

SHEMINI ATZERES / PARASHAS BEREISHIS

Praying for Rain

The days of summer are only a warm memory. Leaves wither and fall to the ground. Brisk autumn breezes sends chills up our spines. The world retracts into winter. People shut their windows tight and gather indoors around a warm hearth, At just this time, the Jewish people celebrate the Festival of Sukkoth by moving out of the comfort of their homes and into drafty *sukkah* booths. It is a sublime expression of faith in the Almighty, a declaration that our safety, security and comfort derive directly from Him and no other source.

Sitting in the *sukkah* after having only just been purified and cleansed of sin by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are transported for seven beautiful days to a transcendent world of pure spirituality. And then on the eighth day we celebrate the Festival of Shemini Atzereth. And what is one of the central features of this festival? A formal, elaborate prayer for rain!

How can this be? Should we praying for something so prosaic as rainfall and crops at such an exalted time? Or should we rather be praying for spiritual growth, for our souls to be uplifted and our hearts and minds to become receptive to the divine aura that permeates the universe?

Furthermore, after having shown such disdain for the ways of nature and such faith in divine guidance, why are we suddenly so worried about rain? What happened to our faith?

The answer lies in the first Torah portion of the year, which is read on the Shabbos immediately after Shemini Atzeres. The evil serpent brings down the wrath of Hashem upon himself by cleverly inducing Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, and for this he is condemned to "crawl upon his belly and eat the dust of the earth." The commentaries find this punishment perplexing. Being relegated to eat dust is certainly not a very pleasant fate, but it also has its positive aspect. At least, with dust being in such abundant supply, the serpent would never again want for food! Why didn't Hashem give him a punishment that was totally and exclusively negative without even the slightest redeeming feature?

The commentaries explain that there is nothing more precious to a human being than maintaining an ongoing relationship with his Creator. What is the basis for this relationship? On what grounds is it conducted? One of the fundamental connections is prayer. A person

who begs the Creator to fulfill his needs, both material and spiritual, enjoys the added benefit of connecting to the Almighty through his prayers, regardless of whether or not his requests are granted. In fact, the Talmud tells us that the Creator “desires the prayers of the righteous” and therefore withholds some of their needs in order to induce them to pray. The connection between the human and the divine through the act of prayer is clearly an end in itself, far greater than the fulfillment of any particular wish expressed in the prayer.

The serpent was so utterly rejected, the commentators conclude, that he was denied any contact with Hashem whatsoever. His food would be tasteless dust and he would have it in such abundance that he would never have to raise up his voice to Hashem in supplication. He was cast aside and totally ostracized.

On Shemini Atzeres, after we have been purified by the High Holy Days and uplifted by the Festival of Sukkoth, there is nothing more desirable for us than developing and deepening our relationship with the Creator, and we turn to the critical channel of prayer to help us in this respect. We pray for rain not merely to spare ourselves the hardships of drought; we have faith that Hashem will send us what we need. Rather, we pray for rain in order to reach out to Hashem, to connect to Him and submerge ourselves in His infinite goodness.

A courtier was telling his friend about the latest palace politics.

“The minister of war seems to have gained favor over the minister of the treasury,” he said.

“Indeed? How do you know?”

“Because the king fed the minister of the treasury table scraps, but the war minister was treated to a royal feast.”

“It certainly appears you are right. But tell me, exactly where did they dine?”

“The minister of the treasury dined at the king’s table, but the minister of war’s feast was sent to his rooms.”

“Aha! Then you are mistaken, my friend. The minister of the treasury is really the favorite - by far.”

In our own lives, it often happens that some of our prayers go unanswered. Most of us are mature enough to understand that Hashem is not obligated to grant our every request, but it is sometimes difficult not to feel that all the emotional energy we invested in our prayer was somehow wasted. But if we recall the transcendent feeling of spiritual connection to Hashem we experienced while we prayed, we will surely realize that prayer itself is our most precious gift.