Does God Hear Our Prayers: Praying in Behalf of Others in Jewish Tradition and in Our Own Time

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To my parents, Louis and Flo Bloch
To my siblings, Nathan, Rachel, Lenny, Alan, Leah, Doug, Michael, and Stacey
To my friends, Annie Belford and Jennnifer Jaeche
To my doktorvater, Dr. David Sperling
Thankyou for your ongoing love and support throughout the years. Thankyou for believing in me. It is through the blessing of having all of you in my life that I find God's presence.

Summary

Number of Chapters:
This thesis consists of three chapters.

The Contribution of this Thesis:
This thesis will help clergy, caregivers, and lay people to understand the biblical foundations on which contemporary intercessory prayer is based. Our thesis will provide Jewish pastoral caregivers resources for healing today.

Goal of the Thesis:
The goal of this thesis was to analyze ten narrative biblical texts on intercessory prayer and to determine if contemporary modalities of healing stem directly from biblical sources and later Jewish texts.

Divisions:
Introduction
Chapter 1: Intercessory Prayer in The Bible
Part I: Intercessory Prayer in the Torah
Part II: Intercessory Prayer in the Prophets
Chapter 2: Analysis of Biblical Texts on Intercession
Chapter 3: A Comparison of Intercession in Biblical Texts and Contemporary Healing Literature
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Often, when we are working on such a challenging process, we get lost in the details, in the research, and forget to look into the eyes of those who have helped us reach our goals. This thesis does not only mark a completion of a year's research and work. For me, it marks a five-year process of growth, learning and my own personal transformation. This thesis could not have been written without the support and guidance of my thesis advisors, Drs. David Sperling and Nancy Wiener. Thank you both for your support, your encouragement, and all the time you devoted to me. Most of all thank you for being my *chevrutah.*

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
EncJud	Roth, Cecil, and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds. *Encyclopaedia Judacia*. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1972.
IDB	Buttrick, George A., ed. Interpreter's Dicitonary Of the Bible. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.
TDOT	Botterweck, G. Johannes, and Helmer Ringgren, eds. Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974-.

Introduction

It was the Summer of 2001, and I was a chaplain intern at New York University Medical Center. About two weeks into the job, I was to be on-call for the first time. As part of my responsibilities, I was to cover the surgical waiting room. There I met a Jewish family waiting anxiously for their father to come out from emergency heart transplant surgery. After introducing myself as the chaplain intern, we talked for a while about their father's condition. When I asked them if they would like to pray, they asked me if we could sing the *misheberach*. We did. We kept singing and singing-- as if our praises were traveling up to God. Later that day, I went up to my regular floor, the recovery unit. On my way, I was startled by a Code Blue call. At first, I didn't think much of it, considering these calls are common in the hospital. When I arrived at my floor, I walked around to see if I was needed. On the other side of the room, I noticed a group of doctors frantically scurrying around a bed. The situation was critical. Once I was able to get closer the bed and read the nametag, I realized that it was the father of the family down stairs. I immediately froze, unable to do anything, while the doctors prepared to shock his heart. I felt helpless, I closed my eyes and I began to pray. There is no explanation for that moment and the way I felt. I pleaded to God for the life of this man who I did not even know. I cried out for God to save him. Moments later, the blip appeared on the monitor, and even though he was not completely out of danger, life was brought to him as his heart was now beating. I exited the room and later in the night found out that the father survived and had been moved to the Cardiac Care Unit (CCU) to recover.

Although the life-threatening incident that summer day ended, my visits with the family did not. For the remaining two months of the summer, I met with the family daily. I saw the father go from the CCU to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), to a Cardiac step down unit and finally to a regular room. I spent days getting to know him and his family, crying with them, holding their hands, and providing support whenever I could. There were times when I thought he would never make it. There were times when I wondered how he did. When my chaplain internship ended, the father who I now called, Mr.G., left the hospital with his family and headed home. A few months later I received an email from his daughter who tracked me down through my school. She thanked me for my support and informed me that her father was doing well and had made it to her son's bar mitzvah.

Reflecting on this story, almost two years later, I am amazed by its power. In fact, it sometimes brings me to tears and sends chills through my body. I often wonder if God heard my prayers, specifically those sent while Mr. G was in the recovery room, or if God heard any of my prayers that summer at all. I question how much my physical presence matters and whether it is necessary for me to be next to the person for whom I pray. How much does my *kavanah*, my intention, matter when I offer prayers? How do I know if my prayers are sufficient and if I pray "properly"?

From these personal questions only came more generalized questions. I began analyzing the role of a rabbi and why it is that people tend to assume that a rabbi's prayers are more powerful than their own. I noticed how difficult it is for Jews to pray either alone or with someone else. Many deem it necessary to pray, or simply remember to pray, only when encountering a life threatening illness or death. Perhaps that is why I

am often viewed as alien when I ask Jewish patients if I can pray for them or with them if they are not lying on a deathbed. The typical responses are: "I am not dying", or "My procedure is very minor" or "No thanks" or "I am Jewish—I don't need a chaplain". Perhaps some of this stems from our failing to discuss God or pray when life is not in danger. It always astonishes me how for the Black Baptist, the Catholic, or the Protestant patient, prayer comes so naturally. It seems as though God, faith, and prayer are infused in their language; the air is permeated with their questions, their struggles, and pain. While so many Jews in the same situations remain silent.

After my experience in the hospital, I began to question more globally why praying in behalf of another seems to be such a Christian notion. Most Jews do not even know what the term "intercession" means. Everything in popular American culture from Oprah, to Newsweek, to Readers' digest focuses on this notion that prayer can promote healing---but it all seems to be from a Christian perspective. Recently, I came across a bookmark distributed by the Christian Scientists that says "Prayer Heals" with a hotline to call to hear taped messages on how prayer actually does heal. Christian websites even have links in their directory called "Prayer Requests".

With all this, I began to think that while the notion of praying in behalf of others has been central to Christian practice and theology, it is a notion with deep Jewish roots.

All over the world, Reform Synagogues are reciting *Mi Sheberachs* or prayers of that genre at Shabbat evening services, even though it is not the traditional time to recite it. In some synagogues a traditional *misheberach* is not recited, but a space is provided in the service to pray for those who are in need of healing with a formal prayer such as *El Na Rafah Na Lah.* An increasing number of Shuls have healing services once a year or

even more frequently. Even in some Orthodox shuls post 9/11, healing services were being held. And even on the internet, with the ongoing terrorist attacks in Israel, constant e-mails have gone out asking readers to participate in a *yom tzom utefilliah*, a day of prayer and fasting.

On a national level, about thirteen years ago the National Center for Jewish Healing opened in New York City. Today people call the center from all over the world seeking others to pray for them. Centers for Jewish Healing have been opening up all over the country, under professional and volunteer direction. At some JCC's , such as in New York, there are free healing services open to anyone, led by renowned rabbis and folk singers. UJA is sponsoring major conferences on Judaism, Spirituality, and Healing two to three times a year which attract clergy and lay leaders from all the denominations within Judaism. The Healing movement is blossoming and is growing in importance in segments of the Jewish world.

So much of what we do as Jews in this area comes from our sacred texts. Throughout Jewish tradition, our ancestors developed ways of praying in behalf of others and visiting the sick. Clearly our contemporary modes of intercession, whether individual or communal, have roots in our Bible which contains numerous instances of intercessory prayer. In this thesis, through the study of ten biblical examples of intercessory prayers, I illustrate how Jewish contemporary modes of intercession stem from biblical sources, and point out what these sources meant in context. I also call attention to the ways in which Jewish commentaries interpreted these sources.

Chapter 1
Intercessory Prayer in the Bible

In the Bible there are numerous forms of prayer. Often we understand prayer as personal or individual requests to God. However, there is also a form of prayer in which one person prays in behalf of another or others. This form of prayer in which one individual intercedes for another person or for a group is known as "intercession" or "intercessory prayer." Unlike a prayer that is directed from an individual to God, an intercessory prayer challenges us to ask many questions such as: Why does one person need to pray in behalf of another? Why can't one pray directly? Who is being prayed for and why? Does the person who prays in behalf of another need to have a special status? Is the prayer effective?

Throughout the Bible there are many examples of intercessory prayers. Some of these prayers involve rituals, such as fasting or the rending of garments. Some actually provide us with the words that were spoken. Part I of this chapter will examine the intercessory prayers found in the Torah. Part II will examine the intercessory prayers found in the Book of the Prophets.

Part I: Intercessory Prayers in The Torah

Abraham pleads in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah —Genesis 18:23

Moses' prayer in behalf of his sister Miriam, in Numbers 12, is the most familiar biblical intercessory prayer employed in contemporary liberal worship. But Number 12 does not contain the first intercessory prayer in the Bible. That distinction belongs to

Genesis 18. Here, God informs Abraham that He will destroy the cities of Sodom and Gommorah because of the great sins committed by their citizens. Abraham pleads in behalf of the people and implores God not to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. He asks: "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?"[1] God agrees to save the people and forgive them. Abraham humbly begins to bargain with God. He next asks God if there were forty innocent people, would He destroy the innocent along with the guilty. This is followed by his request for thirty, then twenty. Finally God promises not to destroy the cities even if there are only ten innocent people.

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is that it is the first time in the Tanach that we see a human challenge and question a divine decision.[2] It is clear from the text that Abraham intercedes in behalf of the people to save them because God intends to destroy them. After all, God has threatened to destroy the people before in the Bible. In the generation of Noah, when God warns that he will destroy the earth because of the sin of the people, "Noah held his peace and said naught, neither did he intercede."[3] Whereas, in his generation, Abraham drew near and said "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? While Noah[4] did not intercede in behalf of the people, Abraham was motivated to do so.

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[1] All translations, unless specified, are taken from *JPS Tanach.*
[2] R.Friedman. *Commentary on the Torah.* New York: Harper Collins, 2001, page 65.
[3] N.Leibowitz. *New Studies in Bereshit.* (Jerusalem, Israel: Haomanim Press,) 181. She cites the Zohar as her source.
[4] See Sanhedrin 108a for a discussion on Noah as a righteous man in his generation.

One possible explanation for Abraham's role as intercessor is that he is a prophet[5] for whom "intercession before God in favor of man is also an indispensable aspect of his function."[6] Also, "Abraham like the other prophets has been made privy to God's purposes."[7]

Another possible explanation for why Abraham pleaded in behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah is that he is a symbol of what is "just and right". As the biblical text states (Genesis 18:19), "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right (*tzedakah umishpat*), in order that the Lord may bring about for Abraham what He has promised him." Sarna states:

> Abraham is granted this singular privilege because he symbolizes the future Jewish nation, which is destined to become a source of blessing to other nations. As such, he cannot avoid direct involvement in the fortunes of humanity at large. At the same time, he is the repository of those eternal values of righteousness and justice that constitute "the way of the Lord." God relies upon him to transmit this heritage to his posterity, which is the indispensable precondition for the fulfillment of the divine promises. The lessons of Sodom and Gomorrah, the judgement of God, and the actions of Abraham exemplify the principles of justice and righteousness, divine and human.

Another possible explanation for Abraham's role as intercessor is that God afforded him the opportunity. According to Nehama Leibowitz, the verse "Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, And because their sin is very grievous I will go down and see...mirrors the Divine intention to put Abraham to the test to see whether he would beseech mercy for them."[8] Abraham does, and he draws near.

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[5] See Genesis 20:7.
[6] N. Sarna. *JPS Commentary on Genesis*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 142.
[7] Ibid, commenting on Genesis 18:17.
[8] N. Leibowitz. *New Studies in Berehsit—Genesis* p. 182.

According to Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, God says "I will go down and see" to open up for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah an opportunity to repent.[9] It is interesting to note that when one intercedes in behalf of another, there is often an element of *teshuvah* involved in intercessory prayer. In many cases the intercessor is trying to get the one in whose behalf he is praying to repent. Yet, "Neither Abraham nor the messengers warn the people of Sodom of the impending disaster in the hope of arousing them to atonement."[10]

While there are many possible reasons why Abraham interceded in behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, none of these possibilities explains why he did not pray in behalf of his son Isaac.[11] Freidman argues, in his commentary, that there are several possible reasons why Abraham did not intercede in behalf of Isaac. First, Abraham was being obedient. He asserts:

> The mark of Abraham's personality is *obedience*. He will obey anything that his God commands him to do. Leave your land. Leave your birthplace. Leave your father's house. Circumcise yourself. Even if he is commanded to sacrifice his child, he will do it. There are no arguments or even questions. There is only immediate compliance.[12]

Friedman shows that when Abraham was commanded to do something, he just did it. However, in the case of Sodom and Gommorah, God does not command, rather He just presents Abraham with His divine intention. Thus, this leaves it open for Abraham to discuss and argue.[13]

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[9] Aaron Yaakov Greenberg, *Torah Gems: Bereshit.* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Y. Orenstein, Yavneh Publishing House Ltd, 1992,) 152.
[10] Sarna, p.133
[11] Note that the medieval commentators import the motif of Abraham's intercession that we find in Genesis 18 into Genesis 22.
[12] Friedman commentary, p. 74.
[13] Ibid.

Friedman also suggests that Abraham learns from arguing about Sodom and Gommorah that God knows what is in one's heart. He realizes that "...since God knows what is in one's heart, why argue? Since God knows the situation and its necessary outcome, why speak? After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham never argues with God again."[14]

Yeshayahu Leibowitz poses another possibility for why Abraham did not intercede in behalf of Isaac. He claims that Abraham has two levels of faith. The first is a faith that is motivated by Abraham's sense of awe or fear. This faith relates humans to God. The other level of faith that he possesses is a faith based on a promise. Thus, when explaining why Abraham was quiet when told to sacrifice his son, and outspoken with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, Leibowitz suggests that each circumstance evoked a different type of faith. With Isaac, Abraham's faith is motivated by fear and with Sodom and Gomorrah his faith is based in a promise.[15]

Though there are many plausible reasons why Abraham pleaded in behalf of the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah and not in behalf of his son Isaac, his motives still seem uncertain. Perhaps it is easier for biblical characters to intercede in behalf of the people than for an immediate (or blood) relative. In contrast, it may be that the author of the text here is highlighting a socio-political agenda. Or perhaps the author is just utilizing this text to illustrate and emphasize

[14] Ibid,76.
[15] Y.Leibowitz. *New Studies in Bereshit Genesis*. (Jerusalem, Israel: Haomanim Press, 1988) 20-22.

God's divine justice. This story would then be functioning as public relations for God.

It is interesting to note that this act of intercession by Abraham is interpreted by some, but not all, as a form of prayer. In examining the text alone, one may assume that this is not like other examples of intercessory prayer because the narrative lacks the Hebrew word *hitpallel* which means "to pray." However, according to Rashi[16] "Abraham's drawing near" (*vayigash*) may mean to pray. Rashi[17] explains that *vayigash* can have many meanings. First it means either to draw near to speak harshly or to enter into battle.[18] It may also mean draw near to appease,[19] or to draw near to pray.[20]

Similar to Rashi, Saadia Gaon also sees Abraham's plea in behalf of the people as a prayer. He cites 18:22 and explains that Abraham stood in prayer before God.

Our commentators explain Abraham's plea as prayer, an understanding that may be the plain sense of the text. First, in verse 21 God descends, and in verse 23 Abraham comes forward.[21] This may imply a meeting between God and Abraham. In verse 22, Abraham stands before God. Then he addresses God with a plea, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?" Although Abraham does not do it immediately, he does humble himself before God. In

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[16] All commentators cited, unless noted otherwise, are quoted from M. L. Katzenellenbogen, *Torat Hayim* Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986-1991.
[17] All Rashi translations, unless specified, are taken from, Silberman, ed. Chumash with Rashi's commentary, Jerusalem: published by the Silberman Family, 1985.
[18] See II Samuel 10:13
[19] See Genesis 44:18
[20] See I Kings 18:36

verse 27, Abraham claims that he is only dust and ashes. Then in verse 30 and and 32 he attempts to pacify God. Over and over he says, "Let not my Lord be angry." Although this pericope lacks the formal words of prayer, the *peshat* is in accord with the medieval interpretation that Abraham's plea in behalf of the people is a prayer.

If we are correct that Abraham prayed for Sodom, we may ask if his prayer effective. In Genesis 18:32, God answers Abraham's request and says, "I will not destroy, for the sake of ten." It is God not Abraham who ends the exchange. "When the Lord had finished speaking to Abraham, He departed; and Abraham returned to his place." From this we may conclude that God heard Abraham's prayer. Though the text can be understood to imply that God heard his prayer, hearing does not guarantee that the prayer is effective. One might think that it is not because, according to Genesis 19, God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gommorah. Upon closer examination, however, we see that God upheld His end of the bargain. God could not find ten righteous people in the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,[22] therefore He destroyed them.[23] Abraham's intercessory prayer proved effective.

Abraham's Prayer in behalf of Abimelech

Chapter twenty opens with Abraham and Sarah traveling in a foreign land. As he had done previously in Egypt (Chapter 12), Abraham declares that Sarah, his wife, is his

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[21] To reconcile God's arriving before Abraham, it has been suggested that the original text stated that God waited for Abraham and that the Masoretes amended the text so that Abraham waited for God. See Speiser, *Genesis*, ([AB] Garden City: Doubleday, 1964,) 134.

