

Tefillah: The Past, the Practical, and the Profound

On Praying and Receiving No Response (A Vayishlach Special)

1) בראשית פרק ד פסוקים יג-יד (פרשת בראשית)

וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-יְקֹוֹק גְּדוֹל עֲנִי מִנְשָׂא: הֲלוֹ גִרְשִׁתָּ אֹתִי הַיּוֹם מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה וּמִפְּנֵיךָ אֶסְתֵּר וְהִיִּיתִי נֶעַ וְנָדָּב בְּאֶרֶץ וְהָיָה כָּל-מִצְאֵי יְהַרְגֵנִי: וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְהוָה לָכוֹן כָּל-הַרְגָּ קַיִן שִׁבְעָתַיִם יִקָּם וַיִּשֶׂם יְקֹוֹק לְקַיִן אוֹת לְבִלְתִּי הַכּוֹת-אֹתוֹ כָּל-מִצְאוֹ:

Cain said to G-d, "My punishment is too great to bear! Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!" G-d said to him, "I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be exacted." And G-d put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him.

2) בראשית פרק כ פסוק יז (פרשת וירא)

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אַבְרָהָם אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּרְפָּא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וְאֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת-הַיְלָדוֹ:

Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children;

3) בראשית פרק כד פסוקים יט-כ (פרשת חיי שרא)

וַיִּקַּח הָעֶבֶד עֲשָׂרָה גַמְלִים מִגְּמְלֵי אֲדָנָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ וְכָל-טוֹב אֲדָנָיו בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּקָּם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל-אָרָם נְהָרִים אֶל-עֵיר נַחוֹר: וַיְבַרֵךְ הַגְּמְלִים מִחוּץ לְעֵיר אֶל-בְּאֵר הַמַּיִם לַעֲתָ לְעָרֵב לַעֲתָ צִאת הַשָּׂאֵבֶת: וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֵי אֲדָנָי אַבְרָהָם הַקְּרָה-נָא לִפְנֵי הַיּוֹם וְעֲשֵׂה-חֶסֶד עִם אֲדָנָי אַבְרָהָם: הֲנֵה אֲנִכִּי נָצַב עַל-עֵין הַמַּיִם וּבְנוֹת אַנְשֵׁי הָעֵיר יֵצְאוּ לְשָׂאֵב מַיִם: וְהָיָה הַנֶּעֱרָךְ אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֵלָיָהּ הַטִּי-נָא כַדָּךְ וְאִשְׁתָּהּ וְאֶמְרָה שְׂתָהּ וְגַם-גְּמְלֵיךְ אִשְׁקָה אֶתְּהָ הַכַּחֲתָ לְעַבְדְּךָ לִיצְחָק וּבָהּ אֲדַע כִּי-עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם-אֲדָנָי: וַיְהִי-הוּא טָרָם כְּלָה לְדַבֵּר וְהָנָה רַבְקָה יֵצְאת אֲשֶׁר יֵלְדָה לְבִתּוֹאֵל בְּרַמְלֵכָה אִשְׁתֵּי נַחוֹר אַחֵי אַבְרָהָם וְכַדָּה עַל-שִׁכְמָה:

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and set out, taking with him all the bounty of his master; and he made his way to Aram-naharaim, to the city of Nahor. He made the camels kneel down by the well outside the city, at evening time, the time when women come out to draw water. And he said, "O Hashem, God of my master Abraham's [house], grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townspeople come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels'—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master." He had scarcely finished speaking, when Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel, the son of Milcah the wife of Abraham's brother Nahor, came out with her jar on her shoulder.

4) בראשית פרק כה פסוקים כג-כד (פרשת תולדות)

וַיַּעֲתֵר יִצְחָק לִיקֹוֹק לְנִכַח אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי עֲקָרָה הָיָה וַיַּעֲתֵר לוֹ יְהוָה וַתְּהֵר רַבְקָה אִשְׁתּוֹ: וַיִּתְרַצְצוּ הַבָּנִים בְּקֶרְבָּהּ וַתֹּאמֶר אִם-כֹּן לִמָּה זֶה אֲנִי וְתֵלֶךְ לְדַרְשׁ אֶת-יְקֹוֹק: וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק לָהּ שְׁנֵי (גִּיּוֹם) [גִּיּוֹם] בְּבֶטֶןךָ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֶּעֶיךָ יִפְרְדוּ וְלֹאִם מִלֵּאִם יִאֲמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צְעִיר:

Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac pleaded with G-d on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and G-d responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived. But the children struggled in her womb, and she said, "If so, why do I exist?"* She went to inquire of G-d, and G-d answered her, "Two nations are in your womb, Two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other, And the older shall serve the younger."

5) בראשית פרק לב פסוקים ד-טז (פרשת וישלח)

וַיִּשְׁלַח יַעֲקֹב מַלְאָכִים לְפָנָיו אֶל-עֵשָׂו אַחִיו אֲרָצָה שְׂעִיר שָׂדֵה אֲדוּם: וַיִּצְוּ אֹתָם לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמְרוּן לְאֲדָנָי לְעֵשָׂו כֹּה אָמַר עַבְדְּךָ יַעֲקֹב עִם-לְבָבוֹ גִּרְתִּי וְאַחֲרַי עַד-עֵתָהּ: וַיְהִי-לִי שׂוֹר וְחַמּוֹר צֹאן וְעַבְדִּי וְשִׁפְחָהּ וְאִשְׁלָחָהּ לְהַגִּיד לְאֲדָנָי לְמִצְאֵחוֹ בְּעֵינֶיךָ:

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Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob:* I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.'"

