



The Parsha of Chayei Sarah is dedicated in memory of Sophie Katz, a true woman of valour, who inspired us all to seek learning and live life fully.

The Sefer of Bereishis is dedicated in memory of Jacob Cohen by Marilyn and Herbert Smilowitz and family.

Praying in the Fields

By Drew Kaplan, Parshat Chayei Sarah

Since Yitzhak went to the field to pray in this week's Torah portion, the world has not been the same. The Talmud offers two sources for our requirement to pray three daily prayers; one is the prayers themselves of the three forefathers of the Jewish people. Avraham is credited with instituting *shaharit*, the morning prayer; Yitzhak grants us *minhah*, the afternoon prayer; and Ya'akov gives us *ma'ariv*, the evening prayer. The Talmud cites a verse from the Book of Genesis to establish each prayer. For Yitzhak, on whom we will concentrate, it is written (*Brahot* 26b):

Yitzhak instituted the afternoon prayer service, as it is said, "And Yitzhak went out to *su'ah* in the field before evening" (Gen. 24:63); and there is no *sihah* except prayer, as it is said, "A prayer of the afflicted man when he swoons, and pours forth his supplications (*siho*) before HaShem" (Ps. 102:1).^[1]

The Sages saw these verses as being connected in the linguistic similarity of the word *siah*, and they saw in them that what Yitzhak was doing was praying. However, this claim is made on the seemingly ambiguous meaning of *su'ah* found in the verse related to Yitzhak. From where does this connection come?

One Talmudic commentary, Tosafot, suggests that the reason why this word is used in both places is that while one might have thought that Yitzhak simply went out to speak with someone in the field, he actually went out to pray. ^[2]

However, the term evokes a striking similarity to a word of the same root found earlier in Genesis: "Now all the trees (*siah*) of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for HaShem G-d had not yet sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the soil." (Gen. 2:5)

The usage in our verse relating to Yitzhak may now take on an additional dimension – it seems as there may have been an agricultural element to Yitzhak's outing in the field. Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) suggests that what Yitzhak was actually doing in the field was planting trees as well as checking up on his agricultural efforts. (Gen. 24:63, s.v. *Ve-yetze Yitzhak la-su'ah basadeh*). ^[3]



What was it that the Talmudic sages saw in our verse to understand that Yitzhak was praying? Is it possible that the Torah would make sure to tell us that Yitzhak was engaged in mundane agricultural activities? The answer leads one to see that his action was one from which later generations can learn much.

The connection between these two verses in their use of this same word is deeply meaningful when one considers that on the second verse — “Now all the trees (*siach*) of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for HaShem G-d had not yet sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to work the soil.” (Gen. 2:5) — Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki (Rashi), the eleventh century medieval scholar, comments:

For what is the reason that G-d had not yet sent rain, because there was no man to work the land and there was no one to acknowledge the goodness of the rain, and when man came and knew that they (the rain) are a need for the world, he prayed for them and they came down, and the trees and grasses sprouted.” (Gen. 2:5, s.v. *ki lo himtir*).

The usage of the term in this verse may be about agriculture, but the verse is telling us that human beings are needed in order to pray!

But that is not all. The verse preceding the above one states: “These are the products of the heaven and the earth when they were created on the day that HaShem G-d made earth and heaven.” (Gen. 2:4) There is a direct connection between G-d’s creating of the *si’ah* and to the tending of the *si’ah* done by man. In other words, G-d created it in order for man to tend to it. Being involved with the earth is an act whereby one connects with G-d’s handiwork.

In line with this, Rabbi Yohanan, the late third century Talmudic sage, said that one may not pray in a house without windows (*Brahot* 34b). Rashi commented that Rabbi Yohanan said this because looking outside causes one to focus towards heaven and one’s heart will be humbled (*Brahot* 34b, s.v. *halanot*). More than just simply focusing towards heaven, however, one will be able to see the natural landscape – G-d’s handiwork. By praying in a house without windows, one would be surrounded by man’s handiwork, which does not strike one with as much awe and appreciation for G-d.

