



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN

A Prayer, Two Hearts, and a Plate of Brownies

As Parshat Va'etchanan opens, we encounter one of the most poignant moments in Moshe Rabbenu's life: his heartfelt plea to enter the Promised Land. Though a Heavenly decree had barred his entry, he prayed a total of 515 times for it to be rescinded, yet each request was denied. Chazal teach that Hashem ultimately instructed Moshe to stop praying, for one more prayer would have pierced the gates of Heaven and overturned the decree, granting him entry into the Land.

The Vilna Gaon explains that had Moshe uttered one final prayer and been granted entry into Israel, the eventual consequence would have been the annihilation of the Jewish people. Moshe would have built the Bet HaMikdash, and when future generations inevitably sinned, God would have faced a choice between destroying His people or His Temple; unlike the First or Second Temple, however, a sanctuary built by Moshe would have been too holy to destroy. For this reason, God implored Moshe to stop praying, and Moshe spent his final days within sight of the Promised Land — close enough to behold it, yet never to cross its borders.

Curiously, this account invites a deeper question. What compelled Moshe to withhold that final prayer? Here was the greatest prophet who ever lived, having already pleaded 515 times for his lifelong dream. Could he not have envisioned some alternative outcome that would benefit both himself and the Jewish people? And if each of his previous prayers had likewise been met with a "no," why did he stop after the 515th rather than persist once more?

Later in the parsha (4:41), we read of Moshe establishing three of the six cities of refuge that would be for individuals that cause a death inadvertently. Such individuals are subjected to the mercy of the avenging relative unless they seek refuge within the confines of one of these cities. The Torah states that inadvertent killers must remain in this exile until the death of the sitting *kohen gadol*, upon which time their sentence is complete. Naturally, these individuals would long for that moment of freedom — some even praying for his demise. The Talmud famously recounts how the mother of the *kohen gadol* would often bake treats for these "inmates." In doing so, she hoped to gain their favor so that they wouldn't pray for the death of her son.

The question here is glaring: how could a plate of brownies or chocolate chip cookies substitute freedom?

Later in the parsha, we recite *Shema Yisrael*, where we are commanded to love Hashem "with all your hearts" (בכל לבבך). Noting the unusual plural form (לבבך rather than לבך), Chazal teach that we are to love Him with both of our inclinations (בשני יצירתי) — channeling every desire and emotion toward His service, embracing Him with every part of the heart, on both our best days and our worst.

In the second passage of the Shema, which instructs us to "serve Him with all our hearts" (ולעבדו בכל לבבכם), the Talmud interprets "service of the heart" as prayer. It is no coincidence that the wording once again emphasizes the plurality of hearts — communicating that the deepest

prayers are those that arise from every facet of the heart — the good, the bad, and the in-between. It is difficult to expect a prayer to be answered when it is simply rolled off the tongue with no intention; it has to come from the heart, and in order to be heartfelt, it must encompass all the desires, emotions, aspirations, and fears that truly exist in that heart.

With this insight, we can gain clarity into the questions posed above. Of course the mother knew that a platter of brownies wouldn't satiate the people's hunger for freedom. However, once they were on the receiving end of such kindness, they built some level of empathy — and this she knew. She understood that once a connection is built, however inconsequential it may be, that small emotion will linger and even if they were to likely still pray for their freedom, which would necessitate the death of her son, it wouldn't be a prayer that originates from the *entirety* of their hearts. The desire for redemption may be strong, but somewhere in the heart would lay a feeling of compassion and gratitude, and thus their *tefillot* would only be coming from a part of their hearts, perhaps even a majority, but it wouldn't have the same potency as a full heart. The mother's plan was ultimately not to terminate their prayers, but to weaken them in this way.

This explains what happened with Moshe Rabbenu as well. Once he understood that entering the land would come at a cost, as outlined by the Vilna Gaon above, that thought was planted into his mind. From that point, he realized preemptively that it was Game Over. Even if he wanted to submit that final blowout prayer, he simply couldn't anymore since every single one of the 515 *tefillot* up until now had been wholehearted. However, after telling him to stop praying, G-d had essentially done to him what the mother of the *kohen gadol* would do with the brownies. Moshe understood that even with all the justifications and his burning will to enter the Land, it would be impossible for him to pray a 516th time with a full heart that encompassed *all* of his desires.

This secret reveals the meaning behind an enigmatic text in the Talmud (Berachot 30b), which states that pious men would devote an extra hour before and after every single prayer. Initially this sounds strange; did such holy individuals really need extra time to read from a *siddur*? It becomes clear, however, that this time was a necessary component of the prayer itself. They understood that *tefillot* are at their strongest when said wholeheartedly, and so they spent the extra time meditating to align their minds and hearts. They made sure that every word they uttered in prayer was felt genuinely and echoed in every chamber of their hearts.

Sometimes what's missing in our prayers is not just sincerity but spending the quiet time alone with ourselves until our thoughts become clear, our desires become genuine, and our hearts speak without reservation or lingering doubts. When the heart is genuine, raw, and real, the words have a way of finding themselves.

(Based on a d'var Torah shared by R' Shlomo Farhi)

"Find what you'd die for and then live for it."

Dedicated in loving memory of Simcha ben Tamara