

From Dream to Prayer: When God Asked Not To Be Affected

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Parashat VaYeitzei 5777

The verses that open *parashat* VaYeitzei constitute a response to the fundamental question—what is prayer? What is its meaning for the person who prays, and even more than that how does it affect the God to whom it is directed? In the way the verses are read by our Sages, they are so bold as to suggest that in fact prayer aspires to “touch”, “affect”, *lifgo*’a God; this Hebrew root is rich in meaning and we will spend this dvar Torah exploring it.

In this *parashah*, Ya’akov flees from his brother Esav. The *parashah* opens with a particular moment on this journey. It provides a picturesque description of Ya’akov’s setting up camp and setting the stage for his famous dream:

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בראשית כ"ח, יב-טו

"וַיִּפְגַּע בַּמָּקוֹם וַיֵּלֶן שָׁם כִּי בָּא הַשֹּׁמֶשׁ וַיָּקָח
מִאֲבָנֵי הַמָּקוֹם וַיִּשֶׂם מְרֹאשֹׁתָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב בַּמָּקוֹם
הַהוּא: וַיִּחְלֶם וְהִנֵּה סֹלֶם מַצֵּב אֶרְצָה וּרְאִישׁוֹ
מִגֵּיעַ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְהִנֵּה מַלְאָכֵי אֱלֹהִים עֹלִים
וַיִּרְדּוּ בּוֹ: וְהִנֵּה ה' נֹצֵב עָלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנִי ה'
אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָתְךָ אָבִיךָ... וְהִנֵּה אֲנִי עִמָּךְ

וַיִּשְׁמְרֵהוּ בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר-חָלָם וַהֲשִׁיבֵהוּ אֶל-הָאֲדָמָה הַזֹּאת כִּי לֹא אָעִזָּבֻךְ עַד אֲשֶׁר
אִם-עָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבַּרְתִּי לָךְ:

Bereishit 28:12-15

He came upon (*va-yifga*) a certain place and slept there... He had a dream; a ladder was set on the ground and its top reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it. And the Lord was standing upon it and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring... Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

The dream describes a divine realm and God’s words to Ya’akov there. The verses which frame the dream depict Ya’akov before he experiences the dream and his reaction following it. Before the dream Ya’akov is preparing himself for bed: “He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place” (v. 11).

The reaction to the dream happens in two separate scenes. First, Ya’akov wakes up, ostensibly in the middle of the night, the second, is when he wakes up the next morning, “Early in the morning.” When Ya’akov first wakes up, presumably because he is shaken by his dream, he has a realization as a result, “He said, ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place’” (v. 16). The realization is described against the background of the obliviousness that preceded it: “And I did not know it!” This realization also comes with a specific feeling of fear, translated above as “shaken.” But this is not regular fear, but rather a kind of awe-inspiring feeling that instills in Ya’akov a fear of heaven, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven” (v. 17). When Ya’akov wakes up this first time, in the middle of the night, he doesn’t interpret the dream in

an allegorical way or in a way that reflects only his internal state, rather as a reflection of reality. The dream teaches him something about his reality. This is reinforced when he wakes up the next morning, “He named that site Beth-El (House of God)” (v. 19). At this point, out of his newly expanded consciousness, Ya’akov turns to God. He turns to God by making a condition, a vow: “If God remains with me...” (v. 20).

One classical strategy or style of *midrash* is to fill in slight or substantive gaps in the biblical text by imagining a more elaborate form of the story and thereby enriching it. The verses that describe Ya’akov’s dream don’t appear to have any

significant gaps that need to be explained or accounted for, yet the *midrashim* create a point of time in the story that could be filled with more detail. This *midrash* expands upon the scene of Ya’akov’s preparation to go to sleep on the night that he has his dream: Ya’akov’s preparations for going to sleep included taking the time to pray.

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The verse upon which this idea is based seems to describe Ya’akov’s technical preparations as he set up camp, “He came upon a certain place and slept there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place” (v. 10). But the *midrash* in Talmud Bavli Berakhot 26b adds that not only was Ya’akov engaged in physical preparations in the place where he would sleep, he was also engaging spiritually with the God whose presence permeated that place. Ya’akov was in fact, praying, “Ya’akov established the evening prayer, as it says ‘He came upon (*va-yifga*) a certain place and slept there.’”

Ya’akov is not merely setting up his physical surroundings, getting his “pillow” ready so that he can go to sleep, he is also praying. The *midrash*’s reading of Ya’akov’s behavior rests on an interpretation of the verb *lifgo’a* (פ.ג.ל.) as referring to prayer. As the Talmudic *midrash*

continues to explain, “The language of *pegi’ab* can refer to prayer, as it says ‘As for you, do not pray (*titpallel*) for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer (*rinah u-tefillah*) on their behalf, do not plead (*tifga*) with Me; for I will not listen to you” (Jeremiah 7:16).

What can a verse that teaches someone not to pray teach us about the essence of prayer?

This interpretation is based on a verse from Jeremiah in which the word *tefillah* is parallel to the word *pegi’ab*. In this way the *midrash* sets the meaning of the word *pegi’ab* and the root פ.ג.פ. to “pray”. However, in the verse in Jeremiah the request made is to cease from praying, God is

telling Jeremiah NOT to pray! This demand recurs three times in the verse: “Do not pray... do not raise a cry... do not plead.” The choice to learn that Ya’akov prayed from a verse that specifically asks for the cessation of prayer begs investigation. What can a verse that teaches someone not to pray teach us about the essence of prayer?

