

## What is Jewish Prayer?

The first thing we have to understand about Jewish prayer is that there is no such thing as Jewish prayer.

“Prayer” is an English word derived from a Latin word that means “to beg.” And begging or pleading is definitely *not* what the Jewish understanding of prayer—known as *tefillah* in Hebrew—is all about. *Tefillah* is its own unique experience.

Prayer as begging or pleading is problematic, because it suggests some heretical ideas about God. For one, it implies that God changes His mind. “First, God thought this and wanted that, but through our prayer, we convinced Him to change His mind.” God doesn’t change His mind. As it is says in the Book of Samuel 1, “for He is not a man that He should repent,”<sup>1</sup> and as it is says in the Book of Malachi (3:6), “I, God, change not.”<sup>2</sup>

When prayer is understood as begging or pleading, it displays a lack of trust in God. According to Judaism, whatever happens to us is from God, and it is always in our best interest.

This approach to prayer also gives God a bad name. It implies that He is holding out on us. When we pray for a sick aunt, for example, and she still does not recover, we step up our efforts by getting more people to pray for her. If she continues to be sick, we often organize a gathering at the local synagogue. And if she still does not recover, we send e-mails all over the world to get thousands to pray. What are we doing? Are we trying to force the hand of God?

*Tefillah*, however, does not suggest any of these heretical problems, because it is not about changing God’s mind or trying to force His hand. The root verb, *le’hitpallel*, is reflexive—that is, a verb that reflects back on the doer—and as such, it implies that we are doing something to ourselves. When we are *mitpallelim* (praying), we are not trying to change God, we are trying to change ourselves. In *tefillah*, we talk to God so that *we* will change, and if we change, our situation can change.

## Transformation through Communication

Let’s examine what talking to God really entails.

There are two ways of communicating—the male way and the female way. There’s an interesting book called, “You Just Don’t Understand,” by Dr. Deborah Tannen, that explains the different ways men and women communicate. She points out that when men speak, it is generally for the purpose of communicating information. Therefore, if they don’t have any information to communicate, they don’t speak. Women, however, speak even when they have nothing to say, because they feel that speaking creates connection and intimacy.

As a male I can relate to this distinction. When I come home after a full day of teaching, I am generally quiet. But my wife doesn't understand this. She says to me, "You speak all day, and with me you have nothing to say!" I tell her, "I'll speak when I have something to say." It doesn't help that I am especially not good at small talk. When I'm in people's homes where there's small talk going on, I'll keep quiet if I don't feel there is much value in the content of the conversation.

Once, a couple in Kansas invited me over for dinner before I was scheduled to give a speech to their community, which they had arranged. The table talk was inconsequential, and since they didn't ask me anything about Judaism, I had nothing to say. I'm sure that my silence really worried them, because I was the man whom they gathered the whole community to hear! They must have thought, "What on earth is this guy going to get up and say?" When I spoke that night, I'm sure they couldn't believe I was the same person they just dined with. Like many men, I generally speak only when I have something to say.

Women, however, communicate to create intimacy. For woman the content of a conversation is not the only reason for the dialogue. You can imagine a man listening to a discussion between two women on a bus, and thinking, "What are they talking about?" To a man, a casual conversation between women doesn't seem substantive; there's no meaningful encounter there. But for the women, it is meaningful, because they are connecting.

When it comes to communication with God, women definitely have something over the men. In fact, we learn many of the laws of *tefillah* from Chana, a woman who prayed to conceive a child. (Her prayer was answered, and the child born to her became the prophet Samuel.) The power of prayer is more compatible with the approach of woman to communication.

When we speak to God, it is not for the purpose of communicating information. That is a ridiculous notion. God knows what's going on in our lives. We speak to God to create intimacy with Him, to experience a closer connection. And the closer we feel to God, the more we change. The same happens when we speak to people. Our conversations do not change the other person. If anything, we feel changed by virtue of speaking to them. For example, when we feel a little down, we like to talk things out with our friends. We could be talking about the same situation as we discussed the day before, but talking about it creates connection and makes us different. We become transformed by virtue of our intensified relationship.

When we pray, we don't pray to get an answer to our prayer; our prayer *is* the answer. In our praying, we are changed by virtue of the closer connection we feel to God. Feeling this deeper connection is bound to change us for the better in every way.

Clearly, there is more to *le'hitpallel* than just causal small-talk with God. The *tefillah* is very rich in content. However, the value of the content is for our sake not God's. We need to hear and be impacted by what we are saying to God.

*Le'hitpallel* means that we are *palel*-ing ourselves. To understand what this means exactly, we need to look at the way the word *palel* is used in the Torah. It first

appears in the story of Jacob and his son Joseph. When Jacob was nearing his death, Joseph asked his father for a blessing for his two children. Jacob responded, “I never *palelti* that I would see your face again, but God has granted me even to see the face of your children.”<sup>3</sup> The way *palel* is used here seems to mean “I never hoped...” or “I never dreamed...” or “I never imagined/envisioned...”

But, the great 11<sup>th</sup> century Torah commentator Rashi explains this verse differently; he reads Jacob’s words as saying, “I never would have filled my heart to think that I would see your face again.” According to this interpretation, when we are *mitpallelim*, we are actively trying to fill our hearts with what we want to see and do in this world, and then change ourselves to make it possible. If we change ourselves, we change our whole situation. It is not God whom we are trying to change. It is ourselves and our awareness of God that we are trying to change through *tefillah*.

God is constantly showering us with abundant blessings. Our problem is that we block them through our poor attitudes and misdeeds. Like a cloud that blocks sunlight from warming our faces, we block God’s blessings from penetrating our lives. For example, God is constantly sending us healing and health. Therefore, when we are *mitpallelim* and are actively filling our hearts with wellness—we are wanting, and dreaming about, wellness. When we do so, we change ourselves by acknowledging that God is the source of all healing and by becoming receptive to His blessings for health.

Therefore, when we finish our *tefillah*, we must ask ourselves not whether God heard our *tefillah*, but whether we heard it ourselves. Did it impact and change us? Do we feel closer to God? Are we more receptive to His presence and blessings in our lives? For this reason, Jewish law requires that we must hear our *tefillah*. Even though the *Amidah* is referred to as the silent *Amidah*, it is not really silent. We are supposed to announce the words in a quiet whisper audible only to ourselves.

## **Creating Our World through *Tefillah***

*Tefillah* is an exercise in faith. When we are *mitpallelim*, we are actually altering our own subjective world which is made up of our beliefs.

The other day I was watching my son play with his new set of toy policemen. He was sitting on the rug, making all kinds of noises as he maneuvered the policemen closing in on the bad guys. He was totally absorbed in his world of make-believe. Watching him, it dawned on me that we all live in a world of make-believe, because the world as we experience it is actually made of our beliefs.

Our beliefs about ourselves, about the world and about God determine our experiences. If we believe that the world is an accident, we will experience life as an accident. If we believe that the world is operated under the guidance of God, then we will experience that guidance. If we believe that God loves us, then we will feel His love no matter what happens. Thus, through *tefillah*, we reinforce beliefs that empower us to become receptive to God’s blessings and allow them to enter our lives.

King David, who wrote the Psalms, teaches that a holy person “lives in his faith.” In other words, faith is a holy person’s orientation to life.

Our faith creates the perceptual world in which we live. We don’t create our own reality—the Torah teaches that God is reality—but we do create our *perception* of reality, which is our perception of God. Ultimately, how we perceive God is what determines the world in which we live.

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the famed composer of many Jewish melodies, used to tell a story that illustrates this principle. Once he was speaking with a woman who was extremely annoyed because her son, age of 33, was becoming involved with religion. “I don’t believe in God!” the woman declared forcefully.

She undoubtedly expected the Rabbi to plead with her or lecture her about the evidence for God’s existence. Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders and said, “So don’t.”

She was shocked. “How can you say that? You are a Rabbi!”

“If you want to live in a Godless world,” he said, “then go ahead.”

This same message applies to us also. If we do not believe in God, then we will not experience God in our life. However, the more we believe in God and affirm our belief through what we think, say and do, the more God’s presence will fill our world.

With this in mind, let’s take a look at how the *Amidah* helps us change ourselves and fill our world with the presence of blessing of God.

## Introduction to the *Amidah*

The *Amidah* was written in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE at the beginning of the Second Temple period, when the Jews first returned to the Land of Israel from the Babylonian exile and struggled to re-build the Temple in Jerusalem earlier destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. When the Temple—God’s personal sanctuary—stood, it was easy for the Jews to communicate with Him, but with the Temple in ruins, they were rendered speechless.

The *Amidah*, as we know it, was composed by the Sages of the Great Assembly, some of whom were prophets, with the idea of helping common people speak directly to God to keep their connection alive and personal. To accomplish this, they created a liturgy called the “Eighteen Benedictions,” also called the *Shemoneh Esreh* (which means “eighteen” in Hebrew) or the *Amidah* (which means “standing”). The *Amidah* is the central prayer of all three daily services—morning, afternoon and evening.

We start the *Amidah* with the verse from Psalm 51, “*Adonai*, open my lips and my mouth will speak Your praises.”<sup>4</sup> The common understanding of this introduction is that we are in the presence of the King and are unable to speak. Therefore, we ask God to help us in this regard. However, there is an even deeper message expressed in these words:

The word *Adonai* means “Master.” In Jewish law, whatever a servant owns actually belongs to his master; the servant has no possessions whatsoever. This law also governs our spirituality: God is our Master, and, in essence, we own nothing. For example, it is incorrect to say “my” life because it is really God’s life. We do not own the life-force within us.

This is a difficult concept to accept for many people, even if it is a self-evident experience. Consider that if we were, indeed, owners of our lives, then we could stop and start our lives whenever we wanted. We could stop our heart beating and then start it again at will. Our thoughts, too, are not really our own. If we were the masters of our thinking, then we could stop thinking and start whenever we please. But we cannot; we are constantly thinking. The same goes for our feelings; we are constantly feeling and cannot make ourselves stop. We can choose *what* to think, what to feel and what to do with our lives, but the actual act of thinking, feeling and living is within God’s power to control, though He shares it with us. To take our life is to commit suicide. All we can do is humbly and gratefully receive the power of life that God, the Master of life, shares with us.

Even our will is not our own. We did not invent will; we are not the source of will. We do not have the choice to have a will. What we do with our will—how we direct it and invest it—is our choice. *What* to choose is our choice, but the fact that we are *able* to choose is not our choice. Even our motor skills are not ours. We did not

create the knowledge or the skills required to open our mouths. To open our mouths, we tap into a wisdom that is clearly not ours.

Therefore, when we say, “*Adonai*, open up my lips,” we try to contemplate the miraculous mechanism of all our facial muscles and the wondrous ability to speak. We focus especially on the 17 muscles that mysteriously work with perfect coordination, shaping our lips to express every letter and syllable of the words we speak.

Who taught us how to do that? Who empowers us to do that? This is whom we call *Adonai*. He is our Master Self who benevolently shares Himself—His life, will, wisdom, etc.—with us as He asks us to be His partner in the world.

When we are ready to start the *Amidah*, this beginning phrase helps us acknowledge this mysterious and empowering truth about our relationship to God. We must recognize that we are not simply praying to God. We are praying *with* God.

*Tefillah* is not about changing God’s will. Rather, it is about changing ourselves so that we can channel God’s will in the way He wants it to be channeled into the world. *Tefillah* is referred to as *avodah*—a “service” to God. Through our *tefillah*, we serve God by becoming a channel for His will in the world. God wants peace, healing and redemption to fill the world, but for God’s will to manifest, He needs us to channel it. And the more we want what God wants, the more His will and blessings will become manifest.

Therefore, we begin the *Amidah* by acknowledging God’s share in our prayer. In effect, we are saying, “Master, You open my lips. I know this is a partnership between us. You provide the raw material—the will, the thoughts, the feelings and the motor skills—and I determine what form to give these God-given powers.”

