חסידות

From the Chassidic Courts

ZHITOMIR · OHR HAMEIR, LECH LECHA

Why true prayer aims above personal needs

Ohr HaMeir

True prayer, even when voiced through personal need, must be directed not toward one's own lack but toward repairing a deficiency Above and redeeming the Shechinah (Divine Presence) from exile; this is why the Avot (Patriarchs) and Imahot (Matriarchs) were barren, why David and Rabbi Akiva's deepest prayers transcended personal concerns, and why Avraham, in asking for a child, was truly pleading on behalf of the Torah yet to be given, not for his own sake. When prayer is thus purified and aimed at the higher need, the lower, personal good follows automatically. AI SUMMARY

On the verse "And Avram said: O Lord God, what will You give me, seeing that I go childless, and the steward of my house is Damesek Eliezer... And Avram said: Behold, You have given me no seed, and behold, one born in my house is to be my heir... And behold, the word of Hashem came to him, saying" — it appears that here our holy Torah comes to teach a person the understanding of how to counsel his own soul as to what he should say and speak when he comes to supplicate and pray before Him, blessed be He, for children.

A person must be very careful not to direct his aim and thought, in supplicating, toward his own personal need and the like, but rather to direct his entire effort toward [filling] a deficiency Above. We preface with their statement, of blessed memory: "Why were our forefathers barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the tzaddikim (righteous ones)." How deeply they probed in saying that the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the tzaddikim! They meant that those prayers which the tzaddikim pray are certainly not directed, in their heart and soul, toward asking Him, blessed be He, for their own physical deficiencies; rather, their entire intent and purpose is to complete a deficiency Above, to repair the upper worlds, as explained in our words several times, and to bring the Shechinah (Divine Presence) out of exile.

Such is the way of the true tzaddikim: whatever need they pray for in all matters of their prayer — whether their own personal needs or the needs of the multitude of the people of Israel, such as healing, the downfall of enemies, or for those lacking children regarding seed that will endure, and the like, among the many needs of the people of Israel — their primary aim is to repair the Place Above, for in all the suffering of Israel there is the suffering of the Shechinah, as they said: "What does the Shechinah say? 'My head hurts Me,' etc." And the healing follows automatically. Now, for such a prayer the Holy One, blessed be He, also needs, so to speak, that their whole intent be for the need Above — and this is why they probed deeply in saying that the Holy One, blessed be He, also desires those prayers which the tzaddikim pray, as stated.

David, peace be upon him, also alluded to this in saying: "I love [Hashem] for He hears my voice, my supplications, for He has inclined His ear to me." At first glance, who would not love that Hashem hear the voice of his supplications? To what did he direct this, that he said, specifically regarding his own excellent level, "I love," and not otherwise? And our

Sages, of blessed memory, also said and expounded: "Knesset Yisrael (the Assembly of Israel) said before the Holy One, blessed be He: When am I beloved before You? At the time that You..." — and one must understand their statement.

However, according to our words stated, it is well explained: for in truth all of Israel love that the Holy One, blessed be He, hear the voice of their supplications regarding all their needs; but since their speech tends to travel on the earth, to ask only for earthly and physical matters, and from Hashem their heart is forgotten to give thought that presumably this deficiency is Above — "what is it to me to pray for a particular limb? Is it not better for me to pray for the whole, to repair the deficiency in the Place Above?"

— but in the absence of this understanding, their love and their prayer is not complete, and it is not the will before Him, blessed be He, to incline His ear to hear their prayer. Therefore King David, peace be upon him, said: "I love that Hashem hear my voice, my supplications" — on condition that "He has inclined His ear," meaning that my prayer is so pure and clear that He, blessed be He, also desires this prayer, it being for the deficiency of the upper worlds. Thus he said "for He has inclined His ear to me" — indicating that He desires my prayer, in the manner that the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the tzaddikim, for He, blessed be He, also has a need for it.

This is what our Sages, of blessed memory, meant: "Knesset Yisrael said before the Holy One, blessed be He: When am I beloved before You? At the time that You hear my voice" — indicating that my prayer is of the type of the prayer of the tzaddikim, which the Holy One, blessed be He, desires, for they pay no attention at all to their own need, but all their days their heart was troubled within them to bring forth the limbs of the Shechinah from exile, to raise up the scattered holy sparks to their lofty place. This is why they probed deeply that they asked of Him, blessed be He, to raise up above, as explained.

By this one can understand what is stated in the Gemara: Rabbi Akiva, when he prayed in public, would shorten and finish quickly, but when he prayed alone, a person would leave him in one corner and find him in another corner. This is the very matter I have spoken of: certainly Rabbi Akiva's prayer, whether about his own affairs or about the needs of the public, on behalf of the people of Israel — his entire intent and purpose was to deepen his request, to raise it up above, to sweeten it at its root. And since it is sweetened above, everything is sweetened. How very correct are the words of our Sages, of blessed memory, and their allusion: "a person would leave him in one corner" — as if he were praying for a physical need such as healing, sustenance, seed that endures, downfall of enemies, and the like — but in truth Rabbi Akiva deepened his request above so much that he was found in another corner, [having moved on] to repair the upper worlds, to complete the deficiency Above.

Something similar is also alluded to in the verse: "And Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife, for she was barren, and Hashem was entreated of him" (va-ye'ater lo). Rashi, of blessed memory, explained: "opposite his wife" — this one stood in one corner and prayed, and that one stood in another corner and prayed. "And Hashem was entreated of him" — "of him" and not "of her," for the prayer of a tzaddik is not comparable, etc.

