



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 24 | Va'eschanan | Sichah 1

Beyond Deservedness

Translated by Rabbi Zusya Kreitenberg

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | **Senior Editor:** Rabbi Lazer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

© Copyright by Sichos In English 2024 ◦ 5784

A note on the translation: Rounded and square brackets reflect their use in the original *sichah*; curly brackets are interpolations of the translator or editor. The footnotes in curly brackets are those of the translator or editors and do not correspond to the footnotes in the original. Words in bold type are italicized in the original text.

Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation while maintaining readability. As in all translations, however, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

Your feedback is appreciated — please send it to info@projectlikkuteisichos.org

1.

THE INTERPRETATION OF VAESCHANAN

The *parshah* begins — “וְאָתְחִנֵּן to Hashem.”¹ Regarding the meaning of the word “וְאָתְחִנֵּן,” *Sifri*² cites two views:

- a) “וְאָתְחִנֵּן” is an idiom of “הָנִים {free}.” Moshe asked Hashem to let him enter the land of Israel as a **free** gift. Although the righteous³ “could rely... on their good deeds {to secure Hashem’s favor}, (yet) they ask Hashem to grant them their request only **freely**.”
- b) “וְאָתְחִנֵּן” is one of ten verbs used to denote prayer.

In *Midrash Rabbah*⁴ on the verse, these two interpretations are also brought— that “וְאָתְחִנֵּן” (a) is one of ten verbs used to denote prayer, and (b) that semantically, it denotes *a free gift*. However, the midrash does not present them as two opinions but as one and the same interpretation (by the same author). This is the wording of the midrash:

Rabbi Yochanan said: Prayer is denoted by ten terms... “plead,” as it says, “וְאָתְחִנֵּן to Hashem;” and from all these terms, Moshe prayed solely using an idiom of pleading, תְּהַנִּיחַ. **Rabbi Yochanan said** that from here, we learn that a mortal has no grounds to make demands of his Creator, as Moshe... approached Hashem solely using an idiom of pleading, תְּהַנִּיחַ.

This means that the idiom of “pleading” (“וְאָתְחִנֵּן”) denotes a (prayer) request for a gratuitous gift (since “a mortal has no grounds to make demands of his Creator”). [As Rabbi Levi⁵ said (immediately following Rabbi Yochanan’s statement), “Why did Moshe come solely using an idiom of pleading?... I will grant him a **free** gift.”]

¹ {*Devarim* 3:23.}

² {*Sifri* on *Devarim* 3:23;} also cited in Rashi on *Devarim* 3:23 (in altered fashion).

³ Wording of Rashi on *Devarim* 3:23. In *Sifri*: “Moshe and David.”

⁴ *Midrash Rabbah*, ch. 2, par. 1; similarly, *Midrash Tanchuma*, “*Va'eschanan*,” sec. 3.

⁵ The {*midrash's*} use of the syntax “אמר ר' לוי” {to preface Rabbi Levi’s statement} (as opposed to “ר' לוי אמר” {which typically introduces a divergent opinion}) suggests that Rabbi Levi aimed to elucidate Rabbi Yochanan’s statement, rather than to disagree with it. This understanding is further supported by the {language employed in} *Tanchuma* here.

This needs to be clarified: What is the basis for the dispute between the *Sifri* and the midrash regarding whether these are two distinct interpretations or just one?

2.

AN ATTEMPTED EXPLANATION

Some commentators⁶ clarify the difference between both views (in *Sifri*) as follows:

According to the first interpretation of “וְאָתְחִינֵן,” “an idiom meaning a free gift,”⁷ it is as if it would have said, “וְאָתְחִינֵם” — Moshe requested of Hashem, “give it to me as a free gift.” Thus, “וְאָתְחִינֵן” is *not* an idiom for prayer since the word “וְאָתְחִינֵם” itself does not connote prayer or request.

In contrast, according to the second interpretation, “וְאָתְחִינֵן” is among the ten verbs used for prayer, and “וְאָתְחִינֵן” connotes imploring and pleading (as explained above regarding the midrash).

On this basis, the midrash’s approach (which presents both interpretations as one) is that even though the word “וְאָתְחִינֵן” (is not a **cognate of the word** “free, חֶנֶן” but rather connotes pleading), the **object** of a prayerful plea is the request for a free gift.

However, this calls for clarification: Both the *Sifri* and the midrash agree that Moshe, in the final analysis, petitioned Hashem for a free gift. If so, what is the point of the argument whether Moshe employed a term that **exclusively** connotes “free” (as is *Sifri*’s view)⁸ or a term that connotes **prayer**, only that it

⁶ Chizkuni, *Levush* on Rashi’s commentary, *Devarim* 3:23.