Aristotle taught that everything in existence could be defined in terms of substance and form. There is no such thing as form without substance, or substance without form. Through our *tefillah*, we take our God-given powers and form them into expressions of praise: “Master, you open up my lips, and my mouth will speak your praises.” This is true of everything we do. Our daily life is a partnership with God. God provides the raw materials—the substance—and we determine the form. We don’t have the choice to want, think and feel—we are always wanting, thinking and feeling—but we can choose what we are going to want, think and feel. We didn’t choose to be born, but we can choose what to make of our lives. And our goal is to take the powers God shares with us and turn them into praise.

What is praise? In Hebrew, praise is called *tehillah*. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh, the 19<sup>th</sup> century father of neo-Orthodoxy, says that the word *hallel* means “to reflect.” In other words, to praise God means to become a living manifestation of His truth and reflect His greatness. Created in the image of God, we are meant to mirror His splendor and glory. At the start of the *Amidah*, we acknowledge that our service to God in *tefillah* is to reflect His truth—that His presence reverberates in everything we say.

This is the meaning of praying with *kavanah*. This Hebrew word *kavanah*, is most often translated as “concentration,” but it also means “alignment.” You may sometimes find yourself reciting the 16<sup>th</sup> benediction and suddenly realize that while you were saying all the benedictions until now you were distracted, lost in your thoughts about other matters, and you don’t even remember saying any of it. When this happens to me, I find it to be an amazing mystical experience, because who prayed if it wasn’t me? My mouth was moving, yet I was thinking about something else. If I was not aware of forming my words, then how did my mouth know what words to say? It’s an incredible experience to “wake up” in the middle of the *Amidah* and say, “Wait! If I didn’t say these words, then who did?”

When this occurs, I become very aware of the paradoxical truth of how within the self there could be a split and disconnect between a higher conscious aspect of the self and a lower unconscious aspect of the self. The lower aspect of self is speaking, and yet the higher self is not connected to what the lower self is doing. In order to become fully aware and present, I have to bring these two parts of myself together. Any state of mind that is short of total inner connection is a form of sleep, itself a form of death.

This split self experience also helps me understand my relationship with God in a profound way. Within God there exists a relationship—between God who is the Supreme Self and the individual souls (us) who are aspects of God Himself. This concept brings additional meaning to our introduction, “Master, open up my lips and my mouth will speak Your praises.” We align our individual soul with the Universal Soul—our self with the Supreme Self—when we acknowledge that God is our partner. And together, we will pray.

Imagine how alive and focused you are when your higher self and lower self are working together—when you are fully present in your words and actions. Now imagine how even more invigorated you will be when your lower and higher self are connected with the Supreme Self, and you experience God’s presence in your words and actions.

If we are conscious that God is present in our motor skills and He is opening our lips, then we will be completely connected to Him and able to speak His praises. When we achieve this inner connection and harmony, we then sing God’s praises with our whole selves. These praises are *for* God—they are His praises. But also, mysteriously, these praises are coming *from* God—they are His praises in this way too—because when we align our selves with Him, we experience ourselves as His mouthpiece.

### **Summary and Paraphrase**

We begin the *Amidah* by recognizing our total dependence upon God and our partnership with G-d. Although we pray to God we also pray *with* God. Our very ability to speak to Him is coming from Him this very moment.

When you say, “*Adonai*, open up my lips,” contemplate how all your 17 facial muscles miraculously work with perfect coordination to shape your lips to express every letter and syllable. How wondrous is the ability to speak! Who taught you to do that? Who empowers you to do that? *Adonai*—the Master Self.

When you feel God’s presence in your every move—how truly it is He who opens your mouth—your mouth will automatically speak His praises. These praises will not only be *about* Him, but mysteriously you will experience these praises coming *from* Him. When you align your will with His will, you become His mouthpiece and His presence will reverberate in every word from your mouth.

***Master, You open up my lips*** ...I know this prayer is a partnership between us—You open my mouth with Your wisdom and skill ***and my mouth will*** then automatically ***speak Your praise***—let me use my power of speech to exalt You and as Your mouthpiece to channel Your glorious presence.



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**God is All-Loving**

### **The Power to Praise**

The first three benedictions of the *Amidah* are praises of God, the next 16 are requests and the last three are expressions of thanks. Jewish Law (*Halacha*) teaches us that the first blessing is so important it must be said with full understanding and concentration; if not, as soon as we realize that we failed to recite the first blessing with *kavanah*, we have to go back to the beginning and start all over again.

Practically speaking, we do not follow this law today, because it is the sorry state of our times that we are so distracted and have such low concentration, it is questionable we would have any better *kavanah* if we tried again. And then, we would be using God's name in vain. Nevertheless, we are obligated to take this *Halacha* seriously and sincerely try to have *kavanah*. Unless we understand and feel what we are saying during the first blessing, the rest of our *tefillah* cannot have any real meaning.

As important as these praises are, however, they are not recited for God's sake. Remember, we praise God for our own sake.

The Psalmist teaches us "Know before whom you stand." There are a number of ideas implied in this verse. First you need to know who is God. Before *whom* do you stand? And who is this that empowers *you* to confidently stand in His presence, address Him and request of Him? Who is this God with whom you enjoy a personal relationship?

We need to clarify, realize and remind ourselves before whom we are standing so that we can get psychologically ready to truly channel and manifest God's will and presence in the world through our *tefillah*.

The first blessing is the absolute minimum necessary to appreciate before whom it is that we stand and pray, though, in fact, the first three blessings are devoted to the task of succinctly stating the Jewish definition of God—that He is all loving, all powerful and all mysterious. Of course, we know that God is beyond description. Whatever we say about God is nothing compared to what we should say, and what we should say is nothing compared to who God truly is. But nonetheless, we humans need words to give us a sense of before whom we stand. Although words are limiting, these blessings contain the best words (as far as words can go) expressing the truth about God, who really is beyond words and can only be known experientially.

With this in mind, let's look at the first three blessings, phrase by phrase, to see how they clarify the meaning of God and what mindset they establish for us.

## God, the All-Loving

The key word in *tefillah* is the first word of the *Amidah*—*baruch*—which means “blessed be.” The related word *bracha* means “blessing,” “abundance,” “bounty.” Therefore, the very first words of the *Amidah*, *Baruch Ata YHVH* (*pronounced Adonai*) *Eloheinu*, which can be translated as “Blessed be You, Lord our God,” really means, “let there be an abundance of You, God.”

We start the *Amidah* by expressing a desire to increase the manifestation of God in the world and increase our awareness of His presence in our lives. To be more specific this opening really means “May You, *YHVH*, be abundantly manifest as *Eloheinu*.” We want *YHVH*—Timeless Ultimate Reality, the one who was, is and always will be, the source, ground and context of all being—to be abundantly manifest as *Eloheinu*, as “our” God, personal, present and close to us. We want *YHVH* to be abundantly manifest as *Eloheinu*—our Creator—who cares about us and empowers us, judging our deeds, responding accordingly and giving us what we deserve. As we learned in the introduction, *tefillah* is a faith-building exercise. The more we believe and acknowledge that God lovingly guides us through life, the more this truth about God becomes evident and the more we experience it in our lives.

The words *Baruch Ata*—Blessed be You—should knock us off our feet. How could we mortal, infinitesimal earthlings dare to address the Timeless Ultimate One and assert that we relate to *YHVH* as “You,” in a direct, personal and familiar way? Traditionally, we are not even supposed to address our teachers as “you.” Rather, we are supposed to speak in the third person: “How does the Rav feel today? What does the Rav think?” Yet in *tefillah*, we are taught to refer to God as “You,” as if we were intimate friends.

“Blessed be You, *YHVH*,” reminds us that the Timeless Ultimate Reality is always with us. God is not a lifeless, impersonal “It.” He is alive and here for us, and we can call Him “You.” He identifies with us and He is involved in our lives. He relates to us, cares about us and empowers us to grow.

A Buddhist, interestingly, wouldn’t recite such a prayer. Buddhists do not believe that God is personal or that we can have an intimate relationship with Him. In Buddhist practice, a person’s highest spiritual accomplishment is to achieve selflessness and merge with a non-personal Ultimate Reality. Buddhists don’t pray to God. They don’t expect Ultimate Reality to be personable and caring.

Torah is altogether different. Torah revealed to the world that we all stand before an Ultimate Reality who is personal and can be addressed as “You.” God is paradoxically beyond the beyond and yet mysteriously manifest and encountered as close, personal and ever-present.

Further, “You” are *Eloheinu*—which means “our God.” Who are we to say *our* God? Torah says we can. “You,” the Timeless Ultimate Reality, are “our God,” who cares for and personally identifies with us. What we do and experience matters to “You.”

## God, the Caring Judge

*Elohim* (of which *Eloheinu* is the possessive form) is the Divine name associated with God's attribute of judgment. It suggests that God is a judge. Torah teaches that judgment is an aspect of love. In other words, we must understand that God judges us, because He cares about us. God as *Elohim* means that what we do makes a difference to the Divine. We are important and we matter to God, and that is why He judges us.

The people we love the most, we judge the most. We are the most critical of our loved ones because we care greatly that they achieve their highest goals. God, too, wants us to reach our greatest potential. He responds to our choices and gives us what we need, so that we can actualize our highest self as created in the Divine image.

This is why parents react their kids when they misbehave, and this is why God reacts when we transgress.

When I was a child, one day I decided that I would take revenge on my mother over something that, today, I do not even recall. In a fit of anger, I took all of her nylon stockings and tied them into little knots. As I was sitting there feeling very satisfied with my macramé, I heard someone at the door and quickly hid the stockings in the china cabinet. I was proud, but I was also scared. The next day, when my mother couldn't find any stockings, she asked me, "David, do you know where my stockings are?"

"Stockings? Aren't they in the drawer?"

"No."

Several hours later, my mother found her stockings in the china cabinet. Dangling my artwork in front of me, she asked, "Do you have any idea how this happened?"

"The washing machine?"

"No."

My mother knew very well who did it. She punished me by canceling my birthday party. At the time, I was really devastated, but today I am happy because now I am a year younger!

Now that I'm more mature, I can imagine that if my mother wouldn't have cared that I knotted her stockings, it wouldn't have made me feel good. As angry as I was at my mother for whatever reason, and as scared as I was of her catching me, it would have felt worse if her only response was, "It doesn't matter, I'll get more." That would have said to me, "What you do doesn't matter to me. You don't matter to me." Nothing hurts more than not mattering.

I have seen the self-esteem of children destroyed, because their parents never punished them. These kids never experienced consequences to their choices. Of course, I am not condoning any violent or abusive form of punishment. But I do believe that a child has to see—and wants to see—that what he or she does makes a difference.

The fact that God is *Eloheinu*, “our God” who judges us, means that we have a relationship with Him. The Ultimate Reality is not a “what” but a “whom.” The source, essence and context of everything and everyone in existence is alive and conscious. He cares about us and seeks to empower us to actualize our Godliness.

A couple years ago, I was on the Larry King Show with Dr. Deepak Chopra, a well known Hindu teacher and physician. Larry started the show by asking Deepak, “Who is God?”

He responded, “The infinite realm of possibilities. The One who was, the One who is.” He described God in a very esoteric and metaphysical way, but there was nothing personal about his description of God.

Larry then turned to me and asked, “Rabbi, is God watching us, judging us?”

“Yes, Larry,” I answered. “He is watching us. But He is not judging us—He is loving us.”

I could see that Larry and Deepak were surprised by my answer. During the commercial, Deepak warmly told me that he loved my answers. Larry agreed, “Yeah, Rabbi, you are doing great.” I wondered what I had said that was so impressive. But then I realized that for a rabbi to describe God as loving was an anomaly.

He must have assumed, like many people do, that the Jews view God as angry, mean, vengeful and punishing. But how could anyone, and why would anyone pray to such a nasty god?

The first blessing of the *Amidah* reminds us daily that God is all-loving, even as He judges us.

### **The God of Our Forefathers**

After we acknowledge that *YHVH* is our God, personal and caring, we continue to affirm that God is also “*the God of our forefathers*.” In other words, although we need to experience our own personal, unique and contemporary relationship with God, our individual connection must also be set within the context of our historic relationship with God. Our personal connection is also part of a traditional, ancestral relationship. God is not just our own God; this relationship did not start with us. Our personal relationship with God goes way back and is longstanding.