There are three sections of the passage in Jeremiah. The first is the injunction against praying, “As for you, do not pray (*titpallel*) for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer (*rinah u-tefillah*) on their behalf, do not plead (*tifga*) with Me; for I will not listen to you.” The second is the description of the circumstances that inspired this prohibition, “Don’t you see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather sticks, the fathers build the fire, and the mothers knead dough, to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and they pour libations to other gods, to vex Me” (v. 18). The third is a description of the aftermath of the conditions described in the first section: “Is it Me they are vexing?—says the Lord. It is rather themselves, to their own disgrace. Assuredly, thus said the Lord God: My wrath and My fury will be poured out upon this place, on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the soil. It shall burn, with none to quench it” (vv. 19-20).

In the first section the demand that Jeremiah stop praying is repeated over and over in different ways, “do not pray,” “do not raise,” “do not plead,” “I do not hear.” The basic conclusion that emerges from this is that prayer is a catch-all term for a broad and varied range of actions: “praying (*mitpalelim*),” “raising song (*nosim rinah*),” “touching (*pog'im*),” “being heard (*mashmi'im*)”—these are all parallel acts that can be appropriately classified as prayer.

In the second section, the horrifying behavior that inspires God to refuse prayer is laid out. It's not clear what is the exact behavior that brings God to no longer desire prayer: Is the action which has the intent “to anger me” so impactful that God would categorically refuse to be responsive to prayer? Does the gathering for the sake of worshipping of other gods alone produce the prohibition? Maybe it is the group's gathering that is the trigger—that is, maybe if there had been only some isolated individuals who were inclined to idolatry maybe it would not have brought about such a broad and total prohibition on prayer? Maybe it is the familial effort that brings God to put an end to prayer? Either way, what all of these circumstances have in common is the evasion of God, an active avoidance of God that is expressed in choosing another. This avoidance brings God to withhold Himself from being a receptive to, affected by, prayer. He doesn't want to hear, He doesn't have an interest in working on their behalf, He doesn't want to be affected.

It's important to note that *pegi'ah* in the biblical context doesn't necessarily have a negative connotation. Ben Yehudah's dictionary offers a spectrum of meaning: met, encountered by happenstance, hit, killed, requested, pleaded. Some of these different definitions do have negative connotations, but not all of them. Some of them are enacted through words, but not all of them. What is common to all of these definitions is an encounter—for good or for bad—characters that *pog'ot*, meet each other.

The short passage in Jeremiah concludes with a rhetorical question with an implied answer,

“Is it Me they are vexing?—says the Lord. It is themselves, to their own disgrace” (v. 19). This describes a kind of boomerang movement that keeps on coming back to the one who throws it out: If the goal of the people in the cities of Judah is to anger God, the result is that they are angry (at) themselves, angry and confused. But, what follows in the text is a description of a furious God: “Assuredly, thus said the Lord God: My wrath and My fury will be poured out upon this place, on man and on beast, on the trees of the field and the fruit of the soil. It shall burn, with none to quench it.” In other words, despite the returning motion that is described in these verses of an attempt to anger coming back to the ones who have caused the anger, it seems that the active attempt on the part of the people to ignore God impacts Him. He does not succeed in ignoring them. The anger reaches the boiling point.

The intuition that lies behind these verses is that avoidance doesn’t yield neutrality. On the contrary, it hurts, it is *pegei’a* in its negative sense. Being ignored doesn’t feel neutral, it feels terrible. Avoiding someone with whom you already have a connection is not merely the absence of relationship, it’s a kind of toxic and painful relationship. So the circumstances that

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are described in Jeremiah of *pegi’ah* are initially the insult and pain that are the result of being avoided and ignored, which leads the one who is being avoided to want to retreat and not be influenced—*le-hipaga*—through prayer. After such a personal insult (*pegi’ah*), God does not want to be appeased, He doesn’t want to consider mitigating factors, He doesn’t even want to notice faces lifted up to him, and He doesn’t want to be affected by prayer.

What we learn about prayer from Jeremiah invites the one who prays to conceive of God as vulnerable, as always vulnerable. So people have the choice to insult God by withholding

prayer or to affect God by praying. Will one make God angry, or touched and moved?

This teaching also enables us to understand Ya'akov's circumstances in a new light. Ya'akov is at a crossroads and he has to decide—what is the way he is going to interpret his life's circumstance? What meaning is he going to give to it? What is the proper context he should give to his dreams? Will he ignore them or will he invest them with meaning, with potential, with the full depth of opportunity that encounter affords? The *midrash* describes Ya'akov's prayer as a component of his sleep preparations. Through this prayer, this *pegi'ah*, Ya'akov says, "I am not avoiding, I am connected, even when I go to sleep I am doing this out of an anticipation of encounter." Ya'akov chooses to encounter God through prayer and allows prayer to set the frame for meaning. Ya'akov could have "just stumbled upon a place," but instead he meaningfully encounters the *Makom*, the Omnipresent. His prayer transforms his fleeing into a journey and his dream into prophecy.