

# VA'ESCHANAN

## PRAYER FROM THE HEART

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### A

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### Declined Prayers

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Moshe tells Bnei Yisrael at the beginning of the *parsha* about his prayers to enter Eretz Yisrael. “*Va’eschanan el Hashem ba’eis hahi leimor, Hashem Elokim ata hachilosa l’haros es avdecha*. I prayed to God at that time to let me cross into the Land of Israel.” However, Hashem said no: “*Al tosef daber eilay od badavar hazeh*. Don’t speak to Me anymore about this matter.”

Shem Mishmuel asks two small questions that raise important ideas. The word *va’eschanan* is in the *hispa’el* reflexive form. Moshe could have said *v’chananti*, in the simple *binyan kal* form, meaning to beg or pray. Why does he use this unusual grammar in describing his prayer?

The second question refers to the context that Moshe establishes in retelling the story of his prayers. The *pasuk* says, “I prayed to God at that time.” Why is the timing of Moshe’s prayer important? Rashi explains that Moshe referred to a specific time of triumph. “After I conquered the land of Sichon and Og, I thought, maybe the *neder* is broken. Since I partially entered into Eretz Yisrael, perhaps Hashem has forgiven my sin and will allow me into Eretz Yisrael proper. I thought my punishment had been waived.” Why did Moshe Rabbeinu mention this particular point to the Jewish

people? Why is it important for them to know Moshe made his request after the conquest of Sichon and Og?

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## B

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### Closing the Gates

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In order to answer these questions, Shem Mishmuel cites an interesting Midrash. The students asked Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel based on the *pasuk* in Tehillim 69:14, “*Va’ani t’filasi lecha Hashem eis ratzon*. I pray to You, God, at the time of Your favor.” This verse implies that there is a special time of God’s favor during which it is good to pray. The students asked Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel what this means. He explained that, sometimes, the gates of heaven are open to prayer. This is called *eis ratzon*, a time of divine graciousness. Sometimes, though, the gates of heaven are closed to *tefila*.

Elsewhere we are told that the gates of *teshuva* are always open (Devarim Rabba 2:12). The rabbis here based their opinion on the verse in Devarim 4:7, “*K’Hashem Elokeinu b’chol kareinu eilav*. Who is like Hashem, our God, Who listens to us at all times whenever we call to Him?”

These two verses seem to contradict each other. One says that there are auspicious times to pray, *eis ratzon*, and the other says *b’chol kareinu eilav*, that Hashem listens attentively to our prayers at all times.

Shem Mishmuel explains how each of these opinions is correct. Everyone agrees that the gates of *teshuva* are always open because the opening and closing of the heavenly gates reflects the situation in this world. We live in a world of time. In this world, there are specific times when opportunities appear and become available. There are good times and bad times; times change. However, this is only true for things that exist in this world. Things that are beyond this world don’t share its limitation of time. *Teshuva*, says the Gemara, was created even before Hashem created

the world. Since *teshuva*—repentance—existed before the world was created, it is not limited by time and place. Any person can do *teshuva* anytime and in any place, and come back to Hashem.

However, *tefila* did not exist before the creation of the world. Only after God created the world and human beings did He create the concept of *tefila*. Prayer is part of this world. As all of this creation depends on time, prayer therefore has certain times at which it is more appropriate or fitting. There are times when God listens to prayers, and there are times when He doesn't. We want to find Hashem in times when He will listen to prayers.

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## C

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### Keeping the Gates Open

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Shem Mishmuel suggests a second approach to the two views of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel and the *rabanan* concerning the gates of prayer closing. Whenever Shem Mishmuel discusses a *machlokes* in Midrashim, he likes to say that both are valid; you just have to understand the different contexts in which each one makes sense. Thus, it is possible that the gates of heaven are sometimes closed and simultaneously never closed. It depends on the kind of *tefila* that a person prays.

The Avnei Nezer gave over a famous teaching based on Rashi's comments on Bereishis, 48:22. In the *pasuk* there, Yaakov describes his conquest of the city of Shechem, saying that he took the city "*b'charbi u'v'kashti*, with my sword and my bow." Rashi interprets these two as "*b'chochmasi u'vi'tfilasi*," meaning that Yaakov conquered Shechem with wisdom and prayer. Yaakov was not as powerful as the people of Shechem. Torah and *tefila* are the real Jewish weapons.

