**Like the Prayer of an Infant**

**Based on a sicha by**

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Translated by Kaeren Fish

Jewish prayer contains many different elements: prayer substitutes for the Temple sacrifices, it is “service of the heart,” it anchors man’s loftiest emotions, and also enables us to contemplate the greatness of God. These elements underlie all of our prayers, but it seems that *Ne’ila* represents one main principle: “additional pleading and petition” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:7). The Yerushalmi (Berakhot 4:1) states that the essence of *Ne’ila* is to pray more. One of the sources for the importance of offering additional prayers is the example set by Hannah:

And it came to pass, as she prayed at length before the Lord, that Eli watched her mouth. And Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard, and Eli thought she was drunk. (I Sam. 1:12–13)

Hannah’s request of God was clear and organized, but as she extended her prayer, it changed form, becoming wordless and soundless. For this reason, it seems, Eli believed her to be drunk.

When one says the fixed text of a prayer, it can be difficult to hear the voice of the heart, emerging from the depths: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and grievously weak; who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9).

Only the Master of the world, who “searches the heart, trying the inward parts” (ibid., 10), can interpret what is in our hearts. At the inauguration of the Temple, Solomon asks that God hear the prayer of Israel in times of war, drought, famine, and so on. After listing all these various situations, he asks:

Whatever prayer and whatever supplication is made by any man, or by all Your people, Israel, who shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands towards this house – then may You hear, in heaven, Your dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart You know – for You, only You, know the hearts of all the children of men. (I Kings 8:38–39)

What does this last prayer add to the earlier prayers? It seems that there are prayers and wishes that a person himself is unable to express in words. Only God knows the import of such unspoken thoughts – “for You, only You, know the hearts of all the children of men.”

Thus, there is an unformed prayer that cannot express in words the feelings of the person; it may be compared to the crying of an infant, who cannot express in words what pains him. The Responsa of the Rivash (no. 157) records that Rabbi Shimshon of Chinon, after studying the mystical secrets of the Torah, would pray like a new-born infant.

The Hasidim told a similar story concerning the Baal Shem Tov. One year, he prayed with great fervor during the High Holidays. Suddenly, he had a vision that a certain Jew in a different city prayed with even greater fervor than himself. The Baal Shem Tov travelled to that city to visit this Jew. He asked him, “Do you study much Torah?” The Jew answered, “No.” The Baal Shem Tov then asked him, “Do you know how to pray?” The man answered, “No.” The Baal Shem Tov made another attempt to understand: “What did you do during the High Holidays?” The man answered, “Rabbi – I don’t even know the whole alphabet. I only know the letters from aleph to yud. When I entered the synagogue I saw everyone standing and praying with great fervor. I said, ‘Aleph, beit, gimmel…’ until I reached the letter yud. Then I said, ‘Please, God, join the letters that I have said into words and sentences of prayer, and please accept them with love.’ I said this with all my might over and over again.”

We do not truly know the proper set of priorities when it comes to our needs and those of the Jewish people. Therefore we pray like an infant who cries and cannot express its wants and needs, and we ask God to compose the proper and appropriate prayers.

The Gemara recounts:

Our Sages taught, “When R. Eliezer fell ill, his students came to visit him. They said to him, ‘Rabbi – teach us the proper path, which will give us life in the World to Come.’

“He said to them, ‘Protect the dignity of your fellows, keep your sons from speculation, and set them at the feet of Torah scholars. And when you pray, know before whom you stand. Through this you will earn life in the World to Come.’” (Berakhot 28b)

What was R. Eliezer trying to teach his disciples when he told them, “When you pray, know before whom you stand?” It seems that he meant, “When you pray, don’t look for all sorts of special, original *kavanot*. It is enough that you know before whom you stand; then your prayer will be like the prayer of an infant, and that will earn you life in the World to Come.”

The *Ne’ila* prayer was instituted for all public fast days, but on Yom Kippur it has special significance; it is said at the climax of the day, at the moment of atonement, “as it grows dark” (Tosefta Yoma 4:17). The Shelah writes:

The pinnacle of Yom Kippur is *Ne’ila*…for the atonement of Yom Kippur occurs at the end of the day. And the Men of the Great Assembly established at that time to say, “And You, Lord our God, have given us with love this Yom Kippur fast, to be the end, the pardon, and forgiveness of all our iniquities, that we may end the oppression that is in our hands.” (Shelah, Hullin, ner mitzva 54)

At this auspicious hour, the very pinnacle of Yom Kippur, may our prayer be like the prayer of an infant.

[This sicha is excerpted from Rav Amital’s book, [*When God Is Near: On the High Holidays*](https://www.korenpub.com/maggid_en_usd/when-god-is-near.html) (Maggid, 2015).]