



Praying a Few Words at a Time

R. Elie Kaunfer — kaunfer@hadar.org

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What happens when we try to pray, but we just can't make it work? Is there any hope, or any strategies, for those of us who can't always reach the heights of connection with God in every moment of prayer?

A particular interpretation to a strange phrase in this week's *parashah* offers us some guidance. When God gives the instructions to Noah to make the ark, God says:

Genesis 6:16

Make a *tzohar* for the ark (*teivah*).

בראשית ו:טז

צֹהַר תַּעֲשֶׂה לַתֵּיבָה

What is God asking Noah to make for the ark? The word *tzohar* comes only once in the whole Bible, and so we can't be sure what it means.¹ Rashi offers two explanations. First, it could be a window. We know the ark has a window because later Noah opens the window (there called a "חלון" - *halon*) to let out the raven (Genesis 8:6). So perhaps this is the instruction to add a window, albeit by another name, in the building of the ark.

¹ Some modern scholars believe it simply means: "roof," connected to the word טהרו in Mishnah Yoma 5:6 and Tosefta Yoma 4:2, ed. Lieberman, p. 240. See J. N. Epstein, *Mevo'ot Le-Sifrut Ha-Tannaim*, p. 236; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 1008 (although as can be seen there, others translate it as "skylight").



But drawing on R. Yoḥanan in Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108b, Rashi offers another explanation: *tzohar* is not a window; it is a precious stone:

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 108b

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין קח:

“Make a *tzohar* for the ark”—R. Yoḥanan said: The Holy Blessed One said to Noah, “Set in it precious stones and pearls, so that it will shine for you like midday.”

צהר תעשה לתבה, אמר רבי יוחנן: אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לנח: קבע בה אבנים טובות ומרגליות, כדי שיהיו מאירות לכם כצהרים.

R. Yoḥanan notices that the word “*צהר* - *tzohar*” is similar to “*זהר* - *zohar*,” which means a shining light. No natural light could come through a window while it rained for forty days and nights! Instead, the *tzohar* must refer to another object that has internally generated light—like a precious stone that shines.

Starting with the Ba’al Shem Tov (Besht), Hasidic masters broadened this instruction by God beyond the blueprint of the ark. They said it refers to the nature of speech, specifically that of prayer. The word “*תבה* - *teivah*,” translated in our context as “ark,” later comes to also mean “word.”²

Ba’al Shem Tov, Pillar of Prayer, 17³

בעל שם טוב

See that you illuminate the word that comes out of your mouth.

שתראה להאיר התבה היוצא מפִּיךָ

The Ba’al Shem Tov, as reported by his grandson, R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim (Degel Mahane Ephraim), points us in a new direction. The *tzohar* is no longer limited to Noah’s construction of the ark; it is guidance for all of us struggling with speech. The phrase now means: “make

² See, for instance, Babylonian Talmud Menahot 30b and Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 104a.

³ See *Pillar of Prayer*, trans. Menachem Kallus (2011), p. 14-15; Hebrew section, p. 4. Another version of this teaching reads: “שיא מנהיר התיבה” - one should illuminate the word.”



the word shine with light.” The Besht teaches: words that come out of our mouth, especially words of prayer, should have light. Words are significant, and they carry meaning and spirit; they can’t be empty or dark.

Drawing on the view that *tzohar* is a precious stone, and not a window, this application to words is developed further in a later Hasidic commentary by R. Elimelekh of Luzensk:

Noam Elimelekh to Parashat Noah⁴

“Make a *tzohar* for the ark (*teivah*)”... It is possible to say that *teivah* is a hint to mean: word. The word that a person emits from their mouth, one must see that this word shines a great light, like a precious stone.

נועם אלימלך פרשת נח ד"ה צהר תעשה

"צהר תעשה לתיבה" ... יש לומר הרמז
תיבה, היינו המלה ותיבה אדם מוצא מפיו
צריך לראות שהתיבה הזאת תאיר אור גדול
כאבן טוב

Our words don’t need external illumination; they have the power to shine forth from their own light, as R. Yohanan imagined the precious stone doing in the dark days of rain on the ark. The words of prayer can shine forth as they leave our mouth.

But what happens when the words of our prayers don’t shine forth like a precious stone, emitting light to all those around? What happens when we feel that our prayers cannot pierce the heavens, and do not have the power to illuminate? Rebbe Nahman of Breslov recognized this challenge in offering words of prayer. In an essay on this phrase from Parashat Noah, Rebbe Nahman writes:

⁴ P. 3b in the edition published by Zekher Naftali, 1989.



Rebbe Nahman, Likkutei Moharan #112⁵

In one's prayer and supplication and request—even when it is impossible for one to speak a word in prayer and supplication, because of the greatness of the darkness and confusion that surrounds them intensely from every side—nevertheless, one can speak a word of truth even at a very low level.

For instance, one can say, “God, save!” (Psalm 20:10) in truth. Even though one cannot speak with fire and energy as is fitting, nevertheless, one can say a word in truth.

נחמן מברסלב, ליקוטי מוהר"ן קיב
שבתפלתו ותחנונו ובקשתו אף על פי שאי
אפשר לו לדבר שום דבור בתפלה ותחנונים
מגדל החשך והבלבול המסיב אותו מאד מאד
מכל צד אף על פי כן, על כל פנים יראה לדבר
הדבור באמת באיזה מדרגה נמוכה שהוא
כגון למשל, שייאמר: "ה' הושיעה" באמת אף
על פי שאינו יכול לדבר בהתלהבות
והתעוררות כראוי אף על פי כן יאמר הדבור
באמת

Rebbe Nahman acknowledges that praying can sometimes be hard, even overwhelming, especially if our mood is dark and clouded. The words seem to go nowhere. But there are little glimpses of light that we might be able to access, even if our overwhelming feeling is one of despair. He teaches: one can still say a phrase—like “God, save!”—with power and light. Prayer is not a zero-sum game; each and every phrase that leaves our mouths has the possibility to attain a status of luminosity, even if the next sentence doesn't.

I sometimes think of this as the goal of prayer: to say a couple of words, or a phrase, with real intention and truth. Even if one cannot reach the highest level of connection throughout the prayer service, or even within one prayer, that doesn't mean praying is futile. Perhaps there is a moment when one or two words coming out of our mouth generate light, like the precious stone in Noah's ark.

⁵ See also Likkutei Moharan #9.