⁷ Rashi’s wording here.

⁸ In its first approach.

is the appropriate term to use when the prayer's purpose is a request for a free gift?

3.

WHY PRAY?

The explanation:

When a person petitions Hashem for his needs, the request comprises two aspects:

- (a) **How** the request is made — as a plea or as a demand;
- (b) The **reason** Hashem should fulfill the person's request. Either because he is deserving or as a free gift.

Since Hashem created the person, He needs to provide for him, as it says,⁹ “His mercy is upon all of **His creations.**” This is particularly true when the supplicant is a descendant of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Thus, he deserves “a feast like that of Shlomo in his time”¹⁰ and even more. This is especially true concerning someone who observes Torah and mitzvos, about whom it says,¹¹ “If you follow my statutes..., I will give you rain...” Thus, we can posit that a person prays for something (ideally, according to the Torah of truth) because the person is entitled to what he is asking for.

However, if a person is worthy, especially due to his meritorious deeds, why must he pray to receive?

As known¹² [aside from that through prayer, Hashem graciously provides the supplicant with **more** than he deserves], even what Hashem confers as a

⁹ *Tehillim* 145:9; see *Kesubos* 67b; see *Bava Metzia* 85a.

¹⁰ *Bava Metzia* 83a. {According to one opinion in the Talmud, an employer must obtain prior agreement from his workers to accept meals from him if these meals will be less lavish than the food served at a feast held by King Shlomo for his subjects.}

¹¹ *Vayikra* 26:3.

¹² See *Or HaTorah*, “*Shir HaShirim* (vol. 2),” p. 749, **and the sources cited there.**

reward is not **obligatory**. As it says,¹³ “Kindness is Yours, my L-rd, for You pay each man according to his deeds.” In other words, “You **pay** each man **according to his deeds**” is a Divine act of **kindness**.¹⁴

Therefore, we must **pray** to Hashem; we cannot **demand** that He caters to our needs. Instead, we implore Him to grant our request as an act of grace.

As our Sages¹⁵ say, a person should not predicate his prayer “on his own merits” because even when Hashem fulfills a person’s request due to his good deeds, it is inappropriate to **base** the request on his own merit (i.e., to **pray**, “In my merit, do this for me”).¹⁶

4.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *SIFRI* AND MIDRASH

The above explanation provides insight into the difference between the approach of the *Sifri* and the midrash:

The two outlooks mentioned above (in Section 2) on how to connect the word “נְתַתֶּנִּי” with the concept of a “free gift” highlights the two ways of requesting a free gift:

According to the midrash, “נְתַתֶּנִּי” — denoting a free gift, only describes **how** the request is made. As the verse says,¹⁷ “A poor man implores, but the rich man replies with impudence”: The prayer of a person standing humbly, the opposite of impudently, is offered using “**an idiom of pleading**” — asking for a free gift.

¹³ *Tehillim* 62:13.

¹⁴ See the citations in *Or HaTorah*, “*Shir HaShirim* (vol. 2),” p. 749; et al. See also Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 98, par. 5.

¹⁵ *Berachos* 10b.

¹⁶ Rashi on *Berachos* 10b.

¹⁷ *Mishlei* 18:23.

This means that although the supplicant knows his merits, he asks Hashem to grant his request undeservedly. (Therefore, the midrash links “a free gift” with “an idiom of **pleading**” — the idea of a free gift is solely recognized by the **wording** and mode of his prayer.)

In contrast, according to *Sifri*, the idea of a free gift is expressed by how the person words his prayer **and** feelings: He requests a free gift because he considers himself unworthy. He feels he **lacks** the requisite merit for Hashem to fulfill his request, so he petitions Hashem for a **free gift**.

For this reason, (the first approach in) the *Sifri* maintains that “וְאֵתְּתֶנּוּ” connotes a free gift — and this word is consequently **not** among the terms for prayer (as mentioned earlier in Section 2) — because this type of request (for a genuinely free gift) is not categorized as a prayer, to begin with (as explained above).

Although Moshe certainly never forgot that he had received the Torah at Sinai, **among other** {remarkable virtues} — and consequently, he felt that to his credit, he had performed remarkable good deeds — Moshe’s humility was so profound that he figured **he** deserved nothing.

[This aligns with the known explanation¹⁸ of the verse,¹⁹ “And the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth.” Despite Moshe’s awareness of his own great qualities compared to “any person,” he was “exceedingly humble, more than any person.” This is because he regarded his qualities not as **his own** achievements but as qualities conferred to him from Above. **On the contrary**, he was convinced that if someone else had possessed his abilities and endowments, that person would have surpassed him.]

