

Shabbat Parashat Ki Tavo The Purpose and Power of Prayer

The first *aliyah*/prescribed section of Torah reading from this week's *parasha* is a textual source for a great deal of commentary, explanation, and additional application. We learn here that we are required to present the first fruits of our harvest to the *Kohanim*/Temple Priests each year and, when doing so, to recite a particular prayer. A variety of questions could be asked about this practice, but it is the text of the prayer and its meaning that serve as inspiration for this week's D'var Torah.

To begin, while there are numerous occasions when characters in the Torah do indeed pray to God, it is here that we find the first and only mandated or commanded prayer to be recited on a particular occasion. This is another worthwhile piece of Torah trivia, for those who may be interested. In addition, the text of the prayer itself should sound familiar. It begins with: "My father was a wandering/fugitive Aramean and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there..." (Deuteronomy 26:5). This text and the verses of the prayer that follow are central to the telling of the Exodus story in the Passover Haggadah. Much rabbinic commentary exists on these verses, excerpts of which are included in most printed Haggadot as well. At first glance, this text does not really present itself as sounding like a prayer. It does not ask or thank God for anything directly. Rather, it is a short history lesson describing the triangular relationship between Nation-God-Land. It is this different genre of the text of this prayer that makes it particularly powerful and worthy of discussion.

Prayer is just as much about the "pray-er" as it is about God. Our tradition teaches that prayer is intended to act as a mirror – to reflect who one is and what one needs and desires back to the individual who is praying. We recite prescribed prayer texts because we are meant to learn certain truths about who we are and what we need and want from the texts themselves. In this particular case, a history lesson is being reflected back to us in order to explain why it is that the first fruits are being brought to the *Kohanim* at the Temple and not kept for one's own consumption. Out of gratitude for being brought out of Egypt and settled independently in our Promised Land, a farmer gifts his first fruits as a gift to God.

Seeing prayer as more than just one-way communication of human being to God broadens the power of the practice of prayer. If one is not feeling particularly spiritually connected or does not believe in God at all, prayer is still incredibly relevant because through prayer, we are meant to come to a better understanding of ourselves. Oftentimes, a Jewish prayer book can feel foreign because of the traditional prayers' language being Hebrew. However, it is important to note that our tradition teaches that prayer in any language fulfills one's obligation. In fact, there are opinions which state that praying a language which is understood is equally as good as prayer recited in the traditional Hebrew. Therefore, whether you

feel spiritually connected to God or not, understand Hebrew or not, our tradition makes prayer acceptable to you.

As we go into Shabbat this week and continue our preparations for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, take an opportunity to settle into prayer in a way that will be meaningful for you. Look into that mirror and examine your reflection. You might learn something new about yourself. Try praying in English if that will make the experience more personal. In the case of prayer, it is not always about the “how,” it is very much about the “what.”

I wish our VTT extended community a prayerful and peaceful Shabbat!