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מחבר ספרי שו"ת דרך המלך, אמרי מרדכי, ודרכי המלך על המועדים ועוד
רשת מעונות, ורשת גנים, ת"ת פרי תואר, ובית יעקב פרי תואר, תיכון בית יעקב החדש, ת"ת מאור ישראל,
ישיבה קטנה ארחות יהודה, ביהמ"ד גבוה לרבנים ודיינים "לקח טוב" קופת "מפעל החסד" אלעד
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Parashat Va'etchanan

The Power of Prayer

The *parashah* begins with Moshe Rabbeinu's prayers to enter *Eretz Yisrael*. The Midrash Aggadah [*Va'etchanan* 3:63] states, "*Va'etchanan*," [Moshe prayed] 515 prayers over this matter, equivalent to the numerical value of *va'etchanan*. Nevertheless, Hashem did not accept his prayer."

Question:

- 1 – Moshe Rabbeinu prayed 515 prayers and was, nevertheless, unable to nullify the decree. We are on a far lower level than that of Moshe. If his prayers proved unsuccessful, what can **our** prayers be expected to accomplish? Are the words of our Sages meant to discourage us to pray, Heaven forbid?
- 2 – There is an additional difficulty according to the Ramban. The Rambam [*Hilchot Tefillah perek 1*] rules that prayer is a Torah requirement. He derives this from the *pasuk* which states, "And Him you will serve," as well as "And you should serve Him with all your heart." The Ramban disagrees, stating that the only time prayer is a Torah requirement is when a person is in a trying predicament. We see, therefore, that during trying times everyone is in agreement that there is a Torah requirement to pray. In our times, who can say that they do not experience trying times, either on a personal or communal level? Therefore it is incumbent upon all individuals to be mindful to pray. Therefore, according to the Rambam, there is always a requirement to pray, independent of a person's predicament. Even if his prayers are not answered, there is nevertheless, a mitzvah to pray. Yet according to the Ramban, the entire point of prayer is to save oneself from a trying predicament. But if Moshe Rabbeinu was unsuccessful in annulling the decree with his prayer, who can ever hope to do so?
- 3 – Furthermore, sometimes we see that we pray for years and we are not answered. Is there any benefit to continuing to pray? Particularly, when we are praying for a critically ill individual whose end seems near, all the more so, when the doctors have already given up hope – is there any point to our prayers?

People's Perspective

There are many individuals who say or wonder, "What benefit is there in praying? We pray our entire lives but are not answered. Our prayers are certainly not on the level of those of the *tzaddikim*. Certainly they are not powerful enough to reverse a negative decree." Therefore, despondency creeps into their hearts, until all of their prayers are simply recited by rote, in order to fulfill their requirement of prayer, or in order to appear upright in the eyes of the congregation. However, the Torah teaches us that they are making a mistake. For there is not one prayer that is in vain; rather, each one draws the goal ever so much closer – it is only a matter of time. For example, R' Akiva once saw how a hole was eventually formed in a rock as a result of the continuous dripping of water. From this sight, he learned a lesson and began to study Torah, until he eventually rose to become the great Rebbi Akiva. The explanation for this is as follows: R' Akiva contemplated the first droplet of water that hit the rock, and he saw that it had no impact. R' Akiva then asked himself: if this was the case with the first drop of water, perhaps the same thing would be with the second, third, and fourth? Perhaps the hundredth drop and thousandth as well; if the first drop was ineffective, why should the later drops be any more effective? Yet the reality was that there was a hole. If so, it must be that the first drop really *did* have an impact, as did all the subsequent drops. However, the impact of each drop was so minimal that it was unnoticed. However, as the drops multiplied, the impact became noticeable. So too, with prayer – every single prayer has an effect, yet we do not know the extent of it or when the results of the prayers will become noticeable, as we will now explain.

The Power of Prayer

Our Sages have already addressed this in the *Midrash Rabbah* [*Va'etchanan*]: R' Akiva said, "[The *pasuk* states, 'And I beseeched Hashem] at that time saying, 'This is to teach future generations that they should pray at a time of distress, for even though Moshe was told, 'You will not cross this Yarden,' he, nevertheless, began to beseech Hashem. This is to teach you that prayer has the power to change a decree. Had Hashem not told him, 'Do not continue to speak to me about this matter, **he would have prayed an additional prayer, and he would have**



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entered the land." We see from here that even though the 515 prayers were not accepted, if he would have continued to pray one additional prayer, he would have nullified the decree. However, Hashem commanded him to cease praying. From this you can derive that every prayer draws an individual a step closer towards achieving a particular goal and nullifying a decree. It is just that we do not know when this will take place. However, there is not a prayer that does not have an effect, and each one helps to sweeten the *Middat Hadin*, Attribute of Strict Judgment, until the decree is nullified.