We see here that prayer is compared to a bow and arrow. The more you bend a bow, the farther the arrow will fly. If you pull the bow back all the way, the arrow will fly very far.

The power of the prayer is determined by how deep it comes from within the heart. When a person prays, he can use only part of his heart, or he can use more of it. The harder the heart is bent and pulled, the stronger the prayer that will shoot from it.

The heart feels pain and frustration. This is why people turn to pray. They need Hashem to help them. If they only partially feel that need and suffering, the power of their prayer is limited. When a person holds in his breath, at some point he has to open his mouth and breathe out, so much so that the air feels like it explodes from him. Sometimes, a person holds such deep pain in his heart from a terrible situation; eventually, he bursts out in prayer to Hashem from the bottom of his heart, which is filled with so much angst and anxiety. When he unleashes such a prayer from the depth of his agony, that prayer pierces any gate. Every gate in heaven must open for that kind of prayer.

When the *rabanan* said no gates are ever closed to prayer, they were talking about a fully extended bow of prayer, from the bottom of a person's heart. Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, who said that prayers sometimes hit closed gates, was referring to prayers that don't come from the bottom of the heart. Sometimes, the gates open for these regular prayers, and sometimes they remain closed.

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### The Deepest Prayer

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Moshe Rabbeinu said, "I *davened*, *va'eschanan*." Rashi (Devarim 3:23) in this *parsha* quotes the Midrash that says there are ten different words for prayer. *Va'eschanan*, from the root word *techina*, is the last of the ten words for prayer. According to the Ari Hakadosh, the human heart has ten levels. During the *aseres yemei teshuva*, we say Shir Haamaalos Mima'amakim from the ten steps and depths of the human heart. We try to fix those ten steps

of the heart during the days from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. The deepest prayer is *techina*. It is the tenth level, the Yom Kippur level, when one's heart bursts from pain.

Moshe prayed from the deepest depths of his heart. He couldn't contain himself. He deeply wished to go into Eretz Yisrael, but he wasn't allowed to. The rest of Bnei Yisrael, however, were going to go in. He couldn't contain the depths of agony that he felt being excluded from this incredible, ultimate experience of the redemption, of coming to Eretz Yisrael together with the Jewish people. Unfortunately, he would die and stay alone on the other side of the Jordan River. At this time, Moshe burst forth with prayer, out of a tremendous depth of longing and disappointment.

This helps us understand why the word *va'eschanan* is in the *hispa'el* reflexive-intensive form. Moshe didn't just sit down and logically compose a thoughtful prayer. He prayed with his entire being. It was an automatic response to reach out to Hashem to save him from an impossible situation. This was the level of Moshe's heartfelt prayer.

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## E

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### Timely Prayer

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Moshe emphasized the time when he prayed: *ba'eis hahi*, after Bnei Yisrael had conquered Sichon and Og. It was an *eis ratzon*, at which time even a regular prayer (not a completely heartfelt one) would be accepted; at times like this, Hashem will give out of His beneficence, not due to any particular merit. Hashem had just enabled Bnei Yisrael to conquer a part of Eretz Yisrael for the first time, so Moshe perceived that it was a special time of God's blessings.

Shem Mishmuel explains that, often, Hashem won't give blessings of *eis ratzon* when *resha'im* are involved. He doesn't want them to benefit from His special generosity. He only makes

an *eis ratzon* when there are no wicked people. Sichon and Og had just been destroyed and it was therefore a time of great *ratzon*, since these evil kings had been defeated.

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## F

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### Secrets to Successful Prayer

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Now we understand that two elements stood in Moshe's favor. First, he prayed from the depth of his heart. Secondly, he prayed at an *eis ratzon*. Yet Hashem still rejected Moshe's prayer.

What was Moshe trying to teach the people? He knew that the Jewish people were very upset that he was going to die. They would have to fend for themselves in conquering the land of Canaan and its seven powerful nations. Yehoshua was ready to serve as their next leader, but he was relatively young. They knew Moshe's greatness. He took them out of Mitzrayim, and he received the Torah at Har Sinai, and did so many other miracles. They weren't as sure about Yehoshua bin Nun.

