

Rosh Hashana Drush 5767 – Day 2: “This Year – Pray for Others”:

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A woman was at work when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left her work and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication for her daughter. When returning to her car she found that she had locked her keys in the car. She was in a hurry to get home to her sick daughter. She didn't know what to do, so she called her home and told the baby sitter what had happened and that she did not know what to do. The baby sitter told her that her daughter was getting worse. She said, "You might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door." The woman looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been thrown down on the ground, possibly by someone else who at some time or other had locked their keys in their car. Then she looked at the hanger and said, "I don't know how to use this." So she bowed her head and asked God to send her some help. Within five minutes an old rusty car pulled up, with a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head. The woman thought, "This is what you sent to help me?" But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful. The man got out of his car and asked her if he could help. She said, "Yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?" He said, "Sure." He walked over to the car, and in less than one minute the car was opened. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, "Thank you so much! You are a very nice man." The man replied, "Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour." The woman hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, "Oh. Thank you God! You even sent me a Professional!"

We stand here on the second day of Rosh Hashana and we might wonder to ourselves: “Why are we doing this all over again? I prayed yesterday for what I needed – what should I do today?” In fact, today’s service is nearly a carbon copy of yesterday’s service. Indeed, it is an unfortunate reality nowadays, that for this very reason, there are those who do not attend the second day of services. They feel that there is nothing new for the second day.

[It is only because the first day of Rosh Hashana came out this year on a Shabbos, will we be blowing the Shofar today, which is new. But that is only incidental. Generally, the two days are carbon copies of each other.]

As was mentioned yesterday, all the Torah and Haftorah readings deal with prayer:

1. First day Torah reading is Yishmael praying to G-d to save his life
2. Haftorah for first day is Chana praying for a Child.
3. Second Day Haftorah is “Rachel crying for her children.”

The first day Torah reading has another one if you look at Rashi, you will find it: Yesterday we read of the miraculous birth of Isaac. At the ripe old age of 90, long after the barren Sarah had despaired of ever bearing a child, we read in Genesis 21:1: "Va'Hashem

pah'kad et Sarah," and G-d remembered Sarah. Sarah becomes pregnant, gives birth to a son to Abraham in his old age, and Abraham calls the child, Isaac.

Our rabbis are perplexed. After all the years of childlessness, after all the years of trying to bear a child, after the many hours, days and years of prayer, suddenly Sarah is remembered. Why now? The reason that Sarah was remembered at this point of her life, was due to a very special prayer that Abraham offered, a prayer that was more efficacious than any of the numerous prayers that Abraham had previously offered.

What was that special prayer? Instead of praying for Sarah, Abraham offered a prayer for others who had similar problems. In Genesis 20:17 we learn that Abraham prayed for Avimelech, King of Gerar, his wife and his maidservants, who were unable to bear children after G-d had punished Avimelech for abducting Sarah.

Abraham desperately wanted a child from Sarah. He prayed and gave charity and did many acts of chessed (loving-kindness). He welcomed guests from near and far, and even circumcised himself at the advanced age of 99, but nothing seemed to help. And yet, when he prayed for Avimelech and his family, whose family was suffering from the inability to have children, not only was his prayer for Avimelech and his household answered, but Sarah became pregnant as well.

From this episode, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, foremost commentator on the Bible) shares with us the following fundamental principle as expressed in the Talmud Baba Kama 91a: "Whoever seeks mercy by praying for his fellow man, and he himself [i.e. the one praying] needs that very same thing for which he is paying on behalf of his friend, he [i.e. the one praying] is answered first.

I know that a lot of us pray for other people, but quite often it is for our friends, which to a great extent is extension of ourselves, because we feel needy when those that we love are in need.

