

Prayers Hiding in Plain Sight

RABBI PINCHAS GELB



Is prayer mainly the act of petitioning authority – is it like filing a brief with a court (indeed, the outcome sought in American trial practice is called the “prayer for relief”) – or is it a deeply unconscious yearning rooted in the core of what it means to be human, a reaching up from the coarse thickness of this world to speak to God with the confidence of being heard by Him? If the second, then prayer is not necessarily limited to its daily formal act. Rather, there are visceral prayers that resonate above with lasting impact even though they do not appear to be prayers at all.

Rashi pinpoints three examples of these through subtle but powerfully concise formulations regarding Yaakov’s dream, Yehoshua’s name, and *Bnei Yisrael’s* cry in Egypt. Prayer within a dream, someone else’s prayer about a person that becomes part of that individual’s own identity, and prayer at the core of a human outcry do not look like standard *tefillos*. Yet, by characterizing these as expressions of *tefilla* in his Torah commentary, Rashi dramatically broadens the category to expand what prayer means, highlighting it as an essential part of humanity.

Yaakov’s Prayerful Dream

Fleeing from Eisav toward Lavan, Yaakov famously dreams of a ladder touching the heavens with angels going up and down and Hashem standing above:

ויחלם והנה סלם מצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה והנה מלאכי אלקים עלים וירדים
בו. והנה ה' נצב עליו ... (בראשית כח:יב-יג)

And he dreamed and behold a ladder was standing toward the ground and its top reached toward the heaven and behold angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold Hashem was standing over it [or him] ...

This article is dedicated in memory of Mr. Emil Sassover z”l.

Rabbi Pinchas Gelb is a lawyer in Los Angeles.
He has been a member of Adas Torah since 2005.

This evocative image results in sweeping interpretations. The Ramban views it as a prophetic vision about the rise and fall of future empires. The Rambam, in *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 7:3, likewise understands this dream as a prophesy about future global events. In *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:15, the Rambam further interprets it as a vision of the prophetic experience itself, in which the angels represent prophets who reach great heights of understanding and then descend to enrich other people with the insights that they have acquired (see also *Moreh Nevuchim* 2:10).

Rashi, in contrast, appears to avoid interpreting the beginning of Yaakov's dream as a metaphor or symbol of anything at all. Rather, the dream is Yaakov's perception of his spiritual surroundings. As Yaakov journeys to Charan, the angels accompanying him inside the land depart while the angels who will escort him outside the land arrive, all by way of this ladder touching heaven. Moreover, in Rashi's understanding, rather than standing above the ladder, Hashem is standing above Yaakov, and it is for a single purpose: "*leshamro*," to watch over him. Rashi interprets this dream, not symbolically, but as Yaakov's awareness of actual spiritual presence accompanying him. It is not distant or future-oriented, but deeply personal. Hashem stands right over Yaakov, who is otherwise bereft and alone, as the angels protecting him within the land depart and, in their climb upwards, pass by the descending angels who will go with Yaakov outside of the land. In this manner, Rashi zooms the lens of Yaakov's dream away from the panorama of history and toward Yaakov's experience as an individual.

But Rashi then adds a further point of focus. After the dream, Yaakov awakens and exclaims that this place is "*beis Elokim*" (the "house of God") and "*sha'ar hashamayim*" ("the gate of heaven"). Rashi interprets the phrase "the gate of heaven" to mean that this place is defined, not by "prophesy," but by "prayer." He comments:

זזה שער השמים. מקום תפלה לעלות תפלתם [ס"א תפלות] השמימה ומדרשו
 שבית המקדש של מעלה מכון כנגד בית המקדש של מטה. (בראשית כח:יז)
*And this is the gate of heaven. A place of prayer for prayers to ascend toward
 the heavens. Its midrashic interpretation is that the Beis haMikdash
 above is aligned with the Beis haMikdash below.*

Thereby, Rashi explains "the gate of heaven" to refer to prayer, rather than prophesy or any other form of *hashra'as haShechina*. The implication of Rashi's approach is that Yaakov formulated the depictions in the first part of his dream from within himself, as a prayer that his Divine connection will continue even when he leaves the land. Instead of appearing to Yaakov as prophesy from above him (per the Ramban's and the Rambam's interpretations) or even as Yaakov's astute awareness of

the spiritual presence around him (as understood at first glance from Rashi's earlier comments), Rashi clarifies here that the images at the beginning of Yaakov's dream constitute a prayer primarily from inside of him. And Hashem answers this prayer affirmatively, prompting Yaakov's exclamation following his dream that this truly is "a place of prayer."

