentions. So then, maybe I did play a role in his healing.

"If all prayer has an effect, then I too certainly played a role in helping to save my friend and his family! And the role which I played – it was my daily prayers for the boy, prayers in which I implored G-d to heal him."

"We must believe that prayer has the power to save us from misfortune and distress. If our faith is sincere, we are assured of quick deliverance" (Barchi Nafshi).

In his sermons, Rabbi Yechezkel Lewinstein Zatzal (the mashgiach of the Ponevezh yeshiva) often dealt with the importance and power of prayer recited with concentration. He explained that a good prayer requires a submissive attitude; it must also be inseparable from the conviction that all things come from and depend upon G-d. He abounded in references from our Sages and holy books on this subject.

He always brought novel concepts to improve our understanding and deepen our prayers, as well as words to awaken us. While he himself was praying, his face expressed the fear and sacred reverence of someone who was standing before the King. He also secretly wept in prayer.

Before praying, Rabbi Yechezkel prepared himself by strengthening his faith and meditating on words of Mussar. It is said that he always arrived at synagogue early, doing so in order to prepare himself and focus completely before praying.

The 20 minutes in yeshiva dedicated to the reading of Pesukei D'Zimra were not enough for him. He often said that meditating on words of prayer allows a person to perceive Divine Providence in the world. Whoever heard him could feel how verses of prayer came to life in his mouth. From the collection of his teachings, we read that he would fervently tell his students: "How perfect is this moment for each of us to encourage others! The state of the world and our times encourages a person to say: 'Sleepers, awaken from your slumber!' The judgments of G-d are terrifying, and who knows what each day has in store for us! The main thing is to strengthen our faith and vigilance by participating in the three daily prayers with sincerity and concentration, for it is precisely prayer that will lead us to attaining faith and vigilance" (Ohr Yechezkel, Letter 142).

Of course the deeds of the Rav were in harmony with his words: He cleaved to prayer, at the very least by understanding, listening to, and clearly pronouncing each word. Sometimes we see people who pray for a long time, and who appear to be praying with fervor, concentrating with effort. In reality, however, their thoughts are scattered in every direction.

He also mentioned the teaching of the Kuzari: "The pious individual...does not speak in prayer in a mere mechanical way, like the starling and the parrot; but every word is uttered with thought and reflection. The hour [of prayer] is the heart and fruit of his time, while the other hours are merely the path leading to it. He looks forward to its approach, because while it lasts he resembles the spiritual beings and is distanced from animal existence. Those three times of daily prayer are the fruit of his day and night" (The Kuzari 3:5).

From his students, the Rav demanded special preparation for prayer. One day they returned from the funeral of an important individual, and they were exhausted from their long walk. He then prepared a snack for them before starting the prayer service, for it is not good to pray when exhausted!

Guard Your Tongue

I Wasn't the One

Let's suppose that a wrong was committed and that Reuven talks to Shimon about it, asking: "Who did this?" Even if Shimon understands that Reuven suspects him of this wrongdoing, he should not tell Reuven who committed this act, even if he himself witnessed it. He should simply say, "I wasn't the one who did it."

– Chafetz Chaim