However, by Abraham, that was not the case.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim of P'sish'cha (1765-1827, Chassidic leader and well known teacher in Poland), notes that logically Abraham should not have prayed for Avimelech, since it was against Abraham's own best interest. If Avimelech were left infertile, then the world would have known for certain that the child that Sarah bore was indeed fathered by Abraham. But if Avimelech could bear children, then the skeptics would likely exclaim that Sarah lived for decades with Abraham and had no children. She spends one night with Avimelech, and suddenly she's pregnant! Despite this threat, Abraham did not hesitate, and prayed for Avimelech. While it's true that the Midrash says that baby Isaac emerged looking like the spitting image of his father Abraham so that no one would be able to question his paternity, there would always be doubters and skeptics who would say otherwise.

Moreover, Avimelech was Abraham's past rival in terms of who would hold ultimate power and control over the Holy Land. That is why he abducted Sarah into his home – he wanted to control Abraham's family, thereby legitimizing his power over the Holy Land. Only because of G-d's kindness, which punished the entire family of Avimelech, by closing all their physical orifices, was Avimelech compelled to release Sarah and allow Abraham to leave unharmed.

Since the Talmud chose specifically this case as proof of the principle, we see that the most powerful prayers, that will ultimately help us when all else fails, are those prayers that we say for strangers – or even enemies – not those said for ourselves and our friends.

In addition, the Talmud begins this principle by using the word "Kol" to tell you that this rule applies to ALL people – not just people of Avraham's caliber. The Talmud is saying that you need not be as righteous as Abraham. Whoever employs this strategy can expect to have success

in their personal life.

How does this formula work? The Mabit, in his work “Bais Elokim” [Sha’ar Tefila 12] explains how this works: When a person prays for his own needs, his intentions could be selfish, and not altruistic. However, when you pray for others, even though you need the same thing, you are not praying with an ulterior motive – you are making a statement recognizing that no other being can help other people but Hashem.

Let me explain these holy words. On Rosh Hashana we are commemorating the creation of mankind. Mankind includes me, but more importantly it includes all of mankind – each and every one of the 6 billion people who are alive today and everyone else who ever lived. G-d created mankind to give them the ultimate pleasure that can be achieved, which is having a relationship with G-d and enjoying that relationship through the experiences that we have in this world which G-d designs and orchestrates.

A key component in this pleasurable relationship is communication. Not just functional communication, but deeply spoken words that expresses one’s truest feelings about oneself and the object of your relationship. But it isn’t so easy, as evidenced by this anecdote:

A little girl and a little boy were at day care one day.

The girl approaches the boy and says, "Hey Stevie, wanna play house?"

He says, "Sure! What do you want me to do?"

The girl replies, "I want you to communicate."

He says to her, "that word is too big. I have no idea what it means."

The little girl smirks and says, "Perfect. You can be the husband."

Prayers, by virtue of its communicative aspects, make it a potentially powerful tool, but it may not come naturally to us. Quite often our whole relationship is utilitarian – what can I get out of this relationship? And that may be all that we ever communicate. Unfortunately, many of us think the same way about our relationship with G-d. We come to G-d with our shopping lists of requests. As long as the heavenly ATM provides for us, we are happy. When it malfunctions, we curse, kick the machine, and go somewhere else.

Of course, there are many of us who love G-d, and are asking for things, as we said yesterday, in order to serve G-d better. But how can we be sure that we aren’t fooling ourselves? There is one litmus test:

Love people who G-d loves – even though you will get nothing in return – and especially if it may not be beneficial or even inimical to you. How can you show that to G-d, and, most importantly, to yourself? There are many ways of showing this, but the simplest way is to pray for a total stranger for something that you need as well. That proves to yourself that your relationship with G-d is altruistic. It proves that all you seek from G-d, within the context of your relationship with Him, is his love – and you are committed to do the things which He deems important for the world. That is selfless devotion. Even though you need something specific, and you feel the pain of not having it, shift your focus to someone else with the same problem. Why

the same problem and not a different one? Since it is the same problem as yours, you know what it feels like – and more importantly, you can relate to that stranger’s pain. Therefore, the prayer will be heartfelt and meaningful.