[22] One might question why Abraham did not plead to God for even fewer than ten people. According to Rashi, Abraham knew already of two instances where fewer than ten had failed to save the wicked.

[23] God destroys all the citizens except Abraham's nephew, Lot, and part of Lot's family.

sister. After Sarah is taken by Abimelech, the King of Gerar, the entire royal household is plagued with an illness sent by God. God comes to Abimelech in a dream and informs him of the great sin he has committed. God warns him to return Sarah to Abraham under penalty of death. Abimelech protests to God that he did not intentionally take a married woman. Furthermore, he never touched her. God acknowledges that Abimelech took Sarah without sinful intent. Nonetheless, he will die unless he restores her to Abraham. In addition, God requires that Abraham the prophet, intercede in his behalf.

The next morning, Abimelech goes to Abraham with gifts and returns Sarah. Abraham, the offended party, prays in behalf of Abimelech. God then heals Abimelech's wife and his slave girls, enabling them to give birth.

The biblical text provides the reason that Abraham needs to pray in behalf of Abimelech, namely that Abraham is a prophet. But what is it about a prophet that puts him in the role of intercessor? According to Nahum Sarna:

> The prophet is a spokesman for God to man; but intercession before God in favor of man is also an indispensable aspect of his function. Moses frequently acts in this capacity, and so do Samuel, Amos, and Jeremiah. It is primarily in this sense that Abraham is here designated "a prophet." He has already demonstrated his intercessory role in the case of Sodom. In addition, like the later prophets, he has been made privy to God's purposes. [24]

Sarna's answer is similar to that of Rashi. Rashi also provides us with an answer to why the prophetic role leads Abraham to pray in behalf of Abimelech. On the verse: "return the man's wife," Rashi says: "Don't think that he (Abraham) won't take her (Sarah) back because she is no longer attractive, and that he will hate you and refuse to pray in your behalf." Rashi's implied question is: Why does Abraham have to be a prophet to pray in Abimelech's behalf?
Rashi's answer is:

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[24] Nahum Sarna. *JPS Commentary on Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989),142.

> Since he is a prophet, he (Abraham) knows that you (Abimelech) didn't touch her (Sarah) and he will pray in your behalf.

Rashi is responding to what he reads as a special circumstance. Here the offended party, Abraham, is asked to pray in behalf of the offender, Abimelech.[25] Rashi explains that Abraham, as prophet, is fully aware of Abimelech's actions. Accordingly Abraham will have no personal reasons not to pray on Abimelech's behalf.

The commentary of Rashbam focuses on another characteristic of the prophet, specifically the prophet's relationship to God. Rashbam goes so far as to derive the word *navi* from *niv* -- the word for speech.[26] Rashbam states: "He is in close relationship with me and speaks my words, and I love his words and hear his prayers." What Rashbam is saying is that God hears the prayer of the *navi*, and since Abraham is a prophet, his prayer for healing will be heeded. Radak, likewise, emphasizes the relationship that the prophet has with God. Radak explains, "because he (Abraham) is a prophet", *ki navi hu* as:

> He (Abraham) is close to me (God) and I am close to him and I hear his prayer. I won't forgive you (Abimelech) even if you give her back until he (Abraham) prays on your behalf, for even if she were unmarried you sinned by taking her against her will.

It is clear from Radaks's commentary that it is not enough for Abimelech just to return Sarah. True, the use of *im* in verse 7 introduces a condition set forth by God that if Abimelech returns Sarah, he will live. But Abimelech also needs to appease Abraham, because he is a prophet and therefore close to God. Through Abraham's prayer, God will forgive Abimelech's entire household and heal them.

Radak's interpretation suggests an answer to the question of why Abimelech cannot pray directly and needs Abraham to intercede for him. This is not the only incident where a gentile king needs the prayer of a Hebrew prophet to save him from

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[25] Compare Sarna, *JPS Commentary: Genesis*, p. 142, s.v. *he will intercede for you.*
[26] His proof text is *niv sefatayim* in Isaiah 57:17.

death . In Exodus 10:16-17, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray in his behalf to remove "the death" from him. These situations where a gentile king acknowledges the power and supreme kingship of the Hebrew God are meant to glorify Him and to demonstrate that He is the only God worthy of worship.

As it states in I Kings 8:41:

> ... if a foreigner who is not of Your people Israel comes from a distant land for the sake of Your name--for they shall hear about Your great name and Your mighty hand and Your outstretched arm--when he comes to pray toward this House, oh, hear in Your heavenly abode and grant all that the foreigner asks You for. Thus all the peoples of the earth will know Your name and revere You, as does your people Israel; and they will recognize that Your name is attached to this House that I have built.

We see from this text that the biblical writers consider it important that the God of Israel heals gentiles as well as Hebrews.

From verse 20:17 we learn that Abimelech and his entire household suffered from infertility. The verse reads:

> Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slaves girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

It is interesting to note that the wording of God's command is different from the divine response to Abraham's prayer. In 20:7 God tells Abimelech "But now, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will **live**." In contrast, verse 17 says God healed Abimelech *vayirpa*. As Radak demonstrates, in biblical Hebrew the word for live, *vachaye*, also means to be healed from an illness.[27]

In these verses as well as elsewhere in the Bible, infertility is considered an illness that needs to be healed (*vayerpa* = *vachaye*). In that sense, it is no different from other serious visible illnesses in the Bible, such as *tzara'at*. Both

[27] Radak cites two proof texts, Joshua 5:18 and Isaiah 38:24, to show *vachaye* and *vayirpa* are synonyms.

the *metzora* and the infertile woman are considered dead. For example, in Numbers 12:11 Miriam is stricken with *tzara'at*. Aaron says of her condition, *El na tihi k'met*, "Let her not be as one dead." Similarly, in Genesis 30:1, we see Rachel suffering from her barrenness and demanding of Jacob, *havah li vaneem v'im ayin metah anochi, Give me children or I shall die.* Thus, when God heals those who have these dysfunctions, He is healing them from death. God's ability to heal portrays God as beneficent.

The Abimelech story seems to express that both males and females experienced infertility. We know from Genesis 20:7-8 that the men were having difficulty and that impotence is specifically a male difficulty. It reads:

> Therefore, restore the man's wife--since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you--to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that you shall die, you and all that are yours. Early next morning, Abimelech called his servants and told them all that happened; and the men were greatly frightened.

These verses do not inform us of the status of the women. It is not until the end of the chapter that we learn that women, too, experience infertility. In 20:17 it states:

> Abraham then prayed to God and God healed Abimelch and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

This story is the only place in the Bible where infertility is associated with both men and women. The singular notion of Genesis 20 that men may be responsible for infertility is picked up by Radak in his comment to Genesis 20:17.

> The word *vayeldu* is in the plural. It thus includes Abimelech's wife and all his concubines. In addition, the plural may indicate that Abimelech too was infertile and lacked the ability to ejaculate.

Here Radak refers us to the word *vayeldu* in the plural, implying that infertility refers to Abimelech also, not only to his women. Radak explicitly refers to Abimelech's inability to ejaculate. Thus, the healing covered both the women, and the men who could not provide the seed.

When Abraham pleads to God in behalf of Abimelech, we are not provided with the words of his prayer or the content of his prayer. We only know he prayed because of the term *vayitpallel* [28](he prayed). It is noteworthy that when Abimelech returns Sarah, he brings Abraham gifts, such as sheep and oxen, and female slaves and offers Abraham to settle on his property. This leads us to ask if one can motivate another to pray in his behalf through bearing gifts. If not, then what is it that motivates, Abraham, the offended party, to pray for Abimelech? According to Sarna, "it is only fitting that the one wronged [the aggrieved party] should intercede in behalf of the wrongdoer."[29] It appears that the offended party intercedes in behalf of the wrongdoer to help him or her atone for having committed a sin. Therefore, we may conclude that intercession may be linked to *tshuvah*.

Isaac's Prayer in behalf of Rebekah

The intercessory prayer in Genesis 25:19 is distinct from many of the other prayers we have examined in the Tanach, because the story does not include any background information. Rather, this text immediately begins by stating Isaac's relationship to Abraham, his father. In the next verse, it states that Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife when he is forty years old. The couple is childless, so Isaac prays in behalf of

[28] Note that when one prays to *Elohim*, as in this prayer, "*Elohim* is a God moved by prayer" See C.W.F. Smith, *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:858.
[29] Sarna writes, "Moses similarly prayed for his sister Miriam, who had defamed him (Num. 12:13), and Job beseeched God in behalf of his three friends who had misjudged him (Job 42:8)." *JPS Commentary: Genesis*, p. 142.

Rebekah that she no longer be barren. God responds to Isaac's plea and Rebekah conceives. She gives birth to twins, Jacob and Esau. The story lacks much of the background narrative of other biblical stories.

It is clear from the *peshat* meaning of the text that Isaac intercedes in behalf of Rebekah so that she may conceive. Unlike Abraham's prayer in behalf of Abimelech, in which the exact nature of the illness was unclear, this text states that Rebekah "had borne no children." It is clear in this passage that Rebekah's illness is her infertility. What is less clear is why Rebekah cannot pray in her own behalf. The source of the difficulty is the meaning of *l'nochach ishto* (Genesis 25:21), which is debated by the commentators. If *l'nochach ishto* means "in behalf of his wife", why does Isaac need to pray in behalf of his wife?

According to Abravanel, a 15th century commentator, *ki akarah hu vayeatar ladonai l'nochach ishto* does not mean that Isaac prayed for Rebekah alone. He states:

> Now this is the problem. Who told him that his wife is the one who is barren? Perhaps it is he who is barren. In which case, it would have been incumbent on him to pray for himself.[30]

Abravanel here is asking: How does Isaac know that it is Rebekah who is infertile? Perhaps Isaac is infertile. In addition, Abravanel raises the question that if the prayer is mutual, as the rabbis seem to indicate, why doesn't God respond to both Isaac and Rebekah, rather than just Isaac. Why does the text say: *vayeatar* ***lo*** rather than ***lahem***?

Rashi has a similar opinion to the rabbis. He emphasizes the verse *l'nochach ishto*, "facing his wife," and states: "He stood in one corner and prayed whilst she stood in the corner and prayed." Rashi interprets this to mean that both Isaac and Rebekah prayed. This is shared by later commentator Abravanel who likewise raises the possibility of Isaac's infertility. That opinion is shared by Rashbam and Sforno who interpreted *l'nochach ishto* to mean "in behalf of his wife." As Sforno put it, "Even

though he has been assured children, he prayed to God that it be from this worthy woman who stood opposite him."[31]

After studying the commentators, the reader is still left with the question of whether Isaac is praying in behalf of Rebekah, beside her, on account of her or with her. This leads us to our next question: Does the person who prays have a different status than the person who is being prayed for? Abravanel, in his commentary, did not believe that Isaac had a different status from Rebekah. Although Isaac was a *tzaddik,* Abravanel has no doubt that Rebekah was also a *tzaddik* even though she was the daughter of an evil man. While Abravenal asserts that both Isaac and Rebekah are *tzaddkim,* Rashi argues that God was only entreated by Isaac, because of his relationship to Abraham. Therefore the text reads *vayeatar lo adonai* referring only to the male supplicant. He says: "Because there is no comparison between the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of the righteous person and the prayer of a righteous person the child of a wicked person--therefore God allowed himself to be entreated of him and not her."[32] Rashi infers that because Isaac is the son of a righteous man and Rebekah is the daughter of an evil man, that Isaac is somehow more righteous than Rebekah and therefore God responds to Isaac. Despite the fact that Isaac is nowhere identified as a prophet, he can intercede, perhaps precisely because he is Abraham's son.

Similar to the intercessory prayer in Abimelech, the words and content of this prayer are not provided. In this story, the term *vayea'tar,* "to entreat," is employed. As the text reads: "Isaac pleaded with the Lord in behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived." Although, no prayer words or content are given, God immediately responds to Isaac's prayer and Rebekah conceives. Thus, the prayer in Genesis 25:19 is effective.

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[30] All citations of Abravanel are from the edition *Perush al Hatorah*, Jerusalem, B'nei Arbel, 1963.
[31] Raphael Pelcovitz, *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah.* (Artscroll Mesorah Series, Mesorah Publications: Brooklyn, 1997,) 130.

Moses pleads in behalf of the Israelite People---Exodus 32:7-14, 31-ff

Chapter 32 is extremely complicated. It appears to contain two accounts of intercession by Moses in behalf of the people. The first story (32:7-14) begins with the Israelite people fearful that Moses will not return from the top of Mount Sinai. They gather against Aaron and insist that he make them a god. Aaron responds by requesting that all the people take off their gold jewelry. He casts all of the gold into a golden calf for the people to worship. The Israelites bow to the calf, bring it sacrifices and declare, "This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." God tells Moses what the people have done and threatens to annihilate them. Still on the mountain, Moses implores God not to destroy the people, and God renounces His intended punishment.

According to the second story (32:31ff), Moses intercedes in the people's behalf after he has descended the mountain. He offers to go back to God to seek God's forgiveness for the sins they committed. Moses confesses the sins of the people. He goes so far as to give God an ultimatum: If God does destroy the people He might as well erase Moses from the heavenly books. In response, God states that He will only erase those who have sinned; ultimately all the sinners will have their final accounting.

While there are notable differences in each of these accounts, all the traditions agree on certain details. First, Moses went up to the mountain. Second, the Israelite people built a golden calf. Third, God planned to destroy the people. Fourth, Moses was expected to intervene because he was a prophet. Finally, Moses interceded. The traditions disagree about what approach he used to intercede, and how successful he was.

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[32] Silberman, A.M. ed. *Chumash with Rashi's commentary.* (Jerusalem: The Silberman Family, 1985,) 114.

It is clear that Moses prays in behalf of the people because God intends to destroy them for creating and worshiping the golden calf. However, just as we have seen in other examples of intercessory prayer, Moses intercedes in behalf of the people because he is the exemplar of the prophet.[33] According to Sarna, " Intercession before God in behalf of man is an indispensable aspect of the prophetic role...Moses frequently acts as intercessor..."[34]

One of the greatest distinctions between Moses' intercessory prayers is in how they are initiated. In the first example of intercession, God approaches Moses and warns him of the people's actions. Before Moses begins his prayer, God says, "I see that this is a stiff-necked people. Now, let Me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation." Rashi questions why God says "let me be" (*han'cha li*) which he believes that Moses had already prayed, when the text does not say that Moses has prayed yet. Rashi explains, following the Tanchuma, that God's use of "let me be" gives Moses an opening, or a suggestion, that if Moses prayed for them that He would not destroy the people.[35] Similar to Rashi, Sarna also sees "Let me be" as a way to motivate Moses to intercede.

> This phrase both intimates and anticipates intercession for Israel on the part of Moses. As such, it is a tacit comment on Moses' extraordinary character. At the same time it implies that such intercession can be effective. Thus, it is also a statement about the nature of God: He is responsive to human entreaty.[36]

From these commentaries one might conclude that God gives Moses the choice of whether or not to pray. It is up to Moses to decide whether he will attempt to save

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[33] See Numbers 12.
[34] N. Sarna. *JPS Commentary on Exodus.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991,) 205.
[35] See Genesis 18:21. According to some commentators, God made an opening for Abraham to intercede for the people as well.

the people from God's destruction. While Hazzekuni does not say that God instigates the prayer, in his commentary he sees God as building Moses' character and giving him power. In contrast, Rambam understands "let me be" in the plain sense of "leave me alone." Therefore, one can infer that, according to Rambam, God is saying do not intercede in behalf of the people. Plaut understands "let me be" as an invitation by God to Moses to assuage the divine anger rather than as a call to influence the people. Hirsch's commentary builds on Rashi's idea that "let me be" represents an invitation to Moses to intervene, and takes it a step farther. He suggests that Moses' intercessory prayer is a means to motivate the people to do *teshuvah*.

> If you leave it to Me, if you will not intercede in its behalf, the nation will be left to its own devices. If no elements will emerge from within the nation to help it mend its ways and to lead it away from apostasy, there will be no alternative but that it will have to be destroyed. However, my original intention and the promise I intend to fulfill through Israel will not be lost, for you are still here. I will make you be a second Abraham and will raise the promised "great nation" from your progeny, since, after all, you, too, are of the seed of Abraham. (Hirsch Commentary, p.339)

In the second example of intercessory prayer in this portion, Moses approaches God without being asked. He volunteers to pray, yet he is not asked to do so by God or the people.[37] He goes back to God and confesses the great sin of the people. Where in the first prayer Moses uses God's reputation with Egypt and *zchut avot* to convince God not to destroy the people, in this prayer, he goes to the extreme of offering himself to God in order to accept the confession of the people.

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[36] Sarna Nahum, *JPS Commentary on Exodus,* 205, n. 10.
[37] Moses is not asked to intercede, whereas both Abimelech and Samuel are asked.

Another distinction can be found in the language used to describe Moses. In the first example, Moses "implores,"[38] *vay'chal*,[39] God not to destroy the people. Moses then starts with the critical question, "why", by using "*lamah*". Moses uses "*lamah*" two times. The first time (32:11) is to ask God, why are you doing this? The second time (32:12) has a negative sense and asks the opposite, why would you want to do this? Moses then flatters God, by addressing God as a "great power" and having a "mighty hand". Thus, Moses continues his request by using the imperatives: *shuv, zchor,* and *v'hinachem*. Therefore, Moses questions God, flatters Him, and then makes his requests.

