

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Toldot

Unlike the way the it describes Abraham and Jacob, the Torah describes Isaac first and foremost as one who prays. We see this from the order of the narrative. The Torah's very first tidbit about Abraham is that he marries Sarah (Genesis 11:29). The Torah's (Genesis 25:27) very first description of Jacob paints him as a young boy who sits and studies. In relating Isaac's life story, the Torah first tells us his father circumcised him and later bound him on the altar in both instances Isaac remains passive. However, the very first *action of Isaac recorded in the Torah: going to the field to pray.*

As Eliezer returns to Canaan with Isaac's future wife Rebecca, the Torah says (Genesis 24:63) Isaac goes out to the field "to talk." The Talmud (Berachot 26b) interprets this as a reference to the afternoon prayer, which Isaac prayed "towards the evening." Kli Yakar (16th Century) assumes Isaac prayed for Eliezer to return successful from his journey with a suitable wife for him. In the very next episode involving Isaac, described in the opening of this week's portion, Isaac prays to G-d to grant his barren wife a child. The Talmud cites the first prayer of Isaac as the source for the afternoon prayer. It also teaches that Abraham instituted the morning prayer and Jacob established the evening prayer. Why does the Torah record Isaac's prayers as his very first actions, as opposed to the prayers of Abraham and Jacob, which the Torah describes only later in the story of their lives?

The Torah seems to be indicating that prayer plays a major role in Isaac's relationship with G-d and in the legacy he leaves for the Jewish people, an assertion supported by the Maharal's commentary on Avot (1:2). He explains the outstanding characteristics of each of the Patriarchs correspond to the three pillars of the world: kindness, service, and Torah. Abraham constantly ran to help other people and provided for them, whether in the form of physical sustenance via hospitality or in the form of spiritual sustenance by teaching them about G-d. This drive to give to others stemmed from his unique characteristic of loving-kindness.

By contrast, the more inwardly driven Isaac focused on preserving the achievements and beliefs of his father, imbuing him with a desire to serve G-d in the most perfect way. By performing the mitzvot called "mitzvot between man and G-d" one relates to G-d in the most direct way, and the Mishna calls this "service." Man serves G-d in the purest way by offering sacrifices to Him or, in the absence of the Temple, by praying to Him like Isaac did. Jacob followed and focused his efforts on combining the outward and inward tendencies of his grandfather and father (respectively) by studying Torah. Hence, the pillar of Torah listed in the Mishna refers to Jacob, as the Torah describes him as the one who "sits in tents."

Each of the Patriarchs served G-d in all ways, but each had an area in which they excelled especially. For Isaac, that area was prayer. If Isaac excelled in prayer more than the other two Patriarchs, there must have been a deeper dimension to his prayer that made it unique. What was the special quality of Isaac's afternoon prayer that did not exist in Abraham's morning prayer or Jacob's evening prayer?

Let us start analyze the very name of Isaac's afternoon prayer to discover its uniqueness. The morning prayer is called Shacharit, which refers to the earliest time of the day called "alot hashachar," when the rays of the sun begin to light up the sky. Similarly, Arvit means (the prayer) of the night. Seemingly, the appropriate name for the afternoon prayer would be a hebrew word referring to the afternoon. Perhaps we would have called it "lifnot erev," the words the Torah uses to describe the timing of Isaac's afternoon prayer, which mean "turning towards evening." Yet, the Talmud calls it "mincha," which means an offering. Why is the afternoon prayer not described by the section of the day in which we say it, like the other two prayers?



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The Vilna Gaon (18th Century) explains the name “mincha” alludes to the daily meal-offering brought following the afternoon Tamid animal sacrifice in Temple times. While the morning prayer corresponds to the morning Tamid sacrifice, and the night prayer corresponds to the burning of the remaining fats of the afternoon sacrifice, the rabbis did not choose to allude to these when naming the morning and evening prayers. By naming the afternoon prayer with a name that alludes to the afternoon Temple sacrifice, the rabbis underscore the greatness of Isaac’s prayer by comparing it to a sacrifice. Since deep prayer personifies Isaac’s essence, his prayer is compared to an offering on the altar.

But why do we refer to the afternoon prayer by the meal offering and not by the animal sacrifice (korban tamid), brought earlier in the afternoon before the meal-offering? The Talmud (Berachot 29b) says ideally one should pray the afternoon prayer in the later part of the afternoon, closer to when the sun sets, instead of during the early part of the afternoon. The Vilna Gaon explains the later part of the afternoon coincides with the time of the afternoon meal-offering, which they offered only within the last two and a half hours of the daytime. The rabbis therefore named the prayer ‘mincha’ to allude to the ideal time for one to pray the afternoon prayer.

What is so unique about praying in the late afternoon which sets it apart from the prayers of Shacharit and Arvit, whose names do not reflect the corresponding sacrifice? In the morning before one starts work and after dark when one typically has finished work, it is easier to focus and communicate with G-d. Even in the early part of the afternoon, it may be convenient to pray while one stops for a midday break. But in the late afternoon, when workers want to finish the activities of the day, it can be especially difficult to stop in order to talk to G-d. Isaac teaches us to pray “as it turns towards evening,” when we are tired and just want to go home. May we appreciate the legacy of Isaac and gather the strength to pray Mincha with greater meaning, as difficult as it may be to pray in the late afternoon.

Shabbat Shalom
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