

## Explaining Tefilla to Our Children

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The scene is one we know well: Yitzchak and Rivkah davening fervently to be blessed with a child. They each occupy different corners as they offer up their supplications. We also know that Hashem answers the prayers and Rivkah becomes pregnant with twins. My 3<sup>rd</sup> grade daughter recently asked a question common to children about Tefilla. She said that she often asks Hashem for things in davening but doesn't get them – why is that? Underneath the questions is a more troubling question and also a flawed assumption. We could reframe her question more cynically (and often as children grow into teenagers, this is exactly what happens): “If we don't get what we want out of davening then what is the point?”

Both framings of the questions are based on a flawed assumption that sometimes is the result of the somewhat simplistic way prayer is dealt with for younger children. Prayer, writ large, is framed as asking Hashem for all of our needs. While it is accurate that we certainly do list our needs and ask Hashem to fulfill them as part of prayer, there are certainly other facets of prayer. A singular focus on asking for what we want can result in children (and adults) thinking of Hashem as an ATM machine – we punch in the right code and get what we want. Such an image of Hashem then leads to my daughter's question and the image that maybe Hashem is more like a slot machine – we pull the lever (daven) and sometimes we win the jackpot, but not very frequently. Definitely not a recipe for solidifying meaningful Tefilla in our children's lives as they grow into teens and adults.

We actually find that as Jews we specifically should not look at prayer as having the goal of being answered. Rashi (Bereishit 27:28) in our parsha explains that Shlomo HaMelech's prayer upon completing the Beit HaMikdash was that non-Jews should always be answered but that Jews should only get that is truly good for them. He explains that the reason for the difference is that Jew will not find doubt Hashem even though they do not understand why their requests are not being fulfilled. Shlomo was concerned that non-Jews would not be able to accept that they are not getting what they want for their own good and they would come to question Hashem's omnipotence<sup>1</sup>.

What is puzzling about our parsha is that a simple reading of the opening of our parsha actually seems to reinforce the misconception of Hashem as slot machine. Yitzchak and Rivka daven to Hashem and they are answered with exactly what they asked for! Seems like they hit the jackpot. However, if we take a closer look at the wording used, we find a deeper lesson about prayer.

Although we would expect the more common term *VaYitpallel* to describe Yitzchak's prayer, we instead find the term “*Veye'etar*.” More puzzling is the term used for Hashem responding to Yitzchak's prayer is the same verb. The commentaries struggle to translate this

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<sup>1</sup> We find the same differentiation when it comes to giving Tzedakah for an ulterior motive. A non-Jew is not allowed to give Tzedakah in the merit that something occurs while a Jew is allowed to do so (Rosh HaShannah 4a). Rashi (there) explains the distinction in the same way.

word – what could it mean that would make sense both in terms of Yitzchak reaching out to Hashem and Hashem’s response?

- **Targum Unkelos** does translate it as “pray” and then as “Hashem accepted his prayer”
- **Rashi** and **Rashbam** explains that it means “plentiful” (or perhaps “intense”), Yitzchak davens a lot and Hashem responds in kind
- **Ibn Ezra** explains that it stems from the word *ritzuy*, Yitzchak tried to find favor in Hashem’s eyes and he did
- The **Gemara** (Yevamot 64a) says the word is related to the word for pitchfork and it means that a righteous person’s prayer has the power to “move” Hashem to a place of mercy (just as a pitchfork is used to move bales of hay)

Regardless of the exact translation of the word, it seems that the choice of a word that can be used to describe both sides of the relationship is intentional. It is reminiscent of the words in Hebrew for teach and learn – *lilmod* and *l’lameid*. Unlike English where these are two separate verbs, in Hebrew there is no separate verb to teach, teaching is facilitating learning. A teacher can’t be said to have taught something unless there was learning. It is a two-way relationship with one outcome.

The use of the same verb in our parsha seems to suggest a similar message about prayer. Prayer is not something we do so that Hashem is “activated” and we get what we want. It is a connection with Hashem – a two way verb with a shared outcome of connection. Perhaps we may best translate the pasuk and Yitzchak reached out to connect with Hashem and Hashem responded by reaching out to Yitzchak.

This is the model of prayer that we need to share with our children. I am reminded of the story that a counselor on a teen summer program in Israel shared. A teenager who was not particularly connected to prayer sat sullenly in the back at davening refusing to put on his Tefillin. When the counselor approached him he explained that there had been a terror attack the day before and he was so angry at G-d he didn’t want to daven. The counselor responded that he should put on his Tefillin and speak to G-d about it. The counselor walked away to daven himself. After davening the young man went over to the counselor. He thanked him for the suggestion and told him that this was the best davening of his life. He really spoke to Hashem and even though he was frustrated, confused and angry, for the first time he felt a meaningful relationship and connection through prayer. What if we started to use this type of language with our children from a young age, both through our own modeling and also asking about their own connection?

- I was speaking to Hashem today about how concerned I am about the war in Israel
- What did you speak to Hashem about today?
- What else should we tell Hashem?

If we are able to present this concept of prayer to our children, even when they are younger, we may be able to avoid the sense of Hashem as ATM or slot machine. May we all be zoche to have our own experience of connection through prayer and to support the next generation in creating their own connections.