Some people have a personal relationship with God, but it is not linked to history. Conversely, some people have a historic, ancestral relationship with God, but not a personal, unique connection. Recently, I received a letter from a fellow who read my book *Seeing God*. He said that when he was fifteen, he had a religious crisis. He realized that he believed in God because his parents believed in God. That was not a good enough reason for him, so he became an atheist. This man had a traditional connection but was lacking a personal relationship.

The words, “You are the God of our forefathers,” are especially helpful during times when we do not feel so close to God. They help us remember that God is indeed close to us, simply because we are the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even when we feel inadequate to stand in God’s presence and ask for His help, nonetheless, because He is the God of our great, great grandparents, we know that He is always here for us. Even if we feel we have no personal merits, we know that we can approach God because we are descendants of these spiritual giants. We can actually count on the merit of our ancestors. We are their offspring, and the apple does not fall far from the tree.

The prayer then names each forefather: “*You are the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*” This teaches that each of these spiritual giants had a very different perspective of, and encounter with, God—that God related to each of them differently, because God gives everyone individual attention. God personally identifies with each of us as individuals.

Yet as it continues, the blessing also reminds us, “*You are the great, mighty and awesome Divine power, the supreme power.*” Although God is manifest as close and personal, we need to remember that God is beyond personification. The God whom we call “You” is also the great, mighty, awesome Divine power and force.

As soon as the *tefillah* reminds of God’s greatness, it repeats that God personally cares for us and “*nurtures us with good kindness.*” This repetition is highlighting the mysterious contrast between the manifestation of God as the supreme power and yet as kind and nurturing. As awesome as God is, He is still our loving, caring God.

Compare this Jewish concept of God to that of the ancient Greeks. They believed that because the gods were so great and mighty, they had no interest in human beings. In essence, they could care less about us. We, too, may wonder why the Timeless Ultimate Reality would take interest in us mortals. Why would the Infinite care about the infinitesimal? Torah teaches that the greatness of God lies precisely in the fact that He wants to be present in our lives, and that He cares for us and nurtures us.

Let’s focus on the part of the blessing that says “*good kindness.*” You may be wondering whether there is such a thing as *bad* kindness. Well, Torah teaches that there is indeed. The ideal form of kindness does not diminish the stature and self-esteem of the one who is helped. Therefore, good kindness is a kindness that truly nurtures a person without causing him or her to lose self-worth.

For example, regarding the laws of giving to the poor (*tzedakah*), we are taught that it is better to donate in anonymity so that the recipient does not know who the donor is and will not be embarrassed in the donor's presence. It is even better if we can help the poor person get a job. You see, when we give a jobless man money, we take away some of his integrity and self-worth. But if we can get him a job, we are protecting and nurturing his self-respect. God, as the ultimate nurturer, always gives while protecting and building our stature.

### **God, the Giver and Receiver**

The next part of the blessing reads, "*And You make everything Yours.*" This expresses much endearment. Once we recognize that God nurtures us, we must realize that He is, therefore, invested in us. He takes ownership and interest in everything we do.

For example, Jewish law describes the union between a man and a woman as lovingly possessive. It is as if he is making her his own and cherishing her—"I want you to be mine." This is how God relates to us.

This phrase—"And You make everything Yours"—also expresses a paradox. How can someone give and yet still own everything? If everything I give another person ends up becoming my own property, then I didn't really give the other person anything. This is a Divine mystery: God gives and yet continues to own everything.

The blessing continues, telling us that God also "*remembers the kindness of our forefathers, and redeems the children of their children.*" Torah teaches that, in appreciation of the forefathers' kindness, God redeems their descendents. In other words, God values and appreciates what we do for Him. This, in turn, means that He not only nurtures and acquires, but He also receives from us.

It is an amazing idea that God allows us—and empowers us—to give to Him. Of course, God lacks nothing, and He certainly doesn't *need* our kindness. But love means that even when we don't need another person's help, we give him the opportunity to do something for us.

The Midrash, a part of the Oral Torah, points out that even though "God lights up the entire world," He asks us to "light for Him the menorah in the Temple." This can be compared to a blind man and a seeing man walking into a dark room, and the seeing man asking of the blind man and says, "Please, do me a favor. Reach over to the right side of the door and switch on the light so that I can see." This small gesture gives the blind person an opportunity to do something for his friend.

Our ability to give to God, and thereby bond with Him, is God's greatest gift to us. Love is not only giving, but also receiving. When we love someone, we give to our beloved the opportunity to give to us. Sometimes, the greatest gift of love is the opportunity to return love.

God cherishes the goodness He has received from our forefathers so much that His gratitude lasts for generations and, we, the descendents of these great people, can

feel confident that, in appreciation, God will redeem us. We should never feel unworthy to speak to God and ask for His help. Even if we have done nothing for God and feel completely inadequate to stand before Him, we must remember the mere fact that we are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob gives us the right and power to pray. Even if we feel unworthy, we can expect God to answer our prayers and redeem us, because His love for our great, great grandparents extends to us.

## **Redemption**

Redemption means that God will restore to us a sense of Divine dignity, personal significance and self-worth so that we can confidently and comfortably call to Him and enjoy a loving relationship with Him. As it says in the Proverbs, “I endow my beloved with substance.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, God loves us and will enable us to feel how much we matter to him.

And God does all of this “*for the sake of His name with love.*” This is an odd phrase. It’s saying that God cares, nurtures, receives and redeems us for selfish reasons—for *His* name’s sake, and yet with love. How can this be? “For His name’s sake” suggests that, if we are not redeemed, then something about God’s name will be unfulfilled. In other words, God wants us to be redeemed in order for His name to be complete.

The only reason that we are given names is so that others can call to us. If there were no one in existence to call us, we would not need a name. The fact that God has a name at all is a mystery. Although Jewish mysticism teaches that nothing else exists besides God, as an act of love He created us and, so to speak, gave Himself a name so that we can call to Him and bond with Him. God created beings other than Himself because He wants a loving relationship with them. He nurtures us and redeems us from nothingness. He makes our existence matter and empowers us to become His significant other, to feel worthy and confident so that we can call to Him, evoke His presence in our lives and enjoy a personal, intimate relationship with Him.

Psychologist Erich Fromm defined immature love as, “I need you; therefore, I love you,” and mature love as, “I love you; therefore, I need you.” God doesn’t love us, because He needs us. God needs us because He loves us. And because He loves us, He created the possibility for Him to need us.

In other words, the great divine mystery of love and life is that God created a need that He didn’t need. *We* need it, because we need to be needed. A Jewish philosopher once said, “Happiness is the certainty that we are needed.” Essentially, God, because of His love for us, created for us the opportunity to feel needed by Him. God did not need to need us, but because He loves us, He chose to need us. Of course, the word “need” used in relation to God borders on the ridiculous, but it is the best way to describe the truth of our relationship with Him and His ultimate gift to us.

Therefore, God redeems us—empowers us—to feel significant in His presence for the sake of His name, so that we can call to Him. And He does this all as an act of

love, giving us the joy of feeling needed by Him, so that we can fulfill His name and call to Him.

### **King, Helper, Savior, Shield**

The last part of the first blessing reads, “*King, Helper, Savior, and Shield.*”

The Kabbalah teaches that there is no such thing as a king without a nation. For God to be manifest as king, He must have a kingdom that accepts Him as king. Of course, we know that God does not need anyone. However, if God wants to be manifest as a king, then He “needs” a nation that acknowledges Him as such. This is His gift to us. The fact that we establish God as king indicates that we, in fact, are divinely significant. Therefore, He helps, saves and protects us because He needs us.

Not only does God help us and even save us when we don’t deserve it, God also protects us. But this statement begs a question: If God protects us, then why would we ever need to be helped or saved? From what does God protect us?

God protects us from the negative side effects of His help. When we become aware that He helps us and saves us all the time, we tend to lose some of our confidence and sense of personal power. With all that does for us daily, we could even lose our self-respect and feeling of adequacy. Therefore, God protects us from Himself.

When God helps and saves us, He does so in a way that preserves us. He “shields” us from His overwhelming kindness, so that we can maintain our self-esteem and continue to enjoy a meaningful relationship with Him.

### **Shield of Abraham**

The blessing ends with, “*Blessed be You, YHVH, Shield of Abraham.*”

Abraham was the first person who was able to stand in God’s presence, relate to Him and enter into a covenant with Him. Until Abraham, people either thought they were too insignificant to have a relationship with God, or they believed that they too were gods. Abraham revealed the secret of “covenant.” Although there is nothing except God, we exist within the loving embrace of God. This is the miracle of what the Kabbalah describes as a Divine withdrawal (*tzimtzum*).

In the beginning, there was only God. But for there to be a “me” and “you” who could relate to God, God had to withdraw and conceal His “endless light” and presence, so that our own light could shine, and *we* too could have a presence in His presence and relate to Him.

Think about the stars. They seem to come out at night, but the stars are always in the sky, even during the day. We just don’t see them, because the overwhelming



light of the sun nullifies their light. Once the sun sets and its light is concealed, the stars can have presence and their radiance can be seen.

*Tzimtzum*—the withdrawal of the self to make space for another—is the power of love. When you love someone, you may sometimes need to diminish your own light so that your beloved’s light can shine. You may have to shield him or her from your overshadowing presence so that they too can have presence. This is the challenge of parenting. Parents have to diminish their presence so that their children can have their own presence. Otherwise, they will feel insignificant around their parents, and will not be able to have a loving relationship with them.

### **To Bow or Not to Bow**

According to Jewish law, we bow at the beginning and the end of the first blessing. There are also two more times—four times total throughout the entire *Amidah*—when we are supposed to bow. The Talmud teaches that if you see a person bowing more than the four required times, then you are to teach him not to do it.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook explains in his commentary on the *Siddur* why the Talmud says, “*teach* him not to do it” rather than “*tell* him not to do it (because it is the law).” Rabbi Kook explains that we bow before God only as a preparation to stand before Him with proper humility. But, nonetheless, we must confidently stand. If a person is bowing too much, he is confused about the nature of his relationship to God. It is not enough to tell him the law; we must help him understand that the goal of Torah is to confidently and comfortably stand before God, rather than be stooped over, feeling totally unworthy. God empowers us to stand confidently in His presence. He does not want us to be spiritual weaklings.

This basic truth is not only expressed in prayer, it is also evident in the laws surrounding the ritual washing of our hands. The law requires that when we wash our hands in the morning or in preparation for eating bread, we have to do it *b’kuach gavra*—with human strength. To facilitate this, we must fill a cup with water and use it pour over each hand rather than just putting our hands under running water. Jewish law also requires that the cup, which cannot have any cracks, have a flat bottom so that it can stand on its own without tipping over.

These laws hint to us that to be pure, we too must be able to stand on our own; we too must be whole. Spiritual purification is an act of power and assertion, not an act of weakness and surrender. We don’t serve God because we are weak and afraid that He will step on us if we don’t serve Him. We serve God because we are strong, and we recognize that He has empowered us to play a significant role in establishing His kingdom on earth and manifesting His presence in our lives.

Unlike Judaism, many religions teach that spiritual purification can only be achieved through surrendering our human strength and realizing that we are nothing in God’s presence. But Jewish law insists that spiritual purification can only be accomplished through our own assertion.

*Tefillah* is no different. If a person is bowing too much while praying, he has it all wrong. He thinks Torah is about submission and that the goal of life is to be subordinate to God. The real goal is *Amidah*—which literally means “standing”—that is, standing before God, establishing ourselves as His significant other and, with love, bonding with Him. Our two preparatory and two concluding bows are just enough to enable us to accomplish this goal with the appropriate reverence.

There was once a Chassidic rebbe would advise his students to always carry a precious gem in one pocket and a bit of dirt in the other pocket. Whenever they were feeling down, they were to reach into the pocket with the gem and realize they were also gems. Whenever they were feeling overconfident, they were to reach into the pocket with the dirt and realize they are also a piece of dirt.