Moreover, explaining the other phrase that Yaakov uses when reacting to his dream, "*beis Elokim*," Rashi emphasizes that Yaakov went out of his way to return to this place where his father and grandfather had prayed, which was the future location of the *Beis haMikdash*. Shlomo later concretized this when he built the *Beis haMikdash* and referred to it, not only as a place to bring sacrifices, but also repeatedly as a "house of prayer" (*Melachim Alef* 8:28-30, 33, 42, 44-45, 48-49). Rashi's connection between the phrase "*beis Elokim*" and the *Beis haMikdash* further underscores *tefilla* as the main focus of Yaakov's startled exclamation in response to his dream.

In addition to centralizing prayer as the topic of Yaakov's reaction right after his dream, Rashi also emphasizes prayer in Yaakov's conduct immediately before the dream. Rashi cites *Brachos* 26(b) that the phrase "*vayifga bamakom*" leading up to the dream is a term for prayer, which teaches that Yaakov initiated the *Maariv* service (see Rashi to *Bereishis* 28:11). Hence, according to Rashi, Yaakov's dream is bookended by expressions of prayer.

Given this context, and in view of the fact that Yaakov's dream is the specific catalyst for his profound awareness of this as "a place of prayer," his dream, itself, apparently is a *tefilla*. The ladder to heaven with its ascending and descending angels and Hashem standing over him watchfully, "*leshamro*," is Yaakov's poignant prayer at the edge of exile that his connection with the Divine presence will continue even when he leaves the land. This first part of Yaakov's dream is not prophesy imposed from without. Instead, it is a prayer expressed deeply from within. Hashem then affirmatively responds to Yaakov's *tefilla* by promising to remain with him and protect him and bring him toward a bright future and that He will not abandon him (*Bereishis* 28:13-15).

Yaakov's prayer within a dream, which perhaps was a continuation of his *tefilla* right beforehand, established enduring precedent with regard to *Maariv*. Indeed, the *Sfas Emes* points out that *Maariv* can be said any time during the night and also that it has a more voluntaristic quality than *Shacharis* and *Mincha* (so much so that, according to one view, it is "*reshus*"), which exemplifies the spontaneous, visceral nature of Yaakov's prayer as well as the fact that this prayer reflected his strong determination to keep his Divine connection even during his foreboding experiences and night consciousness (*Sfas Emes, Vayeitzei* 5637 & 5651). This is the essence of

what *Maariv* is: a deep yearning that, in the dark of night, there is a ladder near the ground reaching heavenward and teeming with life while Hashem's presence stands watchfully over us. In Yaakov's case, Hashem answered this prayer affirmatively.

Yehoshua's Prayerful Name

Following the list of prominent individuals sent by Moshe to scout the land, the verse in *Parshas Shelach* conspicuously adds that Moshe called Hoshea bin Nun "Yehoshua" (*Bamidbar* 13:16). Rashi explains why:

ויקרא משה להושע וגו'. התפלל עליו י-ה יושיעך מעצת מרגלים.¹
Moses called Hoshea, etc. He prayed for him: "May God save you from the advice of the spies."

Yehoshua's name is a contraction of the phrase "*ka yoshiacha mei'atzas meraglim*," "may God save you from the advice of the spies," which was Moshe's ardent desire for him. Yet, this phrase that Rashi quotes is stated in the second person directly to Yehoshua, not as prayer addressed toward Hashem. Indeed, although *Sota* 34(b) characterizes this statement as Moshe's prayer about Yehoshua, the *Medrash Tanchuma* 6 implies that it was a blessing. So, why does Rashi conclude that this new name involved "prayer" to Hashem about Yehoshua ("*hispallel alav*") instead of saying, as the phrase itself indicates by being formulated in the second person to Yehoshua, that Moshe was "blessing" him directly ("*beirach oso*")?

