

*Shemoneh Esrei*  
Exploring the Fundamentals of Faith  
through the *Amida* Prayer





Rabbi Ezra Bick

שיח ישעי

**SHEMONEH  
ESREI**

**EXPLORING THE  
FUNDAMENTALS OF FAITH  
THROUGH THE AMIDA PRAYER**

TRANSLATED BY

**Jonny Brull**

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מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לָךְ

*Dedicated in loving memory of*

*Tom Weisz z"l*

משה מאיר בן אברהם הכהן ורבקה רחל

*A man of integrity and humility  
with a relentless pursuit of the wisdom of Torah.  
A son of Holocaust survivors, he built a family of Torah  
with his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.  
He continues to be a source of inspiration  
and strength to all who knew him.*

תְּלַמִּידי חֲכָמִים אֵין לָהֶם מְנוּחָה אֶפִּילוּ לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא

Shelli Weisz and family



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## *Introduction*

The *Amida* prayer, the “*Shemoneh Esrei*” (Eighteen Blessings), recited three times a day, six days a week, is the central expression of prayer of God-fearing Jews from their earliest childhood. The Sages declared that the text of the prayer was composed by the Men of the Great Assembly – “One hundred and twenty elders, and among them several prophets, instituted eighteen blessings in order” (*Megilla* 17b). This statement establishes that the prayer text is the creation of rabbis and sages – among them several prophets – from the time of the foundation of the Second Temple. At a later period, Shimon HaPakuli arranged eighteen blessings before Rabban Gamliel in Yavneh, and the Gemara explains (*Megilla* 18a) that they had been forgotten and then were reestablished. This formulation emphasizes the importance of the precise text of the prayer. Two congresses of the religious leadership took place in order to compose the prayer – one at the foundation of the Second Temple, and another after its destruction. The explanation for the phenomenon “they were forgotten and then reestablished” is rooted in the destruction of the Temple – not just as a result of the shock that could have led to forgetfulness, but in reaction to the deep change that took place in the dynamic of the relationship between the worshipper and his God. The Men of the Great Assembly, the Rabbinic leadership of the returning exiles from Babylonia, composed a prayer which accompanied the Temple service that was being renewed in their days. Hundreds of years later, at the

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time of the destruction, the entire relationship between the worshipper of God and the King of Israel was in jeopardy, and undoubtedly went through a significant revolution. *They forgot them* – the heart found it difficult to find the words, they were retained in neither memory nor consciousness, until Rabban Gamliel came and instituted the text anew, opened the gates of prayer before the Jew who now stands alone and bereft, outside of the Temple, without priest and devoid of altar, and yet compelled to fulfill the human need and the Divine commandment to serve his Creator.

The essays included in this book are based upon talks delivered over the course of approximately twenty years to groups of students at Yeshivat Har Etzion, my intellectual home. The decision to attempt to analyze the text of the *Amida* in depth was based upon the assumption that the wisdom of the Sages is embedded within the text, and that within the *Shemoneh Esrei* we can find the fundamentals of faith and divine service. There is an accepted principle in our hands from the Ashkenazic *Rishonim* that it is not only the general themes of the *Shemoneh Esrei* that are a source of wisdom, but that every word and letter, as well as the number of words in every blessing, conceal within them deep meaning and thought (see *Tur O.C.* 113, citing the “*Doreshei Reshumot* who are the *chasidim* of Ashkenaz” regarding the number of words in each blessing). The basis of the lessons was not the desire to analyze the topic of the obligation of prayer, but rather the desire to study a Rabbinic source on the topics of faith and divine service. Specifically, this is a source more authoritative than the entire Aggadic literature, being a halakhic text that was instituted to be recited by the entire nation, and, in addition, a source in which central institutions of Rabbinic authority invested maximal depth of thought, thereby laying the foundations of practical halakhic life. The basic approach was *to learn*, just as yeshiva students learn other Rabbinic sources, and through analysis and perseverance to achieve deep insights. The *siddur* – at least the section of the *Shemoneh Esrei* – is a fundamental work of the Sages, and it is incumbent upon us to delve into it just as we delve into Talmudic discussions across the Gemara.

In order to achieve a deep understanding of the prayer, I relied on several sources. First of all, as is obvious to anyone who examines the

*siddur*, the text of the *Amida* is based on Biblical verses. The Sages used the words of the prophets openly and deliberately in their composition of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. It may well be that this phenomenon emanates from the Sages' desire to refrain from self-formulation as much as possible. My master and teacher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l* emphasized to us the logical and moral deterrent which stands before every person who comes to pray – how can man know what is fitting to utter before his Maker and what permission he has at all to appeal in his own words to the King of kings?! The Sages took the words of the prophets as a source and license to formulate prayer, and this alone shows how precise and deliberate the formulation is. Therefore, when we come to analyze a blessing, we must check the Biblical source, see in what context the words were said, what their meaning is in their original context, and why the Sages borrowed that source for the text of the blessing. It is important to remember that the Biblical context was well known by the Sages and the verses were fluent in their mouths, and one should assume that they also relied on the fact that it is familiar to worshippers and constitutes the cultural and philosophical background of their use of the language.

