

Parshat Haya Sara
Tefilla and the Patriarchs
Melton and Shearith Israel, November 14, 2011
JSI at Academy, November 15, 2011

- A) Sefer Breshit chapter 24, verses 62 – 63; the word לְשׂוּחַ will be the focus of our interest in this verse.
- 1) The difficulty
 - a) It is found only in this one place in the whole Bible.
 - b) The context reveals very little of what the word may mean
 - c) The only way to try to figure out what it means is to compare it to words in other places in the Bible which may be related.
 - 2) Possible understandings suggested by the medieval commentators - the Rishonim - on the page of the expanded Mikraot Gedolot.
 - a) The word לְשׂוּחַ could be related to the word שִׂיחַ found in the creation story in the singular (chapter 2, verse 5) and in the plural in the story of the exile of Hagar (chapter 21, verse 15). It means vegetation or bushes. This understanding easily connects to the context of שָׂדֵה mentioned in the verse.
 - (i) Ibn Ezra, Radak – to stroll among the greenery in the fields.
 - (ii) Rashbam, Hezkuni – to plant trees in the fields.
 - This may connect to the fact that Yitzchak dabbled in agriculture – see chapter 26, verse 12.
 - b) The word לְשׂוּחַ may alternatively be related to the word שִׂיחָה and the word לְשׂוּחָה which mean conversation and to converse respectively.
 - (i) Hezkuni – to go out to converse with friends in the field.
 - This connects back to the idea of strolling in the fields.
 - It is a bit problematic for there is no mention of other people.
 - (ii) Rav Sadya Gaon, Rabanu Hananel, Rashi, Seforno – to pour out words to God, meaning to pray.
 - See Psalms chapter 102, verses 1 – 3. This is one example of a handful.
 - While the other Rishonim are engaged in a independent search for the truth, Rashi and the others who hold as he does are simply bringing down the Talmudic midrash. Indeed Rashi as a rule almost never engages in original exegesis, but rather chooses among the possibilities found in the writings of the classical rabbis of the Talmudic period.
- B) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot, page 26b
- 1) Breirot bring traditions from before the year 200 CE, and possibly going back centuries earlier.
 - 2) “Instituted by the Patriarchs” is certainly not to be taken literally as a discrete legal act, as authoritative or as creating obligation. It rather probably means modeled, showed the way, created the paradigm or the pathway.
 - 3) We will begin with Yitzchak, and then go back
 - a) The midrash assumes the meaning of the word לְשׂוּחַ; we may be quite certain that there is some tradition behind this assumption, but we don’t know its source or how far it goes back. We don’t know if it is founded on the verse cited from Psalms, or if there is more to it.
 - b) As we saw, some commentators took that tradition to be final and authoritative, and others felt that the door remained open to further exploration.
 - 4) Avraham – chapter 19, verses 27 - 28