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch observes that the name Yehoshua does not derive only from the root *י-ש-ו*, which means to save or deliver from distress. If it did, then the new name would have been Yehoshiya, like we say in Hallel: "*dalosi ve-li yehoshiya*" (*Tehillim* 116:6, see also *Shmuel* I 17:47) and as in the phrase "*hoshiya es amecha*" (*Tehillim* 28:9, see also *Tehillim* 12:2, 20:10, 60:7, 98:1 & 118:25). While the noun form of the root is "*yeshua*" (deliverance or salvation), the verb form within this new name should have been "*yehoshiya*" rather than "*yehoshua*." Even Rashi's formulation is stated as "*ka yoshiacha*," not "*ka yoshuacha*." The fact that Moshe changes his name to Yehoshua, instead of Yehoshiya, shows that, simultaneously, there is a second root within the name Yehoshua: *י-ו-ש*, which generally means to "cry" and most often is understood specifically as a cry directed toward Hashem, i.e., to "pray," like in the

¹ Many versions of Rashi use the word "*nispallel*" instead of "*hispallel*." The word "*nispallel*" means "we will pray," which makes no sense in this context. The correct version of Rashi's statement has to be "*hispallel*," "he prayed." Indeed, the change from a "*hay*" (in *hispallel*) to a "*nun*" (in *nispallel*) can be readily attributed to scribal error given the similarity between "*hay*" and "*nun*" in Rashi script.

phrase “*shivati eilecha vetirpa’eini*” (*Tehillim* 30:3, see also *Tehillim* 18:7, 34:16, 39:13, 40:2, 88:14, 102:2 & 145:19). Indeed, the word “*shav’a*” is one of the ten expressions of prayer listed in the *Medrash* (*Sifrei* 26) that Rashi cites at the beginning of *Parshas Va’eschanan*.

Thus, Moshe’s act of praying, his “*shav’a*,” is woven directly into the fabric of his new name for Yehoshua. Besides expressing the content of Moshe’s desire for him (“*ka yoshiacha mei’atzas meraglim*”), the name “Yehoshua” also expresses Moshe’s act of prayer itself (“*hisparallel alav*”). Both the substance as well as the fact of Moshe’s prayer for Yehoshua were part and parcel of his name. This is why Rashi specifies that the name Moshe gave Yehoshua conveys, not only a “blessing” spoken directly to him, but also a “prayer” directed to Hashem about him.

With this insight centralizing Moshe’s act of prayer as an integral element of Yehoshua’s new name, we gain perspective in understanding how the name “Yehoshua” rather than “Hoshea” was used in *Parshiyos Beshalach* (17:9-14), *Mishpatim* (24:13), *Ki Sisa* (32:17 & 33:11), and *Beha’aloscha* (11:28), starting more than a year before the events in *Parshas Shelach* took place.

In reality, the “*atzas meraglim*” from which Moshe asked Hashem to save Yehoshua was not a one-time event. Rather, from the moment of leaving Egypt, there was a persistent temptation for individuals and the nation to assume the viewpoint later articulated by the spies who stated that they simply are incapable of ascending to the land:

והאנשים אשר עלו עמו אמרו לא נוכל לעלות אל העם כי חזק הוא ממנו... ושם ראינו את הנפלים ונהי בעינינו כחגבים וכן היינו בעיניהם. (במדבר יג:לא, לג)
The men who had ascended with him said: “We cannot ascend to that nation for it is too strong for us.” ... “There we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, descended from the giants; in our eyes we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes.”²

In contrast, Kalev asserted that they would definitely go up into the land:

ויהם כלב את העם אל משה ויאמר עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה כי יכול נוכל לה. (במדבר יג:ל)
Caleb silenced the nation toward Moses and said: “We shall certainly ascend and conquer it for we certainly can do it.”

² Rashi adds, based on the *gemara* in *Sota* 35a, that they were actually arguing that they would not be able to ascend into the land because, *kivyachol*, it is too much for Hashem.