Abraham had many self serving reasons to see Avimelech and his family not recover from his sickness. However, his overriding concern was that the ancient Philistines are also part of G-d’s world. G-d cares about them. They are human beings in his image. And only good things can result by praying for them. And indeed that is what happened. Years later, Avimelech runs after Abraham to make a treaty with him, acknowledges how G-d is with him, and he is even able to hear the rebuke that Avraham gives him about the wells that they stole. That is how yesterday’s Torah reading ended: Abraham is recognized by the most powerful kings that He is blessed by G-d – this is true Kiddush Hashem.

Praying to G-d only for others is the greatest proof that we love G-d and the best way to communicate that love to Him. It is the strongest way to feel the pain that G-d has, when ever His children are not worthy to be the recipients of G-d’s beneficence. G-d wants to give us unlimited pleasure, but sometimes our actions create a block that does not enable us to receive those blessings. When mankind is undeserving of G-d’s blessings, this causes G-d great pain. If you really love G-d, it will cause you great pain as well. Even though you do not personally know who the person is, but you know it is one of G-d’s children – that is reason enough for you to pray.

And when you are able to genuinely express your truest and deepest feelings to G-d, that makes your relationship closer to G-d and makes you worthy of receiving the love that G-d wants to shower down upon you. To the point where you will get answered first – even though you have not asked for anything.

There is a true told [“Touched by a Story 3, pg. 33] about a Reuven and Leah Wolberg. They had been childless for 14 years. They tried everything in an effort to have children. They were unsuccessful. One day a friend of Reuven suggested that he go to a certain Chassidische Rebbe to get a blessing. Reuven was not the “Rebbe type”, but he reluctantly decided to give it a chance.

The day came and Reuven had his appointment with the Rebbe. Inside the room, the Rebbe was looking down and his eyes were closed; he seemed to be praying or at least deep in thought. After a moment, he opened his eyes and greeted Reuven warmly. Reuven told the Rebbe of the terrible heartache he and his wife were experiencing. He described how they dreaded attending Simchas for fear that someone might ask them which schools their children attended. Finally, Reuven, who had been skeptical at first, found himself crying and begging the Rebbe for a blessing.

The Rebbe looked into Reuven’s eyes and waited for him to compose himself. He pulled the young man closer, held out his hand to him, and looked deeply into his eyes. Reuven felt as if the Rebbe could actually see his broken heart. Finally the Rebbe spoke.

“I know exactly how you feel. My son Tzvi Yosef and my daughter-in-law have been married for nearly 15 years. They describe the way they feel precisely as you do. They too anxiously

hope, wait, and anticipate having a child of their very own. They have cried endlessly and have begged for my blessing. But I never had an answer for them...until now. I just thought of a wonderful idea. There is a tradition we have- One who prays on behalf of another, his prayer is answered first.” The Rebbe then looked at Reuven and proposed, “What if you would pray on their behalf and they would pray for you?”

Reuven was numb. He had expected some miracle potion and mystical esoteric blessing. But this was different. It was so touchingly human. The Rebbe also had Tzaros, but he knew that sometimes the prayer of a simple Jew who overcomes his or her own selfish needs and pleads on someone else’s behalf is something that can break down any barrier...even when the gates of heaven are sealed shut.

Miraculously, within a year the Rebbe attended two Simchas as Reuven and the Rebbe’s son each celebrated the birth of a firstborn son!