This understanding is also the reason behind the discrepancy between the wording of *Sifri* and that of the midrash:

¹⁸ See Alter Rebbe’s *Maamarim* 5562, p. 51; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5710, p. 236; *Sefer HaSichos* 5700, p. 68; clarified in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 13, p. 30 ff; vol. 17, p. 1 ff.

¹⁹ *Bamidbar* 12:3.

The midrash emphasizes that from Hashem’s perspective, “a created being has no justification for making demands **from his Creator.**” To **Hashem**, our *avodah*²⁰ is insignificant. Thus, we ask Him using an idiom that means pleading (for a free gift).

In contrast, *Sifri* explains that “they could have relied... on their good deeds, they only requested Hashem give them a **free gift.**” This emphasizes (not how “their good deeds” are insignificant to **Hashem**, but rather) the humility of righteous people who deem their merits insignificant to the extent that they request only a **free gift** from Hashem.

5.

A STEP FURTHER

Based on the explanation of the two ways to understand Moshe’s prayer — “אֵתְּהִיָּה לְפָנָיִךְ to Hashem” — we can better appreciate the difference between the two interpretations (which Rashi cites)²¹ regarding Hashem's response to Moshe,²² “It is enough for you”: (a) “So that people do not say, ‘How harsh is the Master, and how stubborn (pressing) is the student,’”²³ and, (b) “*It is enough for you* — more than this is reserved for you, the great goodness hidden away for you.”²⁴ —

These two interpretations align with the two interpretations of “אֵתְּהִיָּה לְפָנָיִךְ”:

According to the interpretation that Moshe asked that his petition be granted as a literal free gift, Hashem told Moshe to desist “so that people do not say, ‘The Master..., and the student...’” If Hashem had not instructed Moshe to stop his prayers, Moshe would not take Hashem’s rejection of his request as

²⁰ {Divine service.}

²¹ Rashi on *Devarim* 3:26.

²² {*Devarim* 3:26.}

²³ *Sotah* 13b.

²⁴ *Sifri*, “*Pinchas*,” 27:12 (sec. 135); see *Sifri* on “*Va'eschanan*,” 3:26.

final. After all, since Moshe was requesting {not based on any presumed merit of his but} as a **free** gift, there would be no limit on how many times he could ask.²⁵

Conversely, according to the interpretation that “אָרְחֵי־תְפִלָּה” is among the ten idioms of prayer — Hashem fulfills a prayer based on the merits of the person praying — Hashem responded, “More than this is reserved for you, the great goodness hidden away for you”: The reward for your good deeds is “**more than this.**”

6.

THE CRUX OF THE DISAGREEMENT

Still, further clarification is necessary: What is the basis of the disagreement between the midrash and *Sifri* concerning the meaning of “a free gift, אָרְחֵי־תְפִלָּה”? The midrash maintains that it only explains the meaning of the **idiom Moshe** used for prayer. In contrast, *Sifri* maintains that the idiom describes Moshe’s feeling that he was really undeserving of any reward; therefore, he could not and did not employ any term implying prayer. Instead, Moshe only asked for a free gift (the view of *Sifri*). What is the argument?

The explanation — to preface:

Hashem had *decreed* that Moshe would not enter the Land. True, Moshe thought that since he had been allowed to conquer the land of Sichon and Og, “perhaps the *vow* had been annulled.”²⁶ But this concerned only²⁷ Hashem’s **oath** that Moshe should not enter the land of Israel. In **this** respect, Moshe had room to hope that Hashem’s oath was indeed nullified because a partially nullified oath voids the entire oath.²⁸

²⁵ {Were Moshe to request based on his merit, the number of times he could make the request would be inherently limited by the extent of his merit. However, since he was asking for a free gift, there was no inherent limit, as it was not bound by any prior merit or earned credit.}

²⁶ Rashi on *Devarim* 3:23, s.v., “*ba’eis hah*”; see Rashi on *Bamidbar* 27:12.

²⁷ For what follows in the text, see *Gur Aryeh* and *Sifsei Chachamim* on *Devarim* 3:23; *Sifrei D’vei Rav* on *Sifri*, “*Pinchas*,” 27:12 (sec. 134).