The “*atzas meraglim*” was a defeated approach and an unappreciative disregard for the Divine promise, and the Divine charge, that had been given to them. Kalev articulated exactly the opposite viewpoint. My father-in-law, Rabbi Levi Meier z”l, would say that, at each important life juncture, there is the voice of “the ten spies” and the voice of “the two spies,” and we should make every effort to listen to “the two spies” and ignore “the ten spies.”

Moshe’s prayer for Yehoshua began around the time that Amalek attacked, not long after the people asked (*Shemos* 17:3): “*lama zeh he’elisanu miMitzrayim lehamis osi ve’es banai ve’es miknai batzama*,” “why is this that you have brought us up from Egypt to kill me and my children and my livestock through thirst,” and further (*Shemos* 17:7): “*hayesh Hashem bekirbeinu im ayin*,” “is Hashem among us or not?” This statement was substantially the same as the later-articulated “*atzas meraglim*,” except that these people asserted it at an early juncture soon after leaving Egypt. Right then and there, when the name Yehoshua is first used in the Torah (see *Shemos* 17:9), Moshe began his perennial prayer asking Hashem to safeguard him from this caustic outlook, even though it would find its most pronounced application only later, during the events of *Parshas Shelach*, when Moshe would send him with the *meraglim* to view the land.

This also solves the problem how Moshe sent the spies at all because, if he changed Yehoshua’s name when he sent them, then the implication is that he knew they were going to bring back a bad report. According to this approach, however, Moshe did not know the spies would take the position that they ultimately did. He simply knew that the outlook they ended up asserting (which Rashi calls the “*atzas meraglim*” as a short-form reference to this viewpoint) already existed because other people articulated it soon after leaving Egypt right before Amalek attacked. Starting then, Moshe changed Yehoshua’s name and began praying for him to avoid this perspective.

The possibility that Moshe, in fact, changed his name to Yehoshua around the time of the battle against Amalek is buttressed by Rashi’s interpretation of *Divrei HaYamim Beis* 36:4 where he cites Moshe changing Yehoshua’s name as an example of kings and leaders who distinguish their assistants by giving them a new name when they first start performing service:

ויסב את שמו יהויקים. כך דרך המלכים והשרים שמכנים למשרתיהם שם שהם רוצים. דוגמא (בראשית מ"א) ויקרא פרעה שם יוסף וגו' וכן (במדבר י"ג) ויקרא משה להושע בן נון יהושע וכן (דניאל א') וישם להם שר הסריסים שמות וגו' והכל כדי להודיע שהוא מושל בו לכנות לו שם כרצונו.

And he changed his name to Jehoiakim. It is the custom of kings and princes to bestow a by-name upon their servants as they wish. An example is (Gen. 41:45): “And Pharaoh named Joseph, etc.,” and so (Num. 13:16): “and Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua,” and so, (Dan. 1:7): “Now the chief officer gave them names, etc.” All this is to make known that he rules over him to name him as he desires.

In this comment, Rashi specifically states that Yehoshua received his new name when he began under Moshe’s tutelage. The Rashbam reaches the same conclusion in his explanation of *Bamidbar* 17:9 (see also the Ramban on *Shemos* 13:16). From the time that Yehoshua started assisting Moshe in matters of leadership, long before the ten spies articulated their perceived inability to ascend into the land, other people asserted the same thing. Moshe changed Hoshea’s name to Yehoshua right then as a sustained prayer that Hashem should save him from this kind of advice and enable him, instead, to maintain the countervailing conviction later asserted by Kalev in connection with entering the land: “We shall certainly ascend.”³

The heartfelt prayers of our role models to Hashem about us are a great gift. Moshe’s prayer to Hashem on Yehoshua’s behalf, which persisted and continued to resonate long after its initial utterance, was integral to his new name. And Yehoshua’s own identification with Moshe’s prayer for him was not bound up with just one incident but started early on and became an essential part of who he was perpetually.

