

As the Jewish people stood terrified facing the direst of all circumstances, the raging waters of the Red Sea on one side and the myriads of armed chariots belonging to the Egyptian army on the other side, the Jews did what Jews always do, they prayed. As the verse tells us, “And the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea...And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were so afraid; and the children of Israel cried out to G-D.” Rashi discussing this prayer, comments “They seized the craft of their ancestors”. The Jews then prayed just as each one of our forefathers similarly turned to G-D in prayer during their particular challenges.

When you consider the implication of this commentary it reveals an incredible insight about the Jewish people. The Jews in Egypt never met Avraham and Yitzchak, yet, they were somehow attuned to the powerful effects of Tefillah. They understood that the secret to our survival was our engagement in daily prayer. However, there still seems to be some difficulty in understanding the Midrash. The Midrash says that when the Jews prayed at the foot of the sea, they were seizing the craft of their parents, inferring that prayer is a specifically Jewish trait. This could not be further from the truth, almost all world religions pray in one form or another. Not only do modern day monotheistic faiths such as Christianity and Islam highlight prayer as an integral part of their religious worship. Even ancient pagan religions of antiquity engaged in ritualized prayer. As both the Romans and Greeks prayed to their pantheon of gods, we can safely assume that the Egyptians prayed to their gods as well. So why are prayers the craft of our forefathers, when it was not necessarily from our forefathers, rather a common component to any religion?

The Gerrer Rebbe explains that our form of prayer differs significantly from any other forms of prayer. When Yaakov came to receive his blessing from Isaac dressed up as his older brother Esav, his father was confused as to his identity. He said, voice is the voice of Yaakov, but the hands, are the hands of Esav. Commentators understand the prescient nature of Yaakov’s words to be a succinct summary of Jewish history. Throughout our existence when the tide turned against us, our response has never been to use our hands, which is reserved for the families of Esav, rather our weapon of choice is always the voice of prayer.

The Gerrer Rebbe points out that Yitzchak did not say that the words are the words of Yaakov, rather it says the voice. While every one of our prayers obviously has specific liturgy that is not to be tinkered or tampered with at all, that is not the essence of Jewish prayer. The essence of Jewish prayer is the voice, the emotion and the passion of prayer.

The verse where it describes their prayers at this precarious moment does not say they prayed or they beseeched G-D; that is something that is common to many religious people. Rather the Torah describes them as crying out to G-D. That is the craft they seized from their forefathers. Even without ever having met their forefathers they understood that the essence of prayer is not the words and the accompanying physical gestations, rather it is the plaintive cry and pleading tone that highlights the fervor and the desperation of Jewish prayer.