Second, there are often explicit Rabbinic sources which shed light on some of the blessings. There are references to some of the blessings, and there are commentaries which decipher for us the Sages' approach to the different ideas that are reflected in the blessings.

Third, in contrast to the vast literature compiled by the *Rishonim* into Biblical and Talmudic commentaries, nothing comparable extends to commentary on prayer. Despite this, there are a handful of fundamental books. First and foremost is the book *Peirush HaTefillot* by R. Yehuda b. R. Yakar, Ramban's teacher, which is packed with insights, allusions, sources, and ideas regarding the text of prayer. This book, which is not sufficiently well known, deserves a place of honor in the library of anyone who wishes to understand the text of prayer. Alongside continual use of this book, I have tried to look at all the other explanations given for the simple understanding of the language of prayer, to the best of my ability.

The topic of prayer – its laws, its meaning, understanding its text, and explaining the experience implanted therein – was a major and special occupation of my master and teacher, *HaGaon HaChasid* Rabbi

Joseph B. Soloveitchik. On many occasions the Rav also used the prayer text or liturgical poems as a source for delving into fundamental ideas in Judaism, and he related to prayer as a Torah source in every respect. There is no doubt that it is from him that I learned to relate to the prayer text as a source for study and analysis. It is difficult for me to say precisely what in the coming pages draws directly from his teachings, but it is clear that his influence is present on every page.

Understanding prayer is not just the result of textual analysis. The experience of one who prays, especially in the *Shemoneh Esrei* which is the daily prayer and to a large extent the religious environment of our entire spiritual life, constitutes a cradle from which intellectual understanding blossoms. I merited to pray most of my life, day by day, next to giants of prayer, giants of the generation in prayer, including my master and teacher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, my master and teacher Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*, and my teacher Rabbi Yehuda Amital *zt"l*, whose voice I often hear in my own prayers to this very day. Especially in my father's family, prayer was an essential foundation of service of God. My grandfather Rabbi Chaim Yechiel Michel Bick *zt"l*, whose commitment to proper prayer was reflected in the fact that he prayed his entire life from a first edition *Beit El Siddur* which he inherited from his ancestor Rav Yaakov Emden *zt"l*, was known, aside from his greatness in Torah, as a one-of-a-kind *chazan* from his youth in the community of Medzibuzh. I only merited to pray a little by his side, but the soul of his approach to prayer continued in the house of my father, who was also a *chazan* on special occasions, especially on the High Holy Days. Alongside the tradition of the Oral Law in halakha, there is also a tradition of the Oral Law in prayer, and it is specifically this that is preserved as tradition today and has largely not been committed to writing. I merited to receive from my father and teacher, Yeshayahu Bick *z"l*, much of this tradition, in both its material content, and more so, I hope, in its soul. I know that it deeply influences the contents of this book.

My father passed away on the fifth day of Chanukka 5770. On his final day, he neither spoke nor ate. When I took him to light the Chanukka candles and I lit them for him – this being the only time that he did not light himself – he barely responded, until I began reciting *Tehillim* 30, *Mizmor shir chanukkat haBayit leDavid*, which is recited after lighting

## *Introduction*

and which we sang in the tune that we received from my grandfather Rabbi Chaim. Suddenly, my father opened his eyes, and together with me he sang the entire chapter, until “*That my whole being shall sing to You and not be silent; HaShem, my God, I shall thank You forever.*” Then he was silent, and continued no more.

This book is my *siach*, my discourse, and “*siach* is nought other than prayer,” but it is to a large extent the discourse of my father as well.

You turned my lament into my dance, You undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy. HaShem, my God, I shall thank You forever.

Ezra Bick  
Adar Rishon 5782

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## Chapter 1

# *Semikhat Geula* *LiTfilla: Adjoining* *Redemption to Prayer*

This volume will examine the text of the *Amida* prayer, namely, the “*Shemoneh Esrei*” – the Eighteen Blessings. Our objectives are, firstly, to analyze the language of the blessings in order to understand them in depth and, secondly, to uncover the ideas implicit within the blessings and to identify some of the basic principles of Judaism and Jewish thought that the Sages embedded in the *Shemoneh Esrei*. The formulation of the *Shemoneh Esrei* will assist us not only as the content of our petition to God, but also as a primary text for study and as a source for the principles and beliefs of the Sages vis-à-vis the relationship between God and man.

