

## *Pray for Evil*

Prayer is not a biblical commandment. According to Nahmanides, that is. According to Maimonides, it is a biblical commandment, but even he agrees that the original concept was much more limited than it is today, as one would pray once a day, in a language and format which suited him or her. Though Nahmanides is more emphatic in his statement that prayer is a personal and emotional concept, Maimonides agrees with him that it should not turn formulaic and mechanical. There is no use in chanting pages from the siddur and chapters from psalms without understanding, intention, or emotion, and already the Bible has warned us against the vacuous prayer which has no actions to back it up. Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Malachi, and Job, all address the problem, but unfortunately, it still prevails. There are those among observant Jews who believe that prayers work automatically, as if pulling levers and depositing coins in God's big vending machine in heaven. For health, press A3, B2 to win the lottery, and a blinking red light on C1 means we ran out of potential dates for you.

That corrupt understanding of prayer leads to the preposterous idea that one could pray for evil things to happen, that we should therefore be afraid of curses cast by religious leaders, and that terrorists succeed because they offer prayers to God. I, for one, would not want to adhere to a concept of God who allows terrorists to wreak havoc because they prayed with intention and devotion, but those who argue in favor of this worldview point to Jewish sources, so I would like to examine them here. There are three main sources which support the idea of "evil prayers". One is the statement of the Talmud (Ber. 63:1) that a burglar says a prayer before breaking into a house. This is obviously a rebuke by the Talmud and not a sign of approval. The Talmud quotes this phrase as a popular saying, and it is used to show the cognitive dissonance between the knowledge that stealing is a transgression, and the urge to offer a prayer to guarantee success.

In the same discussion in the Talmud the following statement appears:

*אפילו לדבר עבירה, והוא יישר ארחותיך – בכל דרכיך דעהו - Always be aware of God, even when you are about to commit a crime, and he will straighten your path.*

Some understood this statement as saying that God will help the one who prays in carrying out his evil plans, and found proof that one could pray for evil outcome. Others tried to refute it by saying that the meaning is that if one is always aware of God he will never sin. The truth is much

more prosaic, though. In rabbinic literature, the words דבר עבירה - an issue of transgression, are sometimes a euphemism for intimate relationships (Ber. 22:1; Megilah 12:1; Sotah 11:2 and 36:1; San. 82:2, and more). The Talmud is saying that intimate relationships should not be a carnal affair but rather invested with spirituality, thus strengthening the bond between the spouses.

The most solid proof, however, that “evil prayer” works, is the story of Balaam, especially in its Talmudic rendition. According to the Talmud (San. 105:1), Balaam knew the exact moment in which God gets angry, and he was able to present his requests for the destruction of his enemies at precisely that moment. Fortunately for the Israelites, God maintained His calm during Balaam’s attempts at cursing them, thus saving them from disaster. Those who rely on this story miss, in my opinion, the Talmudic message here: “evil prayers” do not work. Even if you believe that there is such a moment, the moment is in God’s hands and if He chooses not to get angry, that moment would not materialize. In other words, while it is true that in a state of religious devotion people are capable of doing things they would not do under regular circumstances, their prayers do not affect God. God’s decision whether one will be punished or not is not based on the requests or curses of a mercenary prophets or fanatic clerics, but rather on the actions of humans.

This is also the message of the Torah in describing Balaam as a narrow-minded, greedy, and stubborn person, who kept pressing for a curse and for the big prize from Balak, even after being repeatedly told by God that he will not be able to curse the Israelites, and after being thwarted three times during his journey to Moab. He is portrayed as an arrogant and hot-headed person, who was bested at prophecy by his own donkey. The story comes to show us that of all the dangers lurking in the desert, this was not one that the Israelites should have been afraid of.

Following the Talmud’s statement of God’s “angry moment”, there is a story of a rabbi who was harassed by his heretical neighbor. The rabbi decided to wait for the appropriate moment to curse his neighbor, but kept falling asleep and missing the “golden” opportunity. He realized that praying for destruction or punishment is inappropriate, and this is the message we should apply to our prayers and our religious life, which should never have a negative bent. We should focus our intention and prayers in creating better conditions for us and for others to love and respect each other, and to fulfil God’s mission in making this world better place, one little prayer at a time, and as many great actions as possible.

Shabbat Shalom