



Likkutei Sichos

Translated by Rabbi Moishy Goldman
Edited by Rabbis Eliezer Robbins and Lazer Danzinger

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Prayer -- The Craft of the Avos

A note on the translation: Great effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while at the same time striving for readability. However, the translation carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists. Feedback is always appreciated!

1. As the Torah continues to describe the Jews' exodus from Egypt and their subsequent pursuit by the Egyptians, our *parsha* relates: "Pharaoh drew near, and the children of Israel raised their eyes, and behold! The Egyptians were advancing after them. They were very frightened, and the children of Israel cried out to Hashem."¹ Rashi quotes the words "and they cried out," and comments: "They adopted the craft of their *avos*²."

We need to understand:

- What difficulty exists in the *posuk*³ that compels Rashi to make this comment? Seemingly, the meaning of the *posuk* is clear: When the Jewish people realized their predicament, "the Egyptians were advancing after them", they cried out and prayed to be saved.
- We cannot explain this by saying that Rashi intends to negate the interpretation of "they cried out" as meaning "they complained" (which would explain why they later said, in the next *posuk*, "what is this that you've done to us?") for then Rashi should have specifically precluded that interpretation by saying "...and they cried out' -- **they prayed**, seizing the craft of their ancestors", yet he doesn't do this..
- On the other hand, if there is a need to explain the reason why they cried out and *prayed* to Hashem, then Rashi ought to have clarified this in the first instance of the Jewish people crying out to Hashem in prayer, which occurs in Parshas Shemos: "...and they cried out, and their cry ascended to Hashem from the labor."⁴ (And in that instance, it is obvious that the intention is that they also cried out in prayer to Hashem, and they did not simply cry as a natural response to the pain and suffering of slavery, for the *posuk* there already mentioned how "the Jewish people sighed from the labor".)
- A general point: A craft is a person's permanent occupation. How can Rashi describe prayer as "**the craft** of their ancestors"? Additionally, the

¹ Shemos 14:10

² The term "avos" refers to the patriarchs of the Jewish people: Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov.

³ = A verse in the Torah.

⁴ Shemos 2:23

craft of the *avos*, according to the plain meaning of the text,⁵ was shepherding sheep, as described in the Torah.

2. Rashi then continues to demonstrate how prayer is the craft of our *avos*:
“Regarding Avraham the *pasuk* states: ‘Avraham rose early in the morning to the place where he had **stood** before Hashem.’ Regarding Yitzchak it states: “...to **speak** in the field’. Regarding Yaakov it states: ‘and he **arrived** at the place’.⁶
Rashi indicates that the terms “stood”, “to speak” and “arrived” all allude to prayer.

At first glance, Rashi’s use of these proof-texts is not understood: Why does Rashi bring proofs from *pesukim* where prayer is merely alluded to, as opposed to *pesukim* that explicitly refer to the *avos* praying?

The following *pesukim*, which Rashi did **not** bring, clearly refer to the *avos* praying. Regarding Avraham it states in parshas Lech Lecha, in the *pasuk* preceding that which is quoted by Rashi, “..and he built an altar there, and **he called in the name of Hashem**”. (Alternatively, Rashi could have quoted the previous *posuk* “he built a mizbeach to Hashem who had appeared to him”). The *posuk* actually quoted by Rashi, “to the place where he had **stood**” is stated in the story of Sedom and Amora. Earlier in that same story, the Torah describes in great length and detail how Avraham pleaded and prayed incessantly on behalf of Sedom and Amora. Yet Rashi doesn’t quote these actual prayers to prove his point, instead choosing to quote the end of the story after the destruction of the cities, which only includes an allusion to prayer, “the place where he had **stood**.”

Furthermore, in the Mechilta⁷, which according to the printers of Rashi is the source for Rashi’s comment⁸, the prior *posuk* “and he built a Mizbeach...” is brought as a proof-text, and not the *posuk* that Rashi quotes.

⁹[We cannot prove from the difference between Rashi’s proof-text and that of the Mechilta, that Rashi found a second, unknown version of the Mechilta [though

⁵ In the original, “*p’shuto shel mikra*,” often referred to as “*pshat*.” Rashi states in his commentary to Bereishis 3:8: “I have come only to give the plain meaning of the Torah.”

⁶ Rashi, Shemos 14:10

⁷ Mechilta is a *halachic* midrash on the book of Shemos.

⁸ The Rebbe notes in fn 11 that he believes the true source is Midrash Tanchuma, for two reasons: 1. The wording is a closer match. 2. In the following Rashi, he quotes from Tanchuma; why would he jump from Mechilta to Tanchuma so quickly? Tanchuma also quotes from Lech Lecha, but the later *posuk* (13:4)!

⁹ Parentheses in the original.

even in such a case we could ask why Rashi chose the unknown version, and not the common one], since Rashi did not actually quote the Mechilta; rather, the intent of Rashi's commentary is to explain the *pshat* of the posuk. Thus, Rashi adjusted the wording from the Mechilta to better align with the simple meaning of the *posuk* at hand (as is Rashi's custom in many instances)].

Similarly regarding Yitzchak, we find an explicit *posuk* at the beginning of Parshas Toldos "and Yitzchak prayed -- vaye'tar,"¹⁰ which Rashi explains to mean "He prayed exceedingly, and begged Hashem with prayer" on behalf of his wife, Rivkah.

So too, regarding Yaakov, who the text explicitly describes as praying in Parshas Vayishlach: "Please save me from my brother..."¹¹

In summary, all these Pesukim plainly state that the *avos* prayed, and not only in an indirect allusion, as in the *pesukim* quoted by Rashi. Why did Rashi choose to quote *pesukim* which only **allude** to the *avos* praying, rather than employing direct proofs from the *chumash*, which **describe** the prayer of the *avos*?