"Even if You Were to Intensify Your Prayer, I Will Not Listen"

The aforementioned tenet can also be derived from the words of the *navi*. The *pasuk* states [Yeshaya 1], "The vision of Yeshaya son of Amotz ... When you spread your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you. Even if you were to intensify your prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are filled with blood." It seems that there is a repetitive expression in the *pasuk*. First the *pasuk* states, 'When you spread your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you.' In other words, Hashem will not accept their prayers. Therefore why does the *pasuk* then state, "Even if you were to intensify your prayers, I will not listen." The answer is that the *navi* is teaching us that people pray in two ways: There is one person who offers up but a single prayer, and he may not be answered by Hashem. However, there is another individual who continues to pray repeatedly – he *will* be answered. This is because the power of continuous prayer is unique, for each prayer continues to sweeten the strict judgment until it is nullified. Therefore the *navi* was adding that in that situation, not only would Hashem not hear their prayer, but even if they would offer continues prayers it would not help, because Hashem had specifically decreed that it should not help. However, barring that decree, there is a special power when an individual prays continuously. I found that this is also stated explicitly in the *Midrash Tanchuma* [Veyeira 1], "Hashem said to the Jewish people, 'Be careful with prayer, because there is nothing better than it. It is greater than all the sacrificial offerings, as the *pasuk* states, 'Why do I need your numerous sacrificial offerings ... Bring your worthless meal-offerings no more ... My soul despises your New Moons and Festivals ... When you spread your hands in prayer... Even if you will intensify your prayers ...' From here we see that prayer is greater than all of the sacrificial offerings. Even if an individual is not worthy of having his prayer answered nor being the recipient of kindness, since he prays and prays continuously, I will perform kindness with him. For this is as it states, 'All of Hashem's ways are kindness and truth.'"

Pray Even for the Supernatural

The Steipler *zt"l* once asked the Chazon Ish *zt"l* if there is a reason to pray for an individual who has a severe illness, *rachmana litzlan*. Perhaps his recovery could be deemed a miracle, and we do not pray for miracles. Even if a miracle would be performed for him, it would be at the expense of deducting from his merits. The Chazon Ish answered that that he knows a particular *rav* named R' Datzranigov *zt"l*, whom the doctors said would not live longer than short while. He ended up living thirty more years! This is indeed not considered a miracle, and sometimes even a seriously ill individual could continue to live. The Steipler added that we see that both R' Moshe Chevroni *zt"l* and R' Baruch Sorotzkin *zt"l* lived with their illnesses for dozens of years. We see from here, that continuous prayers help in this case as well.

Part 2 – Heartfelt Prayer Can Nullify a Decree

This applies all the more so if one prays from the depths of his heart – certainly his prayer will be answered. This can be seen from the words of our Sages in *Masechet Berachot* [32b]. Our Sages relate that one time, the prophet Yeshaya visited the gravely ill Chizkiyahu Hamelech. Yeshaya informed Chizkiyahu that since he had not married, he would die in this world and would not receive a share in the Coming World. Chizkiyahu explained that he had foreseen with Divine Inspiration that he would have sons who were not righteous, and he therefore opted not to have children. He therefore asked Yeshayahu if he could marry his daughter; perhaps their combined merits would be able to prevent such an eventuality. Yeshayahu said that this was impossible. At that point, Chizkiyahu ordered him to finish his prophecy and leave. He stated that he had received a tradition from his great-grandfather David Hamelech that even if a sharp sword is placed on man's neck (see Rashi) or a dream interpreter



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tells him that he is going to die, he should, nevertheless, not refrain from praying for mercy. Chizkiyahu immediately began to pray with heartfelt prayer and was healed.

There Were No Better Days Than Tu B'Av – the Day on Which the Generation of the Desert Stopped Dying

It is furthermore stated in *Masechet Taanit* [30b] and also in *Masechet Baba Batra* [121a], "Said Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel: There were no better days for the Jews than *Chamishah Asar B'Av* and *Yom Hakippurim*. *Yom Hakippurim* is well understood, as it is a day of forgiveness, the day that the second pair of *luchot* were given. But what is the significance of the Fifteenth of Av? Said Rabbah Bar Bar Channah in the name of R' Yochanan: It is the day that the generation of the desert stopped dying. As the master stated, until the last of the generation of the desert passed way, Hashem did not speak with Moshe, etc." It is stated in the *Midrash Eicah [Ptichot]*, "Said R' Levi: Every *erev Tisha B'Av* Moshe would announce in the camp that they should go out and dig their graves. They would go out, dig their graves, and sleep in them. In the morning, Moshe would announce, 'Arise and separate the dead from the living.' They would rise and find that out of the 600,000 [members of the Jewish Nation] exactly 15,000 were missing. [This took place year after year.]" In the fortieth year they did so again, and they all arose in the morning. They figured that they must have erred in the date, so they slept in the graves on the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th. Once they saw a full moon [on the 15th] they said, 'It seems that Hashem has nullified the decree from upon us.' They therefore made the day a festival."