This concept is not merely limited to praying for others, it applies equally when it comes to doing for and helping others, as the following story shows:

The popular contemporary author and Maggid (traveling speaker), Rabbi Paysach Krohn, wrote an unusually poignant article in an issue of Kol, the Orthodox Caucus's newsletter that was devoted to the issue of singles, about the thousands of unmarried people who have difficulty finding a shidduch (mate). In his article, Rabbi Krohn strongly encourages parents who already have married children to try to feel the pain of others who still have unmarried children. He proceeds to tell the story of a particular parent who was having a very difficult time finding a shidduch for his daughter. After many failed dates, the father, at wits end, felt thoroughly frustrated. He wondered if G-d was trying to tell him something. In response, he proceeded to make a list of every single man and woman that he could think of, and every time he made a call on behalf of his daughter, he made a call on behalf of someone else on the list. Within five weeks his daughter met the person she eventually married. Rabbi Krohn notes that he is able to confirm that every word of this story is true, since he was that father. He felt that G-d was telling him that he should not be so focused on himself and his daughter, and become more sensitive to the needs of others. If he would become more caring, he was certain that G-d would help.

So why are we here on the second day of Rosh Hashana – what can we accomplish today that we have not accomplished yesterday? The Rabbis tell us that the nature of the two days of Rosh Hashana is totally different. The first day of Rosh Hashanah is the day of individual judgment for each person. Each of us stands on his own in terms of his relationship with G-d. Many of us may think that we have a purely altruistic relationship with G-d, and we hope that G-d agrees with our analysis. Therefore, we leave the synagogue on the first day, hopeful but not confident.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah G-d judges every congregation as a whole unit, the Jewish people as a whole unit, and the entire world as a whole unit. No individual can exclude himself from the group. Moreover, each individual is truly defined as an individual based on how he relates to the group – i.e. all of G-d’s children. Today, we define ourselves in a more global context as to where we stand as Westmount Shul members, Jews, and human beings. If we can succeed in getting beyond our personal needs, as noble as they may be, and focus on the rest of G-d’s world, feeling the pain He feels, and hoping what he Hopes for – we can leave the synagogue knowing that we love Hashem, and G-d will deal with us in a loving way.

Yesterday, we asked G-d to listen to our personal prayers about ourselves. Today we will petition for G-d on behalf of others. That is the theme of the second day of Rosh Hashanah:

“IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT ME.” This will retroactively tell us a lot about yesterday’s personal prayers as well. Only after today’s prayers will we truly know that yesterday when we asked for our own health, our children’s happiness, our parents’ health – it was not for narcissistic needs, but for G-d’s pleasure that He can bestow kindness to mankind. My health, my wealth, my family are really for you. Now we understand the message of today’s Torah reading – the only one that is not directly involved with prayer – the binding of Isaac. Where does the story fit in to our theme of prayer?

One question about the binding of Isaac that is so difficult to answer is: how was Abraham able to sacrifice his only child who he loved more than himself? We know that Abraham was the quintessential man of kindness – certainly he would only want the best for his child?

The answer is found in understanding where Isaac came from. Abraham and Sarah were the most righteous people. They were the kindest people. They founded the Jewish religion and spread the concept of ethical monotheism. Notwithstanding all those merits, they are not blessed with a child. Abraham saves Lot’s life in battle, he circumcises himself. Sarah allows Hagar to marry Abraham, They both do so many Mitzvos – but they can not seem to get the one thing they want most – a child. It seems that nothing this couple does will bring them a child. Nothing!

Then one fine day he prays that his enemy and his enemy’s family should all be able to conceive. It was one prayer - after so many thousands of unsuccessful tear drenched prayers. THAT prayer did the trick. Why? Because no matter how kind a person can be, that person always gets a little pleasure knowing that they are being kind. It is not 100% sincere. Why? Because we are human, and human behavior is predicated on the pleasure it gives us. There is always something in it for us. The old WIFM principle often drives us to do good deeds, because it is ultimately in our best interests. This ONE prayer left no doubt to G-d, and more importantly to Abraham himself that his relationship with G-d and humanity was pure. IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT ME. Abraham has emulated his Creator in the most amazing way – as everything G-d does is for us – He doesn’t do it for himself. This was Abraham’s greatest prayer – and that infinite, untainted love that he displayed with it, evoked G-d’s miraculous response in the form of Isaac.