3. The explanation is as follows: In our *parsha*, upon being chased by the Egyptians, the Jewish people cried out. There is a difficulty in the posuk which Rashi addresses, regarding the words "they cried out": What grounds were there for **prayer** and **crying out**? Hashem had already promised that the Jewish people would come to Eretz Yisroel, to the extent "the Jewish people went out *b'yad ramah* -- triumphantly" (even though "Pharaoh chased after the Jewish people"). The difficulty lies here: If they believed in Hashem's promise, there is no need to pray. If they didn't believe (for they saw that "Mitzraim was chasing after them" and the sea was before them; and thus they had doubts and lacked faith in Hashem), what point is there in praying to Hashem?

Rashi, therefore, understood that they did have faith in Hashem, and the meaning of "they seized the craft of their ancestors", is that they prayed in the same manner and for the same reason the *avos* prayed. The *avos* did not only pray in a time of actual crisis, or other situations which naturally bring a person to pray to Hashem, but rather **this was their craft**, it was a fixture of their behavior, praying to Hashem at all times, as Rashi proves by quoting the *pesukim* which he does, as we will see. (In his commentary with regard to Bilaam and the Jewish

¹⁰ Bereishis 25:21

¹¹ Bereishis 32:10

people, Rashi reiterates that prayer was the craft of the Jewish people.¹²⁾

This was also how the Jewish people conducted themselves being children of the *avos*. They too prayed to Hashem, although they had already been promised by Hashem that they would arrive in Eretz Yisroel, seemingly making prayer for their safety of their journey to Eretz Yisroel unnecessary.

Regarding the statements of the Jewish people, such as in the episode mentioned in the following *pesukim*, in which the Jewish people said to Moshe, “are there no graves in Egypt... what have you done to us... it would be better for us to serve Mitzrayim...” these took place after they had cried out to Hashem and hadn’t been answered, and only at that point did they begin to complain.

We can also say that the above statements did not stem from a lack of faith in Hashem (for they had faith in Hashem, and thus they did not intend to complain), but rather they spoke this way due to the pressure of their situation. It is the nature of people who are in a crisis to speak from a place of pain without realizing what they are saying, as Chazal say, “A person is not held responsible for what he says while in distress.”¹³⁾ Rashi explains that a person in distress does not speak out of wickedness, although he does not speak wisely. However, the Jewish people had full faith in Hashem’s promise, as clearly stated a few *pesukim* later in Rashi on the *posuk* “tell the Jewish people that they should travel”. Rashi comments, “the merit of their ancestors, along with their merit, and **the faith they expressed in Me** makes them worthy.” Thus it is clear that the Jewish people believed in Hashem, and because of this faith, they were deemed worthy of the miracle of *kriyas yam suf*, the splitting of the sea.

4. Now we can understand why Rashi chose those specific *pesukim* to support the notion that the *avos* were constantly engaged in prayer, as a “craft.” The *pesukim* that explicitly refer to the *avos* praying were **not** brought by Rashi as prooftexts, as each of those prayers were motivated by specific needs, and are not emblematic of the *avos*’ prayers as a **craft**. Avraham’s prayer in Parshas Lech Lecha was prompted by a special reason, as Rashi himself points out: “He prophesied that his sons would stumble there... and he prayed there on their behalf”. Similarly in the previous *posuk*, his prayer was a form of thanksgiving, as Rashi himself remarks, “He prayed for the tidings of children and the tidings of Eretz Yisroel”. His prayer for the people of Sodom and Amora, was for the

¹² Bamidbar 31:8

¹³ Bava Basra 16b

purpose of saving them from destruction. Similarly, the prayer of Yitzchak at the beginning of Parshas Toldos was for the purpose of a special request - that his wife Rivkah be blessed with children. And so too for Yaakov: he beseeched Hashem to, “please save me from my brother’s hand..”

Rashi therefore quotes these pesukim “where he **stood**...”, “Yitzchak went out to **speak** in the field”, “and he **arrived** at the place.” In all these instances, there were no specific circumstances that brought the avos to pray; this demonstrates that prayer was a **craft**, a constant occupation, even when lacking a specific impetus that would inspire them to pray to Hashem.

It is therefore obvious that this explanation, that prayer was their **craft** whereby they followed in the footsteps of the avos, would not apply to the prayers of the Jewish People in *parshas* Shemos (“...and they cried out, and their cry ascended to Hashem from the labor.”¹⁴), since their prayer, in a time of crisis, was of the “specific request” variety. They prayed for Hashem to save them from their troubles. Similarly in Parshas Bo: “and the people kneeled”¹⁵ to Hashem, there was a specific reason for this prayer, as Rashi mentions there, that their prayer was “upon receiving the tidings of redemption...”

5. The lesson from this in a person’s Divine service: prayer, as well as Torah learning and *mitzvah* observance, must be in the manner of a **craft**. Thus, Torah learning must be not merely to know what one must do and what one must refrain from doing. Torah must be learned for the sake of studying Torah itself. Similarly with regard to performing *mitzvos* and the *avoda* of prayer, one should not engage in them for the sake of some practical purpose or goal, but rather do so as a **craft**, demonstrating that one’s entire identity and *raison d’etre* is to serve Hashem, as discussed above.

A similar approach must be taken with regard to working with others: Don’t be concerned if someone appears to lack appreciation for Torah and prayer. Realize that at his core and essence, Torah and prayer is the **craft** of every Jew, for this is the **craft** of the avos of every one of us. The outward appearance is deceptive, for his **craft** is concealed within him, and our task is merely to elicit it from its hidden state into a revealed state in his conscious self.

¹⁴ Shemos 2:23

¹⁵ Shemos 12:27

-From a sicha on Shabbos Parshas Beshalach 5735 (1975)