Along this same line, we are taught not to bow too much before God. Torah is not about self-effacement. Torah empowers us to diminish our ego and become radiant, powerful souls, standing in the loving presence and radiance of God. Unlike Buddhism, Torah does not strive for selflessness. Just the opposite, we strive to establish our sacred self and stand erect, with full stature, in the presence of the Ultimate Self and fulfill our loving covenant with Him just as did Abraham.

## **Remembering the Goal**

The goal of Torah is to fulfill the covenantal relationship of unconditional love between God and humanity. But for a relationship to exist—for there to be a “we”—there has to be a “me.” If a person (“me”) is not present in the relationship, how can there be a relationship?

Therefore, in our attempt to diminish our ego—to diminish the “me”—as we bow in the presence of God, we must take care not to overdo it and lose ourselves.

The first person we find praying in the Torah is Abraham, whose example teaches us how to stand humbly yet confidently before God. First, he boldly approaches God and asserts himself, “Will the Judge of the entire earth not act justly?” Then he humbly retreats, saying, “What am I? I am but dust and ashes.” His humble declaration, however, does not prevent him from boldly continuing to petition God about His decision to destroy Sodom. In this dialogue, we see Abraham struggle in his prayer, oscillating between total surrender and yet powerful assertiveness.

The Midrash tells us that when God revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, their souls left their bodies. In other words, they were so overwhelmed by the revelation that they simply died on the spot. God, however, sent angels to revive them. The message here is that while God reveals Himself, He simultaneously protects us from the devastating impact of His presence.

The Psalmist teaches that, “God is like the sun and shield.”<sup>6</sup> He lovingly shields us from His overwhelming radiance, so that we too can stand confidently before Him and be in a relationship with Him. Remember, the goal of the *Amidah* is, literally, “to stand.”

I once heard a guru tell his students that his goal was to teach them how to sit. Torah, however, teaches us how to stand, humbly but confidently, with stature and self-worth, in the presence of God. God's gift to us is that we have presence even in His presence. With love He both empowers and protects so that we can call His name and bond with Him.

## **In Conclusion**

You might think, "Who am I to stand before God? Who am I to request anything from God?"

The first blessing of the *Amidah* establishes the first and most important truth we need to know in order to pray: we can stand before God and request His help. It affirms our belief that God is all-loving. He is close and personal. He cares and relates to us individually. And although He is great, almighty, awesome, even supreme and transcendent, we are nonetheless significant in His eyes. He nurtures us and makes us His very own. He not only gives us love but also receives it from us and remembers the kindness of our ancestors. His gratitude is long lasting, and He will redeem us and empower us to be in a loving relationship with Him.

Because He loves us, He needs us. He is like a king, and we are His kingdom. He helps us and even saves us. He also protects our self-esteem, shielding us from His overwhelming presence so that we can stand before Him—have presence in His presence—and be able to enjoy a loving relationship with Him.

Remember, praises for God are not for God's sake. They are for our sake. We need to hear ourselves praise God. We need to put ourselves into the right mindset for our prayers to be effective. If we approach God with the feeling that we have no right to pray and that God is so great He has no interest in us tiny earthlings, then how can we even open our mouths?

This first blessing is absolutely critical to the understanding of our relationship with God. It enables us to boldly affirm, "I am standing before an all-loving God, who cares about me. He has as a vested interest in me because He is a King and I am part of His kingdom. And even if I am unworthy, I can ask, and He will respond."

## **Summary and Paraphrase**

*In this first blessing we acknowledge that God is personal, ever-present and loving. We pray with confidence because we know He cares. He shields us from His overwhelming presence so that we can have our own presence, so we can stand before Him, express ourselves and enjoy a loving relationship.*

**Blessed be You, YHVH** ...May You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, who is personal and ever-present, be abundantly manifest as *Eloheinu*—our God, Creator and Judge—

caring about us, empowering us and responding to our choices and deeds ... *and* may You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, be abundantly manifest as *the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*, reassuring us that even if we are unworthy, in the merit of our forefathers, You are listening to our prayers and giving us individual attention as You did for them. May You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, be abundantly manifest as *the Great, Mighty and Awesome Divine Power, the lofty Supreme Power*; the Ultimate Force behind the universe, beyond all personification, Who nonetheless personally *nurtures us with good kindness* as our loving parent (without detracting from our self-worth) *and* while being lovingly *possessive of all*. *And* may You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, be abundantly manifest as One who *remembers* (cherishes) *the kindness of our forefathers* towards Him *and*, in appreciation, *brings a redeemer to us, the children of their children*, to restore our self-worth, *lovingly, for the sake of His name* so that we can become His significant other, empowered to comfortably address Him by name. May You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, be abundantly manifest as *a King who helps* us, His nation, *and saves* us, even when we don't deserve it, *and shields* us from Your overwhelming and all-pervasive presence so that we can enjoy a loving relationship with You. *Blessed be You, YHVH* ... May You, Ultimate Timeless Reality, be abundantly manifest as the *Shield of Abraham*, concealing Your endless presence, so that we can retain our own presence in Your presence and confidently stand before You in prayer just as did Abraham, who was the first to stand before You, assert himself in prayer and enjoy a personal and empowering relationship with You.

*The more we believe and acknowledge this truth about God, the more we will experience Him as such in our life.*

## God is All-Powerful

Before we can request anything from God, we must believe that we matter to Him. Therefore, the first blessing affirms that God is loving and good, close and personal. He cares for us, protects and empowers us to stand before Him in a loving relationship. However, to believe that God is all-loving is not enough. We must also believe that He is all-powerful. Otherwise, why pray to God if He is powerless to help?

Harold Kushner, in his best selling book, “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” struggles to understand God’s goodness in the face of all the pain and suffering in the world. Kushner’s own child suffered a rare disease that caused him to age rapidly and finally die at a young age. Understandably, Kushner painfully grapples with the question, “Where is God’s goodness?” He posits that either God is all-powerful but not all-good or God is all-good but not all-powerful. However, God could not be both all-good and all-powerful because if He were, surely He would not allow an innocent child to suffer. Kushner concludes that God is all-good but sometimes powerless to help us; God is all-good but not all-powerful.

If Kushner is correct, then why pray? Kushner explains that he talks to God as if he were talking to a good friend. Even when he knows that his friend is powerless to help Kushner nonetheless finds solace and comfort in voicing and sharing his problems, all the more so with God.

Kushner’s conclusion, however, does not correspond with what a Jew affirms daily in the second blessing of the Amidah which praises, “*You are forever, all-powerful, God.*” God is forever the Almighty. No situation is out of His control. Even when tragedy strikes—and we painfully grope to understand God—we must humbly accept that although we cannot fathom how this tragedy could be a manifestation of an all-powerful and all-loving God it is.

Imagine that you walk into a doctor’s office and the door to a patient’s room is ajar. You can see that the doctor is literally putting pins into the feet of a little boy. The little boy is shrieking with pain, and you can see the boy’s mother is smiling with great joy. From your perspective, the doctor and the mother are, without a doubt, cruel. Your knee-jerk response is to rush in to save the poor boy from torture but you first ask the mother how she could be so cruel to allow this.

She says to you, “Cruel? This is a joyous moment. This is the first time my son has felt any pain. He lost all sensation in his feet, and this wonderful doctor has enabled my son to regain feeling again.” Suddenly, you experience a dramatic paradigm shift. You realize that this doctor wasn’t mean. Rather, he was a loving healer. For this child to feel pain was a great pleasure and gift.

In this same way, we must humbly reserve judgment on God and acknowledge that He is always all-loving and almighty.

And we must never lose hope because God can do the impossible. Therefore,

the second blessing not only affirms “*You are forever, all-powerful, God,*” but also “*You revive the dead.*” In other words, even if the situation seems hopeless know that God can miraculously heal even a person who has been diagnosed as fatally ill. All the more so when it comes to a business deal, a relationship, or any situation that appears hopeless. We should never lose hope and we should never stop praying.

The second blessing also encourages us to never lose faith in ourselves. Even when we feel worthless, devoid of any good deeds and know that we have no right to request of God anything, nonetheless, we *can* because God is also “*abundant in salvation—rav l’hoshea.*”

God is not only all-powerful in His ability to overcome physical obstacles and revive the dead, but His almightiness is also expressed in His ability to overcome even spiritual obstacles. Even His very own attribute of justice cannot block His unconditional love for us. This is the meaning of the verse in Psalms, “Save me, God, for the waters have reached until my soul” (69:2). In other words, although I am drowning spiritually because of my wrongdoings and sinking in a sea of judgment against me, God can still save me. He can overcome even His own just ruling against me and save me.

This reminds me of the time a friend and I were in San Francisco, driving through a bad neighborhood known for its high crime rate. My friend turned to me and said, “God is great. I have to hand it to God.”

I said, “Excuse me? What do you see here that inspires you to feel the greatness of God?”

“Because if I were God,” he told me, “I would have wiped out planet Earth a long time ago. Imagine how much He loves us and patiently waits for us to get our acts together.”

*Salvation* means that God, in His unconditional love for us, can overcome and override even His own judgment against us. Therefore, the Psalmist confidently affirms, “I am a pauper [poor in good deeds] and afflicted [by the judgment I deserve], but Your salvation, God, will raise me high” (69, 30). In other words, even though we may have done wrong and deserve harsh consequence, God’s salvation is abundant and He has the power to supersede His own verdict against us. As it is written in the Zohar, “God’s love for His children conquers and triumphs over His love for justice” (Vol. 3, 99b).

## **The God of Process**

Even though God is forever almighty and able to overcome all physical and spiritual challenges to help us we should not expect immediate results. Therefore the continuation of the blessing states “*You bring the dew* (this is said only during the spring and summer month) and *You cause the wind and the rain.* (this is said only during the fall and winter months)” reminding us that God’s blessings sometimes come gradually, in small measures, like the dew and the rain. Let’s take a closer look at what this really means.

The Hebrew word for “mighty” is *gibor*. *Pirkei Avos*, Ethics of Our Father, teaches: “Who is a *gibor* (mighty person)? One who is able to overcome his tendencies.” How does this definition apply to God? When this idea is applied to people it generally refers to overcoming negative and destructive inclinations. God, however, has no negative inclinations. God’s tendency, so to speak, is only to shower us with goodness. Therefore, God is manifest as a *gibor* when He overcomes His overflowing love for us. In other words, when He is able to control His natural tendency to shower us with endless blessings, and instead bring them upon us gradually, with the right measure and in the right time, just like He brings the rain and the dew in little drops and in the right season. If God were to allow these blessings to pour down upon us all at once or when we were not ready, then we would not be able to handle them. They would overwhelm us.

The second blessing, therefore, affirms that God is not only almighty because He is able to overcome death and the judgments against us, but also in restraining the downpour of His goodness and blessings upon us. This praise reminds us that while we must trust in God’s power we must also trust in His process and be patient in getting our prayers answered. Therefore we continue to praise that although You, God, “*gratuitously support life*” every moment, You are also committed to our lives being a gradual evolving process. You “*compassionately revive the dead, lift up the fallen, heal the sick and free those who are bound.*” Our life process is similar to that of a seed. Even though seeds are buried in the dirt and seem to rot and die there, the rotting and dying are in fact only stages in the seeds’ life toward becoming even more alive and beautiful.

Knowing all of this, we must trust that whatever problem we face in life is part of the process of our own spiritual growth and actualization. We must always remember that God gratuitously supports life, compassionately revives the dead, lifts up the fallen, heals the sick and frees those who are bound.

## **Feel It**

At this very moment, we can know that God gratuitously supports life when we feel His miraculous life force pulsating through us. When we take our pulse, we can be forever awed as we experience how God *gratuitously supports life*. Each beat is as if God is tapping us on the shoulder, assuring us that He is here. Every morning when we awaken from sleep, which is a partial death, we experience how God *compassionately revives the dead*. When we acknowledge the wisdom and motor skills we need to lift ourselves out of bed, stand erect and walk, we experience how God *lifts up the fallen*. Every morning when we relieve ourselves in the bathroom can we honestly say this was our doing? Did we create our digestive system? Did we teach our bowels to move? Of-course not. We must acknowledge that it is You, God, who *heals the sick*. Just the same way that we praise God whenever we relieve ourselves “Blessed be You who heals all living flesh and are wondrous in Your deeds.”

