

Vayera

In this week's Parsha, Parshat Vayera, there is detailed description of Abraham's prayer to G-d on behalf of the city of Sodom. He begged, reasoned and pleaded with G-d not to destroy Sodom, but his prayers were not headed and the city was destroyed. This is the first time the Torah openly describes the concept of prayer, and this story raises many questions. Perhaps looking at this story with greater detail can help one gain insight into what prayer is all about.

G-d come to Abraham in order to inform him of His plans to destroy Sodom due to the wicked ways of its inhabitants. Abraham pleads with G-d to save the city because of the righteous men who lived there. G-d responds that if there are any righteous men he would not destroy the city, but there were in fact no righteous men in the whole city. This conversation is very strange. Did Abraham think that G-d did not realize that there may be righteous people in the city and was therefore reminding him to check? Abraham knew that G-d is all-knowing. Did he think G-d did not realize it was unjust to kill the righteous because of the sins of the wicked? Abraham knew that G-d is all-understanding. Or maybe he thought that G-d knew that it was just but he was going to "change G-d's mind." Why would G-d change his mind? Is there a factor he did not know about or take into account? Is a G-d an emotional being who could be swayed by the pleading of his child? Furthermore, why did G-d come to Abraham about his plans in the first place? Was Abraham someone who G-d was required to consult with prior to making decisions? All these questions really point to one very essential question, which is, what is the purpose of prayer? In other words, why pray? G-d knows every situation and can determine the best outcome for each of them. What then, is the purpose of prayer?

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a Talmudic scholar of the 20th century, gives an insightful explanation of what prayer is about. He explains that prayer is not merely a list of request so G-d. Our Rabbis explain that the reason G-d put us on this world is to serve him, so we can get reward in the world to come. Prayer is one of the ways we serve G-d. When one prays he or she is showing that he or she believes in G-d's presence, and that he or she recognizes G-d's power to do anything. When our prayers are answered G-d's name is sanctified by showing that He responds to those who put their trust in Him. Sometimes, G-d's not answering our prayers will lead to a desecration of His name, as in the case of Sodom. Punishing the wicked is another way of sanctifying G-d's name, and not punishing could lead to a desecration of His name.

This understanding of prayer helps explain a puzzling statement in the Talmud. Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Yossi, How do we know that G-d Himself prays? The verse in Isaiah states "I will bring them to My holy mountain, and I will gladden them in My house of prayer." It does not say

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their house of prayer, rather My house of prayer. We can deduce from here that G-d prays. What does He pray? Rabbi Zutrah, the son of Tuvia, says that G-d's prayer consists of "It shall be My will that My mercy conquers my anger and that My mercy overcomes My other more stern attributes, and that I deal with My children with mercy and go beyond the letter of the law for them."

When working with the assumption that prayer is merely informing G-d of our needs, this passage is very confusing. Who is G-d praying to? He is the one who is in total control of everything, so why does he need to make requests of himself? However, with the realization that the purpose of prayer is much deeper, and that it is in fact an opportunity to proclaim belief that everything comes from G-d, then this statement in the Talmud is much more easily understood. G-d can proclaim that he is a merciful G-d, thus modelling for us how to pray. When we pray, we too must ask G-d to use his attribute of mercy, as did Abraham. When we show our belief that G-d is merciful and he uses this attribute of mercy towards us His name is sanctified. Similarly, G-d taught Moses the thirteen attributes of mercy because understanding them and taking them to heart is the key to G-d answering our prayers.

After the sin of the golden calf, G-d requests of Moses to leave him so he can destroy the Jews. Rashi explains that this was G-d's way of telling Moses that if he leaves G-d's presence and stops praying, that would allow G-d to destroy his people. This was a message to Moses to pray immediately on their behalf so that G-d would save them. This, too, indicates that prayer is much more than merely passing on our wish lists to G-d. He already knows it all. Rather prayer is a statement of one's total belief in G-d. After Moses made this declaration G-d was able to respond and rescind his decree against the Jewish people.

This conclusion brings with it serious ramifications. First of all, when one prays, one should know what he or she is saying, otherwise the prayer is not able to fully achieve its purpose. How can one make a declaration of his belief in G-d, if he does not have a basic understanding of what he is saying? Additionally, a person must remember the purpose of prayer. He must also keep in mind that G-d created everything, G-d controls everything, and the more one can accept this, the closer one becomes to G-d, and the more G-d will answer his prayers.

Shabbat Shalom
The JSN Team

