



Answering Unanswered Prayers

Did you ever really pray for something you wanted? I mean, really fervently, desperately, pray hard for something that was vitally important to you?

If you did, and I think we all pray this way at moments of urgency, you violated an anonymous piece of wisdom:

“Be careful what you pray for, because you just might get it.”

I have not been able to determine who said that. But I know clearly what he meant. In my own life, I have had more than one occasion to look back at answered prayers, which achieved what turned out to be very trivial objectives. And I have certainly been disappointed in prayer, only to learn that in the long run, I was much better off without the benefits of whatever I prayed for so earnestly.

We think we know what is good for us, we think we know what we need, but we really don't. Often, we are much the better for having certain

prayers rebuffed, and we frequently discover that the things we thought were important are not important at all.

In the Torah portion that we read this week, Parshat Va'etchanan, Moshe confides to us how he powerfully beseeched the Almighty, begging Him to reverse His decision to frustrate Moshe's greatest dream, that he be permitted to enter the Promised Land. Moshe uses a synonym for prayer, *chanan*, which connotes imploring, pleading for the undeserved favor, *matnat chinam*.

But Moshe is denied his dream. His petition is torn up in his face. His is the archetypal unanswered prayer.

Joel Cohen, in his book *Moses, a Memoir*, puts these poignant words in the mouth of Moshe:

“I lowered my knees and begged Him once again. I could muster no tears this time... I needed badly to reach and walk about the land He promised to Abraham for us, so long ago... My work is incomplete. My prophecy has achieved no reality for me in my lifetime... There will be no future for me. My staff, the instrumentality of miracles against His enemies, is powerless against His will.”

Beautifully put, by the author of a book I recommend to you all.

What are we to learn from the story of the unanswered prayer of the humblest, but greatest, of men? Many things, in my opinion.

We learn that the gates of prayer are not always open. In the words of the Midrash, they are sometimes open but sometimes closed. And we are not to rely upon them exclusively. Rather, we are to do our own part to achieve our objectives in mundane ways.

Judaism insists upon a balance between faith in the divine and the exercise of practical human effort. It acknowledges that while there must be "bitachon", trust in the Lord, there must also be "hishtadlut," old-fashioned hard work on our part. As the rabbis have it, never rely upon miracles.

We can never allow prayer to become a substitute for doing all we can do. We must not simply expect the Almighty to achieve Jewish sovereignty for us, but must do our parts politically and militarily. We cannot expect manna from heaven, but we must earn our livelihoods by dint of the sweat of our brow. And when we are ill, yes, we must pray, but we must also diligently seek out competent medical assistance.

There are other lessons, to be sure,

to be learned from the unanswered prayer of Moshe. His grave remains a secret, so that it will not become a shrine and that he not be idolized or heaven forbid, deified. For another important lesson about prayer from the Jewish perspective is that we pray to the One Above only, and not to saints and holy men, be they alive or be they dead. Cemeteries are not synagogues.

By not granting Moshe his request, the Master of the Universe was in effect telling him that he did all that he could, and that no more is expected of him. Humans are expected to do all they can, and not necessarily to accomplish everything.

"It is not necessary for you to complete the task, but neither are you exempt from doing all that you can."

Moshe is being told, "You did all you could, even if you did not achieve all of your personal ambitions." No human is complete, no man is perfect.

And then there is a final lesson, one that we learn from the very fact that Moshe persisted in his prayer, although he knew well that his request would be spurned. He modeled the importance of hope, even in the face of impossible odds.

Jewish history contains a long list of Moshe-like figures, whose vision was to enter the Holy Land. They include men like the Gaon Elijah of Vilna, who longed to spend the last years of his life in Eretz Yisrael. And closer to our time, the great sage Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chofetz Chaim, prayed and carefully planned to live out his life in Israel.

Ironically, they, like Moshe, had their dreams frustrated by the Hand of Providence. Like Moshe, they were ready to try almost anything to realize their ambitions. And like Moshe, who was told that he would not enter the land but his disciple Yehoshua would. Various leaders of Jewish history, however reluctantly, took comfort in the fact that their disciples realized their dream in their stead.

This is possibly the most important lesson of all. When our prayers go unanswered for ourselves, they may yet be answered for our children and grandchildren.

Unanswered prayers are mysteriously answered, in inscrutable and unpredictable ways.