

Parashat Vayatzte 5777, 2016:

The Power of Personal 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, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Leah bat Shifra, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* focuses upon *Rachel Emeinu* (our Mother, Rachel), and the intense psychological pain and suffering that resulted from her inability to bear children: “And Rachel saw that she had not borne [any children] to Jacob, and Rachel envied her sister, and she said to Jacob, ‘Give me children, and if not, I am dead.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 30:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the Midrash, explains the somewhat unusual phrase, “give me children,” as meaning: “Did your father [not] do that for your mother? Did he not pray for her?” In other words, Rachel pleaded with Jacob to pray to the Almighty on her behalf, just as his father, Isaac, had done for his mother, Rebecca, when she failed to conceive.

Rachel, however, did not receive the response from Jacob she sought; for although the Torah informs us that Jacob “loved Rachel more than Leah,” he responded to her in what appears to be a harsh manner: “And Jacob became angry with Rachel, and he said, ‘Am I instead of G-d, Who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?’” (30:2) Rashi explains the content of Jacob’s words in the following fashion:

Am I instead of G-d: Am I in His place? **Who has withheld from you:** You say that I should do as my father did. I am not like my father. My father had no sons [at the time he prayed], but I have sons. [It is thus apparent that] He has withheld [children] from you, not from me.

Finally, after waiting for what must have felt like an interminable number of years, Rachel was blessed with her own child:

And G-d remembered Rachel, and G-d hearkened to her (*vayishmah aleah Elokim*), and He opened her womb. And she conceived and bore a son, and she said, “G-d has taken away my reproach.” So she named him Joseph, saying, “May the L-rd grant me yet another son!” (30:22-24)

Rashi interprets the phrase, “And G-d remembered Rachel,” as referring to her kindness in telling her sister, Leah, the secret signs between herself and Jacob, to spare Leah untold disgrace on her wedding night. Rashi does not, however explain the expression, “*vayishmah aleah Elokim*,” which may literally be translated as, “and G-d listened to her.” This leads us to ask, “To what did G-d listen?” We are fortunate that some of the great thinkers of Judaism applied themselves to this question.

Onkelos (35-120 CE) translates and interprets, “*vayishmah aleah Elokim*,” as “*v'kabill tzelotah Hashem*,” i.e. “and Hashem accepted her prayers.” The Netziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin 1816-1893) follows Onkelos’ approach and notes, “She [Rachel] engaged in a great deal of prayer [before the Almighty].” The Malbim (Rav Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, 1809-1879) continues in Onkelos’ footsteps, and formulates his interpretation in a highly nuanced fashion, “for now (“*ki atah*”) she [Rachel] prayed.” As noted earlier, when Rachel beseeched Jacob to “give me children,” she was actually asking him to pray to Hashem on her behalf, just as Isaac had done for Rebecca. Suddenly, like a beam of light that pierces the darkest night, Rachel realized that she was the one that needed to pray, and that now was the time to directly encounter the Almighty through *tefilah* (prayer). By so doing, she taught a vital lesson that was

followed many years later by the childless Hanna when she, too, came before Hashem in profound and heartfelt prayer:

And Hannah arose after eating and after drinking, and Eli the priest was sitting on the chair beside the doorpost of the Temple of the L-rd. And she was bitter in spirit, and she prayed to the L-rd, and wept. And she vowed a vow, and said: to L-rd of Hosts, if You will look upon the affliction of Your bondswoman, and You will remember me, and You will not forget Your bondswoman and You will give Your bondswoman a man-child, and I shall give him to the L-rd all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head. And it was, as she prayed long before the L-rd, that Eli watched her mouth. But Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, and her voice was not heard, and Eli thought her to be a drunken woman. (*Sefer Shmuel* I: 9-13)

As we know, Hannah was anything but a drunken woman. Instead, as she herself professed to Eli, “No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit, and neither new wine nor old wine have I drunk, and I poured out my soul before the L-rd.” (I:15) In sum, Hannah was an intensely spiritual being who, like her mentor Rachel, recognized the power of personal prayer and its potential to burst through the very gates of heaven.

May the Almighty give us the strength and wisdom to *daven* to Him from the depths of our being, so that with Rachel and Hannah as our guides, we, too, may, “pour out our souls before the L-rd.” *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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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 “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” 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.