

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



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Va'eschanan, Sicha 1

The Context:

As the Jewish people drew nearer to entering the Land of Israel, Moshe beseeched G-d to rescind His decree and allow Moshe to enter the Land with his people. The Hebrew verb for Moshe's prayer opens the parshah, *Va'eschanan*, "And I entreated." There are two explanations of this word offered by Sifrei:

1. It is related to the word *chinam*, "free," for Moshe was asking for G-d to vouchsafe him a free gift, regardless of his deservedness. Even though the righteous possess merit, they do not feel this makes them worthy before G-d, and therefore only appeal to G-d's infinite kindness.
2. This term is one of the ten expressions of prayer.

The Midrash Rabbah cites the same explanations, but includes them in one interpretation, implying that there is no difference of opinion between these two meanings.

What is the root of the disagreement between Sifrei and Midrash Rabbah?

Commentaries explain that Sifrei's first explanation understands the verb to mean "and I asked for a gift," without any reference to prayer. The second explanation sees the *Va'eschanan* as a pure expression of prayer, "and I entreated." It follows that the Midrash, which combines both explanations, maintains that the word suggests an expression of prayer and entreaty, but the content of the prayer was that G-d grant Moshe a free gift.

The Question:

It follows that both the Sifrei (in its first explanation) and the Midrash agree that Moshe was asking for a free gift, but only differ regarding the language of his request, if it was expressly asking for a gift (Sifrei), or if it adopted the formula of prayer (Midrash). What, then, is the practical difference between these explanations?

The Explanation:

There are two elements to prayer: a) the language and style adopted for the prayer; b) the justification embedded in the prayer, that is, why should G-d heed the request?

Because we are deserving, or because of His free giving kindness?

Normative prayer, as defined by Torah, is when a person requests something due to their deservedness. Because they have observed G-d's will, therefore G-d must fulfill their requests. Nonetheless, a person must still beseech G-d for these earned rewards, because no human deed can truly make demands of G-d. Even when something is deserved, we are still reliant on G-d's kindness to reward us for our deeds.

This is the subject of the dispute between Sifrei and Midrash Rabbah. The Midrash says that Moshe beseeched G-d in prayer, but did so with the language of asking for a gift. That is, internally, Moshe felt he deserved to enter the Land of Israel due to his merits, but he still couched the prayer in terms of addressing G-d's transcendent kindness. This aligns with the standard conception of prayer mentioned above.

Sifrei, however, explains that Va'eschanan solely means a request for a gift. That is, Moshe truly felt, out of his deep humility, that he was undeserving, and asked G-d simply for a gift. It was not a classic "prayer" which is based on an assumption of merit.

This dispute — if Moshe was praying or simply appealing to G-d's unbounded kindness — can be traced to a deeper dispute. G-d had sealed a decree against Moshe entering the Land, there is a Talmudic disagreement if prayer has the ability to revert a sealed decree, or if it is only effective in the process of Heavenly deliberation prior to the decree. The Sifrei

seems to maintain that prayer cannot revert a decree, and therefore Moshe simply appealed to G-d's kindness; the Midrash, however, does believe that prayer is effective even for a sealed decree.

The Deeper Dimension:

The Alter Rebbe explains that the "free gift" Moshe asked for refers to a revelation of G-dliness that is not earned through human effort and deed, but is vouchsafed out of G-d's kindness. According to this, we can understand the Sifrei's position that Moshe did not "pray" for this, because the service of prayer is the domain of human toil and effort to draw closer to G-d. Moshe was not seeking a revelation commensurate with human effort, he was asking for a "free gift" of revelation.

The Midrash, however, maintains that Moshe still used the device of prayer to ask for this transcendent revelation. The explanation is as follows: The Tzemach Tzedek explains that this revelation was granted to Moshe in the form of Torah — the Divine wisdom of the Torah is a revelation that transcends human effort. Yet Moshe desired that this revelation be felt and grounded in the human experience. That is, he wanted a transcendent revelation, but granted in the fashion of "prayer," related to the realm of human effort and striving.

This request was not fulfilled, however, because G-d desires that this lofty revelation be implemented in reality through human effort.
