

Parashat Beshalach 5777, 2017:

To Praise Hashem

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, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka and the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many beautiful *tefilot* (prayers) that we recite on Shabbat and Yom Tov is *Nishmat Kol Chai*. I find the following passage to be particularly striking in its spiritual depth and scope:

Were our mouth as full of song as the sea, and our tongue as full of joyous song as its multitude of waves, and our lips as full of praise as the breadth of the heavens, and our eyes as brilliant as the sun and the moon, and our hands as outspread as eagles of the sky and our feet as swift as the female deer of the woods – we still could not thank You sufficiently Hashem our G-d and G-d of our forefathers, and bless Your Name for even one of the thousand thousands, thousands of thousands and myriad myriads of favors You performed for our ancestors and for us. (*The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, pages 401-403, with my underlining and emendations)

This prayer focuses upon our passionate desire to praise and thank the Almighty for the innumerable wonders and miracles he has performed for our forebears, and for us. Yet we may well ask, what is the *matir* (permission) for finite man to praise, bless and thank the infinite Creator, for as the text suggests, all of our efforts will ultimately fall short of achieving their goal? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, believed that the answer to this question may be found in a careful understanding of a famous verse in our *parasha*: “My strength and song is G-d, and this is my deliverance; this is my G-d and I will enshrine Him (*zeh kali v’anvahu*); My father’s G-d, I

will exalt Him (*Elokei avi v'arom'menhu*, *Sefer Shemot* 15:2, translation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan zatzal, *The Living Torah*)

The Rav notes that each of the two sections at the end of the *pasuk* (verse), namely, “*zeh kali v'anvahu*” and “*Elokei avi v'arom'menhu*,” contain an aspect of the *matir* to extol Hashem – even though we begin from the position of “abject inadequacy to do so.” He suggests that the word, “*v'anvahu*”

...can be understood as a compound of the words “*ani*” and “*hu*” - *I and He*. We have an obligation to imitate G-d, and by offering Him appropriate praise, we learn about and appreciate His attributes. The desire to be like Him, to fashion our deeds after a Divine design, is understandable if seen against the background of a relationship based on a passionate love. This emotion expresses itself in an overpowering longing for the complete identification of the lover with the beloved. (*Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, pages 197-198, underlining my own)

The desire to “to be like Him, to fashion our deeds after a Divine design,” is known as *imitatio Dei*. According to the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) it is included in the *Taryag Mitzvot* (the 613 Biblical Commandments):

The eighth *mitzvah* is that we are commanded is to emulate G-d, blessed be He, to the best of our ability. The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, exalted be He, “And you shall walk in His ways.” This commandment is repeated in the verse, “To walk in all his ways.” This is explained in the words of the *Midrash Sifri* “Just as G-d is called merciful, so too, you must be merciful. Just as G-d is called kind, so too, you must be kind. Just as G-d is called righteous, so too, you must be righteous. Just as G-d is called pious, so too, you must be pious.” This commandment is also repeated in the verse, “Walk after G-d your L-rd.” This too is explained as emulating the good deeds and fine attributes which are used to allegorically describe G-d, exalted be He, Who is immeasurably exalted over everything. (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, translation, Rabbi Berel Bell with my emendations)

Hence, for Rav Soloveitchik, when we fulfill our “obligation to imitate G-d and offer Him appropriate praise, we learn about and appreciate His attributes.” This, then, is the first *matir* for mankind praising Hashem.

As alluded to above, the Rav maintained that the second reason we may praise G-d is to be found in the expression “*Elokei avi v’arom’menhu.*” This is the case, since: “We ourselves did not originate the custom of praising Him; we do so based upon the tradition of those who came before us, we rely on their precedent.” (Rabbi Herschel Schachter, *Sefer Nefesh HaRav*, page 109) Therefore, when we extol the Holy One blessed be He, we are following the path forged for us by the great ones of *Kenneset Yisrael* and *Adat Yisrael*, two terms that Rabbi Soloveitchik defines in his work, “*U’vikashtem Misham (And From There You Shall Seek)*”:

Knesset Yisrael (the Community of Israel) – its definition: the inextricable connection between the first and last generations of prophet and listener, of Torah scholar and student, of the Revelation of G-d’s Divine Presence in the earliest lights of dawn, and the eschatological vision on that day to come. The Community of Israel is also *Adat Yisrael* (the Congregation of Israel). It incorporates in its innermost being the ancient and true testimony of the myriad visions that have never been obliterated in the depths of the past, the continuity of history, and the unceasing transmission of the Revelation from generation to generation. (Translation my own)

Thus, in the Rav’s estimation, the second *matir* for praising Hashem is our indissoluble link to *Kenneset* and *Adat Yisrael*, and the knowledge they have transmitted to us since the dawn of Jewish history of how to recognize His indescribable glory during the prayer experience.

With Hashem’s help and our heartfelt efforts, may we find the strength and wisdom to walk in His ways, and follow the example set by our Sages, so that we may give the Master of the Universe “song and praise, lauding and hymns [and thereby recognize His] power and dominion, triumph, greatness and strength, praise and splendor, holiness and sovereignty, blessings and thanksgivings, from this time and forevermore.” (Translation, *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, page 405 with my emendations) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on 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 the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther*, 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.