In the second example, Moses does not "implore", *vay'chal*, nor does he *vayitpallel*, pray to God. In this example, we do see that Moses "went up" and "went back" to God, yet there is no verb used to illustrate that Moses pleaded or prayed in behalf of the people. The only root that seems to be used repeatedly is *chata*. Perhaps this is used to emphasize the purpose of the prayer, Moses' confession for the people's sins.

Each prayer seems to serve a distinctive purpose.[40] In the first example, Moses begins his prayer by imploring God. He says, "Let not the Egyptians say it was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains

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[38] According to the commentary *Etz Hayim*, "The unusual Hebrew verb translated as "implore" (*vay'chal*) resembles the verb meaning "to be sick", which prompted the Midrash to suggest that Moses became physically ill when he realized what the people had done. God then responded, not so much to Moses' argument as to the strength of his love for and identification with his people."

[39] See 1 Kings 13:6, 2 Kings 13:4, Jeremiah 26:19, Daniel 9;13

[40] According to Sarna, "Ramban believes that verses 11-14 are in the correct place and that Moses made two separate intercessions. The first (vv.11-14) was intended to gain rescission of the threat to destroy Israel, whereas the second (vv 30-34) was to obtain forgiveness after the pulverization of the golden calf and the punishment of the transgressors. Ramban notes that in the version in Deuteronomy, events are telescoped because the story appears in a different context and is narrated for a different people." (p 205, n. 11-14)

and annihilate them from the face of the earth." Moses then concludes the prayer by asking God to remember His servants, Abraham,[41] Isaac, and Israel[42] and the promises He made to them. Moses is pleading with God in behalf of the people on two levels. First, Moses is appealing to God's public image to dissuade Him from destroying the people. On another level, Moses appeals to *zchut avot* to remind God of His obligations to uphold the oath he made with the ancestors. He promised the *avot* two things: eternal possession of the land and offspring.

In the second example, the purpose of Moses' prayer is to obtain forgiveness for the people. "As would be expected, the prayer blends confession with a plea for pardon..."[43] The use of the word *anna*, please, in 32:31 introduces the plea.[44]

Another important distinction focuses on the success of each intercessory prayer. In the first example, it is clear that the plea of Moses is successful. After Moses bargains with God by appealing to His public image and reminding Him of his enduring commitment to the *avot* and their offspring, God renounces His plan to destroy the people. The repetition of the root *nachem* (in verse 12 and 14) the

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[41] According to Rashi, Abraham was tested ten times and has not been rewarded yet. Therefore his descendants will get the reward.

[42] According to Rashi, "If *they are to be punished with death* by burning, remember for Abraham *his merit* that he gave himself over to be burnt for Your sake (for the sanctification of the Divine Name) in Ur (in the fire) of Chaldees; if with death by the sword, remember for Isaac *the merit* that he stretched forth his neck *to the knife* on the occasion of the 'Binding.' If by exile, remember for Jacob the merit that he went into exile to Haran (leaving the paternal roof in order to fulfill his father's command). If, however, they cannot be saved by their ancestors' merit what is the *good* of You saying to me, 'and I will make of thee a great nation'?-- if a chair with three legs (the merits of the three patriarchs) cannot stand before You in the moment of Your wrath, how much the less a chair with only one leg (the merits of myself alone) (Ber.32a)." (Silberman, p.182)

[43] Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary on Exodus*, 209.

[44] Ibid., 209.

past tense means that God listened. This biblical device, repetition of the same root, implies that God changed His mind and did what Moses asked of Him.[45]

In the second example, where God does not motivate Moses to pray in behalf of the people, the plan is not as successful. Here Moses goes to ask God for forgiveness for the people. When Moses approaches he says, "...perhaps I may win forgiveness for your sin." It is clear from the "perhaps", "*ulai*", that it is not guaranteed that Moses will gain forgiveness. He goes as far as to give God an ultimatum that if He does not forgive them, that He might as well erase Moses from His records. Most scholars interpret this to mean that Moses was willing to die for the people.[46] However, Rashi understands "erase me from the record" to mean erase Moses from the entire Torah. Rashi continues by saying "that people should not say about me (Moses) that I was not worthy enough to pray effectively for them." [47] In contrast when God speaks, there is no "perhaps," "*ulai*." God declares:

> He who has sinned against Me, him only will I erase from My record. Go now, lead the people where I told you. See, My angel shall go before you. But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins. Then the Lord sent a plague upon the people, for what they did with the calf that Aaron made.

Here, God replies but the answer is unclear. Moses is commanded to lead the people, but the prayer is not directly answered. It is clear that God's punishment is suspended, but will come in time.

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[45] See Genesis 6:6-7, here *vayenachem* means relented, meaning God changed his mind.
[46] According to Sarna, "In the present instance, Moses' request is framed in the figurative language of the book of life, so that he is really asking to die if Israel is not forgiven." (page 210).
[47] Silberman, 185-186.

It is interesting that the first prayer is successful and the second prayer is not. This leads the reader to question the agenda of the writer(s). Perhaps the writer(s) of this text wanted to illustrate God's beneficent power. Possibly the first prayer works because God prompted it. In contrast the second one is ineffective because God did not prompt Moses.

Moses pleads in behalf of Miriam—Numbers 12

Chapter 12 opens with Miriam and Aaron speaking out against Moses because of his marriage to a Cushite woman. In addition to attacking Moses' spousal choice, Aaron and Miriam jealously question Moses' superiority and uniqueness as a prophet. In what way, they want to know, is their status as prophet inferior to that of Moses? Moses does not defend himself, rather God appears before Aaron and Miriam and explains how He makes himself known to His prophets. He continues by explaining the way in which the prophecy of Moses is unique and superior to all others. Angry with them for criticizing Moses, God reprimands them and departs, whereupon Miriam is immediately stricken with a skin disease. At this point, Aaron turns to Moses pleading with him to save Miriam from a fate equivalent to death. Moses does not answer the plea himself, rather he turns to God in behalf of Miriam for her healing. Rather than heal her directly, God responds to Moses by limiting Miriam's punishment to seven days, during which she will remain outside the camp.

Numbers 12 opens with *vat'daber Miriam v'Aharon*. Immediately from the feminine use of *vat'daber* in the Hebrew we know that Miriam is the primary actor in this passage. Beginning by criticizing Moses for taking a Cushite wife, Miriam and Aaron proceed to the heart of their complaint: They ask: "Has the Lord spoken only through

Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" If God has spoken through all three of them, then Moses is not unique.[48] A stern pedagogue, God teaches Miriam and Aaron not to challenge Moses' prophecy by inflicting Miriam physically with a skin disease and by making Aaron acknowledge the superiority of Moses by calling him *adoni*, my lord. Moses intercedes for Miriam despite the fact that she has wronged him.

In verse 3 Moses is distinguished from all others on earth. He is described as an *anav*,[49] a humble man. Accordingly we might suppose that Moses intercedes for Miriam out of his own humility. It is true that for Moses, being an *anav* may have kept him from defending his honor when Miriam attacked him. Yet, it is not clear in the text that Moses' humility alone is a sufficient explanation for his plea to God in Miriam's behalf. What is obvious though is that Moses has been the offended party.[50]

In addition to being the offended party, Moses is also the prophetic exemplar. In our text, we see that all the other prophets are spoken to in visions and dreams, Moses is spoken to directly, mouth to mouth, and not in riddles.[51] He is considered by God to be *avdi*, God's servant[52] and trusted throughout God's household.[53] These two qualities of being 1) the offended party and 2) the exemplary prophet provide Moses with a certain status to intercede in behalf of Miriam. However, the challenging question we are left with is: If Miriam is a prophet, why can't she pray for herself?

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[48] Aaron and Miriam have been identified as prophets. See Exodus 7:1 and 15:20.
[49] According to Plaut , p.1099, "Ibn Ezra points out, he had not sought his special status."
[50] It is interesting to note that often the one who intercedes is the offended party. See Genesis 20, Abimelech and Abraham.
[51] According to Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1-20* ([AB] Garden City: Doubleday, 1964,) p. 331 "...Moses enjoyed a degree of access to God that was even more intimate than that normally associated with God's entourage or heavenly household."
[52] Ibid, p.331 "The term '*ebed* obviously connotes loyalty and would be reserved for those who epitomize the loyalty to God. Prophets may also be called YHWH's servants (2 Kings 9:17;17:13; Jer. 7:25; Ezek. 38:17; Zech. 1:6; Ps. 126:5).
[53] According to *Etz Hayim* Commentary, p.834,"This may refer to the divine court to which Moses and other prophets had access (see 1 Kings 22:19ff),

It is clear from the text that Moses' status as prophet is more elevated than Miriam's. This leads to questions about intercession and the levels of prophecy: Is it more likely that an elevated prophet's prayer will be more effective than that of other prophets'? According to verse 9 in our text when it states, "the Lord Departed," commentators suggest that God's departure from Miriam and Aaron took away their prophetic gifts.[54]

After the Lord departs (verse 10), Miriam is stricken with *tzarat*, a skin disease. At this point, Aaron appeals to Moses to intercede in behalf of Miriam. As mentioned previously, Aaron approaches Moses with *bi adoni*[55] now acknowledging his superiority. Aaron states: "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. Let her not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away." Interestingly, Aaron's plea to Moses sounds very much like an intercessory prayer offered to God. His request sounds like the content of a prayer to the modern ear. Why doesn't Aaron pray himself for Miriam? It seems that Aaron, too, lost his prophetic rights by challenging Moses' uniqueness. Thus, it appears he, too, cannot plead on her behalf. However, Rashi provides another answer.

According to Rashi, Aaron[56]cannot pray for Miriam because she is considered a *metzora*, a dead person, or one that is impure and he cannot declare his own sister impure because she is too close to him. Therefore when Aaron implores Moses, *al nah tehi kamet asher b'tzato merehem imo v'yeachel chatzi b'saro*, he is claiming that both he and Miriam come from the same flesh. Rashi also provides another explanation, he states:

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[54] *Etz Hayim* Commentary, p.834.

[55] Aaron addressed Moses as "my lord" one other time: in the golden calf episode. On each of these two occasions on which he acted inappropriately toward Moses, he has ended up having to acknowledge Moses' status humbly and politely. See Friedman Commentary, p. 468.

> Another explanation of אל נא תהי כמת *in the sense of "Do not let her remain a leper" is*: If you (Moses) do not heal her by your prayer, who will put her in quarantine *as a leper* (cf. Lev XIII. 4) who will *ultimately* declare her clean? It is impossible for me to examine her *as to the character of her leprosy*, since I am a near relative and a near relative may not examine the leprous plagues *of his kin* (Siphre; cf. Neg. II. 5) and there is no other priest in the world *who is not her relative*. This is alluded to in the words, אשר בצאתו מרחם אמו ---" since he (the only person who could declare her clean) has come out of the same womb.[57]

Here, Rashi emphasizes that Moses is the only person who can pray because he can make the declaration over Miriam's status of purity, whereas Aaron cannot.

Now it is clear that Aaron cannot intercede for Miriam, nor can she pray for herself. The only person who is suited for this role is Moses. In verse 13, Moses cries[58] out to God and says: *El na refah na lah* , "O God please heal her." Moses' five-word petition is unique in that it is the only intercessory prayer with a formulaic structure.

According to Rashi, before one makes a request, whether to God, or to man, one should supplicate. He states:

> Scripture intends to teach you by this form of prayer the correct attitude in social life—that if one is asking a favour of his fellow man he should first say two or three words of supplication and then solicit the favor (Siphre).

Sforno, on the other hand, doesn't see the words, *El na refah na lah* , as a form of supplication prior to a request. Rather he sees it as a command from Moses for Miriam to be healed immediately so that she does not have to be sent out of the camp. He states:

> Please I ask (of You), cure her now so that we will not have to shame her by sending her outside the camp.[59]

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[56] According to Leviticus 13 and 14, the *Kohen* declares whether one is pure or impure.
[57] Silberman, ed. *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*, 60b.
[58] According Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, ([AB] Garden City: Doubleday) 1964, "the verb, *tza'ak* means to cry out and expresses the language of prayer, conveying an appeal to God by one in pain." (p.333) In the Mishnah the noun *tza'kah* (from the verb *tza'ak*) is a synonym for *tefilah*. See Mishnah Taanit 2:4. See also Mishnah Berakot 9:3-4.
[59] Raphael Pelcowitz, *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*, 707.

Here, Moses wants to avoid any punishment of Miriam so that she is not publicly shamed.

If one looks at Moses' prayer closely, it almost appears to be a *chatima* for Aaron's prayer. After all, Aaron's prayer is four times as long. Yet, Moses offers this terse prayer at such a climactic point.

Rashi presents two explanations for Moses' short prayer. He states:

> Why did Moses not pray at length? In order that Israel should not say: His sister is in trouble and he stands and offers long prayers! Another explanation is: He did not pray at length so that Israel should not say: In behalf of his sister he prays long, but on our behalf he would offer no long prayer.

In Rashi's first explanation, he claims that the brevity of Moses' prayer is because Moses needed to take action right away to help Miriam and there was no time for lengthy prayers. The other reason is so the Israelites do not become jealous that Moses may pray longer for his own sister than for them. It is interesting to note that in both cases Rashi emphasizes that Moses' prayer was brief because it involved consideration of others.

In contrast, modern biblical scholar, Moshe Greenberg states that the brevity of the prayer "indicates Moses' distaste for the whole affair." He writes:

> However, if we compare the cases of Hannah and David, about each of whom it is expressly noted that their deepest distress moved them to pray long (1 Sam. 1:12; 2 Sam. 12:16 ff.), we may be inclined to the contrary notion that such extreme brevity indicates Moses's distaste for the whole affair. He does not support his entreaty with a motive but banks on his favor with God to give it weight. That these five words represent an unenthusiastic, minimal compliance with Aaron's plea on Miriam's behalf is further suggested by the oblique pronominal reference to "her"; indeed throughout verses 11 to 14, neither Aaron nor Moses nor God refer to the disgraced woman by name.[60]

[60] M. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel.* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983,) 15.

Similar to Greenberg, other commentators agree that Moses' terse prayer reveals Moses' lack of enthusiasm and is just in compliance with Aaron's plea.[61]

Although commentators and scholars give various interpretations for the brevity of Moses' prayer, perhaps Moses' prayer is so short because Moses is uncertain how God will react to it. Rashi suggests that Moses' use of *lamor* (verse 13) indicates that Moses questions if his prayer is going to be effective at all. Rashi explains:

> What is the force of this word? *It means "to say" (i.e that God should say, viz.*, he (Moses) said to Him, "Answer me whether you are going to heal her or not,"---until at length he replied: "If her father had but spit in her face etc." Rabbi Eleazar, the son of Azariah, said: In four instances Moses asked the Holy one, blessed be He, to tell him whether He would fulfill his request or not. Similar to the case here is, (Ex. VI 12): "And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, "[Behold, this children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharoah hearken to me]". What is the *force of the word* לאמר? --- "Answer me will you redeem them or not". Until at length the Lord said to him, " Now shalt thou see [What I will do to Pharaoh]". Similar to this is: (Num. XXVII. 15-18) "and Moses spake unto the Lord, saying, 'Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh set a man [over the congregation]'". He answered him, "Take thee [Joshua the son of Nun, etc.]". Similar to this is (Deut III. 23-26) "And I besought the Lord at that time saying, [O Lord, God, thou has begun to show thy servant thy greatness]', the Lord replied: "Let it suffice". [62]

Rashi asserts that in several cases Moses speaks to God requesting to be told what will happen. The word play on the word *lamor* in Numbers 27:15 is a way of illustrating that Moses wants assurance. Moses calls upon God to "say something."

Although God responds to Moses' plea, His response is only partial. God does not heal Miriam immediately, instead He says that she will have to be quarantined for 7 days.

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[61] See *Etz Hayim* Commentary, p. 835.

The story in Numbers 12 is a case where intercession is only somewhat effective, but not completely. Moses' prayer, according to the *mfarshim*, is not necessarily successful. His prayer works in that Miriam is healed, but her healing does not happen immediately. Thus, Moses mitigates Miriam's punishment, but he does not eliminate it. This example of intercession departs from the convention in which God heals immediately.

Moses and Aaron pray for the Isaelite people—Numbers 16:19-22

Numbers 16 is one of the more complicated incidents involving intercession because it appears to be two stories woven into one. The fusion of these different stories makes it quite confusing to understand. There are names of people in one story that do not appear later and there are certain sections that repeat themselves. In fact, according to Jacob Milgrom,[63] "Four separate rebellions are herewith recorded and fused: the Levites against Aaron; Dathan and Abiram against Moses; the tribal chieftains against Aaron; and the entire community against Moses and Aaron." This discussion will not focus on the multiple stories or editorship, rather it will concentrate on the one intercessory prayer that Moses and Aaron say in behalf of the people.

