

VAYEIRA (GENESIS 18:1 22:24)

A Prayer and an Opportunity

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

It is a place of prayer. It is a place of tears. It is a place of charity.

It is Rachel's Tomb.

For thousands of years, Jews have flocked to the Tomb of our Matriarch Rachel to pray. Our Sages tell us that Jacob buried his beloved wife by the side of the road in Bethlehem because he knew prophetically that some day the People of Israel would be led, right past that tomb, into captivity by the Babylonians. He knew that Rachel would cry out to G-d to have compassion upon His People. G-d listened to her plea. And He still does.

To this day, our People continue to go to this shrine to pray to G-d, and to ask Rachel to join in our prayer. (See "Mama's Tears" for more of an explanation about praying at Rachel's Tomb, as well as my own personal emotional experience there ten years ago.)

Where one finds the tombs of righteous people, one finds people praying. Where one finds people praying, one finds charity collectors.

There are many needy people out there. There is hunger and there is sadness. There are families overwhelmed by debt and little if any work to provide the necessary income. There are families with children to marry off and no money to make a wedding. There are people suffering from illnesses and no money for medication. May G-d protect us all from these and all unfortunate circumstances.

We, the People of Israel are a compassionate People. We try to take care of our own. And there they are, at synagogues and cemeteries, jingling change in their hands, and calling out, "*Tzedokah, Tzedokah.*" (Loosely – and incorrectly – translated as "Charity, Charity.")

You see it more in Israel than in the U.S., but if you will walk into most catering halls for weddings and Bar Mitzvahs in religious neighborhoods like Monsey, Boro Park, or Williamsburgh, NY, you will be approached by people collecting for organizations, friends, or themselves.

The need is real. The need is acute. And occasionally, the need is non-existent.

How do you tell the legitimate collectors from the phonies? You don't. When I go to a wedding, or to a Chassidic shul where it is common for there to be collectors, I try to bring along a pocket full of quarters and dimes. I don't give large denominations to people I don't know; I save my larger contributions for organizations or individuals that I know to be legitimate. But I don't want to send anyone away empty-handed.

And sometimes they can be persistent. And if you place a dollar into their hands, they may tell you their tale of woe and try to convince you to up your donation to five dollars or ten.

It can be very disturbing. It can even be annoying. And this is what led to my dilemma two years ago.

I was praying at Rachel's Tomb. I had many things to pray for. I was standing there, at that holy site, pouring out my heart to G-d. I was reciting Psalms with a fervor that is difficult to match in other places. I felt close to our Father in Heaven.

Then it happened. A hand was thrust into my face, with a quick description of a difficult situation of an impoverished family.

To tell you the truth, I don't remember whether or not I gave him a contribution. But what I do remember is that I was, to say the least, very irritated.

Here I was, on a rare visit to Israel, taking advantage of the opportunity to pray in this holy place. I was inspired. I was uplifted. And this charity collector burst into my conversation with G-d and totally destroyed my concentration. How dare he?!

After he walked away, the opportunity was gone. I wasn't able to re-establish the feeling I had had before.

Who was right, I pondered; the collector or me?

In this week's Torah Portion, we read of a somewhat similar situation.

Abraham was receiving a prophecy from G-d. It was the third day after his Bris, and G-d was "visiting the sick." Abraham saw three strangers, and left G-d's Presence, running to wait on these three visitors and provide for their needs. (See "Not Now, G-d, I'm Busy . . . I'll Talk to You Later!") We learn from Abraham's actions that "Welcoming guests is greater than greeting the Divine Presence of G-d."

If Abraham was willing to turn away from G-d to welcome His children, should I not have appreciated the chance to turn away from my prayers to provide a donation for a needy Jew?

On the other hand, I wondered, why couldn't he have waited until I finished? Didn't he see that I was praying? Isn't it common courtesy not to interrupt a conversation? Why had he done that to me?! Had he waited for me to finish, he still would have received his donation, and my prayer would have remained intact!

I have debated this question for the past two years since it happened. I have come to resent when people come up to me with requests while I am praying.

Recently I discussed this issue with a rabbi who often attends Services at my Shul. I told him that I felt that that collector at Rachel's Tomb was wrong.

He saw it differently. "Perhaps," he suggested, "G-d was sending you an opportunity to merit that your prayers be answered. It is very difficult for prayer alone to accomplish our goal to get G-d to answer us. We are not that righteous!

"Prayer needs to be accompanied by concrete action. When, for example, we pray for a sick person to recover, we include in the 'Mi Shebeirach' prayer the name of the patient, and the words '...in whose behalf we offer charity...'

Maybe G-d was sending you a Mitzvah of Tzedakah that would give your prayers the wings that would bring your heartfelt words before the Heavenly Throne."

An interesting thought. Had I lost out on a golden opportunity? Could it be that by not appreciating this Jew who brought to me, on a silver platter, the Mitzvah of Tzedakah, I failed to send my prayers as far as I could have otherwise??

Two weeks ago I was back in Israel. I resolved that I would try to be better prepared. Whenever I went anywhere that I anticipated seeing collectors, I tried to make sure to have sufficient change readily available to do this Mitzvah with minimal distraction from my prayers.

I went back to visit Rachel. As I entered the tomb I prepared for prayer and Tzedakah.

There is a beautiful prayer, composed especially to be recited at Rachel's Tomb. The prayer is written on a large sign on the wall. I began to pray, and "Mama Rochel" worked her magic on me once again. As I absorbed the sanctity of that holy site, my eyes began to well with tears. I once again felt myself more closely connected with G-d.

As I stood there praying, someone approached me. He reached out to shake my hand and said “Sholom Aleichem.” I pulled a One Shekel coin out of my pocket with my right hand and shook his, leaving the Shekel in his hand. As he began to tell me about the needy family he was collecting for, I looked away from the text of the prayer to see his face.

It was HIM! He was back! It was the very same collector I had resented two years before!

Apparently, G-d was giving me a second chance!

I hope I got it right this time!

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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