This is not an exposition on the subject of prayer itself, its essence, significance, or place within Jewish life. There is much to investigate and expound upon regarding the commandment of prayer and the prayer experience; this, however, is not our aim. Thus, it would be only right to begin straight away with examining the language of the *siddur*. However, it is not possible to begin without a short introduction which defines the type of prayer that is reflected in the *Amida*. This understanding will

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serve as a guide in our future efforts to fully grasp the meaning of each and every blessing. For this purpose, as well as in order not to diverge more than is necessary from the textual framework, I wish to begin by examining the text that appears *before* the *Amida*, and its connection to prayer. We shall examine the halakha that requires *semikhat geula litfilla*, to adjoin redemption to prayer, which recommends that there be no interruption between the blessing of *Geula* (redemption, the blessing which follows *Keriat Shema*) – “*Barukh Gaal Yisrael* (Blessed is He who has redeemed Israel)” – and the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

### **1. TEFILLA = AMIDA**

Firstly, note the interesting phenomenon that is demonstrated in the formulation of the halakha of *semikhat geula litfilla*. The Sages state that “*yismokh geula litfilla*” – one must adjoin redemption to prayer. The term “*geula*,” redemption, refers to the blessing of *Gaal Yisrael*. “*Tefilla*,” prayer, in this statement refers to the *Amida*. This is a fine example of a common phenomenon in Talmudic literature. The simple term “*tefilla*” by itself, connotes the *Amida* prayer, consisting of nineteen blessings on a weekday and seven blessings on a Shabbat and festivals. In other words, the *Amida* is the prayer par excellence, the archetypal *tefilla*. In the eyes of the Sages, the other passages that constitute part of what we call the prayer service are prefaces, additions, and in fact sometimes have no intrinsic connection to prayer itself. “*Tefilla*,” as a basic and autonomous concept, refers to the *Amida*. When the Sages sought to formulate the text that would comprise the essential concept of prayer (which, according to Rambam, in contrast to the position of *Tosafot*, is a Biblical precept), they chose the formulation of this very prayer. Hence, our study of the text of the *Amida* is, in actuality, a study of the essence of prayer itself.

### **2. GEULA AND TEFILLA: REDEMPTION AND PRAYER**

In the *Shulchan Arukh* (*O.C.* 66:8) it is ruled that “*tzarikh lismokh geula litfilla*,” one must adjoin redemption to prayer. The implication of this halakha is that it is forbidden to interrupt between the blessing of *Geula* and the start of the *Amida*. It is not just an extraneous interruption, such as speaking with a friend, that is forbidden at this juncture; even responding to other parts of the service is prohibited. For example, if



## *Semikhat Geula LiTfilla: Adjoining Redemption to Prayer*

one were praying and at the exact moment when he finished the blessing of *Geula* he heard the *chazan* begin reciting *Kedusha* or *Kaddish*, it is forbidden for him to respond. The halakhic authorities disagree regarding whether one is even able to answer “*Amen*” to the blessing of *Geula* itself recited by the *chazan*, and from here arises the practice to finish the blessing together with the *chazan*, in order to avoid the need to respond “*Amen*” to his blessing.

In the Gemara, this adjoining is not formulated as an obligation, but as a recommendation. “R. Yochanan said: Who is destined for the World to Come? One who adjoins *geula* to *tefilla*” (*Berakhot* 4b).<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, the Gemara states: “R. Yose b. Elyakim declared in the name of the Holy Congregation of Jerusalem: One who adjoins *geula* to *tefilla* is immune to injury the entire day” (*ibid.* 9b).<sup>2</sup> The style of this recommendation, accompanied by the generous promise of a guaranteed reward in the World to Come, baffled the commentators.

Rabbeinu Yona HeChasid of Gerona questioned:

It must be explained: Is merely adjoining *geula* to *tefilla* really deemed so rewarding that it guarantees one a place in the World to Come?

He answers as follows:

The reason one merits such a great reward is because when God redeemed us and took us out of Egypt, it was so that we should serve Him, as is written, “For they are My servants whom I have taken out of the Land of Egypt.” In the blessing of *Gaal Yisrael*, we mention the kindness that the Creator performed for us. And *tefilla* is “*avoda*,” service, as it is said (*Bava Kamma* 92b): “And you shall serve HaShem your God (*Shemot* 23:25) – this refers to *tefilla*.” Therefore, when one mentions the Exodus from Egypt and

- 
1. In the Gemara this sentence concludes “to the *tefilla* of Arvit,” and the intention is to apply this rule *even* to the *Amida* of Arvit, and even more so to *Shacharit*.
  2. *Tosafot* there claim that this statement refers specifically to one who adjoins *geula* to *tefilla* and prays *vatikin*, i.e., at sunrise.

immediately prays, he demonstrates that, just as a slave is bound to his master, he too recognizes the goodness and redemption in which the Creator redeemed him, and that he is His slave and serves Him. And since he recognizes that he is His slave as a result of the fact that He redeemed him, and thus he fulfills His will and commandments, it follows that he will merit the World to Come as a result. (Talmidei R. Yona, *Berakhot* 2b in *Rif*)

