

וַאֲתַחֲנַן

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Our *Parashah* opens with Moshe Rabbeinu's description of his prayer that he be allowed to enter *Eretz Yisrael*. *Midrash Rabbah* relates that Moshe prayed 515 prayers--the *Gematria* of the Hebrew word "*Va'etchanan*"--for this purpose, until *Hashem* told him (3:26), "Do not continue to speak to Me further about this matter." R' Chaim ben Attar z"l (1696-1743; Morocco, Italy and *Eretz Yisrael*; the "*Ohr Ha'Chaim Ha'kadosh*") explains that *Hashem* rejected Moshe's prayers for the good of *Bnei Yisrael*, as we read (in the same verse), "*Hashem* became angry with me for your sake." Had Moshe entered the Holy Land, he would have built the *Bet Hamikdash* and it would have stood forever. Then, instead of *Hashem* taking out his wrath on sticks and stones, He would have taken it out on the Jewish People, G-d forbid.

R' Avraham Mordechai Alter *shlita* (Yerushalayim) asks: Why did *Hashem* allow Moshe to pray in vain so many times? Why didn't *Hashem* tell Moshe right away, "Don't waste your time praying for this"? R' Alter answers: *Hashem* "could not" (so-to-speak) grant Moshe's request literally for the reason suggested by the *Ohr Ha'Chaim Ha'kadosh*, for example. Nevertheless, no prayer is ever wasted. While Moshe did not get to enter the Land, his prayers strengthened his spiritual connection to *Eretz Yisrael*, which is itself valuable. And he was allowed to see the Land from a distance, as we read in the next verse: "Ascend to the top of the cliff and raise your eyes westward, northward, southward, and eastward, and see with your eyes, for you shall not cross this Jordan."

- Continued in box inside -

Shabbat

"And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, has taken you out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, has commanded you to make the *Shabbat* day." (5:15)

The *Gemara* (*Pesachim* 117b) states that one is required to mention the Exodus from Egypt in *Kiddush*. What is the connection between *Shabbat* and the Exodus? Isn't *Shabbat* primarily a reminder that *Hashem* created the world?

R' Eliezer Kashtiel *shlita* (*Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivat Bnei David in Eli, Israel) explains: We speak of *Shabbat* as the "Day of Rest." Ordinarily, however, rest is not an end in itself; it is something that people must do so they will have the energy to be productive. Surely *Shabbat* is not just a day to regain our strength for the coming workweek. Indeed, in *Birkat Ha'mazon*, we pray for "the day that is entirely *Shabbat* and rest for eternal life." And we say (in the song *Ma Yedidut*), "The *Shabbat* rest is a sample of *Olam Ha'ba* / the World-to-Come," indicating that *Olam Ha'ba* is a place of eternal rest. What is the purpose of resting for all eternity?

R' Kashtiel answers: We read in *Tehilim* (132:8), "Arise, *Hashem*, to Your resting place." Here, "resting place" means a destination or goal. When the Torah says (*Shmot* 20:11) that *Hashem* "rested on the seventh day," the Torah means that *Hashem* created the world over a period of six days for a purpose. Then, on *Shabbat*, *Hashem* created the possibility of man stepping back from the busy workweek and discovering Creation's purpose.

Still, continues R' Kashtiel, there needed to be people to who would actualize this potential, who would implement the world's purpose. Through the Exodus, *Hashem* formed and selected *Bnei Yisrael* to be that people. Thus, the Exodus is a continuation of what *Hashem* created on that first *Shabbat*.
(*Vy'kadesh Oto* p.183)

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“You shall love *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources.” (6:5)

R’ Moshe ben Maimon *z”l* (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes (*Hil. Teshuvah* 10:2), “One who serves *Hashem* out of love engages in Torah study and *Mitzvot* and goes in the ways of wisdom--not because of any worldly thing, not for fear of something bad happening, and not to gain any good, but only because it is the truth. Good will result inevitably. This is a very high level that not every wise man reaches, and this was the level of Avraham Avinu. . .” [Until here from *Rambam*]

R’ Binyamin Yehoshua Zilber *z”l* (1916-2008; a leading *Halachic* authority in Israel) asks: The Torah’s *Mitzvot* apply to every person. Given the *Rambam*’s statement that the love of *Hashem* he describes “is a very high level that not every wise man reaches,” rather it “was the level of Avraham Avinu,” what chance do we have of performing this *Mitzvah*?!

