

מתוקים מדבש



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

REB GIL STUDENT

Bemachshvah Techilah

We are told that, in trying to deal with her pregnancy made difficult by pronounced fetal movement, Rivka went to inquire of G-d (Bereishis 25:22). Rashi explains that she went to the *Beis Midrash* of Shem, who was a prophet, to find out through his prophecy what the future held for her pregnancy. This is, indeed, the standard explanation adopted by many commentators. However, Ramban objects and explains that inquiring of G-d means praying to Him. Rather than going to a prophet to discover the future, Rivka went to pray that the future would turn out for the best. This action was certainly in tune with traditional Jewish attitudes. Instead of giving in to defeatism and accepting the future, Rivka utilized the ageless weapon of tears and cries to change the future. As the great warrior David HaMelech describes the Jewish attitude towards war, "Some with chariots and some with horses, but we – in the name of Hashem, our G-d – call out" (Tehillim 20:8).

However, the Netziv¹ asks the following question on Ramban's explanation. The verse says that Rivka "went" somewhere to inquire

of G-d. Where did she go? If she went to ask for Shem's assistance then it is understood where she went. But according to Ramban's explanation she must have gone somewhere to pray. This is unacceptable, the Netziv argues, because she would not have had to go anywhere merely to pray. Prayer is effective everywhere. Therefore, the Netziv concludes, Rashi and the others are correct that Rivka went to enquire of G-d via Shem's prophetic powers.

This question, though, is difficult for a number of reasons. Primary among them, the exact opposite of the Netziv's claim is reflected in *halacha*. The Gaonim rule that even if someone must pray alone rather than with a *minyan* he should still preferably pray by himself in a *shul*.² Thus, there is a place that is favored for prayer. This preference can be explained in more than one way. It can be suggested that people are able to concentrate more in a *shul* because its atmosphere is one of prayer and seriousness. When one is trained through practice to pray seriously in *shul*, this comes naturally by just being in a *shul*.

This starkly contrasts with prayer at home, where there are many distractions and where one is used to acting frivolously.

It can also be suggested that places with holiness are spiritually more conducive to effective prayer. For example, the *Beis HaMikdash* is the holiest of places and, therefore, prayer there is most effective. Just like repentance – *teshuvah* – is effective all year round but is particularly powerful in the days beginning with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur³, so too with prayer. It works everywhere but has greater strength in places of holiness.

Shuls are our miniature and portable versions of the *Beis HaMikdash* and, therefore, contain some of that holiness.⁴ Prayer in a *shul*, therefore, is prayer in a holy place which has more effect than prayer elsewhere. It is therefore quite understandable why Rivka would try to find a holy place for her most important prayers about her unborn children.

³ Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:6

⁴ See the Ran, Rif on Megillah 8a sv. uman deshari.

² Quoted in Rabbeinu Yonah, Rif on Berachos, 4a sv eimasai. Cf. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90:9.

¹ Ha'amek Davar, Bereishis 25:22

When Ya'akov, disguised as Eisav, presented himself to his father, Yitzchak identified him with the famous words, "Hakol kol Ya'akov vehayadayim yedei Eisav" (The voice is the voice of Ya'akov but the hands are the hands of Eisav – Bereishis 27:22). Rashi innovatively explains the phrase "the voice is the voice of Ya'akov" as meaning that the words spoken are identifiably from Ya'akov and not from Eisav. Ya'akov repeatedly used polite language when talking to Yitzchak. When Ya'akov first arrived he announced his presence by calling out "my father" and then waited for his father to respond (v. 18). He then said "Please arise and eat from my venison" (v. 19). These two examples of politeness in a short exchange were typical of Ya'akov, indeed so typical that he did not think to avoid it so as to hide his true identity. However, Eisav was never that polite. Thus, the "kol Ya'akov", the typical and proper Jewish trait, is politeness.

Politeness in speech is an attribute that everyone aspiring to greatness, or even to the level of an average Jew, must master. It is not merely a matter of formality or artificial standards but rather fulfills all three major types of mitzvos.

