

Vayatze 5771, 2010:

*Prayer: A Rendezvous with Hashem*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The year was 1936. Italy had already invaded and crushed Ethiopia, and Japan was but a short year away from invading and devastating much of China. Hitler, may his memory be erased, had passed the Nuremberg Laws that stripped German Jews of their citizenship, and the Sachsenhausen concentration camp for “political prisoners” was completed a mere 35 kilometers north of Berlin. The United States and the rest of the developed countries of the world, with the notable exception of Nazi Germany, were in the throes of the Great Depression. It was a time of anxiety and foreboding that would ultimately lead to mankind’s most destructive war, and the murder of one third of our people. When viewed with the benefit of historical hindsight, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s words before that year’s Democratic National Convention take on particular significance: “There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny.”

This week’s *parasha*, however, depicts a different kind of rendezvous. Rather than “a rendezvous with destiny,” it depicts a rendezvous with Hashem – the echoes of which reverberate until our own historical moment. While this encounter is not explicit per se, it is intimated by the word “*makom*” (place) that is found six times in the first 12 *pasukim*

(verses) of our *sidra* (Torah portion). In verses 11 and 16 we find three instances of this term preceded by a *bet* (i.e. “*bamakom*”) and in 11, 17, and 19 we have three times wherein the *heh hayediya* (the definite article signified by the letter “*heh*”) is employed prior to “*makom*.” The first expression may be accurately translated as “in the place,” whereas as the second means “the place.” In either case, the Talmud clearly suggests that *makom* signifies a place of prayer (*tefilah*):

R. Helbo, in the name of R. Huna, says: Whosoever has a fixed place (*makom*) for his prayer has the G-d of Abraham as his helper. And when he dies, people will say of him: Where is the pious man, where is the humble man, one of the disciples of our father Abraham! — How do we know that our father Abraham had a fixed place (*d’kava makom*) [for his prayer]? For it is written: And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he had stood. And “standing” means nothing else but prayer. (*Talmud Bavli* 6b, translation, *Soncino Talmud*, emendations and underlining my own)

The identification of *tefilah* with *makom* was further elaborated upon by my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) known as “the Rav” by his students and adherents, in a 1968 *drasha* on Parashat Lech Lecha:

Prayer basically requires a certain [place]...I have to designate a place for prayer. I shouldn’t pray now today here [the] next day somewhere else. Place means a *makom*. The whole *kedushas beis ha’k’eneses* (holiness of the synagogue), the whole concept that a *beis ha’k’eneses* is sacred and there is a certain sanctity invested in the *beis ha’k’eneses* is because prayer is inseparably combined with *makom*, with place. Prayer needs *makom*. (*The Rav Thinking Aloud on the Parsha: Sefer Bereishis*, Transcripts of Shiurim from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Rabbi David Holzer, editor, page 285)

In addition, the Rav noted that “Whenever *makom* is mentioned in relation to the *Avos* [Patriarchs], it means *m’kom t’filah* [a place of prayer].” (Ibid. , page 288, brackets my own)

Rav Soloveitchik, however, did not stop with the identification of *makom* with *tefilah*. Instead, in his inimitable fashion, the Rav extended the notion of *makom* to include the concept of a rendezvous. As such, we now have the following equation: *makom* = *tefilah* = rendezvous. With this in mind, the Rav asked, “Why is there a *m’kom t’filah*?” His

answer is as creative as it is enlightening. In fact, it enables us to have a new understanding of the nature of Jewish prayer:

Usually you have a rendezvous, a date with a person, so you have got to designate the place. You cannot have a date either on Baker Street or on [Fil d'Qual?] You cannot meet a person like that. You have got to designate a place, and designate exactly where it is, otherwise you will miss each other... *T'filah* is a rendezvous with the *Ribbono Shel Olam* [the Master of the Universe], with G-d. That's why a place is necessary for *t'filah*. (Ibid. , page 288)

In addition to a *makom*, a rendezvous requires a specific *z'man* (time): “Two prerequisites are indispensable as far as a rendezvous is concerned, the place and the time.” (Ibid. , page 289) Hence, since *tefilah* is the ultimate meeting between man and G-d, it requires specific times for its fulfillment. I simply cannot treat the Master of the Universe as if He is at my beck and call. This would be grossly improper and inappropriate regarding an appointment with a friend – all the more so with my *Yedid Nefesh* (the Beloved of my Soul).

May each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to pray to Hashem from the innermost recesses of our hearts and souls. Then, like *Yaakov Avinu* (Yaakov our Patriarch) we, too, will be able to declare: “*Mah norah hamakom hazeh*” (“How awesome is this place”), as we rendezvous with the Master of the Universe. *V'chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom

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[http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat\\_hashavuah/index.html](http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html) .

Questions, comments, ideas, musings, thoughts about this drasha? Would you like to share them? My blog is located at: [tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com](http://tefilahandtorah.blogspot.com) .

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me at [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).