

Parshat Va-etchanan
Why Do You Pray?
Avi Mitzner

Deuteronomy 3:23-26

<p>I pleaded with God at that time, saying, "O lord God, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon." But God was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. God said to me, "Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter again!</p>	<p>וְאֶתְחַנֵּן אֶל־יְהוָה בְּעֵת הַהוּא לֵאמֹר : אֲדַגֵּי יְהוָה אַתָּה הַחֲלוּתָ לְהַרְאוֹת אֶת־ עַבְדְּךָ אֶת־גְּדֻלָּתְךָ וְאֶת־יְדֹתַי הַחֲזָקָה אֲשֶׁר מִי־אֵל בַּשָּׁמַיִם וּבָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂהָ כְּמַעֲשֵׂיךָ וְכַגְּבוּרַתְךָ : אֶעֱבְרָה־נָא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן הַהַר הַטּוֹב הַזֶּה וְהַלְבָּנוֹן : וַיִּתְעַבֵּר יְהוָה בִּי לְמַעַנְכֶם וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֵלַי וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלַי רַב־לָךְ אֶל־תּוֹסֵף דַּבֵּר אֵלַי עוֹד בַּדְּבָר הַזֶּה :</p>
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Midrash Aggaddah, Deuteronomy 3:23:13

Va-etchanan. Moshe prayed 515 times on this matter, according to the numeric value of va-etchanan. Even still, God did not accept his prayers.

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 10a

Hezekiah continued: I have received a tradition from the house of my father's father, from King David, the founding father of the dynasty of kings of Judea: **Even if a sharp sword rests upon a person's neck, he should not prevent himself from praying for mercy.** One may still hold out hope that his prayers will be answered, as was David himself when he saw the Angel of Destruction, but nonetheless prayed for mercy and his prayers were answered.

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 32b

Rabbi Elazar said: This story proves that **prayer is greater than good deeds** without prayer (*Tosafot*), as **there was none greater in the performance of good deeds than Moses our teacher; nevertheless, his request was granted**, albeit in a limited manner, in his request to enter Eretz Yisrael, **only through prayer**, when God permitted him to climb the mountain and look out over the land. **As, initially it is stated: "Speak no more to Me," juxtaposed to which is: "Go up to the summit of the mountain."**

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "Celebrating Life" pg.123

Every affirmation is also a denial. Every commitment is also a gesture of self-restraint. Without the strength to say 'No', we lack the ability to say 'Yes'. When two people pledge themselves to one another in marriage, they are saying 'No' to adultery. When two friends speak in confidence, they are tacitly agreeing not to share their remarks with others. Without restraint there can be no trust. Our 'Yes' implies a 'No'.



Something of the kind applies to every serious achievement unless we can say 'No' to distractions, we will never finish the book, or run the marathon, or fix the leaking tap, or take the time we promised to spend with our children. Something always crops up to turn our mind to other things.

One of the siren calls of our culture is 'having it all'. Behind it lies the idea that we can do, or be, or have everything - if not all at once, then at least serially. There are no hard choices, no irreconcilable conflicts, no genuine dilemmas. There is no 'Yes' to something that entails a definite 'No' to something else.

This is the ethics of fantasy. Fortunately, the real world regularly reminds us that there are things that need genuine commitment, even courage. To be a faithful marriage partner, a good parent, a true friend, a decent employer or employee, involves the kind of loyalty that says 'No' to a hundred temptations. Out of such 'No'-saying, moral strength is forged.

I will never forget the woman I met who spent her life curing teenagers of drug addiction. What, I asked her, did she do that made the difference to their lives? She replied, 'I'm probably the first person they've met who cared enough about them to say "No".'

As she to them, so God to us.

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, Olat Reiyah, Essays on Prayer

Prayer must be clean of any notion of altering will or affecting response in G-d's decree, a false conception in relation to Divinity which brings about the destruction of the ways of human perfection. In contrast, the actual value of prayer and the surety of its impact, within the realm of its terms, even aside from the attainment of that which is sought and the elevation and clarification of the soul through prayer, is a great cornerstone in the completion of humanity. Therefore, all who pray must understand that prayer is a wondrous statute which the Holy One, blessed be He, engraved in His world for the completion of His works in all manners of perfection, and in particular to accomplish of their moral completion which grows out of it. Prayer does not lie within the bounds of those things embedded in His decrees, G-d forbid (See Hilchot Teshuva 5:1-2). It is therefore fitting that every prayer be preceded by the telling of praise, to teach that it is right to give great praise over the fixing of the statute of prayer not according to that which is understandable, so to speak, as the nature of His divinity.

And the proof from Moshe is very important. He, in his great understanding, would certainly never come to think that prayer could bring about any change in will or responsiveness in the decree of G-d. Nevertheless, his prayer was preceded by abundant praise, in order to reveal the truth of the proper consciousness fit to be impressed on the heart through prayer. All the more so we, 'unsteady man,' (See Tehillim 116:11) who might go astray after false ideas, should begin with that which elevates the soul and sets it on right conceptions.

