How to pray?

In the Talmudic tractate of Ta'anit page 23, the Gemara tells us about Abba Hilqiya, an extremely honest man, who worked hard to make a living, and lived a life of poverty. His daily meal consisted of a piece of bread, which he shared with his wife, his two children, and any poor and needy who came to his house to ask for a morsel of that piece of bread. Abba Hilqiya was also known for possessing a very special "gift": his prayers (like those of his grandfather Honi haMe'aggel) were reputed to be answered.

The Gemara tells us that, during a particular year of a severe drought, the Sages of Israel sent a delegation of two Rabbis to see Abba Hilqiya to ask him to pray for rain. Before even talking to the sages, Abba Hilqiya had already called his wife and, very discreetly, without saying anything to the Sages, went up with her to the rooftop, and began to pray, together: each at a different corner. Incidentally, this beautiful imagery, that of a husband and a wife praying together in different corners, appears as a theme also in other places: this is the way a Jewish couple prays together for the same thing. Separated but united. In this week's Perasha, Toledot, the Tora (and the Midrash) describes very similarly how Yitzhaq and his wife Ribqa prayed for a child (□□□□□ □□□□).
Returning to Abba Hilqiya, soon after his wife and he started to pray, a cloud appeared in the sky bringing the desired rain. The Gemara notes that this cloud did not come from the side of the rooftop where Abba Hilqiya was praying. The cloud arrived from the side where his wife prayed, hinting that the rain had come mainly because of her merit.

Abba Hilqiya came down from the roof, without being seen by the Sages, and claimed: "Well, I presume you came to ask me to pray for rain. If so, you can go home now, because, as you see, it already started raining on its own." This beautiful story continues describing the dialogue that took place

between the Rabbis – who knew that Abba Hilqiya had actually prayed– and Abba Hilqiya (the full story can be seen here). Several important lessons are learned from this episode of Abba Hilqiya that can teach us how we should pray.

Let's start with the most obvious.

1. As the Gemara itself cares to show, personal virtues that a person has are correlated with such person's prayers being answered: honesty, integrity and assisting people in need, seem to be at the top of this list.

2. There is another element that, although less explicit, also is clear. The modesty of Abba Hilqiya, who did all what he could in order not to take credit for the rain.

3. The point I want to stress most is one that is more subtle: If Abba Hilqiya was so poor, and he knew that his prayers were heard by God, why did he not simply pray for his own material well-being? Honestly, I don't know the answer (please, email me if you have read any commentary about this point). But I can think of two possibilities. a) That Abba Hilqiya cared so little about materialism that one piece of bread a day was enough for him, and he did not consider it necessary to pray for more than what he needed to live. And perhaps, this extreme simplicity was yet another merit that made him and his wife deserving of God's attention. b) That HaShem listens to our prayer especially when we pray for others. That is, when we pray for the welfare or good health of another person, or for the success of Am Israel in general, as Abba Hilqiya did at the time all Israel was suffering for the lack of rain.

On a more personal note, our family had the merit of knowing a woman whose behavior was very similar to that of Abba Hilqiya and his wife: that was ORO BAT ESTER z "l, my wife's mother.

√ During the numberless derashot that took place these days in her honor in Ashdod, Israel, it was heard, for example, that she always asked her daughters to bring with them some nice perfumes when returning from traveling abroad. But she never used any perfume. They eventually came to find out that, when

she learned of any bride without financial means, she would very discreetly hand her an envelope with money along with a perfume with a nice bow that she had made herself. She was always doing good things for others, and in total discretion.

√ One of her grandchildren said that he once got up in the middle of the night and found “Abuela Nori” z “l in a corner of her humble apartment doing Tefila and crying. When he asked her what was wrong, she replied that she was crying because the Chayalim, the young soldiers of the Israeli army, were exposed to too much danger those days, and she was begging HaShem with all her heart to protect them.

√ In our family, we all used to share with her all our challenges and problems, big and small, because we knew that she would pray for us. She was the one in our family with all the merits to be heard by Bore Olam! And it was a very poorly-kept secret that, if HaShem listened to our Tefilot, and our problem was somehow solved, we all knew that “the cloud of rain” must have had arrived from Abuela Nori’s side of the rooftop.