

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shemot

The Midrash in Parshat Va'etchanan, the portion that begins with Moshe pleading with G-d to allow him to enter the land of Israel, says the Tanach uses thirteen different words to describe the art of praying to G-d. Moshe's prayer "va'etchanan" (I prayed) is a conjugated form of "tachanun," one of these thirteen different types of prayer. R' Shimshon Pincus (20th century) wrote an entire book to explain the different emotions, dynamics, and nuances of these thirteen types of prayer.

Three of the thirteen words for prayer, namely shav'ah, ze'aka, and ne'aka, appear in Parshat Shemot (2:23-24). There, the Torah describes the outcries (shav'ah), cries (ze'aka), and moans (ne'aka) of the Jewish people, which served as catalysts to move G-d to deliver them from their Egyptian oppressors. What are these three types of prayer, and why do they appropriately describe the Jews' prayers to G-d amidst their suffering in Egypt?

We can start to appreciate the prayers of the Jews in Egypt by comparing them to the prayers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob taught us. The forefathers instituted prayers for us to pray daily, both in joyous times and times of sadness. Therefore, the Torah never describes the forefathers' prayers in terms of crying and moaning. In contrast, shav'ah, ze'aka, and ne'aka were prayers born from the suffering and slavery in Egypt.

R' Pincus explains shav'ah is a hysterical cry from a person who desperately needs something. When one feels a pressing need for health, success in business, or growth in Torah and passionately cries to G-d, this serves as a significant reason for G-d to answer his prayer. He need not cry with tears in order for his prayer to be called shav'ah. Rather, shav'ah is an inner cry within a person who realizes he simply cannot achieve anything without Hashem's blessing and therefore views his prayer not as a luxury but as a need. If, for even a fleeting moment, he feels totally dependent on G-d to give him what he needs, then his prayer has achieved the quality of shav'ah.

How does the ze'aka cry differ from the shav'ah cry? Rather than a well-articulated, eloquent prayer, ze'aka is a simple cry to G-d without any words. The Zohar says this type of prayer is closest to Hashem, proving it from the fact Hashem says (3:9) he wants to take the Jewish people out of their suffering because their ze'aka has reached him. If a drowning person calls out to someone to throw them a life-jacket, we call that ze'aka. When a person lacks the peace of mind to articulate his thoughts, his emotions can pour forward and create a meaningful cry to Hashem.

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As opposed to the shav'ah and ne'aka cries of prayer, the ne'aka moan is man's natural reaction to disappointment, wishing things would be better. Every moan could be transformed into a form of prayer to G-d. Every little annoyance can be used as an opportunity to connect to G-d and simply ask him to help. For example, if someone fries onions and starts crying, he can think about the long and bitter exile of the Jewish people and express a wish for redemption.

If we look carefully at the story of Parshat Shemot, we see that the cries and moaning of the Jews (2:23-24) play a pivotal role in the parsha. The first two chapters of the parsha talk about the slavery in Egypt, the birth of Moshe, and Moshe's flight to Midian in order to escape Pharaoh. The next two chapters relate how Hashem revealed himself to Moshe and ordered him to go to Pharaoh to ask him to free the Jewish people. Finally, chapter 5 tells us Moshe and Aharon's first attempt to convince Pharaoh to free the Jews really backfires, as Pharaoh oppresses the Jews even more by forcing them to gather their own straw.

At the end of the second chapter, right before Hashem reveals himself to Moshe at the burning bush to tell him to leave Midian and come back to Egypt with his wife and kids, the Torah tells us how Hashem heard the cries and moans of the Jewish people. This is the first time in the narrative that the Torah mentions any prayers from the Jews in Egypt. This is the trigger for the redemption, which starts with Hashem appearing to Moshe at the burning bush and convincing him to go to Pharaoh.

While we learn from the forefathers in Sefer Bereishit to pray consistently three times a day, in Parshat Shemot the Torah teaches us that difficult situations often inspire especially sensitive and deep prayers. Whether experiencing an extremely difficult challenge or simply dealing with the small aggravations one inevitably encounters on a daily basis, one can use these voids as springboards to develop more meaningful prayer. The three languages of tefilla introduced to us in Parshat Shemot teach us even our daily tefila should not be monotonous. Like our ancestors in Egypt found new ways to pray to G-d, our prayers should grow and develop based on our unique and personal situations.

R' Pincus shows that although we no longer suffer from back-breaking labor like our ancestors in Egypt, we can learn from them how to pray in our own challenging life situations. By exploring the types of prayers of our ancestors in Egypt, we learn how to use these types of prayers in our everyday life.

Shabbat Shalom!