The Vilna Gaon divides the Torah into three types of

commandments – mitzvos between man and G-d, between man and man, and between man and himself.¹ An example of the first kind of mitzvah is the commandment to hear a shofar on Rosh Hashanah. This is solely between man and Hashem. A mitzvah in the second category is the prohibition against stealing, which would rob another of his possessions. A mitzvah in the third category is to repent, for teshuvah is the mending of one's soul and the repairing of one's spiritual status.

When you are polite to another person you show them respect. You elevate them and make them feel good about themselves. They feel that you respect them and therefore have more confidence in their own standing and your mutual relationship. A simple word like "please" can create a lasting impression on another human being.

However, even if there was no need to satisfy another person, this human being was created in G-d's image. Hashem endowed this person with life and, most importantly, placed some of His glory onto him. Showing respect to another person is not just displaying honor to him; it is also giving respect to his Creator, the One who placed His image onto this person. When we are polite to

another we are honoring not only him but also Him.

Furthermore, we should keep in mind Ramban's important explanation of the mitzvah to send away a mother bird before gathering its eggs. The reason for this mitzvah is not because the bird feels bad and we must pity it. Rather, Ramban explains², this mitzvah is a provision to keep us from becoming cruel people. We need to avoid activities that are cruel not because the activities are wrong per se, which they may or may not be, but because we are bidden to perfect our personalities and souls. This perfection cannot come if we engage in acts that are counter-productive. We must work to better our character traits and avoid activities that worsen them. Performing a cruel act is deleterious towards our ethical goals, above and beyond any moral issues that may exist.

Similarly, acting politely helps build our own characters. When we do not allow unthoughtfulness or even roughness of speech to enter our lives we are working on ourselves. A refined soul will not speak roughly and we must guide ourselves towards becoming such a polished individual.

¹ Commentary to Mishlei 2:9, Yishayah 1:2

² Commentary to Devarim 22:6

The part of davening called “Hodu” contains three sections. The first begins with “Hodu” and ends with “Uvinvi'ai Al Tareyu”. This is from Divrei HaYamim 1 16:8-22 and is the passage that was read with the daily morning sacrifice, the korban tamid shel shachar. The second section is from “Shiru LaHashem” through “VeHallel LaHashem”, Divrei HaYamim 1 16:23-37, and is the passage that was read with the daily afternoon sacrifice, the korban tamid shel bein ha'arbayim. The last section is from “Romimu” until “Gamal Alai” and is a collection of various verses describing and requesting G-d's mercy¹. Since these passages are related to the sacrificial order Nusach Sephard connects them to korbanos and recites them before Baruch She'amar. However, since they discuss praising G-d, Nusach

¹ This section is the first to be skipped if there is no time. See the Rama in Orach Chaim 52:1 and Aruch HaShulchan par. 7

Ashkenaz recites them after Baruch She'amar.

Like most of Pesukei Dezimra, the first section has two main themes. The first is the mandate to praise Hashem at every opportunity, loudly, clearly, and constantly. The second theme is the content of that praise. G-d is the master of history who has guided and saved the Jewish people. He has intervened in our individual lives and also in our nation's collective life, choosing us for distinction and, during our exile, saving us from extinction.

The first section begins with the verse “Hodu LaHashem” which tells us to praise G-d and to speak to everyone, Jew and Gentile, about His wondrous deeds. “Shiru Lo” Our songs should be about praising Him and our discussions about how He runs the world, rather than about mere mundane matters. “Hishallelu” We should make G-d's actions such a center of our lives that we become known as people who speak of G-d and the resource for those who search for Him. “Dirshu” We must

Sefasai Tiftach

search for Hashem in everything that happens, always looking for the Divine hand in our lives. “Zichru” Furthermore, we must always remember His hand in history. “Zera Yisrael” This is particularly relevant to us, the Jewish people, whom G-d chose and guided with care. “Hu Hashem” We are His people and, even though he is G-d to all mankind, we have a special relationship with Him. “Zichru Le'olam... Asher Karas... Vaya'amideha” Remember the source of our closeness to G-d, the covenant he made with our forefathers which included the eternal Torah. “Leimor... Bihyoschem... Lo Hini'ach... Al Tig'u” This covenant includes His protecting us. Even though we are a small people, and we wander throughout the nations, He has not and will not allow any one person to rule over all of us and, thereby, oppress the entire Jewish nation at once. Furthermore, the leaders who did oppress portions of our people were rebuked by G-d and punished.

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