

“A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Yisrael shall you send to the legion.” (31:4)

The Midrash discusses the number of soldiers who went out to battle. According to one point of view, each tribe sent two thousand men, while the other view contends that each tribe sent three thousand men. The men were divided into three groups: twelve thousand were soldiers who fought in battle; twelve thousand were in charge of the various vessels and weapons; twelve thousand were there to pray. We wonder why there was a need to have an equal number of men designated specifically for prayer. This was Hashem's war; He commanded Bnei Yisrael to wage war on the Midyanim, to avenge what they had done to the Jewish People, to cleanse the world of this abominable nation. Why would prayer be a factor in their success?

Horav Yechezkel Levenstein, z.l., derives from here that tefillah, prayer, is the weaponry, the ammunition of the Jewish People. We do not fight with guns and planes. We fight with prayer. Without the prayer of Klal Yisrael, the guns and the planes are worthless. This is consistent with Rashi's commentary to 31:8, And Bilaam, the son of Beor, they killed with the sword: “Bilaam came against the Jewish People and exchanged his craft for their craft. The Jews only triumph with their mouth, through prayer and supplication. Bilaam seized their craft by attempting to curse them with his mouth. They, too, came against him and exchanged their craft for the craft of the nations, who come with the sword.” The nations of the world live and die with conventional weaponry. The Jewish People resort to the power invested in their mouths – the power of prayer.

Furthermore, as Nachlas Tzvi notes, so great is the significance of prayer that the number of soldiers designated to pray was the same as the number of soldiers selected for battle. This teaches us not to attribute any greater distinction to the ones who battle. They must be given the greatest respect, admiration and appreciation. For it is they who lay down their lives on the battlefield for our people. They are in constant danger, as they risk their lives on our behalf. Yet, we very quickly forget that our power lies in our ability to reach Hashem through prayer and supplication. Just as one cannot do battle without soldiers, one cannot triumph without those who pray.

Prayer plays a special role in a Jew's life: every observant Jew daily brings himself closer to Hashem through prayer. Yet, many do not devote themselves to probing the inner meaning and message that prayer communicates. Central to the “avodah she'b'lev,” “service of the heart,” that is prayer is kavanah, focus or intention. Proper intention is a halachic requisite for prayer. Nonetheless, it is an area in which many of us fail to maintain the proper standard. Rather than discuss the fundamentals of prayer and the essential kavanah one must have, perhaps the following story can demonstrate the significance of kavanah and, thereby, inspire our tefillos, prayers, so that they reach their intended goal.

The Baal Shem Tov and his students were on a journey. They traveled through a forest and

chanced upon an abandoned synagogue. They decided that this would be a good place to daven Minchah. They came to the door and held it open for their rebbe to enter first. Just as he was about to enter the shul, the Baal Shem Tov stopped and refused to cross the threshold. The chassidim were perplexed with their rebbe's behavior, but they were reluctant to question him. After awhile, as the sun began to set and it would soon be too late to daven Minchah, they summoned up the courage to ask why he refused to enter the shul.

The Baal Shem Tov responded, "I cannot go in there because it is so crowded, there is no room for us." The chassidim were understandably taken aback, since the shul was noticeably empty. Taking note of their confusion, the Baal Shem looked at them and said, "A prayer, when uttered with sincerity and wholehearted devotion, always sprouts wings and soars up to the Heavenly Throne of the Creator Himself. I sense, however, that the people who once prayed here had no kavanah. Their prayers, therefore, had no wings and collapsed and fell upon one another, so that the shul is now crammed with dead, wingless prayers. There is no room for us".