

# Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778\*

## Chapter XLV: Va'etchanan (Deut. 3:23–7:11)

### Essay 2. Prayer is greater than good deeds

**ברכות** פרק ה' אומר ר' אלעזר גדולה תפלה יותר ממעשים טובים, שאין גדול במעשים טובים יותר ממשה רבינו עליו השלום, ואף על פי כן לא נענה אלא בתפלה, שנאמר "אל־תוסף דבר אלי עוד", וקמיה ליה "עלה ראש הפסגה". וכתבו התוספות, גדולה תפלה ממעשים טובים בלא תפלה עכ"ל.

At the beginning of the parasha, Moses recounts that he pleaded with the L-rd to allow him to “cross over and see the good Land on the other side of the Jordan.”<sup>1</sup> G-d didn't allow Moses to cross over, but did allow him to at least see the Land of Israel.<sup>2</sup>

It is brought in tractate **Berachot, chapter 5:**

**Rabbi Elazar said: Prayer is greater than good deeds, as there was none greater in good deeds than our teacher, Moses, peace be upon him. Nevertheless, [his request to see the Land of Israel] was only answered through prayer, as it is said, “Never again speak to Me of this matter,”<sup>3</sup> and adjacent to that, “Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east.”<sup>4</sup>**

- Berachot 32b

**It is written in the Tosafot, “Prayer is greater than good deeds without prayer.”**

מקשים היכי יליף מפאן דגדולה תפלה ממעשים טובים, דילמא שוים הם, והא דלא נענה עד שהתפלל, משום דבמעשים טובים לחוד לא סגי, וגם בתפלה לחוד לא סגי, עד דאיכא תרתי בהדי הדדי, ומגלן דגדולה תפלה יותר ממעשים טובים. ועוד הקשה הרי"ף שהניח הראיה עיקרית שהיא "ואתחנן אליה" וכתוב "עלה ראש הפסגה", והביא ראיה מפסוק שהיא מורה הפך, פי שם נאמר "אל־תוסף דבר אלי", דמשמע שלא שמע תפלתו עכ"ל. וגם על פירוש התוספות קשה, דמאי קשיא להו שפירש פן דהא פשיטא דגדולה תפלה ממעשים טובים איירי בלא תפלה, דאיך סלקא דעתך דאיירי בתפלה, שייהא דבר אהד עדיף משתי דברים.

**People ask how is it derived from here in Berachot that prayer is greater than good deeds. Perhaps they are equal, and [Moses' request] wasn't answered until he prayed because**

\* English translation: Copyright © 2024 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are at <https://www.zstorah.com>

<sup>1</sup> Deut. 3:23–25.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 3:26–27.

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 3:26.

<sup>4</sup> Deut. 3:27.

good deeds alone aren't sufficient, and also prayer alone isn't enough, until both accompany each other? So how do we know that prayer is greater than good deeds?

Also, the Rif questions this statement of Rabbi Elazar, for it seems that the principal proof rests on the verse that, "I pleaded with the L-rd," and then it is written, "Go up to the summit of Pisgah." I.e., it would seem that Moses' partial victory of being able to see the Land was a result of his pleading with G-d. [Rabbi Elazar] instead brings a proof from a verse that teaches the opposite, because there it is said, "Never again speak to Me of this matter," which sounds as though He didn't hear his prayer.<sup>5</sup>

Also, the explanation of the Tosafot is difficult, for what is their question that they explained thus? It's obvious that the Rabbi Elazar's statement that "prayer is greater than good deeds" is talking about good deeds without prayer. For how would it enter your mind that [Rabbi Elazar] is talking about good deeds with prayer? It wouldn't make sense to say that one thing, prayer alone, should be greater than two things, good deeds with prayer.

ולדין נראה פשוט ביאור פוננת ר' אלעזר בדרבך זו, דגיש לדקדק מה צורף לו להביא ראיה שגדולה תפלה ממעשים טובים ממשה רבינו, והלא הוא דבר ברור שהקב"ה שומע תפלת כל פה ואף מן הנכרים. וגנבא אפום מתרתא רחמנא קרי, והקב"ה שומע תפלתו אף על פי שהוא רשע, ואילו במעשים טובים צריך שיהיה מלא מצות ומעשים טובים, דאי לא הכי בטלי במיעוטיהו, ומכל שכן אם יהיה עברין או מומר לדבר אחד סס ושלום, שמעשיו הטובים אינם נחשבים לכולם.

