



5780 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Beshalach / פרשת בשלח

The Dual Approach: Prayer and Deed for Yerushalayim

When the Jewish people turn around and realize that the Egyptians are pursuing them, they get startled and scared. Moshe responds by chastising them and then turning to God in prayer. In this chaotic moment, God interjects and surprisingly tells Moshe: “Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the children of Israel and let them travel.”¹ Now is a time for action, not prayer alone.

While commentators suggest different shades of meaning regarding God’s precise intent, the central theme is that in times of crisis prayer alone is often not sufficient. While of course we are entirely dependent on God’s help, we are also commanded to invest our own effort and work towards a solution. Bittahon (trust in God) and hishtadlut (human effort) go hand in hand in the Jewish tradition.

This dual approach to achieving our hopes and dreams is apparent regarding Yerushalayim. On the one hand, Jews have prayed daily for millennium for God to return to His holy city. Our liturgy is permeated with prayers for God to rebuild Yerushalayim both materially and spiritually. Three times a day in Shemona Esreih, every time a person recites the grace after meal, at the climax of the Seder, we pray for God to rebuild Yerushalayim.

This theme of ceaselessly petitioning God on this point is already apparent in the books of the prophets. For example, Yeshayahu declares: “For the sake of Zion, I will not be silent, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest.”² Here, Yeshayahu does not mention concrete action but a torrent of powerful words on behalf of his beloved city. Similarly, King Dovid states: “Request the welfare of Jerusalem; may those who love you enjoy tranquility.”³ We must pray for the welfare of Yerushalayim.

¹ Shemot 14:15. Translations are adapted from Chabad.org.

² Yeshayahu 62:1.

³ Tehillim 122:6.



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But prayerful words are not enough. When speaking of the exile, Yirmiyahu laments: “for they called you an outcast, that is Zion whom no one seeks out.”⁴ The word “*doreish*” or “seek out” implies an activist stance. We must take action on behalf of Zion. From here the Talmud derives that we must adopt specific practices to ensure that the memory of a built Yerushalayim stays fresh in our minds.

But “seeking out” Zion entails more than remembering the past. Rav Tzvi Hirsh Kalisher of the 19th century sought to rebuild a mizbe’ah on Temple Mount and reinstate parts of the sacrificial service. He published his ideas in a book called “*Derishat Tzion*” or “The Seeking Out of Zion.” Clearly his form of “seeking out” was more than actions to trigger memory, but also actions to move towards a glorious future. It is this form of *derishat tzion* that motivated many of the early Religious-Zionists.

In short, we must approach every one of life’s challenges – from being pursued by an enemy army to the rebuilding of Yerushalayim - with the dual approach of trust in God/prayer and taking concrete steps of human initiative. May our integrated approach bear fruits and may we soon see the return of God to Yerushalayim.

⁴ Yirmiyahu 30:17.