This chapter opens with the rebellion of Korah against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. He together with Dathan, Abiram and two hundred and fifty Israelites, accuses Moses and Aaron of acting holier than the rest of the community. In response, Moses challenges Korah and his followers to bring offerings of fire to God in order for Him to determine who will serve as priests.

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[62] Silberman, A.M. ed. *Chumash with Rashi's commentary*, 60b.
[63] Milgrom, Jacob. *JPS Commentary on Numbers*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990,) 129.

Korah and his followers put down their fire pans. Moses and Aaron put down theirs while Korah gathers the whole community against them. At that point, God stirred by anger commands Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the community so that He can consume the insurgents. Moses and Aaron intercede in behalf of the community and ask God not to convict the innocent along with the guilty. God complies and requests that Moses speak to the community and inform them to separate themselves from Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. God then executes judgement against Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their followers. Dathan and Abiram are consumed by fire and the earth opens and swallows Korah.

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is the fact that Moses and Aaron intercede in behalf of the community that has gathered against them. Why do Moses and Aaron intercede in behalf of the people? Moses and Aaron intercede in behalf of the people because the community needs to be prayed for.

In closely examining the text, it is clear that Moses and Aaron intercede in behalf of the people because God intends to destroy them. Moses and Aaron believe that some of the members of the community are innocent and should not be punished. What is unclear from the text is why Moses and Aaron are the ones that perform this function of intercession.

Although Chapter 16 does not provide specific character traits of either Moses or Aaron, it makes clear that Moses' authority and Aaron's priesthood are being threatened. There is a unique relationship between God and Moses and Aaron. After all, when God attempts to demolish the people, He requests that Moses and Aaron separate themselves from the community. Sforno interprets the verse *hibadlu mittok ha'edah hara'ah hazot*

as proof that the guilty can be saved by the righteous. According to Sforno, Moses and Aaron's merit may shield the guilty. Thus, perhaps Moses and Aaron are the intercessors because of their unique relationship with God as well as their own merit.

What is more difficult to understand is why they would intercede for a community that has rallied against them. This would imply that people who intercede for others need not be in a positive (or healthy) relationship with them. It appears that the characters in the Bible may not always have a choice about the recipients of their intercession. Perhaps we might assume that the intercessors are to assist others to a path of *tshuvah*.

Similar to Numbers 12, Numbers 16 provides the words of the prayer, the request that Moses and Aaron express to God. Preceding the words in this passage, there is action and later in the text there is ritual. Prior to their prayer, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces. The text reads *vayepaloo al pnei-hem*.[64] According to Ibn Ezra, this expression means "to pray."[65] As Yochannan Muffs writes:

> Prophetic prayer is a matter of persuasion and dialogue. What did they do when prayer did not work, when the rational arguments of Moses and Aaron were of no avail, when even one rhetorical word is not found in their mouths? "They fell on their faces" (Num 17:10). This gesture is nothing more than a marvelous mode of asking for mercy—prayer without words.[66]

What Ibn Ezra and Muff emphasize is that prayer does not necessarily need to have words. While here this is a prayer with words, the action of prostrating in

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[64] Note that Aaron and Moses fall on their faces in Numbers 17:8, but there is no prayer here. Also see Num. 14:5.

[65] Note that Moses falls on his face in Num 16:4. According to Milgrom, he falls on his face, "so that God would provide him an answer. This view assumes that Moses (but not Aaron) had entered the Tabernacle enclosure to consult God. The midrash, however, claims that Moses fell on his face in despair; he was afraid that his many intercessions on his people's behalf may have exhausted his influence with God, in which case Moses did not enter the Tabernacle but prostrated himself before Korah." *JPS Commentary: Numbers*, 131.

[66] Muffs, *Love and Joy*, 39.

behalf of others also seems to represent an additional form of intercessory prayer in and of itself.

The prayer of Moses and Aaron begins with an uncommon epithet of God, *El Elohei Haruchot lachol basar haish.* [67] For centuries Rabbis and scholars have struggled with why Moses and Aaron use this language to address God and what its meaning is. The commentators feel this epithet used by Moses and Aaron illustrates God's divine power to discern one's character. Rashi explains the verse by citing Midrash Tanhuma. He writes:

> "[O God] who knowest the thoughts of every man." Thy nature is not like that of human beings: an earthly king against whom part of his country commits an offence, does not know who the sinner is, and therefore when he becomes angry he exacts punishment from all of them. But Thou—before Thee all human thoughts lie open and Thou knowest who is the sinner."[68]

What Rashi is saying is that God knows who are the sinners and who are not.

Ibn Ezra, likewise, emphasizes that the address of Moses and Aaron to God acknowledges God's divine power. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary, begins by asking what the reason is for addressing *El* as opposed to YHWH. He explains that *El*[69] means strength and that God has the strength to destroy the community. Ibn Ezra continues by explaining that in as much as *El* denotes strength, and indicates divine control of all of the *ruchot*, the humans, then God knows what is in the spirit of all humans. Therefore, God knows that Korah is guilty and God knows who the innocent people are.

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[67] According to Levine: "In Numbers 27:16, in the context of Joshua's appointment to succeed Moses, YHWH occurs instead of *el: YHWH elohe haruhot YHWH, God of the spirits*....These phenomena relate to synthesis of El and YHWH, a major aspect of the early development of biblical monothesism." *Anchor Bible Commentary: Numbers 1-20*, 415.
[68] Silberman, *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*, 81.
[69] Ibn Ezra uses of Genesis 31:29 as his prooftext.

The Hazzekuni, Rashbam, and Hirsch claim that the meaning of *El Elohei Haruchot lachol basar haish* is that God knows the spirit of each and every one, and can discriminates between the intentions of the innocent and those of the guilty.

Thus, the prayer of Moses and Aaron is unique in that they begin their prayer with this short epithet. Their appeal to God in behalf of the people first acknowledges God's divine power. Their expression emphasizes that only God has the universal discernment to know who is really innocent and who is really guilty.

Moses and Aaron's prayer does not just state that Moses and Aaron pleaded for the people, as is customary in many of the intercessory prayers in the Bible.[70] Their prayer appears to be more of a bargaining with God in which they ask a conditional question and await God's response. The text states: "When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?" It is clear that Moses and Aaron's prayer is an appeal for divine justice. They challenge God to act justly and save the people.[71]

This request for God's divine justice is not a new one among the different instances of intercession in the Bible. Abraham uses it when he intercedes in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah[72]. He also implored God and asked, "Will you sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?" In both situations, with Moses and Aaron and Abraham, the plea is the same and both are phrased as questions: Will God punish the innocent with the guilty?

Interestingly, God responds to the prayer by ordering Moses to speak to the community to warn them to remove themselves from the abodes of Korah, Dathan, and

[70] See Genesis 25:19
[71] There are different commentaries that describe which people are being threatened.
[72] Genesis 18:23

Abiram. God's immediate response to the plea proves that the prayer has been effective. Moses' prayer to God has helped stay God's destructive actions.

Another interesting characteristic of God's response is that He only responds to Moses. Aaron is not mentioned again in this passage.[73] However, Aaron is the main character in the narrative of the related incident that follows. Here Moses does not intercede with prayer, rather Aaron intercedes with ritual. Aaron does *kapparah* for the entire community. This text illustrates that intercession does not always necessitate words, rather it can occur by ritual alone or, as we saw earlier, through an action such as prostration.

The ritual intercession that Aaron performs also highlights that not only are there different forms of intercessory prayers, but there are different intercessors, each with a different mission. One could argue perhaps that Moses' intercession for the people is of a more political nature, where his goal is to just keep the people alive and to maintain justice. Aaron's ritual intercession may go beyond just rescuing a community. Aaron's prayer, through ritual *kapparah*, seems to have an element of *tshuvah* in which his mission is to help the people be reconciled with God.

[73] Num. 17:8

Part II: Intercessory Prayers in The Prophets

Elijah's Prayer in Behalf of the Child—I Kings 17: 1-24

I Kings 17 contains 3 different episodes.[74] In the first episode (17:2-7) Elijah is ordered by God to leave and go into hiding in Wadi Cherith. God tells Elijah that the ravens will feed him and that he will drink from the wadi. Elijah follows God's orders and God supplies him with food and drink. In the second episode, God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath in Sidon where a widow will provide him with food. When Elijah arrives in the town, he comes upon a widow. He asks her for a drink and food. The widow explains to Elijah that she has nothing but a handful of flour and a little jar of oil. Elijah tells the mistress to prepare the food and not be afraid. He explains to her that God will make the flour and oil last. And so He does. In the third and final episode the son of the mistress falls ill and dies. The mistress holds Elijah responsible for her child's death. Elijah then pleads to God in the widow's behalf, stretches himself over the boy, and then implores God to save the child. God hears Elijah's plea and revives the boy. Elijah returns the boy to his mother who now sees him as a man of God.

For the purposes of this paper we will be focusing on the third episode, where we will analyze Elijah's intercessory prayer for the child, in light of the information provided in the first two episodes.

As we have seen numerous times, it is the prophet specifically whose role it is to intercede. This ideal is upheld in this story in which the mistress, the boy's mother, does not pray by herself and does not pray with Elijah.

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[74] Mordechai, Cogan, *I Kings* ([AB] Garden City: Doubleday, 2001,) 433.

In examining the *peshat* alone, it is unclear as to why the mistress does not pray in behalf of her son. One could argue that the text implies that the mistress feels incapable of healing her son because she was not the cause of his illness. The text reads, "She said to Elijah, 'What harm have I done you, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?'" Instead, she believes that Elijah was responsible and therefore he should be the healer. Possibly, she sees herself as powerless next to an *ish elohim*, recognizing there are members of the community more powerful than she.

According to Ralbag, Elijah's presence could cause the boy's death for two reasons. First, the woman suffers because Elijah's presence magnifies her sins. Since the woman is in the presence of a *tzadik*, she no longer looks good. A second possibility suggested by Ralbag is that God is much more exacting of a *tzadik* than an ordinary person and if a person is around a *tzadik*, and God must choose between the two people, the ordinary person will die because of proximity.

Previously we have seen ritual action, such as fasting or rending of garments, used when praying in behalf of another. In this passage we see for the first time physical action along with prayer. Elijah takes the child, puts him on his bed, and cries out to God. Elijah begins with a protest against the apparent lack of divine justice. He states, "O Lord my God, will You bring calamity upon the widow whose guest I am, and let her son die?" Elijah is expressing to God how unjust it is of Him to kill the son of a woman who has just provided him with food

and shelter.[75] Elijah then physically gets on top of the boy and stretches himself over him three times. He again cries out to God saying, "O Lord my God, let this child's life return to his body." This time rather than arguing for divine justice, he cries out for God's direct healing.[76]

The physicality of Elijah's intercession is noteworthy. Radak grapples with why Elijah prays and spreads himself over the child. He quotes *l'nohach ishto* from Isaac's intercession over Rebecca, explaining that Rebecca was physically present at the time Isaac prayed. Radak explains that the prayer is directed better when one is physically connected or near another. Therefore the logical inference is that physical presence can increase the effectiveness of prayer.

Radak goes farther in giving a naturalistic explanation. He interprets "to stretch out, *vayitmoded,* of having to do with the sense of measure in the *binyan hitpa'el* and compares it to the Elisha story:

> Perhaps he did this to blow upon him and to warm him with a natural heat that comes out of his face and body. Many times miracles are performed by the means of little strategies conforming to the ways of the world.

What Radak means by this is that by stretching himself on the child, Elijah gave the child his essence and thereby he resuscitated him.

Ralbag agrees with this notion. He also takes the word "to stretch out," *vayitmoded,* and imports the language from the Elisha story in 2 Kings 4:34. "Then he mounted (the bed) and placed himself over the child. He put his mouth on his mouth, his eye on his eye, and his hands on his hands, as he bent over it.

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[75] "The prophet's words hint at the unfairness of taking the life of the widow's son and echo the tone of the woman's words (v.18) which pointed an accusing finger at the prophet and his God." See Cogan, *I Kings,* p.429.

And the body of the child became warm." With the language from the Elisha story in mind, Ralbag identifies the limbs of the prophet with the limbs of the child. He claims that the prophet is transferring his life-force to that of the child. Elijah heals the boy by complete identification or transference of his soul.

In addition, Elijah employs two different types of verbal intercession before God responds. First, he argues for God to be just and second, he pleads for the boy's healing. The text provides no answer to the argument of justice, but continues with the description of Elijah's action and second cry to God. After Elijah calls out to God in prayer and physically revives the boy, the text reads, "The Lord heard Elijah's plea; the child's life returned to his body and he revived."[77] Whatever the purpose of stretching out upon the child's body may have been, it is YHWH, in response to the prophets's prayer, who brings life back to the dead body."[78] It is also interesting that the text reads *vayishma* but not *vayirpa*.[79] Although the text doesn't literally read that the boy was healed, we see that the boy is physically revived. Thus, God's healing must take place in response to Elijah's plea.

Elisha's Prayer in Behalf of the Child—2 Kings 4:8

The story of Elisha in 2 Kings 4: 8-37 is usually not cited without comparing it to the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17:1-24). Both stories are very similar in that they share the

[76] According to Cogan, *1 Kings*, 429, "Unlike the complaint expressed in his first call to YHWH (cf. V.20), in his second address, Elijah pleaded directly for the child's life.
[77] God's response employs the same word as the request.
[78] Mordechai, Cogan, *1 Kings*, 430.
[79] In Genesis 20:17, God heals (*vayerpa*) Abimelech, He doesn't hear (*vayeshma*) him.

same theme of reviving a dead child. While they share many similarities, there are also differences. Let us now examine those similarities and differences.

Just as in the story of Elijah, the mother in the Elisha story is hospitable to the man of God and provides him with a room. In both stories the child falls ill and dies. Both the mother in the Elijah story and the one in the Elisha story do not pray for their sons. They do not pray alone or with the prophet. After the children die in both stories, both women place blame on the prophet. Both prophets, Elisha and Elijah, intercede for the revival of the dead child by offering prayers and performing physical acts. Both prophets revive the child.

Yet there are great differences between the story of Elisha and the story of Elijah. The first difference is how each prophet came in contact with the mothers. In the Elijah story, God has sent Elijah to the town, and designated the widow to care for him by providing him a place to stay and food to eat. In the Elijah story the woman already has a child. In the Elisha story, in contrast, the Shunemite woman just opened her home to Elisha although God did not send him. In this story, the woman does not have a child when she first encounters the prophet. In fact, it is the prophet who informs her that she will bear a child.

Following the mothers' meetings with the prophets, both children in the stories fall ill and die. It is interesting to note that the type of illness that the boys have in the stories is not the same. In the Elijah story, the text does not describe what exactly happened to the child, he just falls ill, "until he had no breath left in him." In the Elisha

story, the child suffers from a pain in his head. The child cries, "Oh, my head,[80] my head"[81] and then later that day he dies.

Another distinction between the stories is how the mothers respond to the illness of their children. In the Elijah story, the mother attacks the prophet. She doubts that he is a real prophet but nevertheless gives the child to the prophet for healing. Whereas in the Elisha story, the mother doesn't' doubt he is a prophet;[82] she does question why the prophet would take away her child after promising him to her. In addition, the mother in the Elisha story acts, trying to heal the boy. First, she holds the child on her lap until he dies. Then she takes the boy and lays him on the bed of the man of God.[83] It seems only logical that a mother would put her child in his own bed to die in peace. If this is the case, why is the mother putting him in the bed of the man of God? According to Ralbag, the mother put the child in the bed of the *ish haelohim*[84] because the boy would be better protected by the *navi*. It is the idea that a holy man has slept there. The mother's next step of action is to find the prophet. She goes to Mt. Carmel to find the man of God. When she finds him, she demands that he come with her to heal her dead child. She states, "As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you!"[85]

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[80] According to Morcehai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* ([AB] Garden City: Doubleday,1988,) 57. "Thenius plausibly suggested that the lad had suffered sun stroke; he was out in the field with his head uncovered. Cf. Ps 121:6; Jdt 8:2,3."

[81] According to Radak, the boy had a headache. Radak also mentions the reason the boy says, "Oh my head" two times is because those who are in pain are going to repeat that they are. Radak cites Jeremiah 4:19 as proof.

[82] According to, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings*, 56, "It may have been Elisha's comportment that somehow alerted the Shunammite woman to special qualities that set him apart from the typical man of God of that period...this is the only instance where a prophet is spoken of as 'holy,'"

[83] See 2 Kings 13:21, If the bones of the dead prophet can make you live, all the more so could a place where the living prophet has slept.

[84] Moses, too, is an *ish haelohim*, or a prophet.

[85] According to the Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor in *Kings II*, 58, "By her oath, the Shunammite forces Elisha to return with her to the side of the lad who was the 'prophet's gift.' Action by proxy will not do."

The greatest distinction is in how the prophets respond to the mothers requests. While both prophets do intercede physically and with prayer, both do so in very different ways. In the Elijah story, the prophet takes the child and "cries out," "*vayikra* " to God. He then argues "for YHWH to deal justly with the woman who has taken him in during his distress; her act of faith—having kept him alive---is reason enough to bring her son back to life."[86] Then he stretches himself over the boy three times. There is no description of what he does when he stretches himself over the boy. Again he "cries out," "*vayikra* " to God, but this time for the healing of the child.

