

PARASHAS KORACH

The Purpose of Prayer

There was never any question as to who was right and who was wrong. When Korach challenged Moses for the leadership of the Jewish people, it was a brazen attempt to usurp a position to which he had no right. Hashem had chosen Moses to be the leader of the Jewish people, grooming him from infancy for that exalted role. Korach had no such legitimate claim.

How did Moses react to this challenge to his authority? In this week's portion, we read that he prayed to Hashem that He spurn the sacrificial offerings of Korach and his followers. "I have not appropriated so much as a donkey from any of them," Moses concluded in his prayer, "nor have I done them any harm."

The question immediately arises: Why did Moses have to defend himself against Korach in his prayer? Even if Moses had been less than perfect, Korach would have been rejected by Hashem as a usurper.

Let us consider for a moment the concept of prayer. A person is gravely ill or in serious financial trouble. In desperation, he turns to the Creator and begs Him for relief in this time of crisis. But surely, the crisis itself has been brought into being by the same Creator. How then do we have the temerity to ask Him to reverse Himself? What gives us the right to ask Hashem to heal us when He is the one who deliberately made us ill? Are we asking him to admit that He made a mistake, Heaven forbid? Obviously not. What then is the point of our prayer?

Let us consider one more point. Our Sages instituted the requirement to pray to Hashem thrice daily. We ask for his help a thousand times a year, regardless of whether or not we have any pressing needs at the time. Clearly, there is a deeper purpose to prayer.

The commentators explain that the overriding mission of our lives during our brief sojourn in this world is to connect with Hashem, to develop a close relationship with Him, to bring ourselves to transcendent levels of spirituality for all eternity. How do we accomplish this?

One of the most direct avenues to Hashem is prayer. Through prayer, we open our hearts to Him every day, three times a day. We turn to Him as our loving Father in Heaven and pour out all the pain, the fear, the yearning and, yes, the joy that floods our hearts. If we truly engage our emotions in our prayer, if we experience an uplifting personal connection, then our prayer connects us to Him, regardless of

whether or not we receive a positive response to our request. Prayers that result in personal growth are successful prayers. Sometimes, that very personal growth can effect changes in the divinely ordained order of things, but the efficacy of the prayers does not depend on these changes.

When Korach challenged Moses for the leadership of the Jewish people, Moses immersed himself in prayer, seeking comfort in a deeper closeness with Hashem. This led him to profound soul searching and, in his great humility, to a thorough examination of his treatment of Korach's congregation. But even so, he could not recall doing anything to provoke this rebellion. These words then were not an argument and a justification. They were the natural result of true prayer.

A desperate woman approached a great sage. "My child was born with a terrible deformity. Please help me! What shall I do?"

"I want you to pray for your child," said the sage. "Pray at least once every day, and for at least an hour each time."

"And will He then perform a miracle for me?" asked the woman.

The sage spread his hands. "Anything is possible. We will see."

A month later, the woman returned, her face wreathed in a serene smile. "The prayer has really helped," she said. "My child's condition has not changed, but I have. I can accept it now, and go on with my life."

"Ah," said the sage. "Then He did indeed perform a miracle."

In our own lives, we often have occasion to pray to Hashem to extricate us from one crisis or another. Hopefully, our prayers will be answered in the way we want, and we will be spared pain and anguish. But even if Hashem decides not to grant our request, our prayers do not have to go to waste. If we pray in the proper frame of mind, our prayers will inevitably enrich us spiritually and bring us closer to Hashem. They will help us rise above the vicissitudes of the transitory world and become connected to the eternal truths of the universe.