Questions:

1 – Why did they declare the day a festival? **2** – I heard something amazing from the *Mashgiach*, R' Levenstein *zt"l*. He asked: Why did only the last fifteen thousand merit that the decree should be nullified? Did the others not pray to be saved?

He answered that the difference between the previous ones who died and the later ones was as follows: Every year 15,000 Jews out of the tens of thousands who lied in their graves would die. However, most would rise in the morning. Therefore, each time they lied in their graves, their prayers were not completely focused on Hashem's kindness. However, the last fifteen thousand were convinced that they would not rise the following morning; they were sure that they would remain alive. They knew that all they had to depend upon was the mercy of their Father in Heaven. They therefore poured out their hearts in prayer and placed their trust only in Hashem. Therefore their prayers were accepted, and the decree was annulled. This is what David Hamelech taught us, that Hashem answers those who call out to Him sincerely, with a complete heart, not relying on their strength or wisdom. Rather, Hashem answers he who turns to Him alone. According to this it is understood why they established Tu B'Av as a festival. For on this day a miracle transpired, and their prayers were answered. As a result, it was transformed into a day that prayers are readily accepted, like on Yom Kippur. Most of the reasons cited in the Gemara are related to the fact that Hashem accepted the prayers of the Jews. This is why they merited inter-tribal marriages, as well as the tribe of Binyamin once again being allowed to marry into the other tribes. It is also why those slaughtered in Beitar were allowed to be buried, and the sentries were removed, allowing the Jews to once again ascend to Yerushalayim.

A Prayer Which Achieved the Supernatural

In the *sefer Aleinu Le'shabeach*, it is told about a *talmid chacham* who, together with his five year old son, came to the house of R' Chaim Kanievesky. He requested the Torah giant to listen to the story about this boy, who learned in one of the *chedarim* in Bnei Brak. The boy fell ill with cancer, *rachmana litzlan*. When it became clear that he would have to start chemotherapy, the parents told the boy that all the hair on his body would fall out. At first, the boy was not alarmed, but a short time later, he burst out in bitter tears. He said to his parents, "I do not care about the hair on my head, but how can I continue to be called a Jewish child without *peyot*?" The father continued to relate to R' Kanievesky that the boy turned his face to the wall and turned to Hashem in heartfelt prayer. "Merciful Father. I am sure that all you do with me is for the best. I trust that there is no one who has mercy on me more than You. Such is what my father and mother have always told me. Therefore, I accept with complete love the illness that You have brought upon me. I am prepared to endure the difficult treatments with a



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devote heart, because I trust that there, too, You will not forsake me. You will always be with me and guard me. I am willing to sacrifice the hair on my head despite the fact that it will be terribly embarrassing for me. But my *peyot*..." Here the boy broke into terrible weeping. "How can I be without *peyot*? This is the appearance of a Jewish child, and I want to continue to be one. I therefore request and plead to You my Father in Heaven, at least leave me with my *peyot*. Please do not let them fall out during the chemotherapy treatments." "So he prayed for a long while and continued to sob," said the father, "while we, his parents, stood on the side and cried together with him." The father then pointed to an unbelievable miracle that had transpired with his son. "I have brought the child here so that the *rav* can see with his own eyes, the unbelievable miracle that Hashem has wrought for him. Like a Father who displays mercy for his son, so too, Hashem listened to the prayers that emanated from a pure heart. All of the boy's hair fell out except for his *peyot*." The father furthermore related how the doctors did not believe what they saw, and exclaimed that such a thing has never transpired in medical history. R' Kanievsky was also very moved by the story.

Words of Mussar

From here we can understand the power of prayer, which can save a person from all misfortune. It can nullify from both him and his family all harsh decrees. No prayer is in vain; rather, it draws closer the nullification of the decree, even though we do not see any change. This applies all the more so when the prayers are uttered from the depths of one's being. Then there is no doubt that the prayer is effective. Many times, Hashem causes a person to pray continuously in order to help him put an end to his misfortune. Therefore, each individual should strengthen himself to pray from the depths of his heart and Hashem, in His mercy, will hear his prayer, hasten the redemption, and rebuild the *Beit Hamikdash* speedily in our days. Amen.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka