

“This is the matter that you shall do for them to sanctify them to minister for Me.” (29:1)

The Kohanim were to be consecrated by means of the rituals which the Torah is about to describe. It begins with a sacrifice service, as explained in Sefer Vayikra, which would atone for various indiscretions in human behavior. The word, “davar,” which is translated as “the matter” can also be rendered as “the word.” Rabbeinu Bachya infers that the Torah alludes to the time when there will no longer be a Sanctuary and a Mizbayach upon which to offer sacrifices. At that time, we must resort to “words” of Torah and prayer as our vehicle to seeking atonement and meriting Hashem’s mercy.

There is an intriguing Midrash on this pasuk that delivers a compelling message. The Midrash relates a theoretical dialogue between Klal Yisrael and Hashem. Klal Yisrael asked, “Ribono Shel Olam, when a Nasi, Prince of a Tribe, sins, he offers a sacrifice and he receives atonement. When a Kohen sins, he also offers a sacrifice and his error is atoned. What about us? We do not have a korban.” Hashem responded with the pasuk in Vayikra (4:13,14), “If the entire assembly of Yisrael shall err... the congregation shall offer a young bull as a sin-offering.” Klal Yisrael did not accept this, saying, “We are poor and cannot afford sacrifices.” Hashem retorted, “Words, I desire. Words of Torah.” They countered, “We are not knowledgeable; we do not know how to learn.” Hashem resolved this last request when he answered, “Weep! Weep and pray before Me, and I will listen to your heartfelt, emotion-filled prayers.”

Horav Simcha Bunim m’Peshischa explained the dialogue between Klal Yisrael and Hashem as focusing on how best to draw close to the Almighty and to cleave to Him. Hashem first told them to employ the approach of the Nesiim and Kohanim, the leaders of the people. Klal Yisrael complained that this approach is not practical for everyone. “We are poor” — we cannot have our inner relationship with Hashem connected to an external activity. There is always the possibility that circumstances, such as poverty, will prevent us from attaining our goal. No, we need another medium with which to exact atonement. Hashem said, “I seek words, words of Torah. Through study, you can reach the greatest heights.” “This might be the correct approach for the erudite and learned,” they responded, “but what about the simple Jew who has not been able to study? What will he do to achieve closeness with Hashem?” Hashem answered, “Let him cry.” No sacrifices, no Torah study, just something from the heart. Let them open up their hearts, pour out their emotions, and Hashem will listen. This is consistent with the maxim of Chazal: “Shaarei demaos lo ninalu,” the gates of tears are never locked. One can pierce through the heavens and reach the greatest heights by expressing sincere emotion.

We recite in Selichos, “May it be the will of the One Who listens to the sounds of our cries, that You collect our tears so they are not lost; save us from cruel decrees, for our eyes are turned to You alone.”

What a beautiful, poignant prayer! It makes one feel good knowing that regardless of the situation, the options are not closed. There is still hope. The gates of tears are still open.

Is this true? Unfortunately, we know all too well that people have prayed; they have poured out their hearts, cried bitter broken-hearted tears – to no avail. What are we to feel when we cry and cry and seemingly our prayers are not answered?

Chazal present a number of approaches toward understanding this anomaly. We will cite two. The first one comes to us from the father of a kidnapped Israeli soldier, Nachshon Waxman, z.l. Nachshon was kidnapped and held hostage. Thousands of Jews all over the world poured out their hearts to the Almighty on his behalf. They did not succeed in saving him. He was brutally murdered by Arab gunmen.

A member of the secular Israeli establishment asked Nachshon's father, "You prayed, we all prayed, and nothing happened. G-d did not listen. Does that not bother you? Are you not angry?" Mr. Waxman looked at him and answered in a calm voice, "Yes, we prayed, we begged, we asked Hashem to listen, to save Nachshon. He listened. He listened very intently, and He weighed the request. He could have said – yes. He could have said – no. He said – no. Hashem listened. His answer was no."

This response has so much depth. We might think that when we pray to Hashem and our prayers do not elicit a positive response, He did not listen. Chas V'Shalom! Heaven Forbid! He certainly listened. The answer, unfortunately, was not in the affirmative.

As a second approach, I refer to an excerpt of a letter written to the family of a young man who passed away after a long illness. This letter is cited by Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita, in his Pirkei Emunah U'Nechamah:

"We all feel like soldiers who have returned from the battlefield – a battlefield where many men, women and children all shared together in prayer to rescind the terrible g'zar din, decree. It was seemingly to no avail. I cannot remember another time that a person merited such an outpouring of heartfelt prayer from the leaders of our generation, from teachers, students, and their families throughout the world. We all prayed to our Father in Heaven, 'Avinu Malkeinu, our Father, our King, send a complete recovery to the sick of Your People and specifically to...', seemingly to no avail.

"Should we feel that we have returned from the battle in defeat? No! True, we certainly prayed, hoped and looked to Hashem as watchmen awaiting dawn. The dawn of cure, of health, of hope, did not arrive. We have, however, not been defeated. On the contrary. All those who prayed, who wept, gained great merit. Yet, even greater merit was derived by the one for whom we prayed. Our beloved niftar, deceased, had the merit of engendering a community to draw closer to Hashem through the Tehillim they recited and the increased devotion in their prayer. He also had the merit of catalyzing an arousal for teshuvah, repentance, which was expressed in public fasting and self-

improvement. Furthermore, do we have any idea how much forgiveness has come down to the world, how many decrees have been annulled in his behalf?

“There has been a victory, a victory of good over evil. Faith in Hashem has increased, and His Name has been sanctified. The niftar’s path into Gan Eden has been paved with the wonderful merits that he collected during his illness.

“My words are insignificant in consoling your broken hearts, but I could not refrain from expressing my emotions. If anyone wants to know where all those tears and prayers went, the answer is: The hot tears evaporated and became clouds of glory, which joined together with his many merits. Together they will ascend before Hashem’s Throne to praise our unforgettable loved one, bringing him to his resting place in Gan Eden.

“May Ha’Makom console you among all the mourners of Tzion and Yerushalayim.”

Signed in tears.

I feel this letter speaks for itself in providing us with insight into the effect of our emotion-filled prayers.