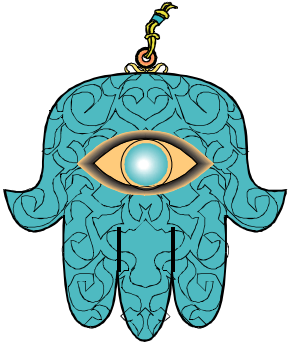
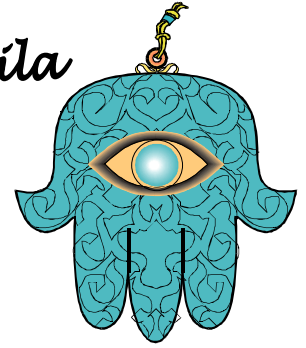


Spiritual Thought for the Week

By Rabbi Daniel Bouskila



Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel
10500 Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90024



November 20/21, 2009

The Power of Prayer ***(Parashat Toledot – Genesis 25:19 – 28:9)***

For the second time in the Torah, we are told of a barren woman. Like Sarah in the previous generation, we are now presented with Rebecca, who is also unable to have children. With Sarah, the attempted solution was for Abraham to father a child with Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. Although Sarah eventually did give birth to a son – Isaac – the episode with Hagar and Ishmael produced painful circumstances resulting in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's household.

In Rebecca's case, there is no Hagar, and such a "solution" is not even contemplated. Instead, the fact that Rebecca is barren is told to us in a verse which already contains the solution: "***Isaac pleaded with God on behalf of his wife, because she was barren***" (***Genesis 25:21***). Instead of bringing in another woman, Isaac instead turns to God in prayer on behalf of his wife.

The classic Hebrew word for prayer is "***Tefillah***," yet here the Torah does not say "***va-yitpallel Yitschak***" (and Isaac ***prayed***), rather "***va-ye-e-tar Yitschak***" ("and Isaac ***pleaded***"). What is the significance of "pleaded" versus "prayed"?

In a creative play on words, the Talmud compares the power of prayer that is delivered with a plea ("ye-e-tar") to the function of a pitchfork (which in Hebrew is called "atar" – sounding like "ye-e-tar"). The Talmud says: "**Just as the pitchfork ("atar") turns sheaves of grain from one position to another, so do the prayers of righteous people, delivered with a plea ("ye-e-tar"), turn the position of God from one of anger and judgment to one of mercy.**"

Does prayer have the power to influence God's decisions? If a prayer is recited by superstition, with selfish self-interest, or in a mechanical fashion that lacks sincerity and heart, then that prayer is merely words. But if a prayer is purely from the heart and delivered as a genuine supplication or plea, then such a prayer has tremendous potential power: "**And God responded to his (Isaac's) plea.**" There are some who can teach prayers. Isaac teaches us *how* to pray.