To understand this: I heard in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, may his memory be for a blessing in the World to Come, who explained "and Peninah had children, but Chanah had no children" — for Peninah alludes to the sitra achra (Other Side), as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "the Satan [is called] Peninah," and Chanah alludes to the Shechinah. The verse complains about the absence of tzaddikim, that there are no tzaddikim in the land who would be children to the Shechinah, to give Her matters with which to be glorified through those who engage in Her building; whereas the children of the sitra achra, that is Peninah, are many, for many are those who breach the bounds of their good deeds and become children to the sitra achra, building up the stature of the sitra achra, which is made through the sin of the sons of man. Therefore the verse complains: "and Peninah had children, but Chanah had no children," as stated.

The heart of the tzaddikim was very grieved upon seeing such a thing, and this is why our forefathers were barren — that the Holy One, blessed be He, desires their prayer, and sent them such an occurrence so that they might attain, from the lower level, the deficiency Above, and would set their spirit and soul [to consider] whence comes the aspect of barrenness — is it not all from the Shechinah, Knesset Yisrael?

And as I explained the verse "and Sarai was barren, she had no child" — at first glance this seems a doubled expression, for certainly since she was barren, it follows that she had no child. But the verse alludes to our way stated above, to indicate from where the cause of Sarah's barrenness derived; it concludes by saying "she had no child," meaning — [referring] to the Shechinah, Knesset Yisrael, for there is no tzaddik in the land who does good so as to be glorified by the success of his deeds. Therefore our mother Sarah was barren, because the Holy One, blessed be He, desired her and her prayer, to pray for the deficiency of children of the Shechinah.

And this is "And Yitzchak entreated Hashem opposite his wife" — meaning, our father Yitzchak deepened his request higher and higher, to pray on behalf of the Shechinah, which is "opposite his wife," for "she was barren" refers specifically to the Shechinah. This is why Rashi came to explain "opposite his wife" — for in truth their prayers were not equal: "this one stood in one corner and prayed, and that one stood in another corner and prayed" — meaning, to direct it as stated, our father Yitzchak deepened his request to pray on behalf of the Shechinah, which is barren — for this his heart grieved — while "that one stood in another corner," [praying] about matters of this world, to be given pregnancy.

But in truth the essential prayer must be for the deficiency Above, and once it is sweetened above, all good automatically follows. This is what Rashi alludes to in his pleasant words: "and Hashem was entreated of him" — "of him" and not "of her," "for the prayer of a tzaddik is not comparable, etc." Certainly it is not comparable, as explained — meaning, in the inwardness of their thought, the prayer of the tzaddik is not equal [to hers]: his intent and thought was to repair above, and he paid no attention at all to physical matters, whereas her intent was for physical matters; therefore "of him" and not "of her," as above.

Now let us return to the first matter. Our father Avraham, peace be upon him, when he came to pour out his speech before the Holy One, blessed be He, to be given seed, began his words truthfully, to pray for the deficiency Above — namely, he knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, would in the future give the Torah to His people Israel, and that all the worlds depend and stand [in suspense] until the sixth day, and if not, the world would return to tohu vavohu (chaos and void). Therefore his heart was troubled within him, and he trembled, and opened his words in supplication: "O Lord God, what will You give me, seeing that I go childless" — meaning, the whole giving of the Torah opens with "I go childless, and there is no one to receive it," and this flaw pierces through and reaches into all the worlds.

And if you should say, "but the one born in my house will inherit me — is it not Damesek Eliezer?" — and it is known, the words of our Sages, of blessed memory: why was he called Damesek? Because he drew and gave drink [doleh u-mashkeh] from the Torah of his master to others. So it would indeed work out well for me through my worthy disciple, for anyone who leaves a disciple in the world is as if he left a son in the world.

This is explained in the Alshich, for in truth the Torah from Avraham did not benefit his descendants with him. And the holy Alshich brings, in the name of Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, that "the souls that they made in Charan" were not transmitted to their descendants after them, but to themselves alone. Therefore Avraham our father, peace be upon him, prayed: since my Torah is not transmitted to their descendants after them, then what have I accomplished by my own perfection? His heart grieved, [saying] "Behold, to me You have given no [seed]" — specifically "You have not given" this, namely, that it be of great benefit to them — my Torah — and also to their descendants after them, generation after generation.

"And behold, one born in my house is to be my heir" — whose [benefit from] my Torah will avail only him alone, and not his descendants after him; thus "I go childless" — "I" specifically, regarding the giving of the Torah, as stated. "And what will become of our holy Torah which is destined to be given, since I have no seed?" And it emerges from these words that he was not at all concerned about the physical deficiency of not having a son, but rather his whole intent and desire was to pray for the deficiency Above and for the flaw that touches all the worlds that stand and depend upon "I" [anochi].

Corresponding to this, the verse alludes [to the fact] that since he deepened his request in his supplication regarding seed for the sake of our holy Torah, the verse says, pointing with a finger, as it were: "And behold, the word of Hashem came to him, saying." And the sense of the verse is that, since his whole intent in bringing forth speech before God was directed toward the higher side, speaking on behalf of the Torah, and not at all from his own need — this is "And behold, the word of Hashem came to him, saying" — meaning, his aim and desire in pouring out his speech was "the word of Hashem [came] to him," and not at all from his own need, as explained.

And may Hashem, in His mercies, show us wonders from His Torah. Amen.

Translation: translated by AI (anthropic/claude-sonnet-5)