Elisha's response is noteworthy for several reasons. First, he sends his servant, Gehazi, to take his staff and go to the boy and place it upon his face. Elisha's servant obliges and goes to the home of the child. He places the staff on the boy's face, but there is no response. Elisha then goes to the house of the child. Elisha "prays", "*vyitpallel*" to God. It is interesting to note that in Elisha's prayer, there are no actual formal words of prayer, whereas in the Elijah text, we do see Elijah cry out with his words.

After Elisha prays, he places himself over the child. The text reads:

> He put his mouth on its (the boy's) mouth, his eyes on its eyes, and his hands on its hands, as he bent over it. And the body of the child became warm. He stepped down, walked once up and down the room, then mounted and bent over him. There upon the boy sneezed seven times, and the boy opened his eyes.

Here is a clear description of what happened when Elisha stretched himself over the boy. It is interesting that in the Elijah story, the prophet stretched himself over the boy three times. In the Elisha story he stretched over him twice. He mounted the child until he became warm, moved around the room, and mounted the child again until he sneezed seven times.

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[86] Moderchai Cogan, *I Kings*, 432.

The medieval commentators have a great deal to say about Elisha's prayer. According to Ralbag, when Elisha placed his mouth on the boy's mouth, this was to transfer his essence to the child. It was as though Elisha made the vitality of his limbs flow from himself to the boy. Similar to Ralbag, Radak comes to the same conclusion. However, Radak expands the idea and explains that all the actions, such as mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, and hands on hands, were to direct the prophet's prayer toward the child in whose behalf he is praying.

Radak seems to focus greatly on how much the prayer is directed. In verse 35 Radak questions why the prophet resuscitates[87] the boy until he is warm, but then steps down. He explains that "*vayashav*," "he stepped down," means that Elisha stepped down to the ground to pray.[88] Radak continues by saying that Elisha's one walk up and down the room was to direct the prophet's heart even more.

Caspi attempts to answer the question, if Elisha prayed, "*vyitpallel*" already, why are all the other physical actions necessary. While Caspi has a very interesting question he does not provide us with a helpful answer. He says we do not know. Caspi also addresses "*achat henah,*" "once up and down." Caspi questions what "once" means. He answers that the text is elliptical and that the commentator is not responsible for supplying details not supplied by the author.

One of the most intriguing distinctions between the stories is how God responds. In the Elisha story, the text reads: "The Lord heard Elijah's plea; the child's life return to his body, and he revived." Clearly, from the text alone, we see that God answered

[87] Today this might be referred to as artificial respiration
[88] Ralbag agrees with Radak that Elisha went to the ground to pray.

Elijah's prayer. Whereas in the Elisha story, while we see the child is also revived, God's name is not even mentioned.

The last distinction in the passages has to do with what happens after the healing. In the Elijah story, the prophet brings the child to the mother. The mother then acknowledges him as a true *ish haelohim*. In the Elisha story, the prophet has his servant, Gehazi, call the mother. Elisha tells her to pick up her son and she falls at the prophet's feet.

Samuel Prays in Behalf of the Israelite People—1 Samuel 7:5-9

In I Samuel Chapter 7, we see a significant example of intercession. The intercession in this chapter consists mostly of ritual. While there are other instances of ritual intercession in other prayers in the Tanach, this specific intercessory prayer attests to several modes of ritual intercession. In addition, this prayer employs words not found in other intercessory prayers throughout the Tanach.

Chapter 7 begins with Samuel explaining to the Israelites that deliverance from the hands of the Philistines will come only if they serve YHWH alone to the exclusion of all other gods. The Israelites comply and choose to serve YHWH exclusively. Samuel summons all of Israel to Mizpah, so that he can pray for them. The Israelites assemble at Mizpah. They draw water and pour it before God. They fast and confess the sins that they committed against God. Then Samuel judges (*vayishpot*) the Israelites at Mizpah.

While the Israelites are at Mizpah, the Philistines take advantage of the situation to attack them. The Israelites learn of the Philistines' plan to destroy them. They implore Samuel to intercede for them. Samuel makes a sacrifice to God and cries out in behalf of

Israel and God complies to his request. The Philistines attempt to attack Israel, but God intervenes, and saves the Israelites.

The text relates how Samuel intercedes in behalf of the Israelites to save them from being slaughtered by the Philistines. Like many of the other intercessors in the Tanach, Samuel is a prophet.[89] His prophetic calling gives him the role of intercessor. Many times he prays and God responds.[90] "Samuel is an intercessor, not a general—or rather he is a general who makes war by prayer."[91]

One of the most intriguing aspects of this incident, is that Samuel intercedes twice in behalf of the people. The first time he gathers all the people at Mizpah and says, "I will pray to the Lord for you." Interestingly, at this point, the Israelites do not implore Samuel to plead on their behalf. He acts on his own volition and intercedes. Why Samuel intercedes for the Israelites at this moment is unclear. Perhaps Samuel doubts whether God will intervene and act justly toward Israel. Samuel has already told the Israelites that if they remove the foreign gods from them and give their hearts to YHWH that they will be rescued from the Philistines. Since God does not explicitly say that He will save them, Samuel may be questioning whether God will act. Therefore Samuel feels he must intercede. At the same time, Samuel's need to pray may merely be a result of his need to act as a leader. The author of this section does not relate Samuel's words or his motives. According to Radak, what helps us to understand that he prayed is the location.

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[89] I Samuel 3:20 establishes Samuel as Prophet

[90] See Psalm 99:6ff

[91] P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel* ([AB] Garden City, Doubleday, 1980,) 149. "The intercessory role of the prophet and his special function in the holy warfare were two important aspects of the prophetic view of leadership"

Mizpah[92] is a holy site. Radak explains that the Israelites gathered at Mizpah because there was an altar there and a place to pray.

After the Israelites gather at Mizpah, they draw water[93] and pour it before God. They then fast and confess. It is unclear why the Israelites felt the need to perform all these rituals once Samuel had said he would pray for them. Perhaps the Israelites did not trust enough in Samuel's prayer and believed that they needed to do their share as well and offer up prayer somehow.

Targum Yonaton interprets the drawing of water figuratively. He states "They poured our their hearts like water in penitence before the Lord." According to him water was not actually used in the ritual of I Samuel chapter 7. Radak, in contrast, interprets the water ritual literally. He understands the ritual as a symbol of one's casting off of sin as thought it were water that flows away.[94] Joseph Caspi agrees with Kimchi that the Israelites actually drew water. He interprets their use of water to cleanse their place of assembly as well as their faces and hands as a way to impress upon themselves that they were cleansing themselves of their inward uncleanliness. Among the modern commentators, McCarter, likewise accepts the literal interpretation and compares it to the water libations known from Tosefta, Talmud, and from Roman practices.[95] Although it is unclear whether the water ritual is literal or figurative, it is clear that the Israelites were repenting for their sins. In fact, one might argue that the process of *tshuvah* had two

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[92] According to P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel*, 144, it was an old place of prayer for Israel. See Judges 20-21 and Macc 3:46. It is important in prophetic history and the rise of kingship.
[93] "The details of the ceremony suggest a need for purification. Fasting and confession were intended to purge the community of guilt." Ibid.
[94] See Job 11:16 and compare our ceremony of Tashlich.
[95] See *I Samuel*, 144.

parts: outward and inward. The Israelites had to give up their other gods physically and cleanse themselves inwardly.[96]

The second time Samuel intercedes is similar to other examples of intercession in the Tanach. This time it is clear that Samuel prays because the Israelites are in trouble and fear being destroyed. It is interesting that the Israelites implore Samuel to pray for them. In this situation, when the Israelites know they are in danger they acknowledge the need to request Samuel to pray for them. It is also noteworthy that in this incident of intercession Samuel uses ritual,[97] whereas the Israelites do not perform any rituals as they had in Samuel's first intercession.

These two instances of intercession employ different verbs. In the first case, Samuel pleads, *I will pray (v'etpallel)*[98] to the Lord for you and in the second case, Samuel *cries out (vayitzak)*[99] to the Lord. Although these verbs are often understood as synonyms for each other,[100] here they may connote very different meanings. The verb *vayitzak* usually is used as a cry of help to God when there is immediate danger, whereas *vytpallel* is often used for specific requests.[101] It is clear in the two examples, that the threat of danger for the Israelites was much more immediate in the second case of intercession.

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[96] The prophets always demand inward change of the heart—oral communication from Dr. David Sperling.
[97] See I Samuel 7:9
[98] This same verb is used in the example of intercession in Genesis 20.
[99] Numbers 12:13 uses the related verb *tsa`aq*. The verbs are probably etymologically identical.
[100] Muffs, *Love and Joy*, 11.
[101] See Hasel, G. "Za`aq." TDOT 4: 112-123. "In a few cases, a cry to God for help is referred to (quite correctly as "praying" (*pll hitpael*, 2 Ch. 32:20) or "prayer" (*te`phillah*, Lam 3:8). But the roots *sa`aq/za`aq* differ from the typical terms of prayer (*pll hitpael* and *tr*) in that they are always associated with a situation of acute distress, and thus specifically express the notion of a cry for help and deliverance, rather than specific petitions. A special feature of the use of *sa`aq/za`aq* is that Yaweh's actions with respect to his people move in an arc from their cry of acute distress to his saving answer." (p.121)

There are different problems in understanding the two different examples of intercession,[102] not all of which can be addressed at this moment. Among these questions are, why didn't Samuel just pray for the Israelites again as he had done previously? Why did the Israelites cry out to him this time? Why didn't they feel the need to implore him to plea to God before? Why are the Israelites not performing rituals as they did before? Do they no longer feel that their rituals are good enough?

While there are numerous reasons we can posit for Samuel interceding twice for the Israelite people, it is clear from the text that the prayer is effective. It states:

> Thereupon Samuel took a suckling lamb and sacrificed it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord; and Samuel cried out to the Lord in behalf of Israel, and the Lord responded to him. For when Samuel was presenting to the burnt offering and the Philistines advanced to attack Israel, the Lord thundered mightily against the Philistines that day. He threw them into confusion, and they were routed by Israel.

The text informs us plainly that God does respond. Although God does not give a verbal response as in other examples of intercession, such as Numbers 12, God does respond through action. God intervenes through thunder.[103] Indeed thunder in the Bible is often the voice of God.[104]

Radak picks up on this notion in his commentary. He believes that God's answer is in the thunder. Caspi disagrees with Radak and claims that the author of this text does not need to tell us in what form God responds. The difference in opinion between the commentators raises a very valid point. It is clear that the medieval commentators were struggling with the question of how one knows if God responds to a plea. Radak, on the

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[102] The present chapter may have originally been written by different authors, whose work was combined by a redactor.

[103] P.K. McCarter, *I Samuel*, p. 145, "Yaweh's intervention in human affairs is often described in the language of the storm. Thus Yaweh often "thunders" in the older hymns, as in I Samuel 2:10; II Samuel 22:14=Ps 18:14 (English 18:13); and Psalm 29, as well as in Exilic and post-Exilic literature..."

one hand, clearly uses the thunder as evidence that God intervenes. Caspi, on the other hand, believes that God answered, but we just don't know in which form.

David's prayer in behalf of his son—Samuel 2: 12 and ff.

2 Samuel 12 opens with God angered at David because of the evil act he committed. God sends Nathan, the prophet, to tell David a parable in order to persuade him to confess for his sin. Nathan tells David a story of a rich man who had very large flocks and herds and a poor man who had only one little ewe lamb. One day a traveler was visiting a town and came to the rich man. The rich man took the poor man's lamb to give to the traveler. Nathan uses the parable to pronounce judgment on the character of the rich man and to illustrate to David what he has done. However, rather than confess his sin, David claims that the man who committed the act deserves to die. Nathan says to David, "That man is you," explaining that he is the rich man who has everything, yet stole from a poor man. Nathan continues to explain to David that he could have had anything he wanted and more. He asks, "Why then have you flouted the command of the Lord and done what displeases Him?" Nathan pronounces judgement on David and says why did you take the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, and then murder him. David confesses to Nathan and admits his guilt. Nathan tells David that God has remitted his sin, but that his unborn child will die for his sins. God afflicts David's child who becomes critically ill. David prays to God in behalf of his child, but his child dies.

David's prayer is similar to other intercessory prayers. A sin is committed, a child becomes ill, and one prays to God in the child's behalf. While David's prayer follows this pattern, it differs greatly from other examples of intercessory prayer.

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[104] The Ancients understood *kolot* and *ra'am* to be the voice of God. See Psalm 29, Psalm 81:8, Exodus

First, it is interesting to note that David is the one who prays in this story. The prophet involved is Nathan, but he never intercedes. Rather his purpose is to declare what will happen to David. While David does have the status of a king, he is not recognized as a *navi*. Although David is not a prophet, it is clear that he has a strong connection to God. He is King of Israel, God's anointed one and is known as having *ruach hakodesh*. As it is written in 2 Samuel 23:10, "The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me. His message is on my tongue."

Another factor that distinguishes David's prayer from others is how he prays. After David's child falls critically ill,[105] he entreats God, fasts, and lays upon the ground. First, it is interesting to note how David entreats God. There is neither invocation nor formulaic prayer. Instead, the text reads that David entreats,[106] *vayivakesh* God.[107]

While other intercessors fast, none of them lies on the ground,[108] refusing to get up. According to Radak, David is fasting and praying in a Temple. After David prays and fasts in the Temple all day, he comes home and fasts and lays on the ground at home. He still will not eat.

What is intriguing about the intercessory prayer in this story is David's actions before and after the child dies. Prior to the boy's death, David prays, fasts, and lies on the ground, exemplifying the behavior of a mourner. However, after the child dies, David rises from the ground, bathes and anoints himself, and he changes his clothes. He goes to the House of the Lord and prostrates himself, and returns home and eats. His courtiers question David's strange behavior. They ask him, "Why have you acted in this manner?

9:23, 9:28, 9:29, 9:33 and Exodus 20:18.

[105] *anash* is a synonym for *chalah*

[106] According to Rabbi Yosef Caspi, David prayed in the fashion of a wise man, see Proverbs 13:16.

[107] According to TDOT 4: 238, *bikkesh* here means, "to seek God" in prayer or petition.

While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but now that the child is dead, you rise and take food!" David replies, "Who knows, *mi yodea*?[109]" hoping that God would have pity on him and the child would survive. David's question raises the whole theological problem of why we pray in behalf of others. Perhaps David's intention is for God to show grace to him because he is praying. Radak suggests that the prophet prophesied that the child was going to die. So David prays because it is not definite that the child is going to die. The prayer is David's way of attempting to save the child. Later, when David says *mi yodea* he explains why he prayed, fasted, and fell on the ground. Jonah 3:9, poses the same theological question, "Who knows, *mi yodeah*," placed in the mouth of the King of Nineveh. However in Jonah, God answers the plea of the people of Nineveh, whereas in 2 Samuel 12, God does not answer David's prayer.

[108] Falling to the ground: In Joel 1:13, we see "spending the night." In Job 1:20 he falls to the ground, but the verb is different *vayepol*.
[109] See Jonah 3:9. This questioning is also in the middle of a ritual including sack cloth and ashes.

Chapter 2
Analysis of Biblical Texts on Intercession

Purpose of prayer

In examining several intercessory prayers in the Bible it seems that there are various reasons why one may intercede in behalf on another or a community. First, one intercedes for the sake of healing. Moses pleads for his sister Miriam who is afflicted with a skin disease commonly translated as "leprosy," but more likely psoriasis (Numbers 12). Elisha and Elijah pray for the recovery of children who fall ill (1 Kings 17:8-24, 2 Kings 4:8), and David prays for the healing of his own son (2 Samuel).

Second, one intercedes either to restore fertility or to conceive. In Genesis 20:17 Abraham pleads on behalf of Abimelech and his community to restore fertility. Isaac prays to God in behalf of his wife, Rebecca, in the hope that she conceive.

Perhaps the most common reason why one intercedes is to save a people from being destroyed by God. In Genesis 18:23, Abraham prays to God that the righteous people of Sodom and Gomorrah will not be destroyed with the wicked. Similar to Genesis 18: 23, in Numbers 16: 19-22, Moses and Aaron fall on their faces and pray to God that He does not wipe out the righteous people with the wicked, Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their followers. Moses also implores God not to destroy the community for building the Golden calf (Exodus 32:7-14). Samuel intercedes for the Israelite community to save them from the hands of the Philistines who are understood to be God's instruments for punishing people for following alien gods.

Our studies of several biblical intercessory prayers illustrate that there are three circumstances in which people intercede for an individual or a community: for healing, for fertility or to conceive, or to prevent God's destruction of a community.

Why is there a problem that necessitates an intercessory prayer?

While we understand that there are many reasons why one intercedes in behalf of another or a community, we must wonder what leads one to intercede. Though sometimes in the Bible events are not explained, many are. In fact, most of the problems requiring intercession are attributed to sin by an individual or a community. God wanted to destroy the Israelite people when they built the golden calf. God wanted to destroy the people for committing the sin of idol worship according to 1 Samuel 7, the Israelite people are worshipping alien gods. It is not unless they remove themselves from the alien gods that God will save them from the Philistines. Similarly, King David's child falls ill and dies because of the sins David committed by killing Uriah the Hittite and taking Bathsheba as his wife. Just as King David took Bathsheba as his wife, Abimelech took Sarah, Abraham's wife, as his own. His sin resulted in infertility within his entire household. In the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, God's desire is to destroy the people because of the sins they have committed. In the case of Korah, his sin is his challenge to the authority of Moses and Aaron. Similarly, in the case of Miriam, she falls ill with *tzara 'at* because she attacks Moses' choice of a Cushite wife and primarily because she challenges his superiority as prophet.

