

THE MATRIARCHS WERE REMEMBERED ON ROSH HASHANAH

Prayer as the key to success

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

A man was sitting on his porch as flood waters began to rise.

The man called out, "Please dear G-d save me!"

A woman in a boat rowed past and asked if she could help.

"No thank you," said the man, "G-d will save me."

The waters rose higher, forcing the man to move upstairs.

A raft full of people floated past. "Get in," they said, "there's plenty of room."

"No thanks," said the man, "G-d will save me."

The flood waters kept rising, forcing the man to climb onto the roof of his house. From out of nowhere, a helicopter swooped in and lowered its ladder. "Thanks anyway," he shouted, "G-d will save me."

The flood waters swept the man away and he drowned.

When he arrived in heaven, the man asked, "G-d, why didn't you answer me?"

G-d looked at the man flabbergasted: "I sent you a boat, a raft, and a helicopter!"



WHERE DOES IT SAY IN the Torah that we should pray to Hashem? The *Sefer HaChinnuch* – Book of (Mitzvah) Education – cites two verses in Parshat Eikev as the Torah source for the mitzvah of prayer:

"You shall fear Hashem, your G-d, Him shall you serve; and to Him shall you cleave, and by His name shall you swear." We are commanded only a few lines later, in the twice-daily recited passage of the Shema: *"...to serve G-d with all your heart and with all your soul."*

Our Sages ask: What is this "service" of the "heart"? To which they answer: Prayer.

Man's natural state of being is one of lacking. We have many needs: physical, emotional, and spiritual – as well as many desires. Prayer is the vehicle through which G-d has established that He will provide for these needs and desires. It is this calling out to G-d regarding our needs – especially in times of urgent need – that serves to fulfil our Torah obligation of prayer. Interestingly enough, the Torah does not prescribe any particular time – or even quantity – for the

performance and fulfilment of the mitzvah of prayer, and our sages offer vastly differing opinions as to when and how often we are even required to pray. Our fixed daily prayers (shacharis, mincha and ma'ariv), which are almost exclusively of a communal focus (eg,

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heal us, forgive us, sustain us, etc), fall under an entirely separate, albeit rabbinic, obligation, with the exception of reading the Shema, which is a separate Torah obligation. One thing is clear: if the only time we pray is in a shul and the only words that we use to

pray are those contained in a book, then we are doing it wrong.

Prayer – regardless of whether it is for our individual or our communal needs – is something that is inherently difficult for us, as it requires us to focus on where it is and what it is that we are lacking. Only after this period of quiet reflection can we turn to G-d, in whose hands rests the unlimited ability to provide anything and everything, and beseech Him for his assistance. This act of calling out to G-d in prayer would be difficult enough were it merely a once-off occurrence, but due to the constant growth and evolution of our needs and desires, we must continually supplicate ourselves before Him.

Although it may be hard to accept, the Creator of the Universe wants a relationship with each of us. In fact, our sages teach that when we pray to G-d, we are not only able to have our needs and desires fulfilled, we in turn also merit being watched over by Him, which comes as a consequence of the connection that we establish with Him through our prayer. It is this cycle of prayer and divine supervision (hashgacha) that amounts to being a conversation with G-d. We speak and G-d responds in, what I like to call, "sign language". G-d's hand is ever present in our individual lives, if we only choose to see it; to see the boats, rafts, and helicopters through which he constantly speaks to us. G-d hears and answers all of our prayers. What is hard to accept is that sometimes the answer to our prayers is no. To put it simply, what we want, or even think we need, is not always what is best for us.

It is well known that when G-d first called upon Moshe to approach Pharaoh and to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, Moshe responded that he was "not a man of words" – that he was "heavy of mouth and heavy of speech." After the Jewish people failed to listen to him, Moshe told G-d – not once, but twice – that he had "sealed lips." How did G-d respond? Don't worry, I'll be with your mouth and teach you what to say. Our sages ask a seemingly obvious question: Why did G-d only offer to help Moshe with his speech? Surely, G-d, who is all-powerful, could have simply fixed Moshe's mouth so that he could speak without any sort of impediment? The answer given by our sages is startling: Moshe never prayed for such a thing. Instead, Moshe

chose to use his speech impediment as an excuse. Sometimes the limitations we face in life are entirely self-imposed. The lesson we learn from this episode is clear: if a person wants G-d's help, he need only ask for it. If we don't ask, then we don't get. G-d is even willing to satisfy our heart's desires – but we must first articulate those desires to Him.

The Talmud teaches that each of the matriarchs who struggled with having children – Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah – was visited (ie, remembered regarding children) by G-d on Rosh Hashanah. The well-known story of our matriarch Hannah's successful prayer for a son, Shmuel HaNavi (The Prophet Samuel), which we read each year on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, serves as the source for several fundamental halachos (laws) regarding *how* we must pray (eg, directing our heart towards heaven; announcing our prayers; speaking in a quiet voice; etc).

In its detailed analysis of the verses from the Book of Samuel that describes Hannah beseeching G-d for a child, the Talmud

explains the verse, "Now Hannah, she spoke *in* (ie, on – see explanation that follows) *her heart*" as follows: Hannah said to G-d, "Master of the Universe, among all of the things that You created in a woman, You did not create any without a purpose: eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, legs to walk with.... and a bosom to nurse a child with. This bosom that You have put *on my heart*, is it not for the purpose of nursing a child? Please give to me a son, so that I can nurse him."

Hannah did not just ask G-d for a son. Instead, she made a compelling argument to G-d: She (1) acknowledged G-d as the Creator of the universe; (2) expressed her appreciation and understanding for the purpose for which He had created something; (3) explained how, in her present state, she was unable to use what G-d had created to fulfil its intended purpose; and finally, (4) she beseeched G-d to bless her with the means that would enable her to do so.

We must not lose sight of the fact that it

was not just *how* Hannah prayed, but *what* she actually said (the very words and arguments that she chose) that helped her to achieve her goal. Just as a parent may ask an older child for a more detailed explanation regarding the basis of a request, so too it seems logical (and quite evident) that G-d expects us to move beyond merely making requests – or even demands – in the way that a child does, to expressing our needs and desires in a more sophisticated way that reflects why it is we need or want what we are requesting, and how having our request fulfilled will make a difference. By studying the successful prayers of our matriarchs – and patriarchs – we can gain insight into how our prayers and petitions should be structured in order to achieve their greatest success. **III**

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