



## FROM THE DESK OF RABBI MOSHE HAUER

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# Vayeira – Praying for Others

The famed kabbalist Rav Yitzchak Luria, the Arizal, taught that before praying one should formally accept upon him or herself the mitzvah of loving one's fellow man, *v'ahavta l'reiacha komocha*, as that is the gateway to entry into G-d's presence. This is remarkable, as prayer is the ultimate religious experience, *bein adam laMakom*, and yet it must be framed and preceded by the consummate interpersonal commitment, *bein adam l'chaveiro*. It was, however, concern for other people that framed the original *shacharit* prayer of Avraham that established the pattern of prayer for the future. When Avraham stood before Hashem in prayer (Bereishit 18:23-33), he was not motivated by the desire for spiritual communion or driven by personal need. His prayer was an expression of love and concern for the people of Sodom. What motivated that original Jewish prayer became the definitive framing for every such prayer.

This perspective can help us resolve an apparent difficulty that arises subsequently in our parsha. We read the story of Sarah being taken by Avimelech and of the plague of barrenness that struck his household as a result. This plague was relieved when Avraham – upon Sarah's release – prayed on their behalf (Bereishis 20:17). The Talmud (BT Bava Kamma 92a) notes that immediately

following this story we are told that G-d remembered Sarah and blessed her with a child. This, explains the Talmud, was because Avraham had prayed for another, even though he had the very same need. One who demonstrates that kind of selflessness will indeed be answered first. Evidently prayer for others – in the spirit of Avraham's prayer for Sodom – is more effective and virtuous than prayer for oneself.

The difficulty rises from the following section (Bereishis 21:17), where we read about Yishmael dying of thirst in the desert. Hagar cannot bear what her son is going through, and so she places him beneath the shelter of a bush and moves some distance away where she raises her voice and weeps. G-d then hears the voice of the child and calls out to Hagar, saying – “Do not fear, for G-d has heard the voice of the child...”. Rashi notes that it was the child's cries who were heard, not those of his mother, “for the prayer of the ill person himself is more powerful than that of the prayers of others on his behalf.”

These two neighboring observations appear to be in conflict. In the first case Avraham's prayer is given extra impact because it is for others, whereas in the latter case, Yishmael's prayer is heard because it is for himself. How do we reconcile these two conflicting sources?

The difference is clear. In the first case, Avraham was not forced to pray for Avimelech; he chose to. Avimelech had apologized to him and had made good to him. He held nothing against him; in fact, he wanted him to thrive. It was Avraham of his own accord who saw their suffering and wanted to do his part to ameliorate it. There is nothing more powerful to G-d, no prayer more welcome, than a prayer that is an expression of our genuine care for each other. Hagar's prayer, on the other hand, was not for her child. Hagar was upset by his suffering, but she was out to relieve her own pain over her son's suffering, not his - witness the fact that she distanced herself from him even as he was suffering and dying. If her concern was truly his pain, she would have stood by him in his suffering. Clearly, her concern was for her own share of her child's pain. She moved to where she would not have to observe, not have to see and to share the depth of his pain.

Hagar averted her eyes from the suffering of her own son. Avraham chose to focus on the suffering of strangers. Avraham defines our legacy, our path in life. It was Avraham's prayer for Sodom that established the format of prayer for the Jewish people, framed by caring for each other.

No matter how long the current war drags on, we will not avert our eyes from the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Israel. May Hashem hear our heartfelt prayers and bring an end to the suffering of *acheinu kol beit Yisrael*. ■



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