These life threatening circumstances occur because of sin. However, sometimes we do not why some biblical misfortunes occur. We do not know why Rebecca is barren and cannot conceive. We do not know why the child in the Elisha story falls ill. In the

Elijah story, as well, we don't know exactly why the child falls ill. In the last instance however, we may assume that he fell ill because of the sin committed by his mother. That seems implied by the mother's words to the prophet, "What harm have I done you, O man of God, that you should come here to recall my sin and cause the death of my son?"[1]

From these texts, one may conclude, that biblical narratives dealing with intercessory prayer in the Bible are designed to serve as subtle warnings to avoid types of behavior which leads to actual or metaphoric "death" likely to result from them.

Who offers intercessory prayers?

One of the questions we have examined in biblical prayers is who can pray and why. Most often the person who prays in behalf of another is a prophet,[2] a *navi*. According to Shalom Paul:

> The prophets not only served as God's "district attorney" but also acted as the "defense attorney" for their people. Herein lies one of the most distinguishing characteristics of true prophets—their role as intercessors. In fulfilling this task, they attempted through prayer to defend their people against their impending doom.[3]

Abraham is the first individual in the Bible to intercede. In Genesis 20:7 he is referred to as a *navi*, for the first time when he intercedes in behalf of Abimelech to heal him and his household of infertility. Previously, Abraham intercedes for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:23, the first time in the Bible where a human challenges God's divine justice. Moses, the prophet par excellence, frequently serves as an intercessor to save the Israelite community

[1] 1Kings 18:18

from being destroyed by God. He also pleads in behalf of his very own sister, Miriam. Similar to Moses, Samuel cries out to God to save the Israelite people from the Philistines. Both Elisha and Elijah pray to God for the healing of a young boy.

While it is clear that the prophet's role is to serve as intercessor, it appears that the prophet is not alone in this role. There is also the priest. For example, in Numbers 16: 19-22, Moses and Aaron intercede with God in behalf of the people. Although it is clear that Moses intercedes because he is a prophet, Aaron's role is not as prophet, but as priest. In the Bible, the priest is an intercessor, but not a healer. According to Leviticus 10:10, the priest's role is strictly to make declarations as to a person's status of is *tamei* or *tahor*. It states:

> This is a law for all time throughout the ages, for you (Aaron and his sons) must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean.

Even though we are told the priests intercede for the people we are not given the priestly liturgy.[4] In Leviticus 16:21 Aaron confesses for the people. The text reads: "Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites." However, the text of Leviticus 16 provides no words of prayer. Only in the Mishnah do we find prayer texts of the priest.[5]

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[2] According to Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel.* (New York: 1992,) 11. "Prophetic prayer is the most characteristic indication of the prophet's total intellectual independence and freedom of conscience."
[3] Shalom M. Paul "Prophecy and Prophets" in *Etz Hayim Commentary* , p.1410
[4] The only priestly liturgy is the blessing in Numbers 6. We do not always find prophetic liturgy either.
[5] See Yoma Chapter 4, Mishnah 2.

Sometimes a king[6] intercedes on behalf of his people. In our studies, we see that David pleads to God to heal his child. Although David is not a prophet, he does intercede.[7] It is likely that although David is not considered a *navi*, a mouthpiece for God, he operates with what the rabbis would later call *ruach hakodesh*.[8]

In one case, the son of a prophet offers an intercessory prayer: Isaac intercedes in behalf of Rebecca for fertility. Although Isaac is not called "prophet, " we do know that he is the son of Abraham, a *navi*.[9] As such, it is possible that Isaac has a special relationship with God. Or, perhaps Isaac is considered a righteous man whose status is what gives him a reason to pray. According to the Talmud, the prayers of a righteous one have a great effect on God. We read in the Bavli:

> R. Yitzhak said: Why were our forefathers barren?
> Because God yearns for the prayers of the righteous.
> R. Yizthak said: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork? As a pitchfork turns the sheaves of grain from one position to another, so does the prayer of the righteous turn the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy...[10]

Who is prayed for?

Sometimes an entire community is prayed for, and sometimes an individual is prayed for. In Exodus 32:7-14, Moses prays in behalf of the Israelite people and in Numbers 12, he prays in behalf of his sister Miriam. In the stories of Elisha and Elijah,

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[6] Note that in 1Kings 8:15 and 22, Solomon prays too.
[7] See 2 Samuel 2:16
[8] According to 2 Samuel 23:10, "The spirit of the Lord has spoken through me, His message is on my tongue."
[9] In Moshe Greenberg, "On the Refinement of the Conception of Prayer in Hebrew Scriptures." *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought.* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995,) 75, "These heroes of faith, have achieved a standing with God that ordinary mortals do not enjoy."
10 Yevamot 64a-b

both pray for the healing of an ill child. Rarely do we see more than one person praying for another or a community, but it does occur. In Numbers 16:19-22, for instance, Moses and Aaron both pray to God on behalf of the Israelite community to save them from God's destruction. It is intriguing that the Bible never depicts a community praying in behalf of another community or in behalf of another person as we do today.

What form does the prayer take?

Biblical Terms for Intercercessory Prayer

The intercessory prayers in each of these stories each take on a certain form. In some we know the exact words said. In others no actual words are provided in the text. Sometimes we do not see exact words of a prayer, but we learn its content in a bargain or a plea. Because the intercessory prayers all have different forms, we must ask the question: How does one recognize an intercessory prayer in the Bible.

Most often the intercessory biblical prayer texts we have studied are characterized by specific verbs. "In fact, the rabbis noted that 'prayer is called by ten different expressions (Sif. Deut 26)', but on closer examination even more can be found."[11]

> The most generally used term is the verb *pll*, which in the piel can mean "to interpose or judge" and in the *hithpael* "to intercede or pray." Its roots anciently was connected with slashing oneself as an act of worship (cf. I Kings 18:28; Hos. 7:14) The noun is *tefillah*, used notably in the titles of psalms. *Qara* is used of calling on God in praise or invocation of God's name. *Sha 'al* may be "to request or make a petition" (e.g., Num. 27:21; Josh. 9:14.) The encounter which is a request of an intercession is described by *paga* (Jer. 7:16; cf. Isa. 53:12; 59:16). By making the face of another pleasant, one may appease (e.g., Exodus 32:11) or seek a favor (e.g. Ps. 119:58) and here the word is *chalah*. Men cry out in need, and the verb *za 'aq*, "to cry," is used especially in Judges (3:9, etc; cf Ps.22:5)...."[12]

[11] Louis Jacobs, "*Prayer.*" *EncJud* 13: 978-984.
[12] CWF, Smith. "*Prayer.*" IDB 3: 857-867.

The term used most frequently in our texts is *hitpallel.* It is used when Abraham prays in behalf of Abimelech (Genesis 20). It is used about Samuel when he gathers all the Israelite people to Mizpah. (1 Sam. 7:5-9) We also find the verb in the story when Elisha prays in behalf of the ill child (2 Kings 4:8). It is interesting to note that in all three of our examples no other words are said, nor is any content of the prayer given.[13] In addition, in our examples, only about prophets is this language used. *Hitpallel* in our texts can be used for prayer in behalf of an individual or a community. One point worthy of note is that God's response is not consistent when *hitpallel* is employed. Sometimes God responds to the plea, and sometimes God does not. In fact, after the intercessory prayer of Elisha, we do not see God in the text again.

Another word used is *he'etir.* In all ten intercessory prayers studied, this verb only appears once. We find it when Isaac pleads in behalf of his wife Rebekah. This verb *he'etir*, meaning "to entreat", is less commonly used in comparison to its synonyms *pll, za'aq, qara* and *sha'al.*[14] Similar to the use of *hitpallel* above, the use of *he'etir* here does not have any other prayer words or content. However, it should be noted that God responds immediately in both stories when Abraham intercedes in behalf of Abimelech and when Isaac intercedes in behalf of Rebecca. Likewise, both intercessory prayers are to restore fertility or conceive. "In Genesis 25:21 Isaac's prayer (only her in *qal*) prompts the alleviation of Rebekah's affliction."[15] The use of this verb reflects a God who answers prayers.[16]

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[13] While the word *vayitpallel* in our studies is not followed by prayer content, there are other examples in the Bible that we did not cover that do. See 2 Kings 38:3ff and Daniel 9:4ff

[14] See Gerstenberger, "*atar*," TDOT 1:458-460.

[15] Ibid, p.459

[16] Ibid, p.460

In the story in which David intercedes in behalf of his son, a different prayer term is employed. Here the verb employed is *biqqesh*, which means "to seek God" in prayer or petition.[17] This example of intercessory prayer, like those in Genesis 20 and Genesis 25:21 does not include any prayer words or content. What is fascinating about this intercessory prayer, in comparison to the others, is that it is the only one where the prayer is not effective. David prays in behalf of his child and his child dies.

Another biblical term that is used is *za 'aq*, which means to "to cry out," occurs in two of the prayers we studied. Moses cries out to God to heal his sister, Miriam. Samuel cries out to God to rescue the Israelites from the Philistines. What is noteworthy about this verb is that in both of our examples, it is used by prophets, Moses and Samuel. It does not seem to matter if the prophet is praying in behalf of an individual or a community, because we see both in our examples. It is somewhat peculiar that in the intercessory prayer that is in 1 Samuel 7:5-9, where Samuel prays twice, that God does not respond to the first plea using the verb *hitpallel*, but He does respond to the second plea using the verb *za 'aq*. Although God responds to Samuel's plea, He only partially responds to Moses prayer for Miriam. She is not healed until she is first quarantined outside the camp for seven days. In addition, it is interesting to note that Moses' prayer here includes a prayer with words. It is one of the few of our selected texts to provide formulaic prayer words. Perhaps Moses is the person described with this term *za 'aq* who prays, because he is the prophetic exemplar.

While Moses "cries out" in behalf of his sister, the biblical text employs a different term when he is interceding in behalf of the people. The term used is *hillah* meaning "to appease." Moses' prayer here too, includes prayer words and content.

[17] See TDOT 1: 238 on *biqqesh*.

Observe that in all cases throughout the texts we have studied, (Numbers 12, Numbers 16: 19-22, and Exodus 32:7-14) Moses' intercessory prayers include words and content. While Moses prays twice here, it seems that God only responds when this biblical term, *hillah*, is employed. Perhaps God responds in this story because it was He who instigated Moses to pray.

Moses is the intercessor again in the story of Korah (Numbers 16:19-22), but different biblical language is used here. Perhaps because Aaron also intercedes, the term is not as common as our other "prayer terms." In fact, in this example of intercessory prayer, the text never reads that Moses and Aaron prayed. The text reads: *vayiploo* "they fell on their faces." It is not until we study the commentators that we learn that the verb *nafal* can mean "to pray." As mentioned above, Moses' intercessory prayer includes words and content. It contains the uncommon epithet, *El elohe haruchot l'chol basar*, "O God, Source of breath of all flesh!" Following this invocation, Moses and Aaron bargain with God and ask: "When one man sins, will You be wrathful with the whole community?"

Another rare term for prayer is used by the narrator when Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Gomorrah. This text reads "Abraham came forward" or *vayigash*. According to commentators, we learn that Abraham drew near in prayer. It is interesting that Abraham's prayer and the prayer of Moses and Aaron both use a rare verb that means prayer. In addition, Abraham's prayer like Moses and Aaron's includes prayer words and content. Again, similar to Moses and Aaron, Abraham bargains with God, also asking God if He will sweep away the righteous with the innocent. Although there is no

uncommon epithet used in Abraham's prayer, there are prayer words such as, "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes."

The last prayer term we will examine is found in the story of Elijah's intercession. The term that is used here is *qara,* "to call on God ." Elijah pleads twice using the same word. Similar to the intercessory prayers of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah and Moses and Aaron's intercessory prayer, Elijah's prayer includes prayer words as well as bargaining. First, he calls out to God and says: "O Lord my God, will You bring calamity upon the widow whose guest I am, and let her son die?" The second time he calls out to God for direct healing of the boy. While we see no reaction from God after Elijah's first plea, we do see that God responds. It is intriguing that though the stories of Elisha and Elijah are so similar in content, they use a different term to express the intercession.

Physical Intercession

Another form that intercessory prayer takes in the Bible is physical intercession. The two most pronounced examples are found in the intercessory prayers offered by Elijah and Elisha. In both prayers, both prophets physically stretch themselves over a child and heal him. While both incorporate a biblical term for prayer, both of them do not incorporate prayer content. As we mentioned previously, Elisha's prayer has no actual formal words, but in Elijah's prayer he cries out to God. Not only does he cry out once, but twice.

The other example of physical intercession in our studies is not found in the biblical text itself but supplied by the medieval commentators. When Isaac prays in behalf of Rebekah, our commentators claim that they prayed in each other's presence.

Our studies show that according to the Bible and the commentators intercession is not only characterized by spoken prayer but by physical intercession as well. Our texts illustrate that physical intercession can have various effects. First, we learn that physical presence can increase the effectiveness of prayer. Second we learn that physical healing sometimes goes beyond words. Finally, we learn that prayer can be directed through physical intercession.

Ritual Intercession

While intercession can incorporate physical acts, it can also include rituals. Sometimes physical acts and rituals appear together, and in some examples, the intercessory prayer is accompanied by ritual alone. The rituals that accompany the prayers may include fasting, a sacrificial offering, or, a water drawing ceremony.

It is noteworthy that the most common examples of intercessory prayers that include ritual in our texts come from the prophetic books. The first example is found in 1 Samuel 7. In this passage Samuel's intercessory prayer also includes ritual. Twice Samuel intercedes and twice ritual is used. The first time, he summons the Israelite people to Mizpah. There they draw water and pour it before God. Afterwards they fast and confess. In his second plea for the Israelites, Samuel takes a suckling lamb and sacrifices it as a whole burnt offering to the Lord. Another example of an intercessory prayer that includes ritual is in 2 Samuel 12. In this passage, David entreats God, fasts, and lies on the ground.

In Elisha's prayer there is a physical intercession with an additional physical component which may be ritual in character. After Elisha physically stretches himself

over the boy, he steps down from the bed and walks up and down the room. The medieval commentators interpret Elisha's walking up and down the room as an integral part of his intercessory prayer. Some commentaries interpret the prostration of Moses and Aaron in front of an angry mob (Numbers 16:19-22) as a ritual gesture.

Who initiates prayer?

While it is clear that each of these intercessory prayer narratives has a character who intercedes in behalf of a person or a community, we must ask if each intercessor acts on his own volition or, does something or someone instigate the intercessor to pray? In some of the examples, it is clear who instigates the prayer. For example, it appears that Isaac initiates the prayer in behalf of Rebekah. In another example Moses and Aaron initiate the prayer in behalf of the Israelite people when threatened by Korah and his followers. Similar to Moses and Aaron, Samuel initiates the prayer for the Israelites at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7: 5). However, in the following verses (1 Samuel 7: 8-ff) in the same prayer, the people instigate Samuel to pray. Another example can be found in Second Samuel 12 in which David entreats God in behalf of his stricken infant son.

In other cases we may question if it is only human characters who initiate the prayer. In fact in several of the texts studied, God causes the problems and then instigates the prayer. When Abraham makes his plea for Sodom and Gomorrah, our commentators understand the story to mean that God afforded him the opportunity and motivated him to pray. In Genesis 20 it is God who tells Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray in behalf of the king and his entire royal household. Similarly, when Moses prays in behalf of the people,

the commentators interpret God's words "let me be" as an opening or a suggestion that Moses pray.

In three of our texts a human intermediary prompts the prayer of the intercessor. In Numbers 12, Moses does not intercede for Miriam on his own volition nor does God motivate him. Instead it is Aaron who instigates Moses to pray. In 1 Kings 17:8-24, it the mother of the child who instigates the prayer and the same is true in II Kings 4 in the story of Elisha.

It is possible that God plays some part in getting all of the intercessors to intercede. That suggestion appears in the following midrash, found in Bereshit Rabbah 45:4:

> Why were the Matriarch's made barren?
> R' Levi in the name of R'Sheila of K'far Tamarta, and R' Helbo in the name of R' Yohanan: Because the Holy One, Blessed be He yearns for their prayers, as it is written (Song of Songs 2:14), "Oh my dove, in the cranny of the rocks...

What the Midrash emphasizes is that infertility is an illness that requires God's miraculous power. In addition, the Midrash humanizes God by claiming that He benefits from the prayers of the righteous. This rabbinic interpretation also provides people with the motivation to pray.

