

VAYEITZEI (GENESIS 28:10-32:3)

Time to Pray!

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

It is well-known that religious Jews pray three times a day. When you live, as I do, in a community that consists of literally thousands of observant Jews, it is possible to find services to accommodate diverse schedules.

At the break of dawn, many synagogues are already filling with “early-birds” rushing to recite the morning prayers at the earliest possible moment in the day. The retirement community where I work provides an 8:30 Morning Service for those who can sleep a little later.

There are even commuter busses – complete with Torah scrolls – that have rolling services so you can pray on your way to work.

The Afternoon Service can be recited from shortly after noon until sundown. (Some have the custom to extend this for a short time after sundown.) This can present a challenge, especially in the winter, for those hoping to remain gainfully employed. Many businesses schedule a short break for the Afternoon Service. (I was once shopping in a local supermarket when I suddenly heard an announcement on the overhead: “There will be a Minyan for Mincha in the Meat Department in 5 minutes.”)

Evening Services can be recited shortly after sundown. For this reason, many synagogues schedule the Afternoon Service right before sundown, and have the Evening Service a little while later. But this doesn’t work for everybody. There are lots of synagogues to choose from with lots of different starting times. Sometimes I come in from out of town late at night, so I proceed to a particular Chassidic shul where I can find Minyans at 12 or later. There is a synagogue (AKA a “Minyan Factory” where the last service of the evening begins at 2:30 a.m.!)

Yes, “Davening,” or praying, three times a day, is a hallmark of our religion. But it wasn’t always that way. Although Davening Mincha (the Afternoon Service) and Maariv (the Evening Service) are very Jewish things to do, Abraham apparently didn’t do those things. Isaac, quite a religious Jew, didn’t Daven Maariv either. That was Jacob’s innovation:

Jacob left Beer-Sheba and went toward Charan. He came upon the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. . . He lay down to sleep there. He had a dream: a ladder was standing on the ground with its top reaching toward Heaven. G-d’s angels were going up and down on it. G-d stood over him and said, “I am the G-d of Abraham your ancestor and the G-d of Isaac. I will give the land upon

which you are lying to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be (as numerous as) the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west, to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil; I will not leave you until I have fulfilled this promise to you.”

(Genesis, 28:10-15)

These were words that Jacob needed to hear. He was on his way, for the first time in his life, to the Diaspora. He was leaving the Holy Land to escape the murderous intentions of his brother and to find a wife. His future, our future, was at stake. He arrived, without realizing it, at the site of the future Temple. It was already a holy place. Abel, the second son of Adam and Eve, had built an altar there. Jacob's grandfather Abraham had built an altar there, and almost offered Isaac upon it. And now Jacob was there.

“He came upon the place and spent the night there because the sun had set. . .” Rashi explains that the Torah uses an unusual word (*vayifga*) for *“He came upon”* because it has a double meaning. It also means *“he prayed.”*

“He prayed in the place . . . because the sun had set.” Rashi explains that Jacob originated the Evening Prayer.

Jacob, in his hour of need, turned to G-d in prayer. G-d responded with assurances that everything was going to be alright.

Our Sages point out, based upon this and other verses, that the morning, afternoon, and evening services were instituted by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob respectively. We, their children, follow their example.

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin points out that each of the Patriarchs had different experiences that led to each of their prayers. Abraham was greatly respected. The various kings of the world accorded him great honor and accepted him as THEIR king. He enjoyed wealth and esteem. His sun shone brightly like the morning sun. All was bright in his world and he thanked G-d for this brightness. Hence, the Morning Service.

Isaac lived at a time that the dark night of exile was approaching. He was the first Jew to be driven from his home. (Ibid. 26:16) Our Sages tell us that the Egyptian Exile began with the birth of Isaac. Darkness was coming. He even lost his vision in his old age. *“Isaac went out to pray in the field before evening. . .”* (Ibid. 24:63) Before the impending darkness of the difficulties just over the horizon, Isaac prayed for G-d's deliverance. Thus, Mincha, the Afternoon Service.

Jacob lived in the darkness that his father had foreseen. He lived a life of difficulty. His brother tried to kill him. His father-in-law consistently cheated him. His son and his daughter were abducted. In his own words, *“The days of my life have been few and hard.”* (Ibid. 47:9) In the darkness of his pain, he turned to G-d. And G-d responded with reassurance.

He had a dream: a ladder was standing on the ground with its top reaching toward Heaven. G-d’s angels were going up and down on it.

Prayer is that ladder. It is a dialog with G-d. When we pray, when we serve our Creator, we create “angels,” heavenly advocates who go up to Heaven to plead our case before G-d. Our prayers go up that ladder and G-d’s response comes down.

Is life going well for you? Pray. Thank G-d for what you have and ask for more of the same. Are things beginning to look scary? Pray. Ask G-d to help you through it. Is your life dark? Pray. Ask G-d to show you the dawn’s early light.

Whether we see Him or not, G-d is always there for us. Are we always there for Him?

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

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