

Parashat Toldot 5783, 2022:

The Tefilot of the Jewish People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of our *parasha* focuses on *Yitzchak* and *Rivka*. Unfortunately, like *Sarah* and *Rachel*, *Rivka* was initially unable to conceive: “And Yitzchak prayed to Hashem opposite his wife because she was barren, and Hashem accepted his prayer, and Rivka, his wife, conceived.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 25:21, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations) In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) suggests the following interpretations of “opposite his wife,” and “accepted his prayer”:

Opposite his wife: This one (Yitzchak) was standing in this corner and praying, and that one (Rivka) was standing in that corner and praying. Accepted his prayer: But not hers, for the prayer of a righteous man, the son of a righteous man (*tzaddik ben tzaddik*), does not compare to the prayer of a righteous man, the son of a wicked man (*tzaddik ben rasha*). Therefore, [Hashem accepted] his prayer and not hers.”

Rashi’s explanation of “accepted his prayer” is based on a statement of Rabbi Yitzchak in *Talmud Bavli*, *Yevamot* 64a: “... their prayers were answered due to Yitzchak, because the prayer of a *tzaddik ben tzaddik* is not similar (*lefi sh’aino domeh*) to the prayer of a *tzaddik ben rasha*, and Rivkah’s father was the wicked Bethuel.” (Translation, *The Koren-William Davidson Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor) Rabbi Yitzchak intimates that the *tefilah* of a *tzaddik ben tzaddik* is qualitatively different, and by extension, on a higher level, than that of a *tzaddik ben rasha*. Yet, how can this be so? Does not *Dovid HaMelech* state in *Ashrei*: “Hashem is close to all (*l’chol*) who call Him, to all (*l’chol*) who call Him in truth (*b’emet*). (*Sefer Tehillim*, 145:18) This

verse clearly indicates that there is “a level playing field” when it comes to heartfelt *tefilah*—and everyone, no matter who they are—has an equal opportunity to draw close to the Almighty.

In his homiletic analysis of the Torah, *Ohev Yisrael*, the Apter Rav (Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel *zatzal*, 1748-1825) focuses on this very issue:

Rashi found it quite difficult that [Hashem accepted Yitzchak’s *tefilah*, and not Rivka’s,] for even though the prayer of a *tzaddik ben tzaddik* is not the same as that of a *tzaddik ben rasha*, nonetheless, the *tefilah* of a *tzaddik ben rasha* is very important in the eyes of the Holy One may He be blessed. This is the case, since [the Holy One blessed be He] answers everyone “who call Him in *b’emet*”—even if he is a son of an evil person. As such, why did the Holy One blessed be He refrain from answering Rivka the *tzadeker*? For, beyond a shadow of a doubt, did not her prayer ascend in grace before the Holy One? (This and the following translation and brackets my own)

Rav Heschel’s answer to these questions is a tour de force that illuminates the deeper meaning of Rashi’s gloss:

[The reason why Hashem accepted Yitzchak’s *tefilah* and not Rivka’s] is because Yitzchak’s *tefilah* was that of a *tzaddik ben tzaddik*, as such, [Rivka’s *tefilah*, which was] in the category of *tzaddik ben rasha*, was deemed relatively unimportant by comparison (*lo nechshavah kol kach*). In truth, however, if the only *tefilah* in this instance had been [Rivka’s] *tzaddik ben rasha* prayer, then, beyond a doubt, it would have been of singular import before Him, may He be blessed, in its acceptance, and Hashem would surely have acted in accordance with her desire and will. Therefore, it is only when you have simultaneous *tefilot* in the categories of *tzaddik ben tzaddik* and *tzaddik ben rasha* that the former will take precedence over the later in its acceptance by Hashem.

The Apter Rav’s response is inspiring. It assures the entire Jewish people that our *tefilot* will be accepted as long as we beseech the Almighty in heartfelt sincerity. As we declare three times a day in the weekday *Shmoneh Esrei*:

Hear our voice, Hashem our G-d, pity and be compassionate to us, and accept — with compassion and favor — our prayer, for G-d Who hears prayers and supplication are You. From before Yourself, our King, turn us not away empty-handed, for You hear the prayers of Your people Israel with compassion. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who hears prayer. (Translation, The Complete ArtScroll Siddur)

May we all be *zocheh* (merit) to have our *tefilot* accepted and answered. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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Please contact me at rdb718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at:

<http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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: [The Rav](#)