5א) וַיִּשְׁבוּ הַמַּלְאָכִים אֶל־יַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר בָּאוּנוּ אֶל־אֶחָיִךָ אֶל־עֵשָׂו וְגַם הֵלֵךְ לִקְרֹאתָךְ וְאַרְבַּע־מֵאוֹת אִישׁ עִמּוֹ:

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and his retinue numbers four hundred."

5ב) וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֵר לוֹ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ וְאֶת־הַצֹּאן וְאֶת־הַבָּקָר וְהַגְּמָלִים לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹתַי: וַיֹּאמֶר אִם־יָבוֹא עֵשָׂו אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֶחָד וְהִכָּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנֶּשְׁאָר לְפָלִיטָה:

Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape."

5ג) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶלְקֵי אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי יִצְחָק יְקֹוֹק הָאֵמֶר אֵלַי שׁוּב לְאַרְצְךָ וּלְמוֹלַדְתְּךָ וְאֵיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ: קִטְנִיתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הַאֲמֹת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹתַי: הַצִּילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד עֵשָׂו כִּי־יָרָא אֲנֹכִי אִתּוֹ פְּרוֹיָבוֹא וְהִכָּנִי אִם עַל־בָּנָיִם: וְאֵתָה אֲמַרְתָּ הַיֵּטֵב אֵיטִיב עִמָּךְ וְשָׁמַתִּי אֶת־זֶרְעֲךָ כְּחוֹל הַיָּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִסְפָּר מֵרֹב:

Then Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham's [house] and God of my father Isaac's [house], O Hashem, who said to me, 'Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you!' I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet You have said, 'I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.'"

5ד) וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא וַיִּקָּח מִן־הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ מִנְחָה לַעֲשׂו אָחִיו: עֲזִים מְאֹתִים וְתִישִׁים עֶשְׂרִים וְחָלִים מְאֹתִים וְאִילִים עֶשְׂרִים: עֲזִים מְאֹתִים וְתִישִׁים עֶשְׂרִים וְחָלִים מְאֹתִים וְאִילִים עֶשְׂרִים: גְּמָלִים מִיְנִיקוֹת וּבְנֵיהֶם שְׁלֹשִׁים פְּרוֹת אַרְבָּעִים וּפְרִים עֶשְׂרֶה אֲתַנֶּת עֶשְׂרִים וְעִירִים עֶשְׂרֶה:

After spending the night there, he selected from what was at hand these presents for his brother Esau: 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 30 milch camels with their colts; 40 cows and 10 bulls; 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys.

6) מַלְבִּי"ם בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרָק לֵב פְּסוּק יֵד

וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם. פִּי הַרִי"א שֶׁחֶשֶׁב אוֹלֵי תְבוּאוֹהוּ נְבוּאוֹהוּ מֵאֵת ה', וְכִשְׂרָאָה שֶׁלֹּא בָא דְבַר ה' לְקַח מִנְחָה לַעֲשׂו אַחִיו:

After spending the night there. Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel explained Yaakov thought that perhaps G-d would appear to him in a prophecy while asleep, and when he saw that G-d did not do so, he then prepared gifts for Esau.

7) בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרָק לֵב פְּסוּק כֵּב

וְתַעֲבֹר הַמִּנְחָה עַל־פְּגָיו וְהוּא לֹן בַּלַּיְלָה־הַהוּא בְּמַחֲנֶה:

And so the gift went on ahead, while he remained in camp that night.

8) רִשׁ"י בְּרֵאשִׁית פָּרָק לֵב פְּסוּק כֵּב

עַל פְּנֵיו. כְּמוֹ לְפָנָיו, וְכֵן חֶמֶס וְשֵׁד יִשְׁמַע בָּהּ עַל פְּנֵי תְמִיד (ירמיהו ו'), וְכֵן הַמְכַעְסִים אֶתִּי עַל פְּנֵי (ישעיהו ס"ה); וּמ"א עַל פְּנֵיו, אִף הוּא שְׂרוּי בְּכַעַס, שֶׁהָיָה צָרִיךְ לְכָל־זֶה (בראשית רבה):

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The Midrash connects the word פניו in פניו על פניו with פנים anger — he (Jacob) was also in an angry mood that it should be necessary for him to do all this (Genesis Rabbah 76:8).

9) Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik, “Worship of the Heart,” p. 35

When man is in need and prays, God listens. One of God’s attributes is *shomea tefillah*: “He who listens to prayer.” Let us note that Judaism has never promised that God accepts all prayer. The efficacy of prayer is not the central term of inquiry in our philosophy of *avodah she-ba-lev*. Acceptance of prayer is a hope, a vision, a wish, a petition, but not a principle or a premise. The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately and the miraculous community embracing finite man and his Creator is born. The basic function of prayer is not its practical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man.