

He encountered the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. (28:11)

Rashi explains that this “place” was none other than *Har HaMoriah*, the site where Avraham Avinu had bound Yitzchak Avinu on the Altar of the *Akeidah*. This was also the future site of the *Bais Hamikdash*. *Chazal* interpret this “encounter” to mean “he prayed.” Yaakov Avinu’s encounter was not with a geographical location, but rather, with Hashem. Why did the *pasuk* not simply state that he prayed? What is the significance of the word, encounter, and what is its relationship to prayer?

Various terms express *tefillah*, prayer; *pegia*, encountering, is one. I think that *pegia* refers to a prayer in which the focus is not on the words, but rather, on the encounter: one feels and acts like he is in the Presence of G-d. One is unaware of his surroundings, in the sense that he feels entirely alone with the Creator. He has no need for words. The individual’s presence is totally subjugated, with no need for external validation; he is withdrawn from the surroundings, but completely focused on Hashem. That is *pegia*. It does not mean that one is alone; rather, it means that one feels himself alone – with Hashem. He achieves total self-abnegation, almost spent, withdrawn from the present and thrust into a far-off encounter with G-d – only with G-d. He feels utter trepidation, overwhelming awe, because he is “here” – in the presence of Hashem. He becomes one (so to speak) with Hashem. This is *pegia* – encounter.

Why so subdued? Where is the enthusiasm? The solemnity and sober-sided feeling of the encounter reflect a certain form of prayer. Perhaps it is prayer when one has nothing else – meaning, he is spent, having articulated and cried out his heart. He is utterly subdued, with nowhere to go. This is it. He is full-face with Hashem. Words are not necessary. Indeed, he has no words. Hashem knows the words. We provide the emotion. That is *pegia*.

Yaakov Avinu “encountered” Hashem as the sun set. *Chazal* teach that he initiated *Tefillas Arvis*, the evening prayer. It is night, the end of the day – the end of the road. Regardless how bleak, how dark, how black – one needs to pray. That is the only way. Yaakov’s life was filled with adversity. Yet, he never gave in; he never gave up. He prayed and taught his descendants that – regardless of the circumstances – one must pray. Indeed, the only medium that is effective is prayer.

At times, all one must do is be honest with Hashem – sort of tell it like it is, open up and pray with integrity. All too often, we promise and promise, but our promises are based on contingencies. We give our word, as long as everything goes our way. Integrity in prayer means realizing that our only avenue of salvation is Hashem. He is not our last resort. He is our only resort.

The following story underscores this idea. A Jewish lawyer, himself non-observant, arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* and asked to see **Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl**. Apparently, his wife was gravely ill, and he sought a blessing for her recovery. The *Maggid* replied, “I will bless you, but I want you to know that your personal prayer on behalf of your wife has greater efficacy.”

The lawyer said, "I cannot speak with G-d!" Rav Sholom was quite taken aback with this declaration. First, he was "impressed" by the straightforwardness. Second, he wondered why. "After all," he asked, "you cannot speak with Hashem? You are a lawyer. Speaking is the staple of your profession."

The man explained. "*Rebbe*, I am a non-practicing Jew. For my entire life, I have maintained my distance from Torah and *mitzvah* observance. I had only one daughter that was born to us after quite a few years of marriage. She became very ill at the age of three to the point that one day the doctor called me to the hospital, 'You must come immediately. Your daughter is in the last few hours of her short life.'

"I was shaken beyond belief. I immediately took a taxi to the hospital, where I went straight to its chapel. I opened up the Ark and began to weep bitterly, 'Hashem,' I cried out, 'I have never once asked You for a thing. Now, I have one request. My baby is dying. She is my only child for whom I waited for years. I plead with You to heal her. I promise that if You heal her, I will never ask You for another thing!' As soon as I concluded my prayer, I ran up to the ICU to discover that a miracle had occurred. My daughter's situation had turned around. She was on the road to recovery.

"Now you see why I cannot pray to Hashem. I gave Him my word, and I will not go back on my word."

Hashem listened to this Jew because he spoke sincerely from the heart. He made a promise which, from his uneducated background, manifested total integrity. He kept his word, not realizing that Hashem wants to hear from us – all of the time.