# WHEN THE FIRST PRAYER IS ANSWERED

*Yitzchak, Rivka, and the tefillah that continues*

There are moments when we can name exactly what we are asking Hashem for. We want a child. We want a shidduch. We want someone we love to become well. We carry that one request into every tefillah.

And then, sometimes, the answer comes. We breathe again. We say *Baruch Hashem*. And almost without noticing it, we begin to put that request away.

This week's parsha invites us to look again at that moment.

Yitzchak and Rivka have been waiting for children. They are both davening. Rashi describes Yitzchak standing in one corner and Rivka in another, each pleading with Hashem. Then the Torah says, "Hashem responded to him, and Rivka his wife conceived."

> ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו כי עקרה היא
> ויעתר לו ה' ותהר רבקה אשתו
>
> "Yitzchak pleaded with Hashem opposite his wife, for she was barren. Hashem responded to him, and Rivka his wife conceived." *Bereishis 25:21*

Two people are davening for the same thing. The Torah specifically attributes the response to **him**.

Rashi explains, "To him and not to her, for the prayer of a tzaddik whose father was a tzaddik is not comparable to the prayer of a tzaddik whose father was a rasha." Yitzchak was Avraham's son. Rivka was Besuel's daughter.

At first, the explanation seems straightforward. Yitzchak's tefillah had the additional merit of his father. But the sefer **Mesukim Midvash** asks us to look more carefully. Rivka had become who she was despite the home in which she grew up. Surely that achievement also has extraordinary value. [1]

> And after the pregnancy began, what became of Rivka's tefillah?

# The person who came from far away

The **Maskil LeDavid** raises the question. Rivka had a father whose example she could have followed, and she did not follow it. She had a brother whose example she could have followed, and she did not follow it. She chose a different life.

Rashi himself makes that point earlier in the parsha. Why does the Torah identify Rivka as the daughter of Besuel and the sister of Lavan? To praise her. She lived among wicked people, and she did not learn from their deeds.

There is also a striking discussion about choosing a *shaliach tzibbur*, the person who leads the congregation in prayer.

The **Rosh**, quoted by the **Tur**, says that a person's suitability does not depend on distinguished ancestry. When someone is personally righteous, we should welcome him even if he comes from a family that was far from Hashem. The Rosh cites a pasuk in Yeshayahu. [2]

> שלום שלום לרחוק ולקרוב אמר ה' ורפאתיו
>
> "Peace, peace to the distant and to the near, says Hashem, and I will heal him." *Yeshayahu 57:19*

Notice the order. First *larachok*, the distant. Then *lakarov*, the near.

The **Taz** reads the Rosh as giving particular preference to drawing close someone from that distant background. Hashem wants the heart. The Taz even writes that this person's prayer can be heard more readily than that of a tzaddik whose father was a tzaddik.

The **Maharshal** takes a different position when the candidates are otherwise equal, and gives precedence to the one with righteous ancestry. The Taz's position is therefore a real question for our parsha. How can we understand his words alongside the fact that Hashem responded to Yitzchak?

> Rivka's background makes her achievement greater. Why, then, was the pregnancy attributed to Yitzchak's tefillah?

# “Not comparable” leaves a question

**Mesukim Midvash** makes a careful observation about the Gemara’s language.

It says that one tefillah is *not comparable* to the other. That language establishes a difference. The phrase alone does not spell out which of the two possesses the greater value.

Consider a familiar Gemara in **Chagigah**. Someone who reviews his learning one hundred times is not comparable to someone who reviews it one hundred and one times. There, the second person has the additional distinction. The words “not comparable” do not mean that the first person mentioned must be greater. [3]

There is another example in **Shabbos**. The Gemara teaches that the world endures through the Torah learning of young children. Rav Pappa asks Abaye about their own learning. Abaye answers that breath containing sin is not comparable to breath containing no sin. Again, the second item in the comparison has the special quality. [4]

So the author suggests that the Gemara’s phrase about Yitzchak and Rivka can also be understood in that way. A tzaddik who emerged from a spiritually difficult home has a particular greatness, and a particular capacity for tefillah.

But now the question becomes even sharper. If Rivka’s tefillah has that special capacity, why does the Torah say that Hashem responded to **Yitzchak**?

The answer comes from another teaching in the very same discussion in Yevamos.

> מפני שהקב”ה מתאוה לתפלתן של צדיקים
>
> “Because the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayers of the righteous.” *Yevamos 64a*

The Gemara asks why the Avos experienced barrenness. Rabbi Yitzchak answers that Hashem desires the tefillos of tzaddikim.

To understand how that answers our question, we have to think more deeply about what Hashem is giving a person through tefillah.