Throughout the day, we should be constantly stunned by the mystery of every move we can make. As we open and close our hands, we can feel how God *frees*

*those who are bound up.* We are amazed at our entire nervous system—how miraculous it is that we can bend our right index finger at will, wiggle our left toe or raise our eyebrows. Surely, this wisdom and power is not ours. God is the power and we are only plugging into His power. With a little contemplation we can feel God, who is intimately involved in our lives at every moment, with every move we make.

When we praise God “*You gratuitously support life, compassionately revive the dead, lift up the fallen, heal the sick and free those who are bound.*” we can literally feel that He is the *gibor*, the source of all power and strength. It is from God that we overcome the death of sleep, get up and overcome the force of gravity, relieve ourselves and move at all.

Experiencing this truth daily in our own lives as we wake up from our sleep, revived from our on partial death we also affirm that God will do the same for those who are literally dead. You, God will “*fulfill Your commitment to those who are sleeping in the dust.*”

### **God in Life and Death**

“*Who is like You, Master of all power?*” the praise continues. “*Who can be compared to You? You are a King who causes death and revives and causes a growing salvation.*”

I once heard Rabbi Noach Weinberg tell an interesting story. A fellow came to him and asked, “Rabbi, do you believe in God?”

Rabbi Weinberg answered, “Yes, of course.”

The fellow exclaimed, “What? An intelligent guy like you believes in God?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I will tell you something, Rabbi. I also believe in God, but not for the reasons that you do. I believe in God because I have *experienced* God. One day I was driving down a mountainous road on my motorcycle, when my bike hit a rock and off I flew over the cliff, down to my death. As I was falling, I experienced two hands catching me and guiding me gently down to the ground. I came out of the accident without a bruise or a scratch. So I know that God saved me.”

Rabbi Weinberg said, “I’m glad that you know who saved you, but did you ever think about who pushed you off?”

Although in the *Amidah* we are praising God for reviving the dead, healing the sick, lifting up the fallen and freeing the enslaved, we really have to think about who causes us to die, fall, be sick or be bound. And why, then, should we praise God for lifting us up after He was the one who made us fall or for healing our sickness if He was the one who brought it upon us?



Judaism teaches that we praise God because we recognize that He is a God of life, and life is a process. We praise Him not only for the saving part of life, but also for the whole adventure and journey of life, the ups and the downs. We see God not only in the revival (*michayeh*), but also in the causing of death (*maymit*).

On the news I once saw a fellow who was arrested for allegedly killing someone. He was in jail for many months and it was a difficult trial. Anxiously awaiting the verdict, which was, finally, innocent, the man and his lawyers, friends and family jumped for joy, wildly dancing around the courtroom. I wondered if this fellow had ever been so alive and happy in his life. Perhaps it was worth being in jail for six months, with all the aggravation, anxiety and anticipation worrying that he may get the death penalty, to then suddenly feel the joy of being proven innocent.

God orchestrates our lives with ups and down. When we thank God for taking us out of Egypt, we don't just thank Him for the redemption but also for the exile, for putting us *in* Egypt. It is the transition from exile to redemption, slavery to freedom, where the excitement of life really happens.

In fact, Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Israel during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explains that this is the reason we eat the *korach*, sandwich of *matzah* and *marror*, on Passover night—to taste both the sweetness of the redemption and the bitterness of the slavery at the same time. It is in this contrast where life happens and from this we praise God and celebrate.

Before we can present our requests to God, we need to acknowledge that He is powerful and can help us. But we must also remember that He created life as a process. A God of life is a God who supports graduation. Therefore, the situations in which we find ourselves are from God, and the getting out of them is also from God. We cannot expect God to answer our prayers immediately if there is meaning and benefit to the dialectical process of our particular life situations.

Here is how the Kabbalah expresses this truth about God. In the beginning all of existence was divine endless light. When God wanted to create a being other than Himself, He withdrew His endless light creating a space in which to accommodate other beings, or vessels as the Kabbalah describes it. Then, the Kabbalah teaches, when God gave His light to the vessels, He caused them to break—an act the Kabbalah calls “death.” The vessels could not take the light and they exploded, or died. The rest of the story is called *tikun*, fixing, which is also referred to in Kabbalah as the revival of the dead. This breaking and fixing, death and revival is what is hinted at in the second blessing of the *Amidah*.

God intentionally causes death, just like He causes sickness, falling and imprisonment, yet He does so to create the possibility for healing, uplifting and freeing. Before we request of God in our prayers we must recognize that God intended for life to be a gradual growing process, as the praise reads, “*You are a King who causes death and revives and causes a growing salvation,*” just like a flower that grows gradually over time.

In addition we are acknowledging that You, God, *are a King who is causing death and reviving* - at the same time. In other words, the very same moment that You

are causing death You are actually bringing about life in the same way as while the seed seems to be dying it is actually coming to fruition. What looks to us like death is actually the beginning new life. What looks to us like sickness is the beginning of our healing. Although we may feel as though we are falling, we are actually growing. What looks like imprisonment is the beginning of our freedom. Every painful challenge is a gift from God, helping us in our spiritual growth.

Imagine you are a seed in the ground. You're thinking, "They buried me. How could they do this to me?" Here you lie in the dirt. It is dark and cold and depressing. Suddenly you see your whole life breaking down, as though it is disintegrating. You feel like you are surely dying. But are you? No, not really. You may be dying as a seed, yet to be reborn anew as a sprout. From there, you die as a sprout to come alive as a plant. And finally, you die as a plant to come alive as a tree. The seed must die in order to accomplish a new evolved stage of life.

We must remember as we pray that what seems like death is actually growth. Remember, God while causing death is bringing about life. No matter what the situation may be—whether our business is failing, a relationship is falling apart or we feel like we are spiritually devoid—God is devoted to reviving death. It is for this reason we pray, and for this reason we should not become devastated when we don't receive an immediate answer. Life is meant to be a process.

## **Be Real**

This praise reminds us that we have to be real when we pray so that we do not become disappointed and disillusioned when our prayers do not seem to be answered right away.

The same God who gratuitously gives us life is also the source of our challenges, and He will compassionately help us to overcome them. Part of God's power is to hold back from making everything better instantly because there is great value in the dialectical process itself, and that is the inner spiritual growth we gain. The joy of life is in the process, in the transitioning and growing. Life is like climbing a mountain: The joy is in the climb, rising to the challenge, not getting to the top.

We also must remember that we should not pray under the condition that God says, "yes" to our requests. The praying itself is meaningful because the act of addressing God and seeking His help brings us closer to Him. Praying transforms and elevates us, empowering us to grow.

People identify God with the good times, but often don't want to identify God with the bad times. For example, they pray to God to cure a friend of cancer, but underneath their prayers lay a feeling of resentment that God brought cancer upon their friend. As much as we seek God's compassion, sometimes we are also angry at Him.

When we pray, we can become easily caught in the paradox of feeling angry at God while beseeching His compassion. The second blessing of the *Amidah* helps us

remember that God is not cruel but rather committed to life process. He creates challenges because they are opportunities for our spiritual growth.

You shouldn't get depressed if you don't get an answer to your pray because you did get an answer to your prayer.

A popular story in Jewish lore illustrates this point. The story is about two children—one a pessimist and the other an optimist. The optimist is praying for a bicycle. "Please, God, give me a bicycle by Rosh Hashanah," he beseeches. The pessimist ridicules his optimistic brother, telling him that God does not care, does not listen and certainly will not answer his prayers.

Rosh Hashanah comes and goes, and sure enough, the optimistic boy does not get his bicycle. His pessimistic brother tells him, "I told you so."

But the optimist says, "You are wrong, brother. God did listen to my prayer, and He answered it. His answer was 'no.'"

There is another powerful, true story about Nachshon Waxman, an Israeli teenager who was kidnapped by terrorists and held hostage for weeks. Nearly every Jew in Israel and perhaps worldwide was praying for Nachshon Waxman's safe release. People lit a special candle every Friday night for him. Thousands of people held prayer rallies at the Kotel. But in the end, Nachshon was killed.

At his funeral, Nachshon's father turned to their rabbi and said, "Nachshon has a question for you. He wants to know how it could be, with all the prayers poured out on his behalf, that God did not answer?"

The rabbi was taken aback by the question. What was he to answer a grieving father at the funeral of his cherished son? "I do not know," he responded.

The father turned to the rabbi and said, "Then I will tell you the answer. God heard our prayers and He answered them, but the answer was 'no.'"

When we are praying, we must have a realistic picture of God. Yes, this is a God who can overcome every obstacle, but this is also a God who puts obstacles in the world to help us grow by struggling with them. God causes death and heals, and the causing of death is as much a manifestation of God's goodness and power as the healing. Life's power and meaning are in the transition from problem to solution, and we gain inner spiritual growth from the process.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*In this second praise we affirm that God not only cares about us but He is also able to help us. However, we also acknowledge that God's help may come over time because He is committed to the gradual process of the life cycle. Know this we will pray with trust and patience.*

***You are forever powerful, God,*** even when things look chaotic and out of control You are still in control. ***You revive the dead.*** Even when things look hopeless You can

miraculously revive even the dead. ***You are abundant in your salvation*** even if I am not worthy to receive what I'm about to ask for, You can overcome Your own attribute of justice. ***You bring the dew and rain;*** You are also almighty in that You overcome Your inclination to shower us with blessings. You bring blessings to us with restraint, in measure and with timing, just as You bring the dew and rain in its time and measure. Although we pray with confidence we also pray with patience because we know that ***You gratuitously support life;*** which is a process. Everyday ***You compassionately revive the dead;*** waking us each morning from our sleep which is a type of death. ***You lift up the downfallen;*** energizing us to get up from our beds. ***You heal the sick;*** enabling us to relieve ourselves daily. ***And You free those bounded;*** empowering us to move about freely. And just as we know this to be true and experience this daily we know that ***You fulfil Your commitment to those who sleep in the dust;*** who are literally dead. ***You are a King who causes death and brings about life*** at the same time, ***and causes salvation to grow.*** We will never despair because we know that salvation is a growth process. Although seeds deteriorate in the ground what seems to be death to us is actually the beginning of a flourishing new life. And we know that ***You are committed to reviving the dead.*** ***Blessed be You God--*** May You be abundantly manifest ***as one who revives the dead.***

*The more we believe and acknowledge this truth about God, the more we will experience Him as such in our life.*

### God is All-Mysterious

The third blessing reads, “*Atah Kadosh, v’shimchah Kadosh, u’kedoshim b’chal yom y’hallelucha*—You are holy, Your name is holy, and the holy ones praise You forever.” This third blessing completes the picture of before whom it is we stand. Although God is all-loving and all-powerful He and our relationship to Him is all-mysterious.

The English words that best allude to the meaning of the Hebrew word *kadosh* are “divine,” “transcendent” and “holy.” The English word “divine” is related to the words “divorce” and “divide,” which all connote set apart from. In other words, the *kadosh* transcends all description and categorization. The holy is ultimately incomprehensible, wondrous and mysterious.

This third praise recognizes that God is beyond everything we could ever imagine or utter. Even “the holy ones,” which refers to transcendental beings (angels and/or righteous enlightened individuals) praise Him forever because even they can never say enough to capture God’s true greatness.

It is critical to remember that anything that we say about God cannot come close to what we should have said, and even what we should have said is a tiny, dull spark compared to whom God truly is. We must remind ourselves that the image that we expressed in the first two praises of an all-loving and all-powerful God is truly limiting. Any description of God is actually a desecration of His profound truth beyond words. But because we are human and we need some kind of tangible understanding of God, we are allowed to refer to God in these familiar conceptual ways.

A Zen master once said that until you realize the futility of your categorizing mind, you are not ready for the truth. Judaism, however, would never describe the mind as futile. Anything God-given cannot be futile. Judaism does recognize, however, that the mind is limited and it can never come close to grasping God’s transcendental truth.