For us, the explanation of the intent of Rabbi Elazar in this way appears obvious. We need to check what need there was for him to bring a proof from our teacher Moses that prayer is greater than good deeds. For isn't it a clear matter that the Holy One, Blessed be He, hears the prayers of every mouth, even from the gentiles? "The thief at the entrance of the tunnel calls on the Merciful One for help,"<sup>6</sup> and the Holy One, Blessed be He, hears his prayer even if he is wicked.

If there are good deeds, it's necessary that one be full of mitzvot and good deeds for G-d to answer him. For if that's not so, [his good deeds] would be invalidated because they are few. In any case, if he is a sinner, or an apostate regarding one thing, G-d forbid, then his good deeds would be considered as nothing.

אלא ודאי צריך לומר שפוננת ר' אלעזר היא לומר, שגדולה תפלה לבדה יותר מכל המעשים טובים שבעולם חוץ מתפלה, וזהו שכתבו התוספות בלא תפלה דהכא, מיירי במי שמקנים כל המצות אלא שאינו מתפלל על צרכיו. ומשום הכי הוצרך להביא ראיה דוקא ממשה, ודייק שפיר לומר שאין לה גדול במעשים טובים יותר ממשה רבנו עליו השלום, ואף על פי כן לא נענה אלא בתפלה.

Rather, it's certainly necessary to say that the intent of Rabbi Elazar was to say that prayer alone is greater than all the good actions in the world without prayer. This is why the Tosafot wrote "without prayer," they were talking about one who fulfills all these mitzvot but

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Josiah ben Joseph Pinto (c. 1565–c. 1648), *Me'or Enayim*.

<sup>6</sup> Ein Yaakov on Berachot 63a.

who doesn't pray for his needs. Because of this, it's necessary to bring a proof specifically from Moses, and it's perfectly fine to say that there's no one greater in good deeds than Moses, peace be upon him, and nevertheless he was only answered through prayer.

וְהָיָה בְּתַפְלָתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה כְּתִיב "וְאֶתְחַנֵּן אֵלֶי-ה'" , וּפְרָשׁ רַשִׁי"י אֵף עַל פִּי שֵׁינֵשׁ לָהֶם לְצַדִּיקִים לְתִלּוֹת בְּמַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הַטּוֹבִים, אִין מְבַקְשִׁים מֵאֵת הַמְּקוֹם אֵלָּא מִתְּנַת חַנּוּם. וְהַקֵּב"ה אָמַר לוֹ "אֶל-תּוֹסֵף דְּבַר אֵלַי" לְפִי שֶׁהֵיָה רוֹצֵה שְׂמִימוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר, לֹא הָיָה רוֹצֵה נְמִי שְׂמִיתִפְלֵל כְּדֵי שְׂלֵא לְגַרְע כֹּחַ הַתְּפִלָּה, שְׂיֵאמְרוּ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַתְּפִלָּה אִין לָהּ כֹּחַ. וּמִכָּל מְקוֹם עָנָהוּ בְּתַפְלָתוֹ בְּמָה שְׂלֵא הָיָה נֹגֵד גְּזִירָתוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ, דְּאָמַר לוֹ "עֲלֵה רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה", דְּמִדְּסַמֵּיָהּ לְ"אֶל-תּוֹסֵף" מִשְׁמַע שְׂעוּהָ אָמַר לוֹ בְּנִכּוֹת הַתְּפִלָּה שְׂעוּשָׁה.

**Here in Moses' prayer it is written, "I pleaded with the L-rd," and Rashi explained, "Even though the righteous could have based a claim on their good deeds, they only requested from the Omnipresent an unearned gift." I.e., the righteous want to be answered based on prayer, and to have the reward for their mitzvot saved for the World-to-Come. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, "Never again speak to Me of this matter," because He wanted him to die in the wilderness, so that upon being resurrected, all those who had died in the wilderness would be able to enter the Land of Israel in Moses' merit.<sup>7</sup>**