Bnei Yisrael’s Prayerful Outcry

The verses in *Shemos* 2:23-25 state, after a prolonged period of deepening servitude and increasingly abject oppression:

ויהי בימים הרבים ההם וימת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלקים מן העבדה. וישמע אלקים את נאקתם ויזכר אלקים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב. וירא אלקים את בני ישראל וידע אלקים. (שמות ב:כג-כה)

It was during those many days that the king of Egypt died and the Children of Israel groaned from the servitude and they cried out, and their outcry [or prayer] from the servitude went up to God. God heard their cry, and God

³ This debate between the “*atzas meraglim*” and Kalev’s outlook whether or not we can “ascend” might also be spiritualized to refer to inner capacity, rather than being limited only to going up to the land, by the statement of Chizkiya in the name of Rabbi Yirmiya in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in *Sukka* 45b and *Sanhedrin* 97b: “*Ra’isi bnei aliya vehein mu’atin*,” “I have seen elevated people and they are few.”

remembered His covenant [with] Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God saw the Children of Israel and God knew.

The verse says that the people “groaned” (*yei’anchu*) in response to the hard labor and “cried out” (*yiz’aku*). The Ramban comments that Hashem “received their prayers in His compassion because of their cry,” “*mipnei hatza’aka kibbel tefillasam berachamav.*”

The implication of the Ramban’s statement is that the people prayed. Indeed, this is supported by the end of this verse which states that their “*shav’a*,” which often indicates prayer, went up to Hashem (see also *Ohr HaChaim* 2:23). But where does the verse actually say that the people prayed in the first place? On the contrary, it states that they “groaned” (*yei’anchu*) from their servitude and that they “cried out” (*yiz’aku*). These were cries by the people from the weight of their hard labor. They do not appear to have been addressing themselves toward Hashem in prayer.

HaRav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt”l* explains the Ramban’s conclusion which characterizes their “cry” as a “prayer” to mean that, even though the people themselves just hollered in pain, Hashem elevated their outcry and received it as prayer:

At this point in their slavery experience, Israel had no intention of formulating prayer as such. This initial stage of prayer was little more than a poorly articulated, instinctive cry. According to the Ramban, Hashem Himself ‘lifted’ their groaning, allowing their cry to rise up before Him.⁴

Thus, the Rav understands the Ramban’s statement to mean that the people did not direct their cry as a prayer to Hashem on any level, but Hashem accepted it as a *tefilla* anyway. In this sense, it was a kind of miracle (one of the many that occurred during the events of the redemption from Egypt), an alchemy of the spirit whereby Hashem, as an act of compassion, transformed the people’s reactive primal cry into efficacious human prayer.

HaRav Hershel Schachter adds, based on the *Haggada*, that there additionally was an intrinsic prayer within their outcry. The *Haggada* interprets the verse in the *Mikra Bikkurim* which states “*vanitzak el Hashem Elokei avoseinu*,” “and we cried to Hashem the God of our forefathers” (*Devarim* 26:7) by quoting the verse in *Parshas Shemos* about the people’s cry in Egypt from the burden of their labor:

⁴ Dr. Arnold Lustiger, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on the Days of Awe* (New Jersey, 1998), p. 160.

ונצעק אל ה' אלקי אבותינו (במדבר כו ז) – כמה שנאמר (שמות ב כג) ויהי בימים הרבים ההם וימת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלקים מן העבדה.

“We cried out to Hashem the God of our forefathers” (Num. 26:7) – As it is said (Ex. 2:23): “It was during those many days that the king of Egypt died and the Children of Israel groaned from the servitude and they cried out, and their outcry [or prayer] from the servitude went up to God.”

In this manner, the *Haggada’s* drasha contextualizes the verse about people’s cry in Egypt as the proof text for the statement in the *Mikra Bikkurim* that “we cried to Hashem the God of our forefathers,” thereby framing the people’s outcry in reaction to their servitude under Egypt as inherently having been addressed to Hashem as prayer. Based on the *Haggada’s* statement of *Torah Shebe’al Peh*, Rav Schachter concludes that, ensconced deeply within the people’s cry in Egypt, was human prayer:

But why should G-d consider the crying out from pain and agony as if the Jewish people had offered a prayer? It would appear that prayer is so essential and intrinsic to the human soul that we assume that subconsciously man would always like to pray. The Rabbis of the Talmud formulated as a halacha (Brachos 21a) that we would wish that man would be able to pray all day long.⁵

