

*The Nature of Prayer*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The end of our *parasha* contains a very difficult narrative wherein Miriam and Aaron speak against their beloved brother, Moses:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. They said, “Has the L-rd spoken only to Moses? Hasn't He spoken to us too?” And the L-rd heard... The L-rd suddenly said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, “Go out, all three of you, to the Tent of Meeting!” And all three went out. The L-rd descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam, and they both went out... With him [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of the L-rd. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses? The wrath of the L-rd flared against them and He left. The cloud departed from above the Tent, and behold, Miriam was afflicted with *tzara'ath*, [a spiritual malady with physical manifestations] as [white as] snow. Then Aaron turned to Miriam and behold, she was afflicted with *tzara'ath*. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12: 1-10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, verse selections and brackets my own)

At this point in the story, Aaron turns to Moses and implores him to intercede with Hashem on behalf of their sister, Miriam. Moses immediately entreats the Almighty to heal Miriam in the following famous words: “I beseech you, G-d, please heal her.” (12:13) While the English translation is a mere seven word prayer, the original Hebrew is even shorter, “*A-le nah refah nah lah.*” Moses’ prayer is shockingly short and, seemingly, almost perfunctory in nature. Beyond a doubt, it is certainly not the kind of prayer we would have expected from the greatest prophet of all time when his sister’s life was hanging in the balance. How, then, are we to understand Moses’ mystifying response to

Aaron's desperate plea?

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon two parallel Midrashic passages, suggested the following answer to our question: **Please heal her**: “Why did Moses not pray at length? So that the Israelites should not say, ‘His sister is in distress, yet he stands and prolongs his prayer.’” At first glance, it seems that this explanation is even more problematic than our original concern. After all, what would have been wrong with Moses extending his prayer – his sister was in dire straits! Moreover, how and when did the Jewish people become the arbiters of appropriate *tefilah* (prayer) behavior? Moses was the greatest prophet in history; as such, he surely would have known the proper response to Aaron's request. Why, then, was the potential reaction of the Jewish people a factor in the type and manner of his supplication to the Almighty?

Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher *zatzal* (1270-1340) is known by posterity as “the Tur” and as the “Ba'al HaTurim,” after the names of his works on Jewish law and Torah analysis. In the latter *sefer*, he noted that Moses prayed on behalf of others on at least two other occasions wherein those *tefilot* differed from our instance of “*A-le nah refah nah lah*”:

The L-rd said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel.” (*Sefer Shemot* 14:15) [If we look at the word “*mah*” (“why”) in our verse, we will immediately notice that it is comprised of the letters “*mem*” and “*heh*.”] Hashem, [thereby,] intimated to Moses that in the future he would, indeed, cry out to Him [in prayer with and through the letters] “*mem*” and “*heh*.” The “*mem*” signifies the 40 days [i.e. the numerical value of this letter] that he would pray on behalf of the Jewish people [to gain expiation for their grievous sin of the Golden Calf]. The “*heh*” refers to the five words [i.e. the numerical value of this letter] that he would one day utilize in prayer on behalf of his sister, Miriam: “I beseech you, G-d, please heal her.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:13) [From here we can learn that] there is a time to shorten and a time to lengthen one's *tefilah*. This time, [when the Jewish people were standing before the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptians drawing ever closer behind them,] was not a time for prayer at all! Rather, “Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel!” [This means that it was a time of action rather than petition.] (Commentary to *Sefer Shemot* 14:15, translation, brackets and parentheses my own)

The Ba'al HaTurim is teaching us a crucial lesson regarding when to pray, and the very nature of the prayer experience. *Kriyat Yam Suf* (the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds) was *not* a time for prayer; instead, it was a time for straightforward action. As *Shlomo Hamelech* (King Solomon) taught us so wisely, “[there is] a time to be silent and a time to speak.” (*Sefer Kohelet* 3:7) Thus, as Hashem taught Moses, *Kriyat Yam Suf* was the moment to move forward and to jump into the sea, rather than stand and pray on its shore.

In stark contrast, the 40 days following the events of the Golden Calf were preeminently days of prayer. Would the promises to the *Avot* and *Emahot* (Patriarchs and Matriarchs) be fulfilled, or would we be relegated to the dustbin of history? Would we continue to be Hashem's truly chosen and unique nation or would we become just one more ancient anthropological footnote? Clearly, the existential future of the Jewish people hung in the balance. At this moment, perhaps more than any other, Moses' intensive prayers and pleas were absolutely necessary to ensure the continuation of our nation. Therefore, this was the time for Moses “to lengthen his prayer.”

In some ways, Miriam's spiritual-physical crisis emerges as a middle ground regarding the nature of the prayer gesture. It was certainly not a time to be silent; yet, it was equally not the time for effusive and extensive *tefilot*. On one side, the Jewish people saw this moment as a time for action, similar in kind to their collective *Yam Suf* experience. Therefore, in their view, Moses should not have prayed at all – instead, he should have actively worked to attenuate the effects of Miriam's *tzara'ath*. Alternatively, both Aaron and Moses knew that this precisely the time for the correct form of *tefilah*. It appears,

then, that “*A-le nah refah nah lah*” emerges as a conceptual compromise that enabled Moses to pray in a manner that was at once fitting and proper, though short in duration. As the Vilna Gaon (Rabbeinu Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, “the Gra,” 1720-1797) noted in a statement attributed to him, the Holy Zohar maintained, “that Moses had a *bona fide* tradition regarding *tefilah* – namely, if one were to use the expression ‘*nah*’ twice in the same prayer it will surely be accepted.” Thus, Moses knew full well that he would be answered, even though his prayer was a mere five words.

Like Moses of old, may we, too, be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the fulfillment of the *bracha* (blessing) in the *Shemoneh Esrai*: “Hear our voice, Hashem our G-d, pity and be compassionate to us, and accept – with compassion and favor – our prayer, for You are G-d Who hears prayers and supplications ...” (Translation, *The Artscroll Siddur V’chane yihi ratzon*).

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

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 via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.