# The chesed within the tefillah

**Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler**, in **Michtav MeEliyahu**, explains that Hashem is the source of chesed. The good He wishes to give extends far beyond what we are able to see. Even a situation that calls forth a painful, searching tefillah can become the setting for a deeper closeness to Him.

When the Gemara says that Hashem desires the prayers of tzaddikim, Rav Dessler understands this as Hashem wishing to give them an extraordinary spiritual good. Through tefillah they can rise to a deeper level of *deveikus*, attachment to Hashem. [5]

Think about the difference between saying words because they are on the page and saying those same words because you feel how completely your life rests in Hashem's hands.

The words may be familiar. The person saying them has reached a new depth.

**Mesukim Midvash** uses that principle to explain Rivka. Hashem wanted her to attain an even deeper level of tefillah. Her capacity to draw close through prayer was itself a reason for Hashem to desire more of her tefillah.

In the author's explanation, Hashem's responding to Yitzchak does not prove that Rivka's tefillah was spiritually inferior. Hashem wanted Rivka's tefillah to continue and to reach further. [1]

> Hashem's desire for a person's tefillah is itself an expression of the good He wishes to give that person.

But this leaves a question open.

Once Rivka became pregnant, the very thing she had been asking for had happened. She could see that the tefillah had been answered in the home. She had no need to know whose merit had brought the pregnancy.

**So why would she keep pleading?** And when would her own tefillah find its fulfillment?

I would like to suggest that the next pesukim show us how to carry this idea further.

# The pregnancy opened another tefillah

The Torah says that Hashem responded to Yitzchak, and the pregnancy began. Then, almost immediately in the Torah's account, something deeply troubling happens within that pregnancy.

> ויתרצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי
> ותלך לדרש את ה׳
>
> "The children struggled within her, and she said, 'If so, why am I thus?' And she went to seek Hashem." *Bereishis 25:22*

Rashi explains that when she passed places of Torah, Yaakov struggled to emerge. When she passed places of idolatry, Esav struggled to emerge. Rivka was experiencing a conflict she could not understand.

She went to the beis midrash of **Sheim**. There she learned that she was carrying two children, the beginnings of two nations, whose paths would separate. [6]

Until now, the plea had been for children. Now she understood that the children themselves would have to find their way through an enormous spiritual struggle.

Here is the chiddush I would like to suggest.

**Hashem answered Yitzchak's tefillah with the pregnancy. Rivka's own avodah of tefillah was to continue.** The difficulty within the pregnancy brought her to Sheim, and she was given knowledge that would keep a mother's heart praying for the future.

For Yitzchak, the particular plea that his wife should conceive could now come to rest. For Rivka, there was already more to ask.

She would be raising Yaakov alongside Esav. The future of Avraham's family would unfold through these two boys. She knew from the beginning that their lives would pull in different directions.

We can imagine what she would now be asking Hashem. Help these children. Help me raise them. Protect their future. Let Yaakov grow into the tzaddik who can carry Avraham's legacy forward.

# She prayed for him until her dying day

The **Ramban** later writes that Rivka had never told Yitzchak the prophecy that the older would serve the younger. On that reading, she carried knowledge that he did not share. That gives further depth to her continuing concern for Yaakov. [7]

**And I would take this much further. Rivka probably continued davening for Yaakov for dozens and dozens of years, until her dying day.**

From the struggle within her womb, she knew that these two children would grow in different directions. As they grew older, the concern became more urgent. After the berachos, Esav planned to kill Yaakov. Rivka learned of his intention and sent Yaakov away to save his life.

> הנה עשו אחיך מתנחם לך להרגך
>
> "Behold, your brother Esav is consoling himself concerning you by planning to kill you." *Bereishis 27:42*

Now imagine that mother. The son for whom she had davened was a grown man, a tzaddik, and his own brother wanted him dead. She had to send him far away. Surely she would keep pleading with Hashem to protect him.

The Torah records no reunion between Rivka and Yaakov. Rashi tells us that, at Beis El on his return journey, Yaakov learned that his mother had died. She never lived to see the reunion for which a mother would have longed. [7a]

**How could her tefillah have ended with the pregnancy? She was still davening for the child she had asked Hashem to give her, for his safety, his righteousness, and his future, until the last day of her life.**

That is the continuation I am suggesting. Hashem answered Yitzchak with the pregnancy. Rivka's knowledge of the struggle opened an avodah of tefillah that could accompany her through the rest of her life.

And this brings us to a contemporary story about **Yehonatan Indursky**, one of the creators of *Shtisel*, and the mother who kept davening for him.