Rashi appears to make this association as well. In his comment to *Shemos* 2:24, he defines the word “*na’akasm*” to mean “*tza’akasm*,” which is the verb in the *Mikra Bikkurim* that the *Haggada* correlates with this outcry in Egypt: “*vanitzak el Hashem Elokei avoseinu*,” “and we cried to Hashem the God of our forefathers” (*Devarim* 26:7). As support for this definition of “*na’akasm*,” Rashi then quotes the first part of the verse from *Iyov* 24:12, but the whole verse additionally equates the word “*na’aka*” with the word “*shav’a*.” Thereby, Rashi indicates that the cry of the people in Egypt was inherently prayerful based on two connections:

1. First, Rashi’s definition of “*na’aka*” to mean “*tza’aka*” identifies it with the term “*tza’aka*” in the *Mikra Bikkurim*, as the *Haggada* does, reflecting that the people’s outcry in Egypt, at least on some level, was addressed to Hashem.
2. Moreover, the verse in *Iyov* 24:12 cited by Rashi equates this cry (*na’aka*) with the type of cry that usually is directed toward Hashem as prayer (*shav’a*).

According to Rashi, it was not that Hashem turned the people’s cry into prayer,

⁵ HaRav Hershel Schachter, “The Prayer of the Jews in Egypt” (TorahWeb.org, 2004).

as the Rav understands the Ramban to be saying. Rather, as established by the *Haggada's* drasha about the *Mikra Bikkurim* and as further emphasized by Rashi's citation of *Iyov* 24:12 to explain the verse here, their cry actually was prayer at its unconscious core.

This idea that people have multifaceted, and even contradictory, layers of intent is more conspicuously stated by Rashi in his comment to *Vayikra* 1:3:

יקריב אתו. מלמד שכופין אותו. יכול בעל כרחו תלמוד לומר לרצונו הא כיצד כופין אותו עד שיאמר רוצה אני.

He shall bring it. This teaches that they force him. One might think that they force him to bring it against his will. To teach us otherwise, the verse says "in accordance with his will." How can this be? They force him [to fulfill his pledge] until he says: "I want to."

The fact that Rashi's reconciliation of the verse that the court pressures this individual to fulfill his pledge until he says "I want to" is considered, not as duress (which would be an unwilling act and would not work), but as a bona fide expression of "*ratzon*," reflects that there is an underlying layer of human will – in this case, the basic desire to keep one's word – which might contradict a more visibly apparent decision but nevertheless is wholly authentic. While latent, this separate layer of intentionality is genuine (see Rambam *Hilchos Geirushin* 2:20 and *Gur Aryeh* explaining Rashi). In other words, people's will and self-awareness can operate on many planes simultaneously.

So too with regard to the people's outcry in Egypt. Consciously, it was a cry of pain in reaction to their servitude. But more essentially, there was a stirring of human prayer resounding deeply from within the maelstrom of each individual's infinite soul. These were inarticulate, ineffable, undifferentiated, yet profoundly authentic prayers that, while unrecognized even by the people expressing their outcry, reached far and resonated deeply with Hashem: "...*vata'al shav'asam el HaElokim min ha'avoda... vayeida Elokim*,"⁶ prompting the beginning of their redemption from Egypt.

Conclusion

It turns out that, besides its overt expressions, prayer is (1) an unconscious dialogue directed toward Hashem, even and especially during times when a person is completely alone (per Yaakov's prayer within a dream), (2) the gift of a role model

6 Rashi comments (*Shemos* 2:25): "*Vayeida Elokim. nasan aleihem lev ve-lo he'elim einav mei-hem*," "And God knew. He focused upon them and did not hide His eyes from them."

who articulates hopes to Hashem about a person, elevating these aspirations and further enabling them to become integral to the individual's own core identity (per Moshe's name for Yehoshua which was a sustained prayer), and (3) a cry from vulnerable humanity who still assert with piercing inner conviction that Hashem is the *Shome'a Tefilla* who hears (per *Bnei Yisrael's* outcry in Egypt which, at its heart, was also a prayer). Accordingly, with just a few well-placed words, Rashi highlights these visceral types of prayers that – in the verses and in life – are hiding in plain sight.

Nitzachon

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Adas Torah

9040 West Pico Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90035
www.adastorah.org
adastorahla@gmail.com
(310) 228-0963

Rabbi Dovid Revah, *Rav and Mara D'Asra*
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