The Eastern traditions teach that “he who knows (the divine) doesn’t speak, and he who speaks doesn’t know.” In other words, an enlightened person knows that truth is beyond words and thus remains silent. He simply revels in the wondrous and mysterious. Judaism agrees with this basic axiom, as the Psalms state, “Silence is His praise.” However, the Psalmist, nonetheless wrote the *Book of Psalms*—a book filled with praises for God. While silence is God’s praise and He is indeed beyond words, we still need words to help us acknowledge His presence in the world and in our lives. Our job, then, is to always remember not to take the words too seriously and forget that God is *kadosh*. He transcends all words and concepts. The Holy is unfathomable, wondrous and mysterious.

Therefore following the first two praises which were quite descriptive about God we now acknowledge that God is holy and transcendental --- beyond all comprehension and praise. We must never feel too comfortable with any concepts or

words used to praise the divine. If we forget this critical sensitivity our praises will actually be considered part of the idolatrous offense of making a graven image of God.

### **Holiness—Beyond and Yet Within**

Let's take a closer look at the word *kadosh*. Precisely because God transcends the limitations of time, space and being, He is able to be manifest within every moment, place and person. This is the mystery of divinity and the miraculous power of transcendence.

Although it is common to say that God is "infinite," this term is actually incorrect. For most people, infinite suggests something that goes on and on in space. But God is the creator of space. Therefore, He is not bound to the laws and limitations of space. When we describe God as "infinite," what we really mean is that God is "spaceless." While "infinite" is the opposite of "finite," "spaceless" means "free from the limitations of space." One who is spaceless is free to be both beyond space and within space simultaneously. This quality is what makes the *Kadosh* beyond this finite world and yet completely within every inch of it.

People often describe God as "eternal," however this is not the best word. The "eternal" suggests that which goes on and on in time. But God created time and therefore is not confined to its limitations. If we describe God as "eternal," what we really mean is that God is "timeless." The eternal is the opposite of the temporal, while "timeless" means "free of the limitations of time." The One who is timeless is free to be both beyond time and within time at the same time. Therefore, the *Kadosh* is both beyond time and yet present within every moment.

This principle is also true when we refer to God as being "One." What we really mean is that God is "non-dual." "One" is limited because it is "the opposite of many." "Non-duality," however, is free of the confines of one or many; free to be beyond the many and within the many. Therefore, God is beyond you, me and everyone else in this world, yet is also manifest within each of us.

According to the Kabbalah in the beginning there was just the presence of God. However, when God wanted to create the world, He created a space within Himself and made place for beings other than Himself through a process of concealment and self-withdrawal called *Tzimtzum*. Within this space, God created humanity and gave Himself to humanity -- giving us the opportunity to intimately identify and bond with Him. However, the Kabbalah maintains that although God's presence "surrounds the void it continues to fill it" In other words, although God withdrew Himself to create a space for us His presence mysteriously continues to fill the space from which He withdrew. Paradoxically, we exist within Him, yet we are completely filled by Him. As it is stated in the *Tikuney Zohar* 57, "There is no place that is empty of Him."

Imagine you are in a room filled with water. Surely, you could not be there unless some water was displaced. Now imagine you were told that the room was emptied of the water, but the water is still there. Sounds ridiculous, right? Such is the wonder and mystery of God. God is beyond all while remaining completely within all.

We acknowledge this profound truth when the congregation recites the *Kadusha* during the cantor's public repetition of the Amidah: *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*-- the Lord of hosts -- His presence (*kavodo*) fills the entire earth.

### **What's in a Name?**

Our relationship to God is a complete mystery. God is *Kadosh* —transcendent; His presence surrounds the void and yet continues to fill it. He makes a place within Himself for us, we enjoy a relationship with Him and yet there is really nothing but God. God is absolutely one and only and yet mysteriously and miraculously His oneness includes the multitudes of us. (For more on this please see Chapter Seven of my book *The Secret Life of God*) We therefore praise, “You are *Kadosh* -- beyond all and within all -- there is nothing but You and yet Your name is *Kadosh* – paradoxically we still exist; able to acknowledge You as *Kadosh* and call to You.”

If God has a name, then there are others who can relate to Him and call out to Him. Otherwise, what's the point in having a name? If we are able to acknowledge and address God as *Kadosh*, then this means that we do exist. And not only do we simply exist, we exist as His significant other— we are able to call to God and enjoy a personal relationship with Him.

Now the mystery becomes even more mysterious. If *kadoshim* – “holy ones,” (which refers not only to angels but also to enlightened righteous people), “forever praise God,” then we too can experience ourselves as transcendental divine beings.

Because God is beyond the worldly, we are not God. Yet because He is manifest within the world and within us, we are certainly something. God is *Kadosh*, yet we too can experience ourselves as *kadosh*. Therefore, prayer is the *kadosh* communicating to the *Kadosh*.

The Kabbalah teaches that the soul is a spark, or aspect, of God. If I am a soul, then when I pray, a spark or aspect of God is talking to God. So then who is talking to whom? Is *tefillah* a dialogue between God and us, or is *tefillah* a monologue within God, whereby God is speaking to Himself through us? This is the divine/human paradox (For more on this please see Chapter Four of my book *The Secret Life of God*).

A sage once said, “Judaism is not the path to paradise but to paradox.” Sometimes I tell people that I am not an Orthodox rabbi, but rather a paradox rabbi. We acknowledge the paradoxical meaning of prayer when we praise God that He is *Kadosh* and we recognize that we too can be *kadoshim*, forever praising Him. We appreciate that while we are speaking to God, mysteriously God is also speaking to Himself through us.

The third blessing reminds us of the unbelievable mystery we are participating in when we pray. We, as aspects of God, are talking to God. A part of God is speaking to God. He is the *Kadosh*—the Holy, His name is *Kadosh* and we -- the *kadoshim*— forever praise Him. Jewish life empowers us to experience the ultimate mystery -- the Holy of holies—God, the One and Only Holy who includes us, the many holies.

## Living the Praise - Achieving Holiness

As we learned in the Introduction, the word *hallel* (to praise) also means “to reflect.” To praise God, therefore, means to reflect His holiness. As beings who were created in the image of God, we are commanded to mirror His truth, not just praise Him in words but with our entire being. It is for this reason that God commands us, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

One of my students at Isralight told me that before he had joined our seminar, he had spent some time in India sitting naked on a mountain, meditating and doing exercises to control his breathing. “I wanted to reach a state of divine enlightenment and transcendence,” he explained.

According to Judaism, secluding yourself from the world is not transcendence. Transcendence means that we are so beyond this world that we are free to be in it. A transcendent existence is not in conflict with the material world. If we have to escape to some mountaintop, that means we are in conflict with the world and not able to transcend it. A truly transcendental person doesn’t need to escape. She can get off her mountain and spend two hours waiting in line at an inefficiently run bank and still keep her cool.

True transcendence is not a state of spiritual beyond-ness, divorced from the material world. It doesn’t even mean being *in* this world but not *of* this world. It means to be in *and* of this world while being free to be beyond it. Such is God’s transcendence. As we discussed earlier this is what we mean when we recite, the *Kedusha* section of during the repetition of the *Amidah*, “Holy, Holy, Holy; the Lord of Hosts -- His presence (*kavodo*) fills the entire earth.”

A holy person, according to Judaism, is not a person who, for example, fasts all day. Rather, it is a person who is free to fast and free to eat without becoming addicted to food. An animal, then, is not holy. If you put water in front of a thirsty animal, it will not stop itself from drinking it. But a person may choose not to drink that water even if she is absolutely parched because it happens to be *Yom Kippur*. She is able to transcend her thirst in interest of a greater spiritual aspiration. If she felt her life were in danger, however, according to Jewish law she should drink despite it being *Yom Kippur*. Her transcendence, therefore, is her freedom from any addictions, both physical and spiritual.

All of the commandments in the Torah empower us to achieve holiness and fulfill God’s command, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” Rabbi Zevi Elimelekh Shapiro of Dinov comments, “If God wanted us to be holy, why did He create us with such gross natural appetites? Because it is precisely in the realm of nature that we are expected to attain holiness.” This idea explains how the end of the verse, “For I, the Lord your God, am holy,” can serve as a rationale for the beginning of the verse, “You shall be holy.” Essentially, God is saying that just as His holiness is expressed in the co-existence of both His transcendence and immanence, so He expects of us to be holy by means of both separation from and involvement in the world. God also told us, “You shall be holy people unto Me” (Exodus 22:30). The



Kotzker Rebbe explains the verse to mean a person can be “human” and “holy” at the same time.

When we achieve holiness and mirror God’s truth, praising Him with our entire beings, then our *tefillah* goes beyond the either/or of dialogue or monologue. We, as *kadoshim*—manifestations of God, are speaking to God—the *Kadosh*.

When you recite this third praise of the *Amidah*, take a moment to contemplate this awesome truth—I am a soul, an aspect of God, speaking to God. Acknowledge the paradoxical meaning of your *tefillah* when you praise God that He is *Kadosh* and recognize that you too can be amongst the *kadoshim* forever praising Him. *Tefillah* is beyond the either/or of monologue or dialogue. Appreciate that while you are speaking to God, mysteriously God is also speaking to Himself through you.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*In this third praise we accept that although we just described God as all-loving and all-powerful He truly transcends all descriptions and limitations. We affirm that there is none other than Him; no one else to turn to for help. We acknowledge that our existence and relationship with Him is a complete mystery; He is paradoxically both beyond us and yet manifest within us. These truths inspire us to pray with passion, wonder and awe.*

***You are Holy.*** You transcend all descriptions and limitations. You are beyond all and within all. You are absolute eternal existence. There is none else but You ***and*** yet, paradoxically, ***Your name is Kadosh;*** You have a name which necessitates the existence of others who can call to You. Although there is none else but You, mysteriously, we somehow exist, relate to You and address You as *Kadosh*. ***And the holy ones*** (angels and those of us who fulfil the command, “You shall be *kadoshim*”) ***each and every day eternally praise You.*** Not only are we able to enjoy a relationship with You, we can become holy like You and partake in Your absolute eternal existence. And we will forever exalt You with endless praise because we will never fully capture in words Your incomprehensible Holiness; how You are the Holy of holies - the one Holy who includes us - the many holies. ***Blessed be You, YHVH, -*** May You be abundantly manifest ***as the Power of the Holy*** (transcendence of all limitations)

*The more we believe and acknowledge this truth about God, the more we will experience Him as such in our life.*

## Summary of the Praises

The first praise acknowledges that God is personable and all-loving; He cares about us individually. He shields us from His overwhelming presence so that we too can have presence, stand before Him and enjoy a relationship with Him. This first praise correlates to the Kabbalistic notion of the *tzimtzum*. God withdrew and concealed His endless presence to create a place for us to exist as individuals. He relates to us and empowers us to relate to Him. (For more on this see my book *Love is My Religion*) Therefore, like Avraham, we can stand before God, assert ourselves through prayer and know that our prayers matter to God.

The second praise acknowledges that God is all-powerful; He is able to answer our prayers. We, however, must also remember that as a *Gibor* He created life as a gradual dialectical process and wants salvation to be a growing process. Therefore we must trust God, be patient and recognize the spiritual value and personal transformation we gain from the journey itself ---from death to life, sickness to health, from downfallen to uplifted, from constraint to freedom. This praise correlates to the Kabbalistic idea referred to as the *Shevriut HaKelim* and *Tikun*—the breaking of the vessels and their restoration which the Kabbalah also describes as death and revival. God intentional caused the vessels to break in order to set in motion a process of becoming (For more on this see Chapter One of my book the *Secret Life of God*). In other words, the goal of life is the process itself. Life is all about the journey; the spiritual awareness we gain from the challenges and the transitions. Just as when we climb a mountain the goal is the climb; the inner personal transformation we enjoy each step of the way. When we realize that the goal of prayer and our only true request is to come closer and closer to God then the success of our prayers is actually up to us. We determine whether our prayers get answered if say them with intention and bring ourselves closer to God through them. If we get impatient and wonder when will our prayers get answered, then we have missed the whole point; we have forgotten before whom we stand. God is a *Gibor* and He overcomes His desire to give us abundant blessings all at once so that we will seek His presence and draw ourselves closer to Him. The journey towards God is His greatest gift to us. The challenges on the way are opportunities to rise higher and feel closer to God. We must recognize that God is the *baal gevurot* – the Master of all Power. He is forever in control and we must humble ourselves and trust in His compassionate process. This is what Yitzchak acknowledged when he surrendered his power and did not resist becoming an offering for God.