Rebbe Nahman of Breslov instructed his followers to engage in *hitbodedut*, or to speak with G-d in the field for an hour every day. In explaining Rebbe Nahman’s teachings, Rabbi Natan Greenberg stated that real prayer involves conversation with the natural world around a person. Indeed, the strength of prayer comes from the Divine, spiritual energy flowing from nature. A person needs all the spiritual energy of the earth to give strength to one’s prayer. Yitzhak first manifests this type of prayer through his connection to nature. He comes to it because he finds it difficult to relate to the world around him. He wants to be in a simple world, G-d’s world, so he walks and prays in the field.[4]

For Yitzhak, praying to G-d in nature was a central part of his Divine service, and it can be for us as well. As Rabbi Mordechai Friedfertig wrote,



“It is interesting that in this week's *parashah*, when it is reported that Yitzhak *davens* (prays) Minhah, it says, ‘*Vayetze Yitzhak lasu'ah bashadeh*’ - Yitzhak went out to supplicate in the field. He left behind all of his worries, and put everything aside so that he could focus on Hashem. And we must do the same – not only every day, to daven Minchah – but throughout our busy, busy lives. We must find the time to leave our worldly cares behind, and venture out into the fields where we will encounter Hashem.”^[5]

The natural world is an excellent setting for praying to G-d. While the Sages call for daily prayer within the walls of the synagogue, Rebbe Nahman calls for daily conversations with G-d in nature, while also leaving open the possibility of occasional prayers to G-d beyond the walls of the prayer hall. By both our going out and working with G-d's creation and by praying within this creation – we seize the opportunity to grow closer to G-d.

Our ability to connect to our Creator in the world He created is an indicator of our ability to live in balance with that natural world. A primarily urban, post-industrial Jewish people that is alienated from G-d's Oneness as manifested in the natural world will certainly misuse that which G-d has given us. The litany of ecological problems we face — from air and water pollution to species extinction and urban sprawl — testify to the Jewish people's disconnect from the natural environment which G-d gave them. Re-connecting to the inspired outdoor prayers of our forefathers can help us regain a sense of the grandeur of G-d's world and of our responsibility to live in balance with it.

Suggested Action Items:

- Learn Rebbe Nahman's teachings on *hitbodedut* and practice them, reconnecting with yourself and G-d's world as you do! (For a wonderful English book that gives Rebbe Nahman's teachings on *hitbodedut* in condensed form, see *Where Earth and Heaven Kiss* by Ozer Bergman.)
- Daven (pray) outside, or to go daven with a minyan outside in order to daven with G-d's handiwork surrounding oneself.
- Plant a garden (or a few herbs in pots) and pray as you care for it that your produce will grow!

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^[1] In another Talmudic statement, these two verses are switched around to derive an imperative for prayer (*Avodah Zarah* 7b):



Rabbi Eliezer says, “One should request one’s needs and, after that, one should pray, as it is said, ‘A prayer of the afflicted man when he swoons, and ours forth his supplications (*siho*) before HaShem’ (Ps. 102:1) – there is no *sihah* except for prayer, as it is said, ‘And Yitzhak went out to *siah* in the field’ (Gen. 24:63).”

[2] See *Avodah Zarah*. 7b, Tosafot, s.v. *ve-ayn sihah*

[3] By contrast, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra suggested that what Yitzhak did in this verse was merely to walk between the shrubs (Gen. 24.63, s.v. *la-su’ah*) – simply enjoying them.

[4] Shiur on Likutei Moharan, part 2, teaching 11. Rabbi Greenberg is the Rosh Yeshiva of the Bat Ayin Yeshiva in . This shiur is available in audio form at www.batayin.org

[5] Rabbi of Congregation B'nai Shalom in Williamsville, New York. Available online at http://www.utj.org/Torah/mfriedfertig/05Chaye_Sarah5761.html