- a) Avraham prayed in the sense of talked to God and made requests of Him many other times, for example the beginning of chapter 15. He also has been described as ‘calling in the name of God’ a handful of times, as in chapter 13, verse 4. This could mean calling others to God but most probably means prayer.
 - b) He talked to God about the destruction of Sedom – chapter 18, verses 17 – 33 - and that is the reference in the verse ‘to the place where he had stood’.
 - c) This particular verse is brought because of the mention of ‘early in the morning’.
 - d) The midrash reads the verse as implying that this time as well he ‘stood’, and that makes the connection to the verse about Pinchas in Psalms chapter 106, verses 28 - 30.
 - e) Note that in general Avraham may be characterized as a ‘morning person’; a number of times he is described as arising early to do something. It is in character that his prayer should be in the morning.
 - f) Of course the assumption would seem to be that he prayed in the morning, and not in the afternoon, and so also Yitzchak – he prayed in the afternoon and not in the morning!
- 5) Ya’acov – chapter 28, verses 10 - 11
- a) The assertion concerning Ya’acov is the one least founded in the simply meaning of the verses.
 - b) “Pegi’ah’ can indeed mean intercessional prayer – as in Yermiahu chapter 7, verse 16 - but also has more basic meaning, and it only means prayer where God is mentioned in the verse.
 - c) “Mekom’ as a reference to God is not found in the Bible, and is a development of rabbinic Hebrew
 - (i) “Hu mekomo shel olam, v’ayn ha’olam mekomo”
 - d) However, in the same passage Ya’acov does pray – at night - in response to his vision.
 - e) Note that Ya’acov may be characterized as a evening or night person; many of the significant events of his life were at night.
- 6) The argument over the times of the Temple sacrifices
- a) We know from historical tradition that the morning and afternoon sacrifices were brought at the times cited by Rebbi Yehudah. However, the tana kama has a legal tradition that it would have been permitted to offer them later, had there been such a need.
- 7) “The evening prayer has no limit”
- a) It is not obligatory
 - b) Its’ time is not limited but rather can be said during all the nighttime.
- 8) The conclusion
- a) “Rebbi Yossi ben Hanina can answer” – means had he been present he could have retorted as such.
 - b) There is another reason why Rebbi Yossi ben Hanina cannot stand in his own but needs the other breita– the fact that indeed the evening prayer is not obligatory.
 - c) The conclusion really leaves two possibilities:
 - (i) The breita of Rebbi Yehoshua ben Levi on its’ own.
 - (ii) A combination of the two approaches.
- 9) Analysis and meaning
- a) Jewish prayer at least to a certain degree is modeled after the fixed daily communal sacrifices in the Temple
 - (i) Communal and not individual

- (ii) Fixed, routine and not spontaneous
 - (iii) Obligatory, a reflection of obedience
 - (iv) Based on the korban olah, perhaps reflected an ideal of giving oneself up for God and to God, self sacrifice.
 - (v) This would explain why Jewish prayer often seems so rote, lifeless and non charismatic – compared say to Evangelical prayer - and might turn what some see as a vice into a virtue.
- b) According to one possibility there is a second element of Jewish prayer.
- (i) Individual
 - (ii) Spontaneous
 - (iii) Voluntary
 - (iv) Reflective of one's one personal predilections, personality and needs.
- c) This second approach would see prayer as balancing what Abraham Joshua Heschel called the two poles of Keva and Kavanna (routine obligation and spirituality)
- (i) Heschel appreciated the Keva aspect of prayer; however, reflecting his Hasidic upbringing, felt strongly that modern prayer has overemphasized the Keva and underemphasized the Kavanna.
 - (ii) It should be noted that the early Conservative movement, like early Modern Orthodoxy, were anti Hasidic. That began changing only in the past 25 years, partly as a result of the efforts of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.
- C) Talmud of the Land of Israel, Tractate Brachot, beginning of the 4th chapter
- 1) In addition to the two above mentioned approaches, it brings a third one: thrice daily prayer is a normal human reaction to the unfolding of the daily natural cycle that man is witness to.
 - a) This is similar to the breita of "Patriarchs", but has some significant differences:
 - (i) Nothing essentially Jewish about thrice daily pray.
 - (ii) No need for a model or trailer blazer for daily pray: it is normal and natural. The prayerful person is not emulating another, but himself directly reacting to God's world.
- D) The non normal, problematic aspect of pray
- 1) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 61a
 - 2) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 31a
 - 3) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot page 33b
 - a) God is awesome and transcendent; there is a yawning chasm between man and God.
 - b) The very idea of prayer is therefore audacious and problematic.
 - c) Therefore prayer ought to be limited.
 - d) Three times a day is a maximum.
 - e) One requires permission or at least precedent to pray.
 - 4) One may certainly read our opening Talmudic passage in light of these last passages.
 - 5) Let us not forget that we have seen many Biblical sources for this approach of distance from God and limits and reticence in approach to Him.
 - a) The theatrics of the revelation at Sinai
 - b) The arrangement of the Tabernacle and the prohibitions against encroachment.
 - c) The prohibition against sacrifice outside of the Tabernacle and Temple.