**He also didn't want him to pray, so that he wouldn't cause a denigration of the power of prayer in the minds of others, such that the nations of the world would say that there was no power to prayer. Nevertheless, He answered his prayer in a way that wasn't against His decree, may He be blessed, for He said to him, "Go up to the summit of Pisgah." That is, because He juxtaposed that to "Never again speak to me," it means that He said that to him, offering Moses the chance to see the Land of Israel, in the merit of the prayer that he offered.**

I.e., the Rif had asked why Rabbi Elazar didn't base his proof on "I pleaded with the L-rd," The Zera Shimshon's explanation is that the follow-up, "Never again speak to Me of this matter," which was used for Rabbi Elazar's proof, reinforces the great power of prayer. G-d was telling Moses, "I have reasons for not wanting you to enter the Land of Israel, so I can't entirely answer your prayer. But if people see that you uttered a prayer and that it wasn't answered, they may discount the power of prayer. So stop praying."

וְקוּשָׁה עַל זֶה וְהָא אֵף אִם מֹשֶׁה יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה מִלְּהַתְּפִלֵּל מִשׁוּם "אֶל-תּוֹסֵף", מִכָּל מְקוֹם הוֹאִיל שֶׁגִּילָה רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁהֵיָה רוֹצֵה לְעֵבֹר אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן הָיָה לוֹ לְהַקֵּב"ה לְעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנוֹ מִתְּמַת מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים, כְּדִכְתִּיב "רְצוֹן-יִרְאִיו יַעֲשֶׂה", וּמָה תִּיֶקֶן הַקֵּב"ה שְׂלֵא יוֹסִיף לְהַתְּפִלֵּל, אֵלָּא וְדַאי שְׂמִכָּאן מוֹכַח שֶׁהַמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים אִין לָהֶם כֹּחַ כְּמוֹ הַתְּפִלָּה.

**A question on this is: Even if Moses had been silent and not prayed because G-d said, "Never again speak to Me of this matter," nevertheless, since he revealed his desire that he wanted to cross over the Jordan, shouldn't the Holy One, Blessed be He, fulfilled his desire because of his good deeds? As it is written, "He fulfills the wishes of those who fear Him."<sup>8</sup> That suggests that G-d will respond favorably to one who fulfils the mitzvot. So what did the**

<sup>7</sup> Deut. Rabbah 2:9.  
<sup>8</sup> Ps. 145:19.

**Holy One, Blessed be He, establish by forbidding him not to pray anymore?** I.e., we have said that G-d didn't want Moses to keep praying, for others might discount the efficacy of prayer. Why didn't G-d worry that by not granting all of Moses' requests, that people would also discount the efficacy of good deeds? **Rather, certainly from here it is proved that good deeds don't have the power of prayer.** I.e., even Moses' high level of good deeds couldn't overturn G-d's decree, but his prayer could have done so. Thus, G-d told Moses to stop praying. This is a proof that good deeds don't have the power of prayer.

ואם תאמר שאני משה שגילה דעתו שלא היה רוצה ליהנות משכר מצותיו, הא לא קשיא, שהרי לפי האמת אנו אין לנו לעבוד כדי לקבל פרס, אלא "ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתו" וכו' למי שעובד אותו בתמימות, ואם המעשים טובים היה להם כח כמו התפלה, היו עושים רצון צדיק בתורת חסד ורחמים נמי. ומדאמר ליה "אל-תוסף" שמע מינה, שהקפיד הקב"ה דוקא על התפלה לפי שגדולה תפלה ממעשים טובים. וניחא שפיר דלא מיתבי ראיה מ"נא-תחנן", שהרי אדרבא עיקר ראיתו היא מ"אל-תוסף" דוקא.

**If you'll say that Moses is different, that he revealed his thinking that he did not want to enjoy the reward of his mitzvot, that he wanted to preserve his reward for the World-to-Come, this isn't a difficulty, because the truth is that we are not to work to receive a reward. Rather, "your Employer is faithful"<sup>9</sup> to one who serves Him whole-heartedly. If good deeds had the power of prayer, the will of the righteous would be done out of the law of kindness. By saying to him, "Never again speak to Me of this matter," we hear from this, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, was especially stringent on prayer, as prayer is greater than good needs. It is fine that [Rabbi Elazar] didn't bring a proof from "I pleaded with the L-rd," for to the contrary, the main point of his proof was especially from "Never again speak to Me of this matter," that people shouldn't denigrate the power of prayer.**

\* \* \*

---

<sup>9</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:14.