Isaac grew up knowing that he was a miracle baby, and his parents knew that they were raising this child for G-d and humanity and not only for their own personal pleasure. They realized that G-d blessed them to be Isaac’s trustees in life, and they would raise him as G-d saw fit. Therefore, if G-d wants Isaac to be brought on the altar, and Isaac is agreeable, Abraham dutifully agrees because he knows that Isaac was not his personal gift, but mankind’s’ gift from G-d that must now be returned.

We may not be on Abraham’s level, but perhaps we can be inspired by the following story: the Otzer HaTorah, published by Artsroll, cites the story of a young man who was trying to start a diamond business. The aspiring entrepreneur went about asking his friends and relatives for leads to potential customers. While many of his friends and relatives wished him well, most were reluctant to provide the names of their own customers. Finally he went to Reb Moshe Mordechai Heschel, who had not yet become the Kopitchnitzer Rebbe, and was at that time still a diamond dealer. Rav Moshe immediately gave the man his full list of buyers and sellers. Astonished, the young man asked him which names he should try? Reb Moshe Mordechai Heschel told him that he should try all of them, and any of them! "But I don't want to take any business away from

you!" the young man exclaimed. Rav Moshe replied with a smile, "Whatever was inscribed in heaven as destined for me, you cannot take away. Our paranasah (livelihood) is in the hands of the Al-mighty, and He has enough for both of us!" Yes, the Rebbe understood that it's NOT ALL ABOUT ME!!

There is an organization in New York called "Kol Hamispalel" that does this very thing. You call them up and tell them your Hebrew name and what your problem is. There are a number of categories that you can ask help for: infertility, expecting mothers wanting an easy labor/healthy children, singles wishing to marry, sickness, success in school, marriage issues, success in raising children, court cases, making a living, etc. They call you back with another person's name with your same problem. The service is free and confidential. It has been very successful. The program is only a few years old and has helped so many people. There are over 40 couples who have had children or are expecting, in situations where doctors said they could not have children. This program is a beautiful melding of the Jewish people. Sefardim praying for Ashkenazim, Chassidim praying for modern Orthodox Jews, religious Jews praying for their non-religious brothers and sisters – and vice versa – all intertwined in a compassionate web of prayer. You can call the number at 1-646-294-4355. You can try it after Yom Tov. But what can we do now?

Prior to hearing the Shofar and saying the most important Musaf prayer, we will give everyone in Shul a couple minutes to do the following. Turn to the closest congregant who you do not know and ask him what should you pray for him/her? Find out their name and focus on them for the entire service – not yourself. If you have time, ask two people. Also, allow a stranger to know what your needs are, enabling them to care for you as a child of G-d. Once that is done, we can truly pray to G-d altruistically. In addition, make a commitment in how you plan on helping others in more tangible ways in the coming year.

Will this activity guarantee that all our prayers will get answered today? Who knows! The wisdom of the Talmud teaches us equations for life. These are principles that work. Off course there are other principles of life operating at the same time, which may not allow each prayer to succeed. So why do the exercise? First of all, you are employing a tool that has been successful for many people. But even if it will not be successful for your own situation in life, I can say this for sure: merely going through this exercise and praying and pleading for another person with all your heart, for no other reason beyond that this person needs it, will make you a better, more sensitive person – which is an amazing thing! Praying for someone who is in need of G-d's help is a beautiful, tangible way of fulfilling the Mitzva of "Loving your neighbor like yourself." This is a kindness you can do even though you don't have the resources to help them in more physically tangible ways. It is the easiest way to demonstrate that you are an active part of Am Yisroel and you care about their welfare.

Finally, at the same time that praying for others expresses Ahavas Yisroel, it also develops Ahavas Yisroel within the person praying. G-d loves people who love his children – let's show Him how much we do.