²⁸ {*Nedarim* 9:6.}

Nonetheless, an annulment of the oath would not necessarily annul the actual **decree** (and punishment) that barred Moshe from entering the land of Israel. This is why only after (he thought “perhaps the *vow* had been annulled”) he still prayed that Hashem remove “**the decree that was issued.**”²⁹

On this basis, we can posit that the disagreement between *Sifri* and the midrash hinges on the two viewpoints³⁰ — whether prayer also aids “after the verdict” or specifically “before the verdict”:

The midrash holds that prayer helps even “after the verdict.” So Moshe **prayed** to Hashem using one of the ten terms for **prayer** (only that from among the various expressions, Moshe specifically chose the term denoting to plead).

In contrast, *Sifri* (according to the first interpretation) believes prayer is only efficacious before the Divine verdict. Consequently, in our context, (an expression of) **prayer** would be useless. Instead, Moshe *asked* for a **free gift**.

7.

A DISPUTE OF BAVLI AND YERUSHALMI

We can posit that this could similarly clarify the dispute between *Talmud Bavli* and *Talmud Yerushalmi* regarding the mishnah’s statement³¹ that a prayer (for an expectant mother) that “my wife should give birth to a boy’ is a futile prayer.”

According to *Talmud Bavli*,³² the mishnah {in saying that the prayer is futile} also refers to the period immediately following the 40 days (when the fetus’s form is already established). In contrast, according to *Talmud*

²⁹ Rashi on *Devarim* 3:24, s.v., “*atah hachilosa.*”

³⁰ *Rosh Hashanah* 17b.

³¹ *Mishnah, Berachos*, ch. 9, *mishnah* 1.

³² *Berachos* 60a.

Yerushalmi,³³ the mishnah refers explicitly to “when she is seated on the birthing stool.” However, beforehand, the prayer can, in fact, help in **changing** the gender of the fetus from female to male. According to another authority {not only can the gender of the fetus change beforehand, but} “even while she is seated on the birthing stool, the gender can still change.”

The learning style of the *Talmud Bavli* ³⁴ {relies on a student’s arduous scholastic efforts, resembling} “below to above.” It entails tackling multiple questions, and so forth, requiring a **scholar to toil** to reach a resolution. This process resembles the modus operandi of prayer, which is constrained by the boundaries and limitations of the **worshipper**. And because within the purview of nature, a fetus cannot change its gender from female to male (after 40 days), to pray for a change is futile.

[This also clarifies the answer (in this discussion in *Talmud Bavli*)³⁵ regarding why, in the case of Dinah, a prayer was effective (after 40 days), as this was “a **miracle**”: Since Leah was **accustomed** to miracles, in **her** case, (a human being’s) prayer could bring about a miraculous result.]

In contrast, from the perspective of *Talmud Yerushalmi* — whose study method is not linked (as much) to human effort, but instead comes in a manner of “*or yashar*,”³⁶ as a gift from Above — in this case, prayer also has the capacity of a free gift, unrestricted by limitations, to the extent that “even when she is seated on the birthing stool, the gender can still change.”

³³ *Talmud Yerushalmi*, “*Berachos*,” ch. 9, par. 3; see *Or HaTorah*, “*Bo*,” p. 272; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 1, p. 232; note *Derech Mitzvosecha* 145b.

³⁴ See an extensive explanation of this concept in *Shaarei Orach*, s.v. “*be’chof hei be’Kislev*,” ch. 52 ff; *Or HaTorah*, “*Va’eschanan*,” p. 75 ff; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5708, p. 121 ff; et al.

³⁵ The first answer.

³⁶ {Direct illumination — light as it is revealed from its source.}

8.

ACCORDING TO CHASSIDUS

The explanation according to the teachings of Chassidus:

The Alter Rebbe, in *Likkutei Torah*,³⁷ clarifies that the teaching, “וְאֶתְחַנֵּן” means none other than a free gift” implies that Moshe desired, by entering the land, to bring about the radiation of a level **beyond** what could be attained through the *avodah* of created beings, within the Jewish people (in the lexicon of Chassidus: *Isarusa dileila*³⁸ that is entirely beyond the level of *israrusa dilesata*).³⁹ This is expressed in the term “**free** gift” — “free without mitzvos”⁴⁰ — a level that is “far beyond the level of mitzvos.”

On this basis, we understand that the view of *Sifri* that “וְאֶתְחַנֵּן — a free gift” — is **not** among the ten terms for prayer:

Prayer is a form of *avodah* analogous to an *israrusa delesata*.⁴¹ Therefore, to induce Hashem to fulfill Moshe’s request “Please, let me cross over and see...”⁴² — which would lead to a revelation for the Jewish in the manner of an *isarusa dileila* — the nature of his request also had to resemble the desired effect: The request had to be expressed (not with an idiom of prayer, but rather) as a request for an actual free gift, completely independent of merits (as elucidated above).

³⁷ *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of “*Va’eschanan*” (3a, 3c ff); See also Alter Rebbe’s *Maamarim* 5564, s.v., “*va’eschanan*”; **and at length**, *Or HaTorah*, “*Va’eschanan*,” s.v., “*va’eschanan*.”

³⁸ {Lit., “an arousal from Above.” This Aramaic term refers to the gift of sudden and unexpected revelation initiated by Hashem.}

³⁹ {Lit., “an arousal from below.” This Aramaic term refers to the Divine revelation attained through the initiative of a person’s *avodah*.}

⁴⁰ Similar to the wording of our Sages (*Sifri* and Rashi) on the verse, *Bamidbar* 11:5 — cited in *Likkutei Torah*, “*Va’eschanan*,” 3c.

⁴¹ As clarified also in *Likkutei Torah* (2c, 4a); and at length in *Or HaTorah* (p. 51, ff.).

⁴² *Devarim* 3:25.

9.

CLARIFYING THE MIDRASH

Nevertheless, the midrash maintains that “אָתָּה תִּתֶּנֶּנִּי — a free gift” is among the ten idioms of prayer.

This will be understood according to the elucidation offered by the Tzemach Tzedek regarding the above-cited statement in *Likkutei Torah: Likkutei Torah*⁴³ clarifies that Moshe’s request mentioned above (for a revelation of *isarusa dileila* beyond the reach of *isarusa dilesata*) refers to the Torah. This is because, through Torah, there is a downflow from “the level of ‘I am who I am’..., which is far beyond the reach of *isarusa dilesata*” — it comes as a gift.

The Tzemach Tzedek asks:⁴⁴ If so, why do we say that Moshe’s prayer did not achieve {his goal}? We have the Torah through which {Divine influence} “from this level of *isarusa dileila*” is also elicited now!

He clarifies that Moshe requested that the downflow through Torah (which comes as a gift, and *isarusa dileila*, as explained above) should have an impact below in the earthly realm. This is the advantage of the impact of prayer over the impact of the Torah.⁴⁵ Torah (primarily) has an effect above, in the supernal realms. However, prayer can “change created beings from their current state, such as healing a sick person or causing rain to fall....” [This is because prayer, originating from below and ascending upward, affects the world “below” from where the prayer wells forth.] Moshe sought the effusion to the **lower realms** to resemble an *isarusa dileila* (through Torah).

Therefore, the midrash says that Moshe’s request for a free gift was also an idiom of prayer because Moshe desired a combination of **both** advantages: Even though the effusion is given **freely** (*isarusa dileila*), Moshe wanted it to still

⁴³ *Likkutei Torah*, 2d; and at length in *Or HaTorah* (p. 51, ff.).

⁴⁴ *Or HaTorah*, “*Devarim*,” p. 54 ff; see *Likkutei Torah*, “*Va’eschanan*,” 3d.

⁴⁵ *Tanya*, “*Kuntres Acharon*,” s.v., “*Lehavin Mah Shekasuv bePri Eitz Chaim*.”

egress to the lowest of the low (in the “place” of prayer). Therefore, his prayer encompassed both aspects: It was used as an expression of prayer, but it was a request for an undeserved gift.

10.

AN ATTEMPTED EXPLANATION

Nevertheless, in the end, Moshe’s prayer was unsuccessful because the ultimate purpose is for everything to come through *avodah*. True,⁴⁶ as a result of Moshe not entering the land of Israel, Yehoshua led the Jewish people into the land. And since Yehoshua was compared to “the face of the moon,”⁴⁷ which changes, exile at a later time became possible.

[If Moshe had led the Jews into the land, however, subsequent exile would have been impossible. For then, the redemption from Egypt would have been everlasting (since the conquest of Israel would not have relied upon the *avodah* of the lower realms).]

Nonetheless, specifically through this {leadership of Yehosha}, the advantage of *avodah* could be gained. “You desire the work of Your hands,”⁴⁸ eliciting an even more sublime light⁴⁹ (than the light irradiated when given as “a free gift”).

This lofty spiritual illumination will be revealed below in this world, with the true and complete redemption through our righteous Mashiach. May this happen very soon.

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Va'eschanan*, 5725 (1965)

⁴⁶ For what follows in the text — see at length *Or HaTorah*, “*Va'eschanan*,” (p. 65 ff) and the sources cited there.

⁴⁷ *Bava Basra* 75a.

⁴⁸ *Iyov* 14:15.

⁴⁹ See *Or HaTorah*, “*Devarim*,” pp. 87, 109.