Efficacy of Prayer:

The biblical intercessory prayers that we have examined almost always prove effective. According to the ancients, "effective" meant that the supplicant received what he/she prayed for. Therefore, in most of our examples God directly answers the plea. When Abraham intercedes in behalf of Abimelech. The text reads: "Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his male and female servants." In

the prayer of Isaac in behalf of Rebekah, Isaac pleads for Rebekah to conceive, God responds and Rebekah conceives. In Elijah's prayer, Elijah cries out to God, and God hears his prayer.[18] In Samuel's prayer in behalf of the Israelite people, God responds to Samuel's prayer.[19] When Moses prays in behalf of the Israelite people, God renounces the punishment.[20]

It is noteworthy, that God's response to the intercessory prayers are usually not the same. In Abraham's prayer, God "heals" (*vayirpa*) and in Isaac's prayer, God "responds" (*vaye'tar*). In addition, in Elijahs's prayer, God "hears" (*vayishma*) and in Samuel's prayer, God "responded" (*vayahnehu*) to him. In Moses' prayer, God renounces (*vayenachem*) the punishment.

Though there are several examples of intercessory prayer easily classifiable as effective, there are some where it is more difficult to determine their efficacy. In these examples, God does not directly or immediately respond to the plea of the intercessor. At first glance it appears that Abraham's intercession in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah is ineffective because the cities were destroyed. A closer examination reveals that Abraham got exactly what he asked for. God promised Abraham that he would not destroy the righteous with the wicked and He upheld his end of the bargain. As demonstrated by chapter 19: 4 and 5, there was not a single righteous individual in Sodom. God replied to Abraham, upheld His end of a bargain.

There are two examples which illustrate the partial effectiveness of intercessory prayer. In Exodus 32 God does not wipe out the entire people as he had threatened, and

[18] Note that God does not respond to Elijah's first plea, but only to the second for the boy's healing.
[19] God does not respond when Samuel offers to pray for the people. It is not until they request that he pray in their behalf that God responds.

in Numbers 12 Miriam's punishment is commuted. She is not healed immediately, but her punishment is limited to 7 days. The fact that God does not heal immediately in this challenges us to the question the status of Moses and the effectiveness of his prayers.

It seems that despite Moses' limited effectiveness, biblical tradition still credits him with being one of the most effective intercessors. As Yochanan Muffs states:

> "There are two prophets, Moses and Samuel, known for their efficacious prayer. One must take the power of their prayer seriously; echoes of it are still heard in Psalms: "Moses and Aaron are among His priests, and Samuel among those who call upon His name; they call upon the Lord, and he answers them" (Ps 99:6)."[21]

Another example of an intercessory prayer which is effective, but is not so easy to classify is found in 2 Kings. In Elisha's prayer, Elisha prays to God, but the text never states God response to the plea. While God's words are not directly provided by the text, Elisha did pray for the child's healing and the child revived.

In our examples only one prayer is completely ineffective. In 2 Samuel, David intercedes in behalf of his child. Not only does God not reply directly to David's plea, but the child dies.

The Needs of Biblical Characters addressed by Intercession

In the biblical texts we have studied, there are numerous examples in which a person intercedes in behalf of a community or an individual. The purpose of intercession is to prevent death and sustain life through intercessory prayer. One desired outcome is the hope to achieve repentance. In some examples the hope to achieve repentance is

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[20] When Moses confesses for the people, God does not respond immediately, rather, God claims that he will only destroy those who has sinned against him.

[21] Y. Muffs. *Love and Joy: Law, Language, and Religion in Ancient Israel.* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1992,) 27.

obvious and confessions are made. Thus, when Moses intercedes in behalf of the people the second time, he asks God for forgiveness for the Israelite sin of the golden calf. Similarly, Samuel intercedes and makes confession for the Israelite people for engaging in idol worship. Although in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah it is not explicit in the text, the commentators understand Abraham's intercession as giving the people an opportunity to repent.

In other examples, the desired outcomes are different. In the case of Abraham's plea in behalf of Abimelech, the author may be wishing to demonstrate that the power of the Hebrew prophets is so great that they can even heal gentiles.[22] In Samuel's intercessory prayer there are two desired outcomes 1) to influence the political destiny of Israel and 2) to eliminate idol worship.

[22] For a similar example see 2 Kings 5 in which Elisha heals the Aramean general

Chapter 3
A Comparison of Intercession in Biblical Texts and Contemporary Healing Literature

Modern Definitions of Intercessory Prayer by Those Involved in Healing

What is prayer? After thousands of years theologians, chaplains, and doctors have yet to agree on an answer. Some follow the Oxford English Dictionary[1] and view prayer as:

> 1 a. A solemn request of thanksgiving to God or an object of worship (say a prayer) b. a formula of form of words used in praying (The Lord's prayer) c. the act of praying (be at prayer) d. a religious service consisting largely of prayers (morning prayers). 2a. an entreaty to a person. b. a thing entreated or prayed for.

Others consider prayer to be "an attempted intercourse with God, with or without the mediation of priests or heavenly beings; it is usually, but not necessarily, vocal."[2] Dr. Larry Dossey, author of *Healing Words* and prolific author known for his prayer studies, defines prayer as "communication with the absolute." [3]

The list of definitions of prayer seems endless. It is not difficult to imagine that every person who prays today---90% of the world population[4]—has his/her own definition. This paper, however examines intercessory prayer. Dossey views intercessory prayers as "...a go-between-an effort to mediate on behalf of, or plead, the case of,

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[1] "Prayer." Def. *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide*. 1999.
[2] Smith, CWF. "*Prayer.*" IDB 3: p.857.
[3] Larry Vandecreek., ed. *Scientific and Pastoral Perspectives on Intercessory Prayer: An Exchange between Larry Dossey, M.D. and Health Care Chaplains.* (New York: The Haworth Press, 1998,) p.10.
[4] Dennis Patrick, Ohara, 2002. "Is there a Role for Prayer and Spirituality in Health Care?" *Medical Clinics of North America.* 86 (1).

someone else. Intercessory prayer is often called 'distant' prayer, because the individual being prayed for is often remote from the person who is praying."[5]

Although it is not often spoken about in Jewish circles, intercessory prayer has its roots in Jewish tradition. Jewish law mandates that every person visit the sick. In *Mishnah Peah*[6] we learn that *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, is an obligation without measure, which we are reminded of every day in our morning liturgy. Rabbi Kerry Olitzky states:

> Each individual is part of the healing equation. But healing is not a consolidated process nor is the power to heal in the hands of any single person. Individuals visit the sick, but their visits are best viewed as part of a personal responsibility in the context of a community response.... Thus, healing involves the persistent actions of a variety of people, all focused on the well-being of the one who is sick.[7]

From ancient sources to modern time, intercession clearly has a place in Judaism.

Purpose of Prayer:

After reviewing the biblical analysis, it is clear that, biblically, intercession occurs for three reasons: for healing, to conceive or restore fertility, or to save a people from being destroyed by God. All three reasons to intercede relate with preventing death and preserving the life of an individual or a people. Though these reasons for intercession find their roots in the Bible, they are not significantly different from the reasons we may intercede in behalf of others or another today.

Today we still intercede in behalf of others for healing and for fertility. We even pray to prevent the destruction of a people, such as when one nation or group of people

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[5] Larry Vandecreek., ed. *Scientific and Pastoral Perspectives on Intercessory Prayer: An Exchange between Larry Dossey, M.D. and Health Care Chaplains*. (New York: The Haworth Press, 1998,) 10.
[6] Mishnah Peah 1:1
[7] Olitzky, Kerry. *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness*. (Woodstock, Vermont. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000,) 67-68.

attempts to destroy another nation. While these broader categories of healing, rescuing a community, and restoring fertility found in the Bible still exist, today it appears that these categories-- especially healing-- have expanded and include more components. Today, people pray in behalf of others or another to prevent miscarriages and stillborn children; to encourage conception; or for a successful surgery. The list includes every sort of physical ailment, as well as emotional and spiritual distress. Today, people intercede not only for healing of body, *refuat haguf*, but also for healing of the soul, *refuat hanefesh*. Intercessory prayers today are for things such as strength, for inner-peace, for comfort, and for hope. Intercessory prayer is no longer just to prevent physical destruction, disease, or infertility, it is to prevent afflictions to the body and the soul as well. This is one of the greatest differences between intercessory prayers in the Bible and intercessory prayers today.

Why is there a problem that necessitates an intercessory prayer?

In the Bible, one intercedes for an individual or a community to prevent suffering that results from committing a sin. However, there are a few exceptions in which one intercedes because suffering occurs, when no sin has been committed, as in the case of Rebekah who is barren, or the child in the Elisha story who falls ill.

Today, similar to the Bible, one usually intercedes to prevent suffering. However, the modern's understanding of the source of suffering is not as clear and concrete. For contemporary Jews there is often no claim of what brings about suffering. The notion of sin, that pervades so many of the biblical stories that deal with intercession, still influences how many understand suffering today. Without using the word for sin, the questions contemporary patients ask could have been uttered by our biblical ancestors:

"What did I do wrong? Why is this happening to me? Why is God doing this to me?" Even today when we do not have the answers for suffering, there is still an assumption that there is a cause and effect related to illness and suffering, whether or not one believes in God. Sometimes these questions are connected with God and sin, other times they are asked as a way to express anger and confusion.

Who offers Intercessory prayer?

In the Bible, the person who usually intercedes in behalf of a community or an individual has a certain status. The majority of the time the person is a prophet, a *navi*. However, through our studies we have seen that there are a few exceptions, for priests, kings, and righteous people are also capable of interceding.

Today, those who intercede for others do not need a certain status. As it states in the Talmud:

> When R. Dimi came (from Palestine) he said: "Whoever visits the sick causes him to live, and whoever does not, causes him to die." How does one 'cause' this? Does this mean that whoever visits the sick will seek mercy (pray) that he may live, and whoever does not will seek mercy (pray) that he should die? —'that he should die!' can you really think so? But [it must mean:] He who does not visit the sick will not ask mercy (pray) neither that he should live nor die.[8]

This talmudic text clearly shows that any individual can pray in behalf of another. It also implies that every individual's prayer is efficacious.

Although Jewish tradition teaches that anyone can visit the sick, not everyone feels capable of praying for the sick. Perhaps this feeling stems from the Bible and later Jewish law codes, from which we learn that only certain people with a certain status were able to offer efficacious prayers. For example, in the Talmud it states:

[8] B. Talmud, *Nedarim 39b-40a*, Translations according to Rabbi Simkha Weintraub.

> On another occasion it happened that R. Hanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with R. Johanan ben Zakkai. The son of R. Johanan ben Zakkai fell ill. He said to him: "Hanina my son, pray for him that he may live." He put his head between his knees and prayed for him and he lived. Said R. Johanan ben Zakkai: "If ben Zakkai had stuck his head between his knees for the whole day, no notice would have been taken of him." Said his wife to him: "Is Hanina greater than you are?" He replied to her: "No, but he is like a servant before the king, and I am like a nobleman before the king."[9]

This text illustrates the notion that some people's prayers are more effective than others. Perhaps this is the reason why many today call on a rabbi to intercede in behalf of loved ones. Rabbis, for most people, are seen as the priests of old who were once considered to have the highest status and the closest connection to God.

> Thus, classical Jewish thinking teaches that prayers of a wise or righteous person have special efficacy in the eyes of the Almighty. This is not merely folklore, theology, or philosophic theory. It is codified in Jewish Law and also cited as practical guidance in the following medieval commentary [from R.Yosef Habiba—15th century Spain]: '...this is the custom in France. All those who have a sick person would seek the presence of the rabbi who holds forth, that he [the rabbi] may bless him.'...Today, most people, Jews as well as non-Jews, believe that the prayers of or at least the presence of clergy add an extra dimension of aid to the invalid. Jewish patients find it reassuring to have a rabbi who presents Jewish wisdom, practice, and history, at their bedsides.[10]

In the Bible, we found that one person usually prays in behalf of a community or an individual, yet we never see the community praying in behalf of another community or in behalf of another person. It almost seems unfathomable today to imagine a community not praying in behalf of another or others. The rabbi's development of the notion of *minyan* and the importance of community has drastically changed the community's role in intercessory prayer. In fact, outside of hospital and nursing home chaplains, much of the intercession performed today is done by the community. A common feature of most

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[9] Talmud *Berakhot* 34b

[10] Joseph S. Ozarowski, *To Walk in God's Ways: Jewish Pastoral Perspectives on Illness and Bereavement* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995,) 43-45.

Torah services is a *misheberach*, a prayer for healing of the sick. Even outside the synagogue, there are prayer vigils and services held by one community for other communities. For example, annually at the Isaiah Peace Wall, in New York City, there is a *Tisha B'av* Prayer Service for Jewish Communities in Danger. As opposed to the communities of biblical times, communities today clearly intercede in behalf of others and other communities. This seems to corroborate the assumption stated by Kerry Olitzky, "..the assembling of people as a community has a profound impact on healing."[11]

What form does the prayer take?

In the Bible, there are specific terms used to describe one who intercedes in behalf of a community or an individual. Some examples are *pll* "to pray or intercede", *qara* "to call out", *chalah* "to appease", *za'aq* "to cry out", and *biqqesh*, "to make requests." Today people still pray, cry out, call out, appease, and make requests. Sometimes people do this spontaneously, using their own words. Other times they draw on fixed formulas, as found in the Bible or in later Jewish traditional liturgy. These fixed formulas include the *Misheberach*, *Rafeinu*, and Psalms. Some of these fixed forms, specifically the *Misheberach* and the *Amidah*, make reference to *zchut avot*. This seems to be directly related to Moses' plea in behalf of the Israelite people in the Bible. He states:

> Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac and Israel, how You swore to them by Your self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.[12]

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[11] Kerry Olitzky, *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness*. (Woodstock, Vermont. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 70.
[12] Exodus 32: 13

In contemporary healing practices, *zchut avot* has been incorporated as well. According to Brenner:

> This connection to the large, historic community is an invocation of hope. For prayer to be efficacious, there must be the sense that it is a tested, healing modality: If our ancestors have been worthy of blessing, perhaps we are as well. Drawing on ancestors through words of prayer is a way of renewing faith.[13]

Another traditional source that is found in contemporary healing services is the biblical prayer formula in Numbers 12, *El na rafah na lah*. While these prayer words are not part of traditional liturgy, they have become incorporated in almost every healing service as a reading or a chant.

For many modern Jews, these traditional forms are merely the beginning of an intercessory prayer. In 1997, Rabbi Simkah Weintraub, Director of the National Center for Jewish Healing published "*Modes of Praying for Healing.*"[14] This list includes 18 forms of intercessory prayer used today, including traditional prayers and new creative liturgy. He mentions meditating on a verse from liturgy, *nigguns*, chanting wordless melodies; modern poetry; stories; and even silence.

Another form of prayer that is often used in contemporary healing practice is spontaneous prayer. Many Jews are still uncomfortable with this practice.

> It appears that Jews do not expect or seem to need spontaneous bedside prayer. This may be true because Jews are used to prayer from a fixed liturgy and assume pastoral care deals only with the personal dimensions of the visit, as described earlier.[15]

While Jews are still not comfortable with this practice, it is clear that it has ancient roots and perhaps should be reincorporated in modern day healing practice. Though many

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[13] Dayle A. Friedman, ed. *Jewish Pastoral Care*, (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001,) 134.
[14] R. Weintraub. *Modes of Praying for Healing*, 1997.
[15] David Freedman and Judith Abrams, eds., *Illness and Health in the Jewish Tradition: Writings from the Bible to Today* (Philadephia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999,) 200.

rabbis today are attempting to pray spontaneously with patients, a study conducted by Dr. Bari S. Dworken found that "Generally the rabbis interviewed were less comfortable with spontaneous prayer than specific formal prayers." [16]

Although there are not many prayer formulas in biblical intercessory prayers, perhaps some of the epithets found in them can be used today as introductions for spontaneous prayers. For example in Numbers 16, the epithet *El elohe haruchot l'chol basar haish*, "O God, Source of breath of all flesh, could be a beautiful addition to our healing liturgy.

Physical Intercession

We learn about the power of physical presence from the Bible. In Genesis 25, when Isaac prays on behalf of Rebecca, Rashi suggests that they pray facing each other. He states that "He (Isaac) stood in one corner and prayed whilst she (Rebecca) stood in the corner and prayed." Perhaps Rashi is alluding to the power of being physically present for someone who is suffering. This is certainly the message of the Talmud which relates the following story:

> R. Abba said in the name of R. Hanina: One who visits a sick patient takes away a sixtieth of his pain. Said [the rabbis] to him: If so, let sixty people visit him and restore him to health. He replied: The sixtieth is as the tenth spoken of in the school of Rabbi [Judah the Prince. This means that a sixtieth of the remainder of the pain is removed each time a visitor comes, but visits can never fully remove all the pain;][17]

The power of touch is also illustrated in the Bible. In the story of the Shunemite woman, Elisha heals the boy by physically placing himself on the child, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, and hands to hands. Elijah, also physically heals a child by stretching

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[16] Dworken, Bari S. 2002. "The Prayer Practices of Rabbis During Pastoral Visits." *The Jewish Chaplain.* 5 (1): 38-41.
[17] B. Talmud *Nedarim 39b*

himself over the boy. This notion of physical intercession is rooted in the Bible, and it is also found throughout Jewish tradition. For example, the Talmud states:

> Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill and Rabbi Johanan went into visit him. He (R. Johanan) said to him: 'Are your sufferings welcome to you?' He replied: 'Neither they nor their reward. He (R. Johanan) said to him: 'Give me your hand.' He gave him his hand and he raised (healed) him.[18]

This text clearly illustrates that by physical presence or touch, one can be healed.