# The son who prayed for his mother

Yehonatan grew up in a frum family in Yerushalayim and learned in **Ponevezh**. While still a young man, he left that way of life. His parents urged him to remain close to them and welcomed him home, even while he was choosing to live differently.

He went on to study filmmaking and helped create *Shtisel*. The series brought him international recognition. Years passed, and outwardly his life had moved far from the path on which he had been raised. [8]

In 2021, while in New York for a lecture, he learned that his mother had been diagnosed with cancer. He promised to visit the **Lubavitcher Rebbe's Ohel in Queens** and daven for her.

At the Ohel, he called her. He placed the telephone near the resting place, and she prayed from the other end of the line. He could hear her crying and pleading with Hashem.

He had arrived to pray for his mother. Then his own need came pouring out as well. Although he had not planned to leave a written request, he wrote about feeling lost and being unable to bear losing her. He tore the note into pieces and left it at the Ohel.

In recalling that moment, he described the return of a simple, believing Jewish part of himself. It was a significant moment in a gradual process. In time he married an observant Jewish woman from France, and he returned to a life of religious observance. [9]

Years before anyone could see that outcome, his mother had continued praying. In the published account, she described her wish that he would marry a religious woman and establish a home with religious children. She had also fasted one day a week during the years of his absence from observance.

About those years, she said, **"I prayed and prayed and prayed."**

We can now hear another part of the story. The young man standing in Queens, searching for words, was a son whose mother had continued carrying his name before Hashem through the years.

> He had come to daven for the mother who had been davening for him all along.

# Tefillah after the chuppah

And there is another story I remember, which I believe was told about **Rav Shmuel Berenbaum**. I may not have every detail exactly right, but this is the way I remember it. [10]

The Rosh Yeshiva would often serve as *mesader kiddushin* at the weddings of his talmidim. Bachurim would give him rides from the yeshiva to the wedding and back.

On one such occasion, after the chuppah, the student who had driven him offered to take him back. The Rosh Yeshiva said that he would stay a little longer. The bachur could go home.

As it happened, the bachur did not go home. He remained there and, over the course of the next few hours, noticed that the Rosh Yeshiva was still there as well. He was saying Tehillim.

Eventually, it emerged that he had said **the entire Sefer Tehillim for the chassan and kallah** whose kiddushin he had just arranged.

And, as I remember the story, it later became known that he did this for **every chassan and kallah** for whom he served as mesader kiddushin. He had done it quietly, in a way that people did not know about. Only eventually did the practice come to light.

*If anyone hearing this recognizes the story and knows the correct details or its source, please get back to me.*

Think about what everyone had been davening for. The shidduch should work out. The couple should reach the chuppah. The marriage should take place *besha'ah tovah*. And now, *Baruch Hashem*, it had happened. The chassan and kallah were married. We could easily feel that the request had been answered and that we could stop davening.

**But Rav Shmuel understood that a marriage continues to need Hashem's care every day. The couple had reached the chuppah. Now they needed a lifetime of shalom bayis, patience, health, and siyata diShmaya.**

That brings us directly back to Rivka. Yitzchak's particular plea for the pregnancy could come to rest when she conceived. We might likewise stop praying once the couple is married. **But Rivka kept praying for her children's future, and Rav Shmuel, in this remembered account, kept praying for the couple's future.**

> **At the very point when we might think we can stop davening, there is so much more for which to continue davening.**

# Keep bringing the future to Hashem

The mother who continued davening for her son, and the Rosh Yeshiva who continued davening after the chuppah, bring us back to Rivka. Each helps us see how much of a person’s future remains ahead after the first yeshuah.

**Rivka, I would suggest, prayed for Yaakov for dozens and dozens of years, for protection from Esav, until her dying day.**

We often daven intensely at a beginning. Before a birth. Before a wedding. Before someone starts a new chapter.

Then the baby arrives, the chuppah is over, the new chapter begins. There is so much to be grateful for. There is also a whole life ahead.

We can bring both to Hashem in the same tefillah. Gratitude for what He has already given us, and a plea that He continue to guide the people He has placed in our care.

For parents and grandparents, that can mean continuing to daven even when we have no particular crisis to report. For the young couple to have patience. For the child to have good influences. For the adult child to feel at home with Torah. For the wisdom to know when to speak and when to listen.

A parent can pray faithfully while the outcome remains beyond their control. We keep loving, we keep doing what we can, and we keep turning to Hashem.

> We davened for the child to come into our lives. We can keep davening for Hashem to accompany that child through life.

May Hashem hear the tefillos of every parent and grandparent, bring refuah and yeshuah to those who need them, and grant us the zechus to see our children and grandchildren grow in health, in Torah, and in a deep and lasting closeness to Him. **Amen.**