

Parsha Ponders

Vayechi | December 20, 2018 | 13 Teves 5779

The weapon of prayer¹

ואני נתתי לך שכם אחד על-אחיך אשר לקחתי מיד האמרי בחרבי ובקשתי

I have given you one portion² over your brothers, which I took from the Amorites³ with my sword and my bow⁴

As Yaakov realized his time on this Earth was almost at an end, he had some final messages to share with his son Yosef. He was rewarding him with an extra portion in the land of Israel over his eleven brothers. Yaakov described his conquering this land using his sword and his bow. However, Targum Onkelos translates⁵ the words “sword” and “bow” as בצלותי ובבעותי, my prayer and my supplication. What is the difference between prayer and supplication, and how are they implied by the words “sword” and “bow”?

צלותי is Aramaic for תפילה, or prayer. This type of prayer refers to the set prayers that are recited three times a day. These prayers have an arranged order. First we praise Hashem, then we beseech Him with our worldly and spiritual requests, then we thank Him for all that He has done for us⁶. This is unlike בעותי, which is Aramaic for בקשה, or supplication. These are voluntary requests that are added into the set prayers. We are permitted to add in our own prayers into the set blessings, so long as they share the same theme⁷.

There’s an important difference between prayers and supplications. תפילה, or the set, daily prayers, require very little concentration to be effective⁸. Of course, every added level of concentration is beneficial, but it’s not inhibitive⁹. This isn’t so for a בקשה, supplication. These additional prayers require extra concentration¹⁰. Now that we’ve explained these two types of prayers and their differences, we can now understand how they can be implied from the words “sword” and “bow”.

A sword is a weapon which is intrinsically deadly. The sharpness of the blade is such that it can kill incredibly easily¹¹. However, a bow on its own isn’t deadly. It requires the input of the archer, who uses their strength to launch the arrow. This is why prayer is implied by the word “sword”. Even without concentration, the set prayers are effective, just like a sword, which doesn’t take much to be lethal. As well, the additional supplications are properly implied by the word “bow”. A bow is as effective as the force put into it, just like personal supplications. This is what Yaakov was alluding to in his final words to his son Yosef.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on [Meshech Chochmah](#) to [Genesis](#) 48:22

² [Targum Onkelos ad. loc.](#) See [Rashi ad. loc.](#) This at least appears to be a pun, as the city he gave Yosef was named Shechem

³ [Rashi ad. loc.](#) brings from [Bereishis Rabbah](#) 97:6 that this is really referring to Eisav

⁴ [Genesis loc. cit.](#)

⁵ [Ad. loc.](#)

⁶ [Tosefta Menachos](#) 6:6

⁷ [Avodah Zara](#) 8a

⁸ All that’s needed is the standard intention that one is about to fulfill a *mitzvah* ([Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim](#) 60:4)

⁹ Ex post facto if the person praying only concentrated on the first of the nineteen blessings, they have fulfilled their obligation ([Mishneh Torah Hilchos Tefillah](#) 10:1; [Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim](#) 101:1)

¹⁰ The [Meshech Chochmah](#) learns this from [Berachos](#) 29b: אמר רבי זירא אנא יכילנא לחדושי בה מילתא, ומסתפינא דלמא, [מטרידינא](#). Cf. [Rashi ad. loc.](#) [Rav Kupperman](#) also understands that the [Meshech Chochmah](#) learned this from [Rambam ibid](#) 1:9, although I don’t see it in his words

¹¹ See [Mishneh Torah Hilchos Rotzeach](#) 3:4