R. Yona's explanation of the importance of *semikhat geula litfilla* is based on the definition of prayer as "avoda," service. According to the Sages, prayer is *avoda shebalev*, service of the heart.<sup>3</sup> Rambam bases his position that prayer is a Biblical precept on the Sages' defining it as service. It seems that this equation, *tefilla = avoda*, is widely accepted and is understood to be a parallel between prayer (service of the heart) and the sacrifices, namely, the Temple service. Now in English, prayer is often called service, but I am not sure that we understand the implication of the term. R. Yona's words bring us to the inner meaning of the concept of service. *Avoda*, service, is a form of *avdut*, servitude, as a slave serves and obeys his master. According to R. Yona, the mitzva to serve God emanates from the fact that God redeemed us from slavery in Egypt and by doing so literally "acquired" us to be His slaves. The notion that redemption from slavery in Egypt subjugates us to the Redeemer is an interesting idea in and of itself, although that is not our topic at present. R. Yona concludes – and his entire explanation as to why one merits the World to Come for *semikhat geula litfilla* is based on this conclusion – that the central expression of being a slave to one's master is by way of performing his master's will and his commands. The essence of slavery is obedience and the acceptance of authority. The fulfillment of mitzvot that emanates from internalizing a relationship of slavery with respect to God is what brings one to merit the most desirable of rewards, a place in the World to Come. One who adjoins redemption to prayer, that is to say one who accepts upon himself God's authority due to his

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3. "And so it says, 'And to serve Him with all your heart' (*Devarim* 10:13) – what is this service of the heart? You must say that it is prayer" (*Mekhilta DeRashbi* 23:25). In the same vein, see *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 4:6 and *Sifrei Devarim Eikev piska* 41.

recognition of the fact that the redemption from Egypt constitutes an acquisition of him by God, merits the World to Come. This is because, by doing so, he commits himself as a performer of the mitzvot of the Torah both now and hereafter.

But precisely this understanding of prayer as service poses a problem. Where in prayer, and particularly in the *Shemoneh Esrei*, do we see an acceptance of authority and obedience? On the contrary: the main body of the *Shemoneh Esrei* consists of requests for our needs and not our subjugation to the needs of the Master. Its content seems to be diametrically opposed to the idea developed by R. Yona. We do not serve the Master but instead request – in a subtle manner, of course – that He serve us! This being the case, why is it labeled “*avoda*,” service, in the sense of performing His will and obeying His commandments, like a slave does for his master? The recital of *Shema*, which is defined by the Sages as *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*, the acceptance of the yoke of heavenly kingship, would seem a more fitting choice as the primary medium for *avoda*, rather than the *Amida*.

### **3. AVDUT AND AVODA: SERVITUDE AND SERVICE**

The answer lies, I think, in understanding the true nature of the servitude. A slave obeys his master’s will and receives instruction from him regarding how to behave. But this is just an expression of a far deeper and more significant point. A slave obeys his master because he has no goals of his own, just as he has no property of his own. He has no future of his own, nor does he have his own aspirations based on a sense of purpose that is unique to him. The aims and goals of his life are those of his master. Everything that he has comes from his master. In a word, the slave is totally *dependent* on his master, from whom he receives not just instruction and sustenance, but also meaning, significance, direction, and purpose. The slave has nothing of his own. The ultimate meaning of slavery is total dependence that provides everything and leaves nothing over for the autonomy of the slave.

There is, however, one crucial difference between the slavery in Egypt, i.e., human bondage, and servitude to God. The Egyptian master has his own needs, and the slave is required to provide them. The master has selfish goals, and it is incumbent upon the slave to serve those

goals. But the Master of creation has no selfish needs, and consequently does not require His servants to provide for Him. On the contrary: total dependency on God does not command the *nullification* of man's own goals; rather it *provides* true goals for man. What the human master demands from his slave is to provide him with his own needs, thus *emptying* the slave of all meaning. What the Divine Master demands from man is the benefit of man, his perfection and welfare, and consequently Divine servitude completes and perfects man by *giving* him meaning. Granted, the slave/man is obligated to something external rather than to himself; however, this is precisely what awards man valuable inner meaning, as the Master/God does not intend for submission to Him to deprive man of his true destiny.

The servant of God derives his goals and ends from Him, just as any other slave does from his master. The slave sees in his Master – and in Him alone – the source of all his happiness. Given that the Master of the Jewish slave is the ultimate Good who wants only the best for His creations, with no demands of His own, this dependency awards man self-worth. Such a dependency allows man to acquire for himself a value set above all other values – that which is dubbed “*tzelem Elokim*,” the image of God: to resemble God and to develop into becoming like Him, so to speak. The “free,” uncommitted man is in the image of man. The man who serves God is in the image of God, which is his ultimate end and his true destiny.