The third praise acknowledges that God transcends all limitations and is all-mysterious. He is beyond us and yet manifest within us. This correlates to the ultimate paradox of the Kabbalah which states that although the God's presence surrounds the void is continues to fill it. In the first two blessings we praised God as all-loving and all-powerful, however, in the third praise we remind ourselves that our relation to God is a complete mystery. Although experientially God is within our reach He is still beyond our grasp. Therefore we must prayer like Yaakov our father with utter awe.

After reciting these three praises we are psyched – inspired and ready to pray with the proper intention. We now know before whom we stand. We will pray with confidence knowing that God cares. We will prayer with trust and patience knowing

that God is almighty but He also created life to be a dialectical process. And we will pray with wonder and awe because God is mysteriously both beyond us and yet manifest within us.

## **Grant us the Power to Pray**

We have explored the *Amidah*'s first three blessings which clarify before whom we stand and set the stage for the requests that follow.

Before making any request of God we must first acknowledge that God is all-loving. He cares, listens and empowers us to confidently stand in the face of His overwhelming presence. We must believe that God is all-powerful. He is able to respond to our prayers and help us overcome any obstacles in our lives—even those that seem insurmountable. Finally, we must know how much we do not know and remember that God transcends all definition and limitations. He is the only power who can help. Once we acknowledge these fundamental truths about God, we are able to begin our requests.

In days of old when subjects would make requests of their king they would first praise Him. “His Highness is wonderful, great and powerful. Please His Majesty may we ..... ” Clearly you can't start reading off a long shopping list of requests without first paying proper respect and flattering the King.

This is not what Judaism means when it teaches that we must first praise God before making our requests. We are not buttering up God to get what we want. God doesn't need us to praise Him. In fact, any praise of God is actually an insult, a desecration of His true greatness. He is infinitely beyond any praise we could ever say.

To utter praises for God is actually a divine concession. He has allowed us to describe Him in these ways because we need to describe Him in a way that inspires us to present our requests with confidence, trust and humility.

### ***Unmasking the Asking***

To fully understand the meaning and power of each request we must explore three aspects:

1. What we are asking for,
2. When we ask for it (there is meaning to the order of the requests), and
3. The way we ask for it (each request is formulated in a completely different way than the others).

Why do we present each request in its own particular way? Shouldn't every request have the same structure? Why does the first request start by praising God with “You grace a human being with knowledge,” and the second request begins without praise, “Bring us back, Father”? Why is the format of all the requests inconsistent throughout the *Amidah*? Sometimes we mention a name of God, and sometimes we do not. Sometimes we express a reason for our request, as in, “because You are One who pardons and forgives” or “because You are a mighty Redeemer,” yet sometimes we offer no justification for our request.

To answer these questions, we must look closely at how each request is presented. In this chapter, we will examine the request for knowledge—the fourth blessing.

### **Knowledge—Knowing What We Want**

The fourth blessing reads, “*Ata chonein l’adam da’at u’melameid l’enosh bina* (You grace humans with the power to know, and You teach frail mortals insight). *Chaneinu mei’itecha daiyah, bina v’hasekeil* (Grace us that we may receive from You the power of knowing, insight and foresight). *Baruch Ata Hashem chonein hada’at* (Blessed be You God, Who graciously bestows the power to know).”

The essence of each request is expressed in its summation—the phrase, “Blessed be You.” Therefore, this first request is for *da’at*—the power to know. *Bina* (insight) and *chochma* (foresight) are only meaningful if they are stepping stones that lead to *da’at*.

*Chochma* is objective and holistic thinking. It is the power to conceive something in a general sense. With *chochma*, we are able step back as an observer and objectively grasp the whole picture, which is greater than the sum of the parts and details. Therefore, *chochma* is referred to as *hasekeil* because the word *keil* means all or whole. *Chochma* is also defined as foresight. The Talmud explains that one who has *chochma* is able to see consequences—the future outcome of his thoughts and actions.

*Bina*, on the other hand, is subjective and analytical thinking. It is the power to perceive and distinguish. Rather than understanding from the outside as an observer, *bina* enables us to understand from within as a participant. The Talmud defines *bina* as the ability to understand *d’var mitoch d’var*—something from within something. Therefore, *bina* is the power of insight, which includes the ability to probe, investigate, elaborate and, therefore, to discern and formulate the details.

According to Kabbalah, the male sperm cell symbolizes *chochma*, and the female womb symbolizes *bina*. The man puts into the woman a microscopic sperm cell that she turns it into a baby. *Chochma* is an idea in its seed form. *Bina* develops that seedling of an idea, formulating and elaborating it into full detail.

Let’s take smoking as an example. We all know that smoking is hazardous to our health. This general knowledge is the application of *chochma*. But after doing more research and learning about lung cancer and emphysema statistics, we can say, “Ahh, now I understand.” This knowledge of the finer details is *bina*. However, even though we now have more insight into the matter, we continue to smoke. Then we visit a cancer ward and speak to patients dying from lung cancer. Now we really get it! We leave there completely shaken up after; fully realizing the dangers of smoking. And we commit to never smoking another cigarette.

But what really happened? Visiting the hospital didn’t give us any new ideas. We already knew that people are dying from cancer. The difference is that after the visit, our knowledge became realized. This point of realization is *da’at*. We are deeply

impacted by what before we only thought about (*chochma*) and understood (*bina*). The danger of smoking has now become very real and we are moved to take action and stop.

*Da'at*, therefore, is realization, processing our thoughts and insights until they become real. First we have a general idea, then we formulate it in more elaborate detail, and then it hits us and we acquire the idea. The Talmud teaches that only a person who has *da'at* can purchase something. A child who is not old enough to have *da'at* cannot acquire something.

## To Know and Go

The Torah uses the word *da'at* to also describe sexually intimacy-- Adam "*yada*"—knew his wife. He achieved the most intimate connection with her. In the context of the process of thinking *da'at* means that we connect intimately with an idea. The idea becomes so real that it literally moves us. It puts us in motion. *Da'at* is the point of transition transforming the flow of intellectual energy into emotions which then puts us in motion and gets us moving.

In this fourth blessing, we ask for *da'at* because *da'at* is the goal of all intellectual pursuit. If we can't take our ideas and process them until they become real and impacting, then our ideas are just pie in the sky.

The Kabbalistic classic *Sefer Yetzira* states that "there are 10 *sephirot* (divine qualities); not 11 and not nine." Why would it clarify "not 11 and not nine" if it already specified that there are 10? Because one could easily think that there are 11 or nine if they mistakenly counted both the *sephirot* of *keter* and *da'at*. *Keter* which literally translates as "crown" actually correlates to "will." *Da'at* is also will but a refined will. It comes after the raw will of *keter* has been intellectually processed till it hits you deeply and you finally intimately know what you want. *Da'at* is actually *keter* after it has been fully comprehended, formulated, contemplated and realized. Therefore, they should not be counted as two independent Sefirot.

Let me give a few examples. *Keter* is, "I want something, but I don't know what I want. I just want." *Chochma* is, "I have a general idea about what I want. I want security, but I do not know what I mean specifically when I say that I want security. I need a more formulated understanding of what security means to me."

Once we accomplish *chochma*, we can then seek to achieve *bina*. We probe and try to elaborate: "Maybe I need a new job. No, that is not the kind of security I'm looking for. Maybe it's a house. Nope, that's not it either. Maybe I want to be married. Perhaps I want a life partner. Yes, that's it!"

When we arrive at "Yes, that's it!" we have achieved *da'at*. When we've found that detailed image (*bina*) of our general interest (*chochma*), then we're affected deeply by the realization (*da'at*) that this is what we want. We suddenly experience a surge of motivation. We no longer have to think about what we want. We realize it, feel it in a deep, emotionally way, and we are driven to do something about it. "Yes, yes! That is what I want!" At this point, we have accomplished *da'at*.

The word *da'at*, which is loosely translated as “knowledge,” really means realization -- an intimate connection to what you know till it impacts you emotionally and you are moved to do something about it. The goal of all intelligence is to get to *da'at*, the point where your thoughts and insights become real and impact your feelings and behavior.

### ***Da'at* in Prayer**

The Talmud teaches, “If there is no *da'at*, where will your *tefillah* come from?” In other words, how can we ask God for anything if we don't deeply realize what it is that we are asking for and thus truly want it? When we ask for *da'at*, we are asking for the ability to ask. Without the power of *da'at*—knowing what we want—we cannot powerfully articulate what we want and be truly receptive to receiving it.

It is not enough to have an idea about what we want, and it is surely insufficient to simply read the request written in the *Amidah*. We must deeply realize and connect to what we are requesting. It is meaningless to daily recite, for instance, the request for the ingathering of the Jewish people if we don't really want it. Have we contemplated the two thousand years of exile? Have we envisioned the joy of returning back to our land, affirming our independence and fulfilling our national and universal destiny? Has our will for our national redemption reached the level of *da'at*?

One Friday afternoon when I was on the way to synagogue, I met an old high school buddy, Sheldon. It was the first time we had seen each other in years. During my high school days I did not live a Torah life so he was very surprised to see me all dressed up for Shabbos, with a *kippa* on my head, *tzitzit* hanging out of my pants and a *siddur* in my hand.

“Oh, no!” he said. “You didn't get ‘Ortho-ed,’ did you?”

“Hi, Sheldon,” I said. “How are you?”

“You became an Ortho Jew?” he repeated. Apparently, this notion was hard for him to handle.

“Well, Sheldon, I don't like labels.”

He said, “I can prove to you that everything in that book you're holding is a lie.”

“Sheldon, cool it,” I retorted. “This is my *siddur*.”

“No,” he repeated. “It's a lie.”

“Why is it a lie?” I asked.

“For instance,” he explained, “you Orthodox Jews pray everyday to return to the Land of Israel, so why don’t you Jews just get on an El Al airplane and go?”

“That is a good question,” I admitted. “But why are you asking me? I live in Israel!”

No, the prayer book is not a lie. But, as this experience taught me, perhaps what is lacking is in the way people pray. If we really want something, then we must ask ourselves what are we doing about it. If we are able but not willing to answer our own prayers how can we expect God to take us seriously?

Of course, changing our lives is not so simple. People have many different reasons for making their decisions. Understandably it is not easy for everyone to just pack up and move to Israel. But if we are praying that the our people return to Israel, our homeland (more about this in Chapter 10), at least we should feel saddened that we are not there, and prepare ourselves and/or help others to get there and successfully live there.

A friend of mine who was visiting Los Angeles was speaking to a religious woman there. She was raving to him about the new Hungarian goulash *glatt* kosher restaurant that had just opened up, and how they have a shopping mall with *glatt* kosher this and *glatt* kosher that, a new *mikveh* with a diving board (just kidding), and so on and so on.

My friend said to her, “You seem very happy here.”

“We are very happy here,” she said.

“But you seem very, *very* happy here,” he clarified.

“Quite frankly,” she said, “I hope that when *Moshiach* comes, he will let us stay.”

Clearly, there is something wrong with this woman’s prayers if she daily asks of God to return the Jewish people to Israel.

How can we pray if we don’t have *da’at*? How can we pray if we don’t intimately connect with what we are asking for, if our requests are not real to us, if we have not come to realize our will and thoughts?

Prayer is an exercise to help us get in touch with what is worth wanting and really wanting it. Therefore, the first request is for the power of *da’at*. Because without *da’at*, there is no meaning to our *tefillah*. We have to intimately connect with what we are requesting. We have to know what we are asking for, not voice empty requests.

*Da’at* is the power to deeply realize that “this is what I want.” We ask God to bless us with this clarity and conviction. Otherwise how can God give us the blessing He has in store for us if we really do not want them and truly anticipate the joy they



will bring us and the world. God can shower us with blessings, but if we don't acknowledge them and truly want them, we will not succeed in receiving them.

