

"And Yitzchak prayed opposite/for his wife for she was barren." (25:21)

The cause and effect seem to be presented in the reverse sequence in this *pasuk*. The *Torah* should have mentioned Rivkah's inability to conceive prior to citing Yitzchak's prayer on her behalf. In response to this analysis, the *Torah Temimah* suggests that Rivkah actually was an *akarrah*, childless, because Hashem desired to hear the *tefillah* of Yitzchak and Rivkah. The cause was the need for supplication, while the effect was Rivkah's barren state.

What really is a *tefillah*, prayer? *Tefillah* is an expression of extreme devotion in which man negates his entire being in deference to Hashem. His individual essence melts away as he entreats Hashem. A *tzaddik* who prays to Hashem does not think of himself. He beseeches the Almighty on behalf of others. This form of prayer reaches to the most High. Even when one prays for himself it should be for a lofty purpose. One asks for health and welfare in order to enhance his *mitzvah* observance. When we pray to Hashem, we ask that He grant us life, *lbgnk*, for You, so that we will be better equipped to serve Him.

The *Torah* states that Yitzchak prayed *u,at jfbk*, opposite his wife. *Rashi* interprets this construct to mean that Yitzchak stood in one corner and prayed, while Rivkah stood in prayer in the opposite corner. The *Otzar Chaim* interprets *u,at jfbk* as meaning "for his wife". Although Yitzchak had his own personal reason for petitioning Hashem for a child, he nonetheless prayed "for his wife's sake." This is true prayer, selfless, altruistic and considerate of others. Hashem responded to this prayer.

A poignant story reflects the essence of prayer. Czar Nicholas I of Russia issued a decree against Russian Jewry. The goal of this decree was to decimate Jewish youth, thereby destroying the future of Judaism. All young Jewish men from the age of twelve years were conscripted into the Russian army for a minimum of twenty five years. During that period of obligatory service, the Russian army made every effort to convert these innocent souls to Christianity. Representatives of the government kidnapped young boys from their parents in the most devastating manner and sent them away to Siberia and beyond, never to be heard from again. Thousands of these child martyrs died from disease, lethargy or fright. Baptism was forced upon them in the most inhuman torturous manner.

There were, however, a few *kedoshim*, martyrs, who survived this torment and resisted conversion. They were released as crippled, broken, "old" young men to live out their lives in pain and misery. The Russians succeeded in breaking their bones, but not their spirits. These devout *tzaddikim* eventually founded their own communities and synagogues. They were referred to as the "Cantonists." They were "supported" by the Czar and were permitted to live wherever they chose.

It happened once that the *Netziv of Volozhin* and *Horav Yitzchak Elchonon Spektor of Kovno* led a

delegation of prominent Rabbis to St. Petersburg to intercede with the Czar on behalf of Russian Jewry. Due to the urgency of the circumstances, they were forced to travel during the *aseres ye'mei teshuvah*, the days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. Consequently, they were obliged to spend *Yom Kippur* in the Russian capitol. The nearest synagogue to their place of lodging was one founded and attended by these Cantonists.

As the congregation was preparing to begin the *Kol Nidrei* prayer, one of the great rabbis offered to lead the service. The conscripts, however, graciously declined, saying that among them was a broken old man who had suffered immeasurable torture for the sake of the Almighty. Despite the inhuman torture, he never once succumbed to the oppressors. His loyalty to Hashem was unwavering; his commitment and devotion remained unblemished. He would lead the congregation in prayer.

The rabbis of the delegation turned around and saw an invalid, scarred from torture, emaciated from disease and malnutrition, hobbling over on crutches to the podium. As he approached the *Aron Ha'Kodesh* in preparation to lead the service, he turned to the congregation and said, "My friends, usually one prays to Hashem for three things: *banei*, *chayei*, and *mezonei*, children, life and sustenance. Regrettably, we do not pray for these things. We are in no need of food, for as veterans of the Czarist army we are fed by the Czar. We are already too old and sick to marry and have families. Concerning our lives, we belong to the Czar, who at any moment can draft us back to the misery we have endured. We are probably better off dead than alive! Therefore, my friends, our prayer to Hashem is simple, '*Yisgadal veyiskadash Shmei Rabbah*, May Hashem's Name be glorified and sanctified!' May *Yidishkeit* survive its enemies. May Hashem's *Torah* reach out to all Jews. May *Klal Yisrael* prosper."

Immediately upon hearing the heartrending cries of this haggard and crestfallen man, the entire congregation raised up their eyes to Hashem. With tears streaming down their faces, they cried out in unison, "*Yisgadal veyiskadash Shmei Rabbah*." The *gedolim* remarked that this was the most moving *Kol Nidrei* they had ever experienced in their lives. It was a selfless prayer which emanated from the deepest recesses of the heart and implored Hashem only on behalf of His people.