Moshe said to them, "You should pray that my successor, Yehoshua, should succeed with you when you cross the river. Your prayers will be more effective than mine. Even though I prayed with my ultimate strength, Hashem still rejected it for His reasons. But you should know that Hashem will never reject the Jewish people." On the *pasuk* in Devarim 3:29, "*va'neishev bagai*," Rashi explains that Moshe told them, "*Hakol machul lachem*—Everything was forgiven for you. You worshiped idols and, still, Hashem will bring you into Eretz Yisrael. But I was not forgiven."

Moshe taught the people not to worry that he would not be with them. "You have more strength than me myself. You are allowed to go into Eretz Yisrael while I am not. Use your power of prayer and power of Torah. You will be successful and Hashem will help you."

In Parshas Nitzavim, Rashi says the same thing. When the

people heard all of the curses of Parshas Ki Savo, Moshe said, “*Atem nitzavim hayom*—Even though you do many sins, Hashem will never abandon you. He has a special loyalty and affection for you. No matter what, you will always be in God’s grace.”

We have seen that *teshuva* can always open the gates of heaven. Prayer from the depths of the heart can also open the gates. And Hashem will accept even a regular prayer when a person prays at a time of grace.

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### Three Qualities of Shabbos

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Every week on Shabbos, all of these three ideas coalesce together. Shabbos is a day of *teshuva*. It is a day beyond time, just as *teshuva* is beyond time. Shabbos is the day of the relationship between a person and Hashem. It is a rendezvous between us two, when we don’t have to worry about daily responsibilities. It is the day when Hashem meets the *baal teshuva*. The Avnei Nezer said that Shabbos is not a twenty-four hour day; it is an eternal day. It is a day of *menuchas margoa*, a real rest, not *menuchas arai*, a temporary rest. We are not supposed to think about the week on Shabbos, because Shabbos really is beyond the weekdays.

Additionally, Shabbos brings heavenly light into the world. This light is limitless and does not need a vessel to carry it. Thus, we do not wear *tefillin* on Shabbos, as it is a vessel through which the light of Hashem flows during the week. Shabbos is God’s pure, unadulterated light. This is like the prayer that issues from the bottom of person’s heart. It bursts forth in limitless intensity, the infinite light that lies beyond the everyday experience.

Shabbos is also a special time of *ratzon*, God’s grace. In the Shabbos prayers we say *u’virtzoncha*, asking Hashem to show us special beneficence on Shabbos. It is a special day on which a person’s prayers can always be answered.

We should keep our Shabbosos and realize the opportunity of the special, timeless rendezvous with Hashem and His light. We will then be *zoche* to keep the Shabbos and have all our prayers answered.

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### Praying Power

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It is very important to remember as we pray not to hold ourselves back. Prayer is the expression of the very depth of the human heart. Unfortunately, some people feel embarrassed when they pray. They don't want to appear too emotional; they feel it is unseemly. Prayer should be a time of complete emotional expression. Sometimes, my emotions are contained within certain limits. That is fine. But, sometimes, the emotions overflow beyond any barrier. They are explosive. These emotions can give way to the most powerful *tefilos*, the *tefila* of *va'eschanan*. This can take the form of extreme happiness and joy, and it can also be expressed as extreme angst. These are the most powerful prayers.

When you pray, use all of the emotion you have. Don't feel that you have to hold back. It is a time to cry, to jump and sing. This way, your prayers will always go through the open gates of heaven and, with God's grace, will be received with blessing.



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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Why is *teshuva* always accepted?
2. Which prayers pierce any heavenly gate?
3. Which prayers need an *eis ratzon*—open gates in heaven?
4. What is unique about Hashem's relationship with the Jewish people?
5. How is Shabbos like *teshuva*?
6. Is Shabbos an *eis ratzon*?
7. Should you become emotional during prayers?

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## EXERCISES

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1. Evaluate your daily prayers for the level of emotion you feel during them.
2. Did you ever pray from the bottom of your heart, with all your heart?
3. Try to add emotions to your prayers. Try to pray at least once a week with all of your heart.