How is prayer, the request for one's needs, a service of God? He who prays and supplicates declares that there is no other source of happiness or worth other than God. Just like the regular slave, he depends entirely on his Master and turns only to Him to fulfill his needs. There is no other source for direction in his life other than from his Master, God. *Ein lanu ela Avinu shebashamayim*, “We have no one other than our Father in heaven” – this is the fundamental essence of prayer. Through prayer we make ourselves dependent on God, and this dependency is the essentiality of servitude and service. Is there anywhere else to where man can turn to satisfy his thirst for significance, for the means to survive? He who prays as a slave before his Master answers in the negative: *Ki eineinu lekha teluyot*, “For our eyes look to You, and You alone.”

## *Semikhat Geula LiTfilla: Adjoining Redemption to Prayer*

The Sages established that *ein tefilla ela tachanunim*: the central defining element of prayer is supplication. At the heart of the daily *Amida* is a list of requests. Other blessings too, such as the *Amida* on Shabbat, are formulated as requests; even the blessing of thanks (*Modim*) in its closing line concludes with a request – *Vekhol hachayim yodukha sela*, “May all the living give thanks to You.” Some religions shifted the main focus of the man-God conversation to one of praise or song, deeming it a more fitting service for the mortal man standing before the King of kings. Judaism, however, did not agree to such a change. Prayer is not essentially praise; rather it is the service of God, and service is expressed through dependency. Man, a physical being with needs and constraints, is obligated to identify the root of his happiness and the source for filling his limitations. If he imagines that he is able to provide his own needs unaided, he will stand independent, a “free” man, without dependency or servitude. The truth, however, is that what we lack can be satisfied by God alone. Recognition of this fact – *that* is real prayer and supplication, a genuine declaration of servitude to God, and is true service of the heart.

The service of the angels is to sing songs of praise; the service of man is to submit and subjugate himself. We serve by stating: Without You I am nothing, dust and ashes, therefore I turn to You...for everything: wisdom, forgiveness, health, redemption, sustenance, justice, reward, both national and personal needs – everything that the Sages included in the *Shemoneh Esrei*. And where did we learn to view God in such a way, not just as a convenient supply house but as the Master of everything and the source of our lives? R. Yona answers: From the Exodus from Egypt, when God redeemed us from being slaves to exploitative man and brought us into His service, to a servitude that grants us the freedom of accepting His values and His munificence for ourselves.

In summation, the content of the *Amida* is primarily requests. The inner meaning and implication of this activity is servitude, placing ourselves before God as totally dependent on Him. Our requests are a fulfillment of the service of God, for by turning to Him for our needs we are stating that there is none other than Him from whom we can obtain anything, and that everything in our life comes from Him alone. Given this, it is understood that the regularity of prayer and its recital thrice daily is not in order to remind God of our needs, but is in order

to fulfill our service of Him, and to define our entire life as dependent on Him, at every given moment, as the basic definition of our existence.

#### **4. BITACHON: TRUST**

R. Yona offers a second explanation for the importance of *semikhat geula litfilla*. This answer is necessarily different than the first, but one can immediately perceive that underlying it is the same idea regarding looking to God as the only source which can satisfy our needs. He writes:

Alternatively, when one mentions the redemption from Egypt and prays immediately afterward, he shows that he trusts in God for his prayer, since he requests his needs from Him. For one who does not trust Him will not request anything from Him. And this idea is found in [Midrash] *Shemot Rabba* on *Parashat Bo*, where it is written that when Israel saw the miracles and the wonders which God did for them, overcoming the laws of nature, they trusted in Him, as is written, “And Israel saw the great hand which God wielded against Egypt; and the people feared God, and they believed in God” (*Shemot* 14:31). So now, when one mentions that redemption where our forefathers trusted in God and He saved them, and then he immediately prays, it is clear that he also trusts in God to answer him, just as He answered Israel when they trusted in Him. That is why one mentions that redemption (*geula*) and prays immediately. And trust (*bitachon*) is the foundation of fear of God and faith in Him, so he will thereby merit the World to Come. (Ibid.)

R. Yona offers two suggestions as to what underlies the *Shemoneh Esrei*. The first explanation revolves around the concept of service (*avoda*), and the second around trust (*bitachon*). As we have seen regarding service, the two ideas are closely related, for both trust and service are based on one’s appealing to God as the source of everything.

The distinction between R. Yona’s two explanations does not affect our topic, given that they both view prayer as an expression of one’s dependency on God. The difference between them does not relate to the definition of prayer, but rather to explaining the connection between

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prayer – prayer adjoined to redemption – and meriting the World to Come. The former explains that dependency leads to obedience, which is expressed in fulfilling the mitzvot, this of course being the key to the World to Come. The latter identifies the attribute of trust that is rooted in dependency, and trust “is the foundation of fear of God and faith in Him, so he will thereby merit the World to Come.” The difference between the explanations, therefore, is that according to the former the key to the World to Come lies in action, i.e., performance of the mitzvot, whereas according to the latter it lies in attributes of the heart – “fear and faith.” The former views prayer as a first step in committing to a future of action, while the latter sees him who prays as having a faithful persona in the present, this persona befitting him to merit the World to Come. Of course, this distinction is fundamental across the entire range of religious thought, but it does not affect our discussion of prayer as service.

