

As traditional Jews, we are well accustomed to the time honored obligation to engage in prayer three times a day. The Talmud in tractate Brachos explains that each of our patriarchs instituted one of these 3 prayers. Avraham instituted Shacharit, the morning prayers, when he awoke early in the morning to perform G-D's command, the sacrifice of Isaac. Yitzchak instituted Mincha, the afternoon prayer, in anticipation of meeting his bride to be, Rivkah. In this week's Parsha we read of the last of the patriarchs, Yaakov, and his institution of Maariv, the evening prayer. After Yaakov leaves Israel and goes to seek out his own destiny in the foreign land of Charan, the Torah tells us, "Vayifga Bamakom, - he encountered the place." The Talmud explains that the term Vayifga - and he encountered, is actually a term used to describe Tefillah, meaningful prayer. However, why is this term used to describe prayer? How is a meeting a form of prayer? In addition, why is this term used to describe specifically the evening prayer? Finally, why was Yaakov the patriarch who was responsible for establishing the nighttime prayer?

The Gerrer Rebbe (R. Yitzchak Meir Alter) explains that Maariv is a complex prayer. On the one hand it is the most challenging, but on the other hand, it can be the most rewarding of all of our prayers. The morning prayers represent the times that both personally and nationally there is light. It reflects the moments that G-D's divine presence is clear and apparent in our lives. The verse in Psalms quite accurately and succinctly states that "It is a good thing to give thanks to G-D... to declare Your loving-kindness in the morning and your faith in the nights." In the sunlit mornings when G-D's kindness is evident, a state of meaningful prayer is easier to achieve, but perhaps less potent in power. Prayer during the dark and dreary hours of the night when one cannot see G-D, rather relies solely upon faith alone is a far more difficult proposition. However, as elusive as that prayer may seem, it is also the most rewarding. It is the prayers of the night that transcend word, liturgy, and even tune. During these evening prayers one feels so alone and isolated, because he cannot see or even feel G-D's presence. Words cannot be found and one's voice remains still, yet he finds within himself the ability to meet G-D in a silent and meaningful encounter. This powerful and silent prayer is the prayer of Yaakov. Avraham and Yitzchak lived most of their lives in peace and tranquility with only temporary disturbances and hardships. Yet, Yaakov lived in the dark evening hours, a time of struggle and challenge; fighting his brother, dealing with a treacherous father-in-law, and finally losing a son. Throughout every one of these awful episodes he never loses his faith and remains committed to meeting G-D. It is Yaakov's faithful encounters with G-D without clarity of mind and without words on his lips that form the basis for our evening prayers. In its silence can be found its greatest strength. Precisely because this prayer of faith is not bound by the limits of words nor tied to the regiment of liturgy and is instead a personal encounter between man and G-D, it can be the most intimate prayer known to mankind.

I once heard about a couple who was happily married for over 50 years. When asked to explain the secret to their marital happiness, the husband responded that every week they take an hour long evening stroll together. When questioned as to what they discussed on their walk together, the husband responded that they say absolutely nothing; they simply walk silently with one another. This couple's intimate bond did not require words nor conversation. Just each other's presence alongside each other was necessary to ensure their continued feelings for one another.

Each and every evening, we have an incredible opportunity to meet with G-D. Although it may be dark outside, and we may even be feeling darkness inside as well, there cannot be a more meaningful and powerful conclusion to the day than the wordless Maariv encounter of Yaakov, our forefather.

**Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum**