

Parashat Vayera, 5780, 2019:

*And Hashem Heard Yishmael's Voice*

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the many challenging verses in our *parasha* concerns the nature of *Yishmael's* behavior at the moment he is about to die of thirst: “And G-d heard *kol ha'na'ar* (the lad's voice), and an angel of G-d called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, ‘What is troubling you, Hagar? Fear not, for G-d has heard *kol ha'na'ar* (the lad's voice) *ba'asher hu sham* (in the place where he is).” (*Sefer Beresheet* 21:17, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The two terms, “*kol ha'na'ar*” and “*ba'asher hu sham*,” are very difficult to understand, since their meaning is elusive. Does *kol ha'na'ar* refer to *Yishmael's* voice, his cry, or something else entirely? Then, too, *ba'asher hu sham* seems superfluous on every level, for after all, where else would Hashem have heard *Yismael* other than the “place where he is?”

Chapter 30 of *Midrash Pirkei d' Rabi Eliezer*, contextualizes and, in so doing, interprets the phrase, “*kol ha'na'ar*” through the use of the following narrative:

*Yishmael's* very being was exhausted from thirst, and that point, he went and he threw himself under one of the desert bushes. [At that moment he] said: “Master of all worlds! If You have the desire to give me water to drink, give me water to drink and do not allow my soul to depart from me as a result of the extreme thirst I am suffering; for death from thirst is different from and more difficult than all other forms of death!” And the Holy One blessed be He heard his *tefilah*, as the texts states: “And G-d heard *kol ha'na'ar*.” (Translation my own)

According to this midrash, “*kol ha'na'ar*” clearly refers to the heartfelt *tefilah Yishmael* uttered at this moment of mortal danger. If this is the case, the midrash is teaching us something universally applicable, namely, *Yishmael's* personal prayer experience, and its positive outcome, is available to everyone. This idea was given powerful voice by *David HaMelech* when he famously declared, “Hashem is near to all who call Him, to all who call upon Him with truth.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 145:18)

At first glance, *ba'asher hu sham* does not seem connected to *kol ha'na'ar* and, as suggested earlier, appears completely unnecessary. If so, why does our verse include this phrase? Perhaps this question is one of the reasons Rashi (1040-1105) suggests the following interpretation:

**Where he is:** According to the deeds that he does now he is judged and not according to what he is destined to do (*Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah* 16b). For the ministering angels acted as accusers and said: “O' L-rd of the Universe, for one [that is, *Yishmael's* descendants] who is destined to kill Your children with thirst, You are bringing up a well?!” And He answered them, “What is he now, righteous or wicked?” They replied, “Righteous.” He said to them, “According to his present deeds I judge him” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 53:14). And that is the meaning of “where he is.”

In one deft stroke, Rashi's midrashically-infused analysis teaches us that *ba'asher hu sham* does not refer to a physical location; rather, it is a description of *Yishmael's* existential state at the moment of uttering his *tefilah* to the Almighty. As such, *kol ha'na'ar* and *ba'asher hu sham* are actually closely intertwined, and each advances the understanding of the other. Knowing that Hashem judges us according to our present deeds, instead of any future missteps we may take, inspires us with a sense of security and suggests that we are able to honor and serve Him through our actions. As *Shlomo HaMelech* taught us some 3,000 years ago: “The end of the matter, everything having been heard, treat G-d with awe and keep His commandments, for this is the ultimate purpose of man.” (*Sefer Kohelet* 12:13) May we then be *zoche* (merit) to be in a place where Hashem will be willing to hear, and answer, our *tefilot*. As we say three times each day 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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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 *Tanach* 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.