## Chapter 2

# Opening One's Lips

The basic unit of the *Amida* is the “*berakha*,” blessing. The *Shemoneh Esrei* – literally “Eighteen” – is so named because it originally comprised eighteen blessings. Halakha mandates that a blessing open with “*Barukh*” (Blessed), which is indeed the case with the first blessing of the *Amida*, which opens with the words, “*Barukh Ata HaShem Elokeinu veElokei avoteinu*,” “Blessed are You, HaShem, our God and the God of our fathers.” Given that the structure of a blessing is fundamental to the composition of the *Amida*, our analysis will naturally address, for the most part, these structures. This being so, it would seem logical to define “*Barukh*” as the starting point of the *Amida*, the word with which the first blessing begins. However, before this word lies a verse, a phrase that is not part of any blessing, and we shall begin our analysis by examining this one anomaly and its significance.

### 1. **HASHEM SEFATAI TIFTACH**

Before the first blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, there appears in the *siddur* a verse taken from *Tehillim* (51:17): “*HaShem sefatai tiftach ufi yaggid tehilatekha*,” “God, open my lips, and my mouth shall utter Your praise.” Nowadays, at the start of *Mincha* and *Musaf* in Ashkenazic practice appears an additional verse: “*Ki shem HaShem ekra havu godel leElokeinu*,” “When I call out HaShem’s name, ascribe greatness to our



God" (*Devarim* 32:3). In halakhic literature other verses are mentioned, such as: "Shome'a tefilla adekha kol basar yavo'u," "Hearer of prayer, all flesh will come to You" (*Tehillim* 65:3), and, in Sephardic practice: "Sof davar hakol nishma," "At the end of the day, everything is heard" (*Kohelet* 12:13), or "Tikkon tefillati ketoret lefanekha," "May You establish my prayer like incense before You" (*Tehillim* 141:2). There is, however, a difference between the verse "*HaShem sefatai tiftach*" and the other verses. This difference is clearly reflected in the way that the halakhic authorities forbade the recitation of any verse at Shacharit and Arvit other than "*HaShem sefatai tiftach*." And why did they do so? As we saw in the previous chapter, it is necessary to connect the blessing of *Gaal Yisrael* to the *Amida*, to adjoin *geula* to *tefilla*. We must therefore avoid any interruption between the blessing of *Geula* and the *Shemoneh Esrei*. This halakha applies only to those prayers where *Geula* is recited. Given that the mitzva of *Shema* applies "when you lie down and when you rise up," namely in the morning and the evening, so too does *Geula*, one of the blessings of *Keriat Shema*, apply at Shacharit and Arvit alone. It is for this reason that there is no issue adding anything that one wishes before the *Amida* of Mincha. However, at Shacharit and Arvit it is forbidden to make an interruption. Therefore, even though at Mincha or *Musaf* it is permissible to add verses such as "*Ki shem HaShem ekra*" and "*Shome'a tefilla*," at Shacharit and Arvit these verses constitute an interruption between *geula* and *tefilla* and therefore may not be added.

However, as mentioned, "*HaShem sefatai tiftach*" is indeed said even at Shacharit and Arvit. This seemingly contradicts the rule of *semikhat geula litfilla*, adjoining redemption to prayer. The Gemara addresses this problem:

How can one connect *geula* to *tefilla* at Shacharit? Did not R. Yochanan say: Before [the *Shemoneh Esrei*] one says "*HaShem sefatai tiftach*," and afterward he should say "*Yihyu leratzon imrei fi*" ("May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be accepted before You, O God, my Rock and Redeemer")? The answer is that since the Sages required one to say "*HaShem sefatai tiftach*," it is as if it is part of one long *tefilla* [i.e., *geula* is

indeed connected to *tefilla*, which begins from “*HaShem sefatai tiftach*”]. (*Berakhot* 4b)

One should not see this verse as an embellishment to the *Amida*, a mere introduction, that is not truly part of prayer itself; if this were the case, it would not be possible to recite it at Shacharit as it would constitute an interruption between *geula* and *tefilla*. The Gemara explains that this verse is an enactment of the Sages and is therefore considered an integral part of the *Amida* itself, despite the fact that it is not part of a blessing. Despite the definition of prayer as a composition of blessings, the addition of this verse before the blessings constitutes “one long *tefilla*.” The problem of *semikhat geula litfilla* is thus solved, as the blessing of redemption is indeed connected and joined to the real beginning of prayer, namely the verse “*HaShem sefatai tiftach*.” This conclusion requires us to ascertain the significance of reciting this verse and the reason that the Sages felt a need to institute its recital and to join it to the *Amida* itself. What is so important about this verse and why is it necessary?<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THE RIGHT TO PRAY

“God, open my lips, and my mouth shall utter Your praise.”

