



5780 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayigash / פרשת ויגש

Approaching Prayer in Yerushalayim

Last week's parsha concludes with Yehuda pleading with the viceroy of Egypt to free Binyamin and our parsha picks up with the middle of this conversation with Yehuda continuing to petition Yosef on Binyamin's behalf. It is for this reason that Chazal note that the problem inherent in the first phrase of the parsha: "And Yehuda approached [Yosef] and he said."¹ If Yehuda and Yosef were in the middle of a conversation then what is the nature of this approaching?

In response, the Midrash offers several possibilities for the meaning of "and he approached." One of them is: "The Sages say that "approaching" refers to prayer."² In other words, in the middle of his conversation with Yosef, Yehuda took a moment to approach God in prayer. While this midrash answers the textual anomaly, it raises a broader conceptual question. Why would the Torah refer to prayer with the word "approach"? Are there not clearer and more direct words to be used to refer to prayer?

One possible suggestion is that this midrash hones in on one of the key aspects of prayer. On a simple and literal level, prayer consists of singing God's praises and asking Him for one's material and spiritual wellbeing. However, on a more basic level, the part of the definition of prayer is simply standing before God. The very approaching God and the accompanying realization that one is standing before the King of Kings is an integral part of prayer. In fact, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik argued that if one says the words of prayer but does not have this consciousness of "approaching" God and standing before Him, then one's prayer is invalid.³

¹ Bereishit 44:18.

² Bereishit Rabbah 93:6.

³ Chiddushei HaGrach al HaRambam, hilchot tefilah.



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With this in mind, we can better understand the relationship between Yerushalayim and prayer. Prayers all around the world are directed to Yerushalayim. The Beit HaMikdash in Yerushalayim is referred to as the “house of prayer.” All of our prayers enter heaven through Yerushalayim which is “the gate of heaven.”⁴ What is the connection between Yerushalayim and prayer?

Perhaps the connection is in the approaching. When one enters Yerushalayim one enters God’s home and stands before His presence. This coming close to God and realization of His presence is itself part and parcel of the very definition of prayer. It follows then, that prayer as a whole has a special meaning and potency when said from inside Yerushalayim.

Let our prayers for and in Yerushalayim be answered!

⁴ Introduction to the Siddur of the Shelah.