Today, physical presence is still considered an integral aspect of healing. Despite its biblical roots, many modern Jews limit the use of touch in their intercessions for healing. Perhaps this is because it is considered to be very Christian in nature, based on the New Testament when Jesus heals the sick. According to David C. Baker, "Scripture informs us that Jesus had a kind of power that was described as physical emanation coming from him that healed people who came in contact with him."[19] In addition, "the early Church practiced prayer and healing, and included belief in the 'laying on of hands' as [sic] important part of early doctrine."[20] Laying on of the hands is when "actual physical contact takes place between the healer and the healee." [21] Therefore, it is possible that many Jews perceive healing through touch or the "laying on of hands" as a non- Jewish practice.

It is only in the last couple of decades that Jewish pastoral caregivers have attempted to bring back the ancient Jewish prayer form of physical intercession. Jews are more likely to physically intercede in the manner that Isaac and Rebekah did, through physical presence, rather than touch. As Barbara Eve Breitman states:

> When people can be with one another, the possibility for holiness is manifest. Being with another creates the basic condition for healing or sacred encounter. As we offer and enable our being to touch another, we

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[18] B. Talmud, *Berakhot 5b*
[19] L. Vandecreek, ed. *Scientific and Pastoral Perspectives on Intercessory Prayer*, 102.
[20] Ibid, p.102.
[21] Larry, Dossey, *Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine.* (New York: Harper Paperbacksm, 1993,) p.65.

enable the aspect of God Who dwells among us, *the Shechina*, the indwelling presence, to become manifest.[22]

Ritual Intercession

Our earlier text analysis illustrates that rituals such as fasting, lying on the ground, and sacrificing were incorporated in intercession during biblical times. Although today people may not practice such extreme rituals as animal sacrifice, they often do turn to fasting. For example, since the beginning of the *matzav* in Israel, numerous emails from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and rabbis in the U.S. have circulated asking Jewish communities here and abroad to designate a day for a *yom tzom u'tefillah*, a day of prayer and fasting.

One can also see intercession accompanied by ritual in the various modern healing services that exist today. For instance, many healing services often begin with a handwashing ritual,[23] to help mark personal transformation. This ritual may have roots as in 1 Samuel 7:5-9, when the Israelite community draws water as Samuel intercedes in their behalf. Another ritual that is often practiced at the beginning of a healing service is the contribution of *tzedakah*.

Often the healing services that exist today incorporate rituals that are connected to the Jewish calendar. For example, some healing services use havdalah as the ritual component of a healing service. Other healing services use other rituals or themes from Jewish holidays. To encourage healing through introspection themes such as repentance and *tshuvah* and the wailing sounds of the shofar calling us to turn inward can be used at the High Holidays.

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[22] Dale A. Friedman, ed., *Jewish Pastoral Care.* (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001,) 78.
[23] See "Shema Koleinu: A Liturgy for Healing" by Rabbi Nancy Flam

Ritual often provides a transformative experience. Perhaps intercessory prayer is often accompanied by ritual to ensure that it is indeed a transformative experience.

Who initiates prayer?

In the Bible there are different reasons that motivate one to intercede. Sometimes one intercedes based on his own volition, such as in the case of Isaac and Rebekah. Other times someone or something instigates the intercessor to pray, as in Numbers 12 when Aaron instigates Moses to pray in behalf of Miriam. In certain examples, God instigates the prayer, as in the case of Abimelech.

Today, people are motivated to intercede for the same reasons as found in the Bible. Often one intercedes of his/her own volition. When one hears that a loved one is ill or about to have surgery or any kind of need, he/she just begins to pray. Sometimes, one intercedes because someone or something motivates him/her. For example, often an individual will call upon a friend to intercede in behalf of a loved one.

The last reason found in the Bible, that God instigates prayer, is not as apparent to people today, as in the Biblical times. Some people pray because they feel God may answer their prayers. However, it is unlikely that God instigated them. Perhaps what spurs people to pray in behalf of others today is that our tradition teaches that such intercession is a mitzvah commanded by God.

The Needs of Contemporary Jews addressed by Intercession

In the Biblical texts we have studied, there are numerous examples of one person interceding in behalf of a community or an individual in the hope of achieving a certain

desired outcome. One such desired outcome, for example, is repentance. Both Samuel and Moses attempt to intercede by confessing, in the hope of achieving *tshuvah* for the Israelite people.

This notion of using intercession to achieve *tshuvah* is found throughout Jewish writings. For example in the Talmud it states:

> There were some lawless men who lived in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir, and they used to vex him sorely. Once Rabbi Meir prayed that they should die. His wife, Beruriah, exclaimed: What are you thinking? Is it because it is written, "Let sinners cease out of the earth? But does the text say hot'im (sinners)? It is written hata'im (sins). Glance also at the end of the verse, '...And let the wicked be no more'—i.e., when sins will cease, then the wicked will be no more. Rather you should pray that they repent, and be no more wicked!" Then Rabbi Meir offered prayers on their behalf, and they repented.[24]

This text illustrates that prayer should be used to help the wicked repent.

According to our commentators, in Abraham's prayer in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham interceded to give the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah an opportunity to repent. Talmudic texts support this notion that the only way one's actual death or metaphorical death is prevented is through atonement:

> "R. Alendri said in the name of R. Hiyya b. Abah: A sick person does not recover from illness until all his or her sins are forgiven, as it is written: "Who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases" (Ps. 103:3). R. Hamnuna said, This person then returns to the days of his/her youth. As it is written, "One's flesh shall be fresher than that of a child and he/she shall return to the days of youth" (Job 33:25).[25]

Today we still offer ways to help people seek atonement. One of the more traditional ways this is done is by reciting the *vidui*, the deathbed confessional, in someone else's behalf. This also happens more spontaneously, such as when a rabbi or a chaplain does a

[24] B. Talmud, *Berakhot 10a*
[25] B. Talmud *Nedarim 41a*

life review with the patient, inquiring if there is anything for which the patient wants to atone.

Intentionality

One of the most interesting factors about intercessory prayer today, in contrast to the Bible, is the notion that intentionality is necessary for prayer. We understand that the Bible usually does not describe people's feelings and emotions, and therefore does not convey one's intentions while praying in behalf of another or a community. However, as Jewish tradition has developed, intention, or *kavanah*, has become essential for intercession. In the Talmud, the Rabbis insist that there needs to be *kavanah*, or intention, when one prays. It states:

> Our Rabbis taught: When a person prays, he should direct his heart to heaven. Abba Saul says: A reminder of this text is the text, Thou will direct their heart, Thou will cause Thine ear to attend. (Ps. 10:17)[26]

This finds a parallel in contemporary writing on prayer:

> Prayer in Judaism is thought to be efficacious if offered by the proper person at the proper time with the proper intent under the proper circumstances.[27]

Contemporary prayer studies seem to corroborate this notion. Patricia Swanson Megregian, Director of Spritual Care, Children's Hospital in New York, believes that intention is necessary "whether praying with a patient and family or praying for bacteria to grow" she feels that her "participation in the moment of intercessory prayer is crucial

[26] B. Talmud *Berakhot, 31a*
[27] Fred Rosner. 1975. The Efficacy of Prayer: Scientific vs. Religious Evidence. *Journal of Health and Religion* . 14 (4): 294-298.

to the power of prayer."[28]Eetla Soracco, a spiritual healer in New Mexico agrees with Megregian:

> I think that we all have the gift of healing. Think of a little boy who has hurt his knee. His mother gives him a kiss, and he feels better. When you're in trouble, and you come to me, my presence and willingness to share your grief helps to heal you. I believe we all can do this. What it takes is concentration, focus, and intent. The intent is the most important thing. It is the key to healing. [29]

Effectiveness of Prayer

In the Bible, intercessory prayer proved effective when the intercessors' requests to God were answered and they received what they had asked for. For the ancients answering prayer meant one got what was asked for. Although prayer is not always answered immediately in the Bible, it is almost always answered. The only exception in our studies was David's prayer in behalf of his ill child. According to the biblical account, David's prayer was ineffective. Yet, would it be considered ineffective today?

Efficacious prayer today may not necessarily be described as a prayer that is answered. In fact, today many doctors, clergy, and chaplains are doing studies to discern the true meaning of efficacious prayer. One of the earliest studies was done in 1872 when Sir Francis Galton tested the efficacy of prayer through studying the effects of prayer on the health of clergy. Although his study did not prove prayer effective, it illustrated that the relationship between health and prayer needed to be researched. Additional prayer studies have been done since 1872. One of the most famous studies is credited to cardiologist, Randolph Byrd. His study was the first to prove prayer effective in a coronary care unit. In Byrd's study, the results of the patients that were prayed for were

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[28] Ibid, 107.
[29] Larry Dossey, *Healing Through Prayer: Health Practitioners Tell the Story*. (Toronto, Canada: Anglican Book Centre, 1999,) 72.

significantly different in certain areas than those that were not prayed for. According to his study:

1. They [the prayed-for patients] were five times less likely than the unremembered group to require antibiotics (three patients compared to sixteen patients).

2. They were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema, a condition in which the lungs fill with fluid as a consequence of the failure of the heart to pump properly (six compared to eighteen patients).

3. None of the prayed-for group required endotracheal intubation, in which an artificial airway is inserted in the throat and attached to a mechanical ventilator, while twelve in the unremembered group required mechanical ventilatory support.

4. Fewer patients in the prayed-for group died (although this difference was not statistically significant.)[30]

While initially Dr. Byrd's findings were received with enthusiastic response, upon the publication of the study there was much criticism. While we do not yet have conclusive evidence that prayer is effective for humans, we do know the effects prayer has on certain fungi, yeast, and bacteria.[31] In addition, there also have been studies on cells, plants, and animals where prayer has proved effective.[32] Although there is not concrete evidence for humans, we do have some information on the efficacy of prayer. According to Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist who teaches at Harvard University:

> We know that certain types of prayer elicit a set of physiological changes in the body...With the repetition [of certain verbal formulae] comes a certain set of physiological responses; for example, the rate of metabolism decreases, the heart rate decreases, the rate of breathing decreases, brain waves get slower.[33]

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[30] Larry Dossey, *Healing Words*, 249.
[31] Ibid, 263.
[32] Ibid, 263.
[33] Larry Dossey, *Healing Through Prayer: Health Practitioners Tell the Story*, 44.

Dossey adds that "if you meditate and pray even the cholesterol level in the blood will fall."[34] These anecdotes illustrate that prayer is effective on some level.

Another area of prayer under examination is distant healing. Currently there are projects testing the efficacy of prayer when those who are praying are spatially removed from the ones for whom they are interceding. In one of these studies, performed by Dr.Elizabeth Targ on AIDS patients, "the distant healing group experienced significantly fewer outpatient doctor visits, fewer hospitalizations, fewer days of hospitalization, fewer new AIDS- defining diseases, and significantly lower illness severity level."[35] This again suggests that prayer has effective outcomes.

However, today, "effective outcomes" to prayer do not necessarily mean that the prayer is answered. Sister Constance Joanna Gefvert asserts that healing does take place even if God does not answer our requests. She states:

> I believe very strongly that God always works in cooperation with us when we are open to the divine energy. God is always working for healing---but not necessarily the healing that we expect.[36]

Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz, Professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion asserts, "When we ask the question if God answers prayer, we must believe that 'No' is an answer too."[37]

According to our ancient writings, prayer can effect God's actions. Some medieval philosophers did not believe this was a possibility. However, we are reconsidering this today in our modern studies. In a recent article published in Shema,

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[34] Larry Dossey, *Healing Through Prayer: Health Practitioners Tell the Story*, 31.
[35] Larry Dossey, *Healing Through Prayer: Health Practitioners Tell the Story*, 53.
[36] Larry Dossey, *Healing Through Prayer: Health Practitioners Tell the Story*, 66.
[37] Dr. Borowitz, during a discussion of a senior sermon, January 13, 2003.

Ilana Blumberg asserted that our liturgy implies that we can effect God and change God's mind, especially during the High Holidays. She writes:

> As we end the paragraph of liturgy, and proclaim that prayer and returning and justice cause the harshness of the decree to pass away, we are just celebrating a different kind of lack of fixity: not God's ability to think new thoughts, but our own ability to become different than we are and thus sway God's judgement of us. [38]

We can logically assume if we believe prayer in general can effect God's actions then perhaps intercessory prayer can also effect God's actions.

[38] Ilana Blumberg, "The Divine Attribute of Change." Sh'ma 25/477: 6-7.

Conclusion

Throughout our studies, it has become clear that contemporary modalities of intercessory prayer are rooted in the Bible. While it is obvious that our intercessory prayers today are more expansive and cover more issues, people today pray in behalf of others or for another for many of the same reasons as our biblical ancestors did: for healing, for fertility, and for the prevention of a people's destruction. One of the most significant similarities is that moderns use many of the same methods as those cited in the Bible to intercede such as through fixed and spontaneous prayer and through ritual and physical intercession. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects that our analysis has revealed is that the modern does not know why he/she is suffering, whereas our biblical ancestors thought they knew.

It is also important to note that this analysis was not exhaustive but was limited to selected biblical texts. To understand intercession in the Bible more fully, the prayers in Daniel (9:3-ff) Jeremiah (15:1, 18:20, 7:16, 11:14, 14:11-12), Samuel (15:11, 12:19, 23), as well as texts in Numbers (14:13-20) and Deuteronomy (9:20) need to be studied and analyzed. This thesis leaves many questions unanswered. What does it mean to be sick? What does it mean to pray? What does it mean to intercede? How effective are our prayers? What is God's role in healing? Perhaps additional study of other biblical texts might present answers or other questions related to intercessory prayer.

One unassailable conclusion of this thesis is that praying when visiting the sick has been part of Jewish tradition for thousands of years. Nonetheless, it is still something with which many liberal rabbis, Jewish leaders, and lay people are uncomfortable.

According to the Dworken study on prayer practices of rabbis, many do not want to pray when with a patient.

As the population ages and as we live increasingly with the ongoing threats of war and terrorism, it is critical now, more than ever, that Jewish leaders learn to pray in behalf of another or others. Perhaps this means that there needs to be more training for rabbis and lay leaders regarding healing and prayer. Fortunately, there are many new opportunities for rabbis and lay leaders in this area, such as: courses in chaplaincy at seminaries; a year residency in pastoral care at the Jewish Institute; and conferences on healing and spirituality. Although the research on prayer may not have proven its effectiveness, we do know that prayer can give hope to a person and to a community. While it is unclear if intention can influence prayer, it seems there is a consensus among contemporary doctors, scholars, and practitioners that it can. Yet, rabbis still seem to have a great deal of reluctance toward intercessory prayer, particularly spontaneous intercessory prayer. Perhaps these contemporary modes of healing, which are rooted in Jewish tradition, still seem too Christian in nature to liberal rabbis and lay leaders. Perhaps the healing movement is too new and therefore needs more time to gain a broader influence.

Regardless, it is my hope and prayer that we rabbis and leaders will learn to pray in behalf of another and others. Although our prayers may not physically save a community, help another to conceive, or heal a person's cancer, we may help to provide a community or an individual with *refuat hanefesh*.

> *El elohei haruchot basar haish*, O God, Source of breath of all flesh, let us learn how to be fully present with those we serve at their most critical moments in life. As we offer healing and comfort, let us remember not to

judge others---but help us to be reminded that we are sitting face to face with Your image. Give us the strength, Adonai, to ask the questions—even those that are most difficult and even though we may be afraid. Teach us not only to listen with our ears, but with our hearts and with our souls. Grant us the ability to give our love and support to another through the power of touch. Give us the strength to have hope even in the darkest times. Adonai, our God, let us learn to emulate your ways, let us learn to walk after you. Let us learn from our biblical ancestors how to lift our voices, our hearts, and our souls up in prayer and cry out to You in behalf of others.

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Becoming Moral Educators: Lessons from Tradition

by Sara Lynn Blumstein

March 3, 2003

This project is a study of the relationships among secular theories of adolescent moral development, Jewish texts and to Jewish education. Readers are provided with an analysis of the works of five prominent psychologists; Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, Erik Erikson, and Robert Coles. The theories are then applied to an analysis of two biblical adolescents, Joseph and Rebecca. The later portion of this project contains a unit of three staff development sessions based upon the information contained in the first portion of the project. The final element is a list of resources about all aspects of Jewish adolescent moral education. "Becoming Moral Educators: Lessons from Tradition" was written to contribute a new perspective on how students learn and develop ethical sensibilities, especially within a Jewish context.

The aim of this thesis is to view adolescent moral education from a Jewish textual and educational perspective. The hope is that educators will be able to translate what learn from the reading and staff development sessions into their work with adolescents. The ultimate goal is to imbue students with Jewish moral values and understanding.

This thesis contains four chapters as follows: Becoming Moral Educators, Lessons from Tradition, Staff Development Unit, Resource List. In addition there is an appendices and a list of works cited. The materials used for this project included secular and Judaic sources on morality, adolescence, education, and Jewish texts.