



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY JULY 28, 2009 / ז' אב תשס"ט

PARSHA:

VA'ESCHANAN / ואתחנן

SERMON TITLE:

A PRAYER IN WRITING

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

VA'ESCHANAN

A PRAYER IN WRITING

When President Obama visited the Western Wall last year, he left a note in which he asked for G-d's blessing.

As you know, the note mysteriously wound up in the hands of a reporter, who broadcast the note to the public.

An investigation immediately ensued to determine how the note made its way to the papers. Some said that a yeshivah student pulled the paper out from between the stones of the Kotel. Others countered that Democratic Party operatives did it.

But regardless of who did it and why, let's talk about the custom itself. What is the source of the custom to write notes and push them between the stones of the Wall? Is it not enough to visit the Kotel, stand close to it and verbally express what you need? Why do you need to write it?

In Jewish prayer, there are several levels: thought, speech and action.

There is a concept of saying a prayer in your head – thinking it. In cases where verbal prayer is not physically possible for whatever reason, then this mental prayer is legitimate, as the verse states, "Say it in your hearts"—meaning that there exists such a thing as saying it in the heart.

For example, it's known that when a person immerses in a mikvah, a special time to ask G-d for his needs is when he is beneath the surface.

Whenever I tell this to people, I add two disclaimers: One, be sure that your list is short because otherwise, we'll have to fish you out of the water and two, don't try to verbalize your prayer while underwater—unless you're really thirsty...

The next level of prayer is verbal prayer—one must orally express his requests.

We learn this from the Torah portion of the week. In our Parshah, we first read the Jewish People's most famous prayer: "Shma Yisroel, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echod"—"Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One."

The first word of this important prayer, "Shma," teaches us that one needs to verbally say the prayer. The Gemara (Tractate Brachos 15a) tells us, "One who recites the Shma must be heard by his own ears, as the verse states, 'Hear...'"

Now we may ask: Why indeed is it so important to verbally speak the prayers? What really is so bad about praying within one's heart?

In the beginning of Parshas Vaeschanan, we read Moshe Rabbeinu's famous prayer in which he asks of G-d to be permitted to enter the Holy Land. So Moshe Rabbeinu tells us: "And I pleaded to G-d at that time, saying..."—meaning that he uttered his prayer with his mouth. The Torah commentator Or HaChayim explains that the reason for this was so that "his prayer would be explicit and not bearing an improper expression." This means that as long as a person does not express his request verbally, it's not always clear to him what he truly wants, what he needs. It's still foggy. That's why his request might be improperly expressed. G-d very much wants to fulfill your request, but He sees that you are still not sure what you exactly want. That's why the Torah says that you need to verbally state your prayer—because then you know clearly what you want.

But even though you need to say your prayer verbally, Jewish law establishes that the Amidah prayer needs to be said silently. We learn this from the prayer of Chana in the Book of Shmuel, where it states, "Only her lips were moving and her voice was not heard." Now, why it is so important to specifically pray quietly? Answering this, the halachah states that it is "in order to not embarrass sinners who confess their sins in prayer."

The halachah is concerned for those confessing their sins in prayer: that the person standing next to them might hear what he or she did and immediately go tell "the chevra."

But it's more than that. Let's say someone comes to shul and wants to thank G-d for a great business year. He made lots of money—but he doesn't want anyone to know it (especially the rabbi, of course), because then they'll immediately start asking for donations and "suck the life out of him". For this reason, the Sages established the silent Amidah.

But there is an even higher level: written prayer, as in the notes placed in the Kotel.

Why indeed do we write notes? Is it not enough to stand and verbally ask for what you need? Why must it be written?

Perhaps we can simply explain that since you're not going to be at the Kotel all the time but you want your prayer there to be repeated again and again, you therefore put your prayer in writing and leave it there, thus keeping your request there constantly, just like a person puts the family's portrait on his office desk to constantly remind himself of his or her family.

This week, somebody asked me: if writing prayers at the Kotel is so important, then why don't synagogues have walls replicating the Kotel where everyone can come and stuff their prayers into its cracks? I told him that if we did that, people would start relying on their written notes and not feel a need to come to shul anymore—and I would be left without a job.

But it's more than that. In the Haftarah of the Torah Portion of Vayigash, we read how G-d tells the Prophet Yechezkel after the Destruction of the First Temple to take two pieces of wood and write the name "Yehudah" on one and the name "Ephraim" on the other—and to hold them in one hand as if they were one piece.

When the Jews would ask him, "What are these to you?" he would reply with G-d's prophecy that the wooden pieces symbolize the two kingdoms of Israel.

During biblical times, the Land of Israel was split into two kingdoms for about 250 years; the Kingdom of Israel which was connected with Ephraim, and the Kingdom of Yehudah which ruled Jerusalem. There was no great love between these two kingdoms—and on this did G-d grant Yechezkel the prophecy that the day would come when these two kingdoms would become one and the nation would be unified as one.

Why did G-d tell him to write it on two pieces of wood? Isn't it enough that G-d promises him that one day this will happen? The Rebbe explains that when one writes something, it gives it a certain level of reality—in this case, it was the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Chassidim observe the same custom when they visit the Ohel (Rebbe's resting place) to request a blessing—we write our prayer on a slip of paper and then leave it there.

We follow the lead of the Rebbe himself. All through the years, the Rebbe would bring all the letters that had been sent to him asking for blessings, to the resting place of his father-in-law, the previous Rebbe, where he would read them and leave them there.

But before he'd leave them there, he would do something very responsible: he'd rip up the letters. Why? Maybe to prevent what happened to Obama at the Kotel.

Additionally, the torn-up scraps of letters would periodically be incinerated for the same reason. The Rebbe once referred to this burning in a talk, saying that the requests "went up in flame to Heaven."

So anybody who wants to send a letter to the Ohel, I'll be happy to take their letter to the Ohel with me at the first possible opportunity—to recite it there, rip it up there and leave it there at the Rebbe's resting place.

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