In my opinion, this is not a request of God to aid us to pray. I do not mean to claim that one does not require the assistance of God in order to speak; however, one needs help in moving one’s lips no more than in moving one’s hands and legs. Even breathing requires the assistance of God, who is Master of everything. Such a need would not justify prefacing prayer with this verse. My claim is that this is not a request for assistance, but rather a request for permission.

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1. Based on this gemara, my teacher Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik required that the *chazan* begin his repetition of the *Amida* with this verse. Were this verse considered a mere introduction recited *before* the *Amida*, it would have been possible to rely on its recital before the silent *Amida* for the *chazan*’s repetition too. However, since it is not an introduction to, but an integral part of prayer, the *chazan* who repeats the entire *Amida* is obligated to recite – aloud – this verse too before beginning with “*Barukh*” (see *Shulchan Arukh* 111:2 and *Magen Avraham* ad loc. 4).

Man, facing God, recognizes that he is unworthy to utter the praises of God, that the very thought of God's praise, God's majesty, God's kingship, on his lips is inappropriate. Who am I and how dare I presume to bear the glory of God's majesty on my poor, sinful lips? Or – if we rephrase this idea within the context of the previous chapter, where we explained that prayer is the service and servitude of the King – who am I to be counted among the servants of the King? Servitude is seen by us, of course, as lowly and humiliating, but regarding the servants of God this is not so. To be called an *eved HaShem*, a servant of God, is an honor and a privilege, and this honor must be granted by God. The problem here is not the physical ability to move one's lips and give praise, but rather the permission to assume a position of cosmic significance, to count ourselves among the servants of the King of kings, Master of the universe. In order to join the ranks of the servants of the King, one must be *accepted*. Man, standing before his Creator, is mute, his lips sealed, until the King raises His golden scepter and points to him, and only then may he open his lips in order to utter the praises of God.

“God, open my lips” – give me the right, O God, to speak before You, to utter Your praises, to count myself among those who serve You, for if not, I remain silent and mute.

With this we return to the paradox I described in the previous chapter. To serve God is to receive from Him the contents of the *tzelem Elokim*, the image of God. Nullifying ourselves before Him means to be affirmed and empowered. By serving God, we do not fade away, lose dignity and a sense of self, but on the contrary: we become truly human, in the sense that to be human is to be in the image of God. So too is the case with prayer, which is service of the heart. To serve God through prayer is to be empowered and to receive a status of *eved HaShem*, servant of God – to be a *tzelem Elokim*. Before I utter a single word, before I formulate even one request, my very standing before Him as a servant constitutes a huge request for the most important of values, to be a servant of God and thus a man of worth, to be ready to receive significance, meaning, mitzvot, everything; for everything comes from Him and there exists no other source. The Sages chose the words of King David in order to express this request, that precedes all private requests and specific prayers. O God, open my lips – and only then dare I utter Your praise.

### **3. THE ABILITY TO PRAY**

What is the meaning of the words “Open my lips”? Opening the lips is, of course, a metaphor for speech; however, we must understand what lies behind this metaphor and ascertain its significance. It seems that hidden within the metaphor lies the basic meaning of the concept of “*tzelem Elokim*.”

By saying “God, open my lips, and my mouth shall utter Your praise,” we seem to imply that the praises are waiting inside of us, bottled up, unable to pass the sealed portals of our lips. There is no need to formulate and compose long, complex prayers; there is only a need to open the locked gates and, consequently, the words will spill out, “My mouth shall utter Your praise.” This implies that there is an enormous gap between my inner depths and my outer expression. In the deepest recesses of the heart, of which even my own consciousness may be unaware, resides an entire world of connection to God, lie values of holiness and purity, and a direct link with the Infinite. However, the moment I try to express all of this, something feeble and superficial emerges instead, devoid of all glory and grandeur. Only the power of God can help me bridge this gap and unleash the inner fullness of my soul’s expression.

Why does such a gap exist? The concept of “*tzelem Elokim*,” the image of God in which man was created, refers to man’s potential. Man is created in His image, meaning that there is no plan, description, or model for man that defines and limits him, other than God. Everything is created according to a plan that details its characteristics and abilities. A dog, for example, is created according to the blueprint called “dog,” within which are listed the abilities and characteristics of a dog. Man is created in the model that is called “God.” In actuality, in the external expression of *tzelem Elokim*, a person at any given moment is no more than the finite, limited state that he has attained. The camera freezes man’s state at that particular moment. But man is not really defined as finite or limited; man was not created in the image of man, according to a blueprint of what a man should be. By definition, man was created from the outset in the image of God, free of restriction that could limit his abilities. The word of creation was that man should be “*thus!*” – in accordance with the blueprint and model, no less than God.

