



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

Praise & Prayer

Prayer plays an important role in Yaakov's life.

He prayed when he left home as a lonely young man, full of apprehension. He prayed on his way home twenty years later, still fearing his brother's wrath.

From his prayer on this occasion is derived a basic liturgical principle, that one should praise God before proceeding to pray to Him.

This explains why the Amida, central to each of the daily services, opens with blessings of praise before continuing with petitions.

In Yaakov's case, the praise first acknowledged God's mercies and then came to the point: "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Eisav" (B'reishit 32:9-13).

But there is a problem with the principle of "praise, then pray", since God is not likely to be susceptible to flattery, nor can we imagine Him waiting for us to praise Him before deciding whether to respond to our petitions. He can hardly be a God who can be bought.

Telling Him how great He is will, in itself, not influence His answer to our prayer. And yet we still echo Yaakov and praise Him first.

Yaakov himself provides the key, in one simple word, KATONTI - "I am not worthy of all Your mercies" (B'reishit 32:11). So much is summed up in this one word.

What do we do when we pray? Two things, both suggested by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his celebrated essay, "Two Types of Prayer".

The first is amazement at God's world, awe at being in the Divine presence. In the light of God's greatness we are overtaken by humility. We say KATONTI. In the scheme of things we are so small. How can we have a claim on God? Our praise is OUR recognition that He is so great and we are so small.

But then we pray. And "genuine prayer", says Heschel, "is an event in which man surpasses himself. Man hardly comprehends what is coming to pass... What is happening is not always brought about by the power of man."

Despite our smallness we are lifted up beyond ourselves to be able to speak to God and to find a place in the Divine plan.

God's answer to our petition may be "no", a "no" that is said by His silence:

we have sought too much, or the wrong thing.

It may also be "yes", the "yes" that comes when we turn back to our earthly concerns and find ourselves blessed and guided on the right path.

Who Came to the Funeral

When Devora, Rivka's nurse, died, she was buried under an oak that was called ALON BACHUT, "the oak of weeping" (B'reishit 35:8).

We know that Rivka had been accompanied by Devora when she went to marry Yitzchak (24:59).

Rashi says that it was the nurse whom Rivka sent to bring Yaakov home after Eisav's anger died down (27:45), but she died en route. If it is the same Devora throughout the story, she must have been very old when she died.

Why her burial place was ALON BACHUT is explained by Ramban on the basis that Rivka herself had died and the weeping associated with the oak tree was for Rivka. But why is Rivka's death and funeral not reported more fully?

Perhaps because it was unlikely that the family would have attended her burial. Yitzchak was old and unable to

see; Yaakov was away from home; and Eisav was impatient with religion (the sages say that his quarrel with Yaakov began on the day of Avraham's funeral, when Eisav resented giving up his hunting for the sake of a funeral). So Rivka's funeral must have been very modest. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH