

Parshas Beshalach

Our Profession

As the Jewish people were leaving Egypt, they noticed Pharaoh pursuing them with his army, and they cried out to G-d. This Sicha gives a deeper understanding into what this prayer to G-d was all about, based on Rashi’s commentary on the verse.

After the Israelites leave the land of Egypt, Pharaoh has a change of heart and chases after them.

When Pharaoh finally reached the Israelites, they cried to G-d.

Text 1

Pharaoh drew near, and the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold! The Egyptians were advancing after them. They were very frightened, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord.

Shemos 14:10

Rashi explains the action that the Israelites took when faced with the Egyptians as follows:

Text 2

They seized the profession of their ancestors [i.e., they prayed]. Concerning Avraham, it [Scripture] says¹: “to the place where he had stood before the Lord.” Concerning Yitzchak, [it is stated²] “to converse in the field.” Concerning Yaakov³, “And he encountered the place.”

Rashi, ibid

This commentary requires clarification:

- 1) What is the difficulty in this verse that warranted an explanation? The verse seems clear; when the Jewish people faced the Egyptians, they prayed to G-d.
- 2) The term “crying” can be an expression of crying out in accusation. While it may seem possible to explain that Rashi’s intent is to say that in this case their crying meant prayer as opposed to accusing G-d of treating them unjustly, this is not the case. Were that to have been what Rashi’s intent, he would have explained that clearly in his commentary. Instead of Rashi saying, “They seized the profession of their ancestors,” he would have said, “they *prayed*, and seized the profession of their ancestors.” Being that Rashi did not add the word “pray,” it is clear that he was not focusing on this point.
- 3) If it is indeed important to define the word “crying” to mean prayer, Rashi should have done so the first time this word is mentioned, in the Torah, and not have waited until this verse. Already in the Torah portion of Shemos, this language is used in the following expression:

¹ Bereishis 19:27.

² Bereishis 24:63.

³ Bereishis, 28:11

Text 3

Now it came to pass in those many days that the king of Egypt died, and the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out, and their cry ascended to G-d from the labor.

Shemos 2:23

In this case, it would seem appropriate for Rashi to clarify that the word crying here would refer to prayer, for it does not refer to crying out of suffering. This could be seen from the fact that an expression of pain was already expressed earlier⁴ in the same verse, in the words, “the children of Israel sighed from the labor.” It is obvious then, that the meaning of “and they cried out” was that they prayed. If this is so, why does Rashi not explain the crying to mean prayer until the verse “and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord” which is situated later in the Torah?

- 4) Rashi says that the children of Israel “seized the *profession* of their ancestors.” How is it appropriate to give prayer the term “*profession*?” The profession of the Patriarchs was shepherding sheep, not prayer.

Hinted expressions

Rashi continues his commentary in proving that prayer was “the profession of their ancestors” by citing three examples in the Torah, which mention the prayer of each of the Patriarchs: Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

It is puzzling however, why Rashi would choose these specific proof texts to support his statement of prayer being the profession of each

of the Patriarchs, since these verses express their prayer only in a hinted manner. The expression of prayer in all three of these verses is rather vague.

There are far more relevant verses found in the Torah, which articulate that the Patriarchs prayed, in a more direct manner than expressed in the verses brought by Rashi.

Avraham’s prayer

Regarding Avraham, Rashi brings the verse:

Text 4

And Avraham arose early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the Lord.

Bereishis 19:27

This verse speaks of Avraham’s return to the place where he had prayed for the salvation of Sedom and Amarah. “To the place where he had stood before the Lord,” is expressive of the concept of prayer.

There are numerous questions though on Rashi’s choice of this specific verse:

- A) He could have cited a more explicit expression of Avraham’s prayer, which appears even earlier in the Torah:

Text 5

And he moved from there to the mountain, east of Beis-El, and he pitched his tent; Beis-El was to the west and Ai was to the east, and there he built an altar to the Lord, and he called in the name of the Lord.

Bereishis 12:8

⁴ Shemos 2:23.

The words “and he called in the name of the Lord” explicitly express the concept of prayer, whereas the words, “to the place where he had stood before the Lord,” merely hint to it.

B) Even if Rashi wished to quote the instance of prayer by the story of Sedom and Amorah, it would appear more logical to cite the verses which *actually* speak of Avraham’s excessive beseeching to the Almighty to save the inhabitants of those cities. These verses demonstrate that Avraham prayed when faced with adversity.

Instead, however, Rashi brings the verse in which Avraham *returned* to the place at which he had prayed, rather than the verses that deal with his prayer at length.

C) The source that is brought for Rashi’s entire commentary is the Mechilta. Rashi, however, veers away from the proof texts that the Mechilta uses, and instead brings a variant text. There, it does indeed bring the verse found earlier in the Torah as the support for Avraham’s habit of praying: “And he built a *mizbeach* (altar) for G-d there, and he called in the name of the Lord.” For what reason does Rashi feel compelled to choose a different verse, which expresses Avraham’s prayer in a more obscure manner?

Yitzchak’s prayer

Concerning Yitzchak, Rashi employs the supportive verse:

Text 6

And Yitzchak went forth to converse (לשוח) in the field towards evening, and he lifted his eyes and saw, and behold, camels were approaching.

Bereishis 24:63

The meaning of “to converse (לשוח) in the field,” means to pray, as Rashi notes there.

Text 7

(לשוח) Converse is an expression of prayer, as in⁵: “He pours out his prayer (שיחו).”

Rashi, ibid

In this instance, we need additional explanation in order to understand that Yitzchak’s conversing here was actually referring to prayer, as opposed to its standard meaning of conversation.

Why then, did Rashi relate to Yitzchak’s prayer in an obscure manner, instead of using a verse that clearly articulates his praying to G-d?

Rashi should have rather included the direct instance of prayer, in which the Torah expresses the Yitzchak’s supplications to the Almighty.

Text 8

And Yitzchak entreated to the Lord opposite his wife because she was barren, and the Lord accepted his prayer, and Rivka his wife conceived.

Bereishis 25:21

⁵ Tehillim 102:1.

The words “and Yitzchak entreated⁶” articulate Yitzchak’s prayer in a direct manner, whereas the text that Rashi brought is more obscure. The latter refers to the time when Yitzchak prayed at great length for his wife Rivka to bear children. Why indeed does Rashi use the text, “And Yitzchak went forth to converse,” instead of the verse that expresses his prayers directly?

Yaakov’s prayer

The same question can be asked regarding Yaakov as well. Rashi brings his support of Yaakov’s prayer from the words which speak of his arrival to Charan, after fleeing from his brother Lavan.

Text 9

And he encountered the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place.

Bereishis 28:11

Rashi explains that the meaning of the words “and he encountered the place” refer to prayer, as opposed to their literal meaning. He explains, how in addition to the simple meaning that Yaakov reached his destination, this phrase also refers to his prayer to the Almighty.

Text 10

Heb. ויפגע, as in⁷: “and it reached (ופגע) Yericho”; “and it reached (ופגע) Dabbeshes⁸.” Our Rabbis⁹ interpreted it [the word ויפגע] as an expression of prayer, as in¹⁰: “And do not entreat (תפגע)

⁶ Bereishis, 25:21.

⁷ Yehoshua, 16:7.

⁸ Ibid, 19:11.

me,” and this teaches us that he [Yaakov] instituted the evening prayer.

Rashi, Bereishis 28:11

While the literal meaning of the verse is that Yaakov “encountered the place,” Rashi explains that it actually refers to Yaakov’s prayer.

It would seem more logical to bring the expression in regards to Yaakov’s clear prayer to the Almighty when he heard of his brother Esav’s impending arrival, after their long period of separation. There, the Torah states Yaakov’s plea to the G-d as such:

Text 11

Now deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I am afraid of him, lest he come and strike me, [and strike] a mother with children.

Bereishis 32:13

In the above verse, the prayer of Yaakov is explicitly stated, instead of being merely hinted to in the word “encountered,” in the former verse that Rashi brings.

Hence, in all three supportive verses that Rashi brings here, the citation only describes the prayer of the Patriarchs in a *hinted* manner. Why would Rashi choose to bring these verses specifically, rather than the more obvious ones?

The real question

From all of the above questions on his commentary, it is clear that Rashi had a different

⁹ Bereishis Rabbah 68:9; Berachos 26b.

¹⁰ Yirmiyahu 7:16.

problem with the verse, which could only be answered through the support of the verses that Rashi indeed brought.

Rashi was bothered as to why the reaction of the Jewish people, when faced with Pharaoh at their heels, was to pray, as this reaction seems like a conundrum.

If the Jewish people were confident in their promise from G-d to take them out of the land of Egypt, why would they show fear at this time and cry out? G-d had already assured them through Moshe that he would ultimately bring them to the Land of Israel:

Text 12

And I said, 'I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Chittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Chivvites, and the Yevusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.

Shemos 3:17

Why were they scared of Pharaoh, when the Almighty had already assured them that He would bring them to the land flowing with milk and honey?

Conversely, if the Israelites prayed to G-d because they did *not* trust His word, their crying seems out of place as well. If they had lost their faith in G-d's assurance and indeed were fearful that Pharaoh would overtake them, why would they then pray to the same G-d that they weren't trusting in?

If they trusted G-d would save them why did they pray to Him, and if they *didn't* trust in Him, why would they pray to a G-d that they didn't trust?!

Rashi therefore resolves this point by explaining, that their act of crying out to G-d was similar to

prayer by the forefathers; the Patriarchs did not only turn to G-d in prayer when faced with adversary, but prayer was rather a "profession" of theirs.

They did not only pray when they had something specifically to pray for. They were in the habit of praying often.

So too, the Jewish people also prayed because it was their nature and "profession," and not because they were worried about the outcome.

The Jewish people did not lose trust that G-d would save them from the hands of Pharaoh, but even though they trusted in their salvation, they prayed, as this is what Jews are inclined to do.

In the footsteps of their fathers

In each of the scenarios of the Patriarchs that Rashi cited, they were not in a stressful situation where they needed to pray for G-d's salvation. Rather, each of those instances were in situations where there was nothing specific for them to pray for. It portrays their habit and "profession" of turning to G-d in prayer in all times.

In the same way, the Jewish people were indeed confident that the Almighty would fulfill his promise to take them out of Egypt, and that they wouldn't be harmed by Pharaoh and his army. However, being that their instinct was to turn to G-d at all times, they as well lifted their voices to the Almighty at this time, as Pharaoh and his troops advanced.

The trust of the Jewish people

It does seem though, that the Jewish people did lose some of their faith in the Almighty. As the verse tells us very soon after this time, that the Jewish people complained about G-d and did not believe that he would save them. The Torah relates:

Text 13

They said to Moshe, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done to us to take us out of Egypt? Isn't this the thing [about] which we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert.’?”

Shemos 14:11-12

While this verse may indeed express a lack of faith, this was after they had turned to G-d and yet they hadn't received a response. Initially, they did trust in G-d, but once they had prayed and G-d had still not saved them, they began to lose hope.

In addition, it is also possible to explain that these words “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert,” were not an expression of a lack of faith, but rather an expression of their exasperation, and were words that they did not truly mean.

The Sages explain this idea as follows:

Text 14

Iyov speaks without knowledge, and his words are without wisdom¹¹. Raba said: “This teaches that a man is not held responsible for what he says when in distress.”

Talmud, Bava Basra 16b

When a person is overwhelmed, they often say things that they do not truly mean. The same too with the Jewish people—although they truly

¹¹ Iyov 34:3-5.

trusted in G-d and His deliverance, they still said words that implied otherwise.

We can see that G-d Himself attests to the faith that the Israelites had in Him. In His instruction to the Israelites to travel onward toward the direction of the sea, G-d instructed Moshe¹²: “Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel.” Rashi explains these words as an expression of the faith that the Jewish people had in the Almighty:

Text 15

They have nothing to do but to travel, for the sea will not stand in their way. The merit of their forefathers and their own [merit], and the **faith** they had in Me when they came out [of Egypt] are sufficient to split the sea for them.

Rashi, Shemos 14:15

G-d says that the merit that the Jewish people had was their faith in G-d. Their words that seemed to express otherwise were merely words said in frustration, when they were not in a proper state of mind.

Three verses

According to this understanding, we can appreciate why Rashi specifically brought the three verses that he did, in regard to the prayers of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

Each of these scenarios brings support to Rashi's statement that prayer was a “profession” by the Patriarchs, being that they portray the Patriarchs' tendency to turn to G-d frequently in their lives, not only praying to Him in specific times of need.

¹² Shemos 14:15.

The other verses which Rashi does not bring, all describe times where the Patriarchs turned to G-d for a very specific reason. Rashi therefore chose not to bring those verses that express the Patriarchs prayer directly, and instead brought the verses that express the Patriarchs “profession” to pray at all times.

Avraham: the verse which tells us, “and he called in the name of the Lord,” was not prayer for its own sake, but for a specific purpose.

His goal was to pray for his descendants who would later transgress at that very spot. This example of prayer was thus not one expressed as his “profession.”

Text 16

He prophesied that his sons were destined to stumble there because of the iniquity of Achan, and he prayed there for them.

Rashi, Bereishis 12:8

Similarly, when Avraham beseeched G-d to spare the cities of Sedom and Amarah, he was also obviously praying to accomplish a particular goal, and not merely turning to the Almighty as a “profession.”

Yitzchak: In the same way, Yitzchak’s entreaty to the Almighty for his wife to bear children was a prayer for a specific need, and also not a prayer expressed as his “profession.”

Yaakov: Yaakov’s prayer for the Almighty to save him from his brother Esav, was a supplication for salvation, as opposed to expressing his regular occurrence of prayer.

Therefore, Rashi brings the other three verses, each of which depict more everyday examples. In these instances, the Patriarchs also prayed to G-d, being that this was their “profession” and

something they were accustomed to doing often.

With this understanding of Rashi’s original query, it is also evident why Rashi only brought his commentary regarding the Jewish people’s cries here, as opposed to the earlier time that their cries were mentioned, regarding the tremendous burdens that they suffered with in Egypt.

When the Jewish people “sighed from the labor, and they cried out,” their prayers were due to the burden of their labor. They were praying as a result of certain distress, and therefore Rashi did not find it necessary to explain the intent of their prayer.

Only later, by the crossing of the sea, when the Jewish people cried out *despite* their trust in the Almighty, did Rashi find it necessary to explain that they followed the footsteps of their forefathers and prayed for no specific purpose.

They seized the profession of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov and prayed, although they had trust in the Almighty.

The lesson

Each one of us must realize that the ultimate “profession” of the Jewish people is to serve G-d in prayer, in learning Torah and in doing *mitzvos*.

When we pray, when we study Torah, or when we fulfill any mitzvah, we must not only perform these for a specific purpose, but we should do so because this is our *profession*.

We should pray because this is our identity—to connect to the Almighty! We should learn Torah not only for the purpose of understanding which activities we should be doing or which we should stay away from.

Learning Torah and prayer themselves, should be our profession, being that our entire identity

is G-dly and it is in a Jew's nature learn and pray to G-d.

In the same way, we must realize that the Torah life is the profession of each and every Jew, no matter what they may appear to be on the outside; no matter if it may seem that this is not their real identity.

Even if externally, a person may not seem to be the type who is involved with Torah and *mitzvos*,

we must realize that the Patriarchs bequeathed this "profession" to each and every one of their descendants; to each and every Jewish soul. We only need to reveal this desire from its hidden state.

(Based on Likutei Sichos 11, Beshalach 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel.

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