The definition of man is not what he is, but what he can be, what he should be, the infinite striving to transcend any restriction of value in his ascent to the infinite. Therefore, the inner meaning of man, that which we term his "*tzelem Elokim*," is expressed in his striving to transcend himself, to elevate himself to a higher state. As a result of this, there exists a constant gap between man's inner meaning – the potential to reach God – and the external, objective reality. Man's inner potential is "imprisoned" within him, hidden and buried deep down. Limited in the external reality, man is unable to utter God's praises. Not only is he unfit, but he is incapable, and does not even come close to the level required in order to comprehend God and His praises. If, however, man's lips are opened, one can find those words inside which are hidden deep within his *tzelem Elokim*. Man calls out before God: What do I want, but that You should open my lips, open their locks, and my mouth shall utter Your praise that is stored within me.

If one does not pray, or prays to himself, he can at most be equal to himself, flesh and blood, dust and ashes. He can express in words only that which he can express in action. If, however, one prays to God, entering into the service of the King of kings and subjugating oneself to Him, thereby recognizing Him as the source of all value and meaning in his life, he can become something of infinite value. Such a person grows steadily closer to ultimate worth and expresses his true, inner personality as a reflection of what is truly hidden within him: a *tzelem Elokim*.

#### 4. THE WAY TO PRAY

There is another point that must be raised regarding the assistance that we ask of God in order to pray. Aside from the right to stand and serve, and the ability to stand in such a way that my prayers and praises should be meaningful, there is also the problem of how to formulate the prayer, the question of knowing how to pray correctly.

There are two types of prayer. One is spontaneous, bursting forth from the depths of the heart, true and honest, elemental and unsophisticated. When man is in trouble or danger, his prayer does not reflect his service of God, but his immediate, experiential needs. There is no formal service or standardized *tefilla*, but a "*ze'aka*," a cry. *Tefilla* takes

## *Shemoneh Esrei*

place in the palace of the King; *ze'aka* bursts forth and ascends from inside the cave, from the straits of distress.

*Maskil* to David, when he was in the cave: a prayer.  
My voice to God I cry (*ez'ak*), my voice to God I beg.  
I shall spill before Him my words, my trouble before Him I shall tell.  
When my spirit surrounds me, and You know my path,  
On the way which I go, they have hidden a trap for me.  
Look right and see, I have no friend, I have lost all escape,  
there is none to look out for me.  
I cried (*zaakti*) to You, O God,  
I said: You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.  
(*Tehillim* 142)

Man, within the cave, seeks not the royal palace in which to serve the King, but a refuge in which to hide from the enemy. From the midnight of the soul, man cries out to God to save him. This requires no preparation, no formalities, no keeping to royal protocol. One need not be wise or scholarly to formulate such a prayer. In fact, one should not “formulate” such a prayer at all. There are no requirements of set times or special locations, no need for a *minyan* of ten, no obligation to keep to precise dictates of introductory praise or concluding thanks. The legitimacy of *ze'aka*, a cry, is in the heart of the *zo'ek*, the individual who cries out.

But daily prayer, service of the heart, is fundamentally different. Service of the King does not burst forth from a burning house, but is incorporated into the King's court, as part of one's servitude and service. The reason why the Sages composed the *Shemoneh Esrei*, according to Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:4), is that the common man, stumbling over his words, was unable to formulate an appropriate prayer whereby to express himself properly. In serving the King there are rules of procedure – what comes first and what last, how to stand and when to bow, at which time and in which location. The legitimacy of prayer lies in its being the service of God, and this service must be performed in an appropriate manner, one that befits the King of kings. In the King's house there is behavioral protocol, and every visitor must “play by the

rules." For a prayer such as this, the Sages deliberated over every word, searching for the Biblical sanction and support for their formulation, in order to produce the perfect prayer. As such, prayer is an ordered work, a "*siddur*."

It is not simple to know how to pray in this manner. How do I know what to say? Shall I address God as "merciful" or as "gracious"? As "merciful Father" or as "mighty King"? Which of my needs are important enough to be mentioned first, which should come last, and which should not be mentioned at all? For the most part, the Sages based their formulation of prayer on the masters of prophecy, on verses in the Tanakh. In other words, the Sages relied upon a Divine source in order to know what to say before Him. It is for this reason too that we first say: "God, open my lips, and my mouth shall utter Your praise."

In our further study of the formulation of the *Shemoneh Esrei* we will examine the sources for each blessing. We shall see that the Sages carefully combined Biblical phrases into a seamless whole. One of the fundamental methods which we shall use in order to understand the blessings is to examine the sources used within them, in order to shed light upon the *Amida* from the Tanakh. The assumption that prayer reflects not merely that which befits the suffering of the soul and man's most pressing needs, but also that which is appropriate to recite before God, obligates us to first request that He open our lips so that our mouth may indeed utter His praises, those which befit *Him*, and not merely those that suit us.