R’ Zilber answers: It appears that *Rambam* himself means to address this very question later in the chapter (*Hil. Teshuvah* 10:6), where he writes: “It is well-known and clear that love of *Hashem* does not become solidified in a person’s heart until he occupies himself with it at all times, and he abandons all other things in this world, as the Torah commands, ‘With all your heart [and] with all your soul.’ A person can love *Hashem* only to the extent that he knows Him, and proportional to that knowledge will be his love--if a little, a little; if a lot, a lot. Therefore, one must dedicate himself to the extent of his ability to understand and comprehend that which will educate him about his Creator, as we explained in *Hilchot Yesodei Ha’Torah*.” [Until here from *Rambam*] (Ed. Note: *Rambam* is referring to *Hil. Yesodei Ha’Torah* (2:2), where he writes that the way to develop love of *Hashem* is to reflect upon the wonders of His deeds and His creations, and to infer from them how great *Hashem*’s wisdom is.)

R’ Zilber concludes: *Rambam* is teaching us how to perform this *Mitzvah* in practice. Just as one who wants to grow something must first plow the ground to clear a place to plant, and then he must plant a seed, so one who wants to love *Hashem* must first “abandon all other things,” and then he must dedicate himself to “understand and comprehend that which will educate him about his Creator.” (With proper work, the very high level of which *Rambam* speaks is attainable.)

(*Mekor Halachah: Kuntreis Darchei Ha’lishmah*, p.461)

– Continued from front page –

The same is true about our prayers, R’ Alter continues. Often, we do not see the result for which we prayed. Only *Hashem* knows why a specific prayer is or is not answered literally. Nevertheless, we should never stop praying, as no sincere prayer fails to produce some beneficial result.

(*Divrei Emet: Emtza Makom L’Hashem* p.137)

“You shall know this day and take to your heart that *Hashem*, He is the *Elokim*--in heaven above and on the earth below--there is none other.” (4:39)

R’ Don Segal *shlita* (Yerushalayim and Brooklyn, N.Y.; a leading contemporary teacher of *Mussar*) quotes R’ Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev *z”l* (1740-1809; early *Chassidic Rebbe*) as teaching: “In heaven--above!” When one is evaluating his standing in Heavenly matters--for example, how well he prays or studies Torah--he should look at those “above” him, *i.e.*, he should aspire to be like those who pray or study better than he does. On the other hand, “On the earth--below!” When one is evaluating his earthly existence--*i.e.*, his financial status, his home, etc.--he should focus on how well off he is compared to those “below” him, *i.e.*, those who have less.

R’ Segal adds: Human nature is to do the opposite--to be jealous of those who are better off in this world, and to be content when one’s prayers and Torah study are better than the next guy’s.

(*Chovat Ha’adam Al Iggeret Ha’Ramban* p.54)

“This is the Torah that Moshe placed before *Bnei Yisrael*.” (4:44)

R’ Chaim Druckman *z”l* (1932-2022; rabbi, *Rosh Yeshiva*, and *Knesset* member) asks: Why does the verse say that Moshe “placed” the Torah before *Bnei Yisrael*, instead of saying, “This is the Torah that Moshe taught *Bnei Yisrael*”?

He answers: The *Gemara* (*Yoma* 72b) comments on the fact that the Hebrew words for “placed” (נָסַח) and “elixir” (סֵדָה) are homonyms. (Both are pronounced “*Sahm*”). The *Gemara* says: If one merits, the Torah will be an elixir of life for him. If one does not merit, it will be an elixir of death, a poison. [Until here from the *Gemara*]

As such, R’ Druckman writes, the Torah’s word choice is teaching: Moshe placed the Torah before us. What we do with it, whether we use it properly or do not, is our choice.”

(*Hakdamah L’Shir Ha’shirim* p.112)

R’ Eliyahu *z”l* (1720-1797; the *Vilna Gaon*) explains the above *Gemara*: The Torah is like rain. If rain falls on a field planted with beneficial seeds, the result will be a beneficial crop. But if rain falls on a field of weeds, the result will be thicker weeds.

Likewise, when Torah is taught to a good-hearted person who works on his character, the result is an even better-hearted person with an even finer character. But, if Torah is taught to a bad-hearted person with no interest in character improvement, the result will be a person with even worse traits.

Therefore, says the *Vilna Gaon*, before a person begins studying Torah each day--and again when he finishes learning--he must clear away the rottenness of any improper beliefs or character traits and replace them with *Yir’at Chet* / fear of sin and with good deeds.

(*Even Shleimah* 1:11)