### **Becoming Receptive to Constant Blessings**

Every request ends with a concluding blessing that is always formulated in the present tense. In this fourth blessing of the *Amidah*, it reads, "Blessed be You, God, who *graciously bestows the power to know*"—always, even right now. God not only constantly graces us with knowledge, but with all the blessings we ask for throughout the *Amidah*. The only question is, are we receptive to receiving them, can we envision them in our lives, do we really want them?

Imagine being in an airport on a gray day. From the window, there appears to be no sun whatsoever. Yet when the plane takes off and moves through the clouds, you realize that it is never a gray day. Up there, the sun is always shining. It's just that sometimes, clouds block out the sun. So too, God is always shining His love and blessings upon us. But from our view, we simply may not be receptive to them. In order for us to receive God's blessings, we need to open ourselves up to them, want them and be receptive to them. Then we will begin to experience the blessings in our lives.

The more we acknowledge that God is always giving us knowledge, the more it becomes manifest in our life. As we learned in Chapter 1, the words *Baruch Ata* (Blessed be You) mean, "May this truth about You be abundantly manifest in the world."

Acknowledging and experiencing God's constant blessings in our lives is the real power of prayer. Praying is not about simply talking to God so that He will know what we want and then respond. The goal of prayer is to clarify and know for ourselves what we want and become receptive to what God is already giving us constantly. Prayer helps us align our will with God's will. Without exercising our will through prayer, we end up clouding our lives with the wrong wants and hopes, and thereby blocking out the light of God's presence and gifts in our lives. *Tefillah* is a will-building and consciousness-building exercise, helping us envision and clarify what we truly want. Without *da'at*, there is no *tefillah*.

### **Clarifying Our Wants**

When we ask for *da'at*, we are asking for the ability to ask; the power to know what we want and really want it. Many people today simply do not know what they want in life. In fact, I once saw an article titled, "I Can Get Anything I Want If I Only Knew What I Wanted." Our first request is to know what we want. The greatness of the *Amidah* is that it outlines for us what is really worth wanting, in what order of priority and how to effectively ask for it.

When I was growing up, there was a popular song by the rock singer Janice Joplin, which went, "Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all have Porches; I must make amends." The song satirized the fact that people have no idea

what is worth wanting. Countless people lead impoverished lives because they want a Mercedes when they could want understanding, wisdom and knowledge. A sad fact of the world today is that people still don't know what they want or what is worth requesting from God.

There is a Chassidic story of a Rebbe that had to get to a certain *shtetl* (Jewish ghetto) in time for Shabbat. He hires a horseman, and on the way it starts to storm. The Rebbe begs the horseman to try his best to persist forward. So the horseman drives his horse harshly through the storm and gets the Rebbe to the *shtetl* on time.

The Rebbe says to the horseman, "I bless you with a huge portion of the World to Come. Thank you so much."

Meanwhile, the horse dies and the horseman becomes so devastated that he also dies. God faithfully fulfills the Rebbe's blessing and gives the horseman a huge portion in the after life. However, the horseman was dissatisfied with spiritual abundance when all he ever wanted in his life was to ride his horse. Unable to give him what he doesn't want or appreciate, God gives him a horse. This horseman happily rides his horse forever. That is all he wanted, so that is all he was receptive to.

In this first request of the *Amidah* we ask, "Please, God, enlighten me to know what is worth wanting and want it. Please, God, empower me to deeply realize my request. Please, God, grace me with *da'at*, the power to know, feel and make it real."

## **Presentation is Everything**

As we mentioned earlier, when we analyze the requests of the *Amidah*, we must strive to understand what are we asking for, why are we asking for it here and not earlier or later in the *tefillah*, and why are we asking for it in this particular way. We must consider carefully the meaning of the nuances in the way each request is presented.

Let's first address why this first request starts with praise and ends with a request. We start with the praise, "You grace humans with *da'at*, You teach frail mortals *bina*," and then we humbly request, "Grace us with *da'at*, *bina* and *hasekeil* (*chochma*)." This fourth blessing is really a combination of praise and request. The authors of the *Amidah* clearly wanted us to, gradually and humbly, transition from praising God to requesting of God. After three blessings of praise it would be inappropriate to suddenly jump into requesting mode.

What we will see throughout the *Amidah* is that with each request, our assertiveness and confidence in requesting is gradually magnified. An example is the difference between this humble request of "Please grace us with *da'at*" and the boldness of the request further along of "Blast the great shofar." With each request, we become more empowered and emphatic. In fact, the later requests are presented in a way that sounds more like decrees than requests.

As we explore the unique presentation of the upcoming requests, we will see that each one reflects a gradual spiritual evolution in our stature. We become

empowered to stand more confidently before God. The *Amidah* (which, we learned, literally means “to stand”) gives us the ability to stand erect before God with courage, power and confidence. Only in this way can we enjoy a true and loving relationship with Him.

Now let’s look at the request for *da’at*. We articulate this request with tremendous humility. After praising God, we inch our way forward to the request section of the *Amidah* by first acknowledging our low intellectual and spiritual status comparable to the level of animals. To understand this, let’s take a closer look at the words of the request: It begins with, “You grace *adam* (humans) with *da’at*.” This tells us that an *adam* is a person who lacks only *da’at*. The prayer then continues with, “You even teach *bina* to *enosh* (frail mortals).” *Enosh*, we see here, are people who lack both *da’at* and *bina*. Then it finishes with the request which was our objective all along, “Grace us with *da’ah*, *bina* and *hasekeil* (*chochma*).”

A human being is only missing *da’at*. A frail mortal is even missing *bina*. But we, who are asking for *da’at*, *bina* and even *hasekeil* (*chochma*), are acknowledging that we are closer to the spiritual status of an animal.

*Blessed be You YHVH, who graciously bestows da’at.*

With this first request, we recognize our complete dependence on God for our intellectual faculties—which distinguish us from animals. But in the end, we acknowledge that *da’at* is the true goal of all intellectual pursuit—to know what we want and want it.

Remember that although this first request is expressed in a self-effacing tone it is only the beginning. As we continue to explore the format of the upcoming requests we will see how with each request we feel more and more significant and empowered. We experience ourselves standing more and more confidently and powerfully before God.

It is interesting to note that each request of the *Amidah* is written in the plural. Our ability to feel a direct, personal relationship with God is only achieved through identifying with the totality of the Jewish people. If we pray on behalf of the Jewish people—as a member of the community—we will then achieve an individual, personal connection to God. In Jewish tradition, each soul is a unique manifestation of the collective soul of the nation. Self-actualization does not happen in opposition to or in spite of the community, but rather because of the community and our connection with it.

As we learn about each request, we will begin to see that the *Amidah* is like a cleverly crafted script written by a master screenwriter. Each line has been carefully written by our sages in a way that expresses not only what we should request but what we could be feeling at each point in our *tefillah*. A talented screenwriter knows how to write the script in a way that elicits from the actor the appropriate emotions he is meant to feel and express.

Embodied in the text of the *Amidah* are the thoughts, feelings and spiritual experiences that the sages wanted us to tap into and embody. Therefore, we must be

sensitive not only to what we ask and when we ask it, but also how we ask it. In fact, how we ask embodies the inner experiences that the sages wanted us to feel.

### ***Summary and Paraphrased***

*In this first request we ask for daát which is the purpose of all intellectual pursuit -- the power to know and want what is truly worth wanting. Daát empowers us to make our prayers real.*

*After three blessings of praise it would be inappropriate to suddenly jump into requesting mode. We, therefore, start with a praise and end with a request; gradually and humbly, transitioning from praising God to requesting of God.*

***You grace Adam*** (people who already have foresight and insight) ***with daát***; the power to know and want what is truly worth wanting. ***And You*** even ***teach Enosh*** (mortals who only have foresight but lack both *da'at* and *bina*), ***bina*** - insight. However, we are less than an *Adam* and *Enosh*. We, therefore, humbly ask: ***Grace us of Yourself, daáh*** (knowing), ***bina*** (insight) ***and*** even ***heskeil*** (foresight); Grace us with the wisdom to know and want You. ***Blessed be You, YHVH, --*** May You be abundantly manifest as the one -- ***Who graciously bestows*** right now ***daát*** – the power to know what to want; the ability to make our prayers real.

*The more we believe that God is always sharing His wisdom with us and we sincerely want to be enlightened, the more His wisdom can penetrate us and inspire us to pray with clarity and sincerity.*

*Empower us to Return and Reconnect with You*

With each request of the *Amidah* we become more assertive and feel more confident to stand before God. This gradual growth process is referred to as “building the *Shechina*,” the Divine Imminence we experience within us. Before we begin the *Amidah* we take three steps as an expression of humbly retreat, but that is only in preparation to take three steps forward and approach God with confidence.

Similarly, each request of the *Amidah* represents another step toward bringing us closer to God. To pray effectively, we need more than belief in God—we also need to believe that we are worthy to stand before Him and make a request.

In this fifth benediction—our second request—we address God as our Father and our King, a significant step up in our relationship. If God is our Father, then we are His children. And if God is our King, then we are His royal subjects, His kingdom. As we learned earlier, there is no such thing as a king without a kingdom. Therefore, we indeed enjoy significant stature in God’s presence.

The blessing reads, “*Hashiveinu Avinu l’Torahtecha*,”—Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah. “*V’karveinu Malkeinu l’avodatecha*”—Bring us close, our King, to Your work. “*V’hachazireinu b’teshuva shleima lefanecha*”—and return us in complete *teshuva* before You. “*Baruch Ata YHVH, harotzeh b’teshuva*”—Blessed be You, God, He who wants *teshuva*.

Remember, our first request was for *daat*, the ability to realize what we want and come to truly want it. Now we ask for *teshuva*, the root and foundation of all requests that follow. *Teshuva* is most often translated as “repentance.” But more correctly, *teshuva* means “to return,” specifically to our original, authentic self. *Teshuva* is not about being “born again.” Rather, it is about finding our true self after we’ve lost it.

The ‘past’ in Hebrew is *kedem*, and yet the Hebrew word for progress is *lehitekdem*. According to Torah, progress is not about going forward towards something new but rather coming back to the original; what was but had been lost. According to the Kabbalah, the highest goal we aspire to achieve is referred to as *Atik Yomim*, the “ancient days.” In other words, progress really means a forward motion but back to the past; returning to the original essential you.

Each of us is a soul, a spark of God. However, when we see, hear and do things that betray our godliness, we lose our true selves. We sometimes lose ourselves in our careers, our property and our money. Some of us lose ourselves in public approval. *Teshuva* is the process of reclaiming our pure selves and returning to the essential godly beings we were created to be -- enjoying a loving and empowering relationship with God.

*Teshuva* is the theme of Jewish life. In fact, returning to what originally was is the essence of the cosmos—the goal of everything we’re trying to accomplish on earth.

Each request that follows is a detail in the general theme of our desire to do *teshuva*. We first ask for our personal penitence. We then express our desire for national penitence—the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. We continue with a concern for global penitence, which is expressed in our prayer for the coming of the Messiah, *Mashiach Ben David*. Finally, we utter an amazing prayer for God, expressing our hopes for “Your salvation” and calling for His return to Zion. As we’ll explain later, God also wants to do *teshuva*.

### **A Closer Look at *Teshuva***

To find out what it really means to achieve *teshuva*, let’s review the blessing and see what we are specifically requesting: “*Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah. Bring us close, our King, to Your work. And return us in complete teshuva before You. Blessed are You, God, He who wants teshuva.*”

When it comes to “Torah,” we address God as “our Father” and ask Him to bring us “back.” But regarding “His work,” we address God as “our King” and ask Him to bring us “close.” Even after all this, we ask God to “return us in complete *teshuva* before You.” The prayer points to three different steps to *teshuva*, which we accomplish with the help of God as our Father and our King.

To understand how this process works, consider the way in which parents guide their children. Let’s say that the child’s room is dirty. The first step in getting him to clean up is to bring him back to the principles, in other words, remind him of the importance of cleanliness, hygiene, etc. If the child doesn’t take the initiative to clean up his mess, then the next step is to bring him closer to the work, specifically, to pick him up and put him in front of his mess. If he still doesn’t take action on his own, then all we can do is stand over him and force him to clean up.

In this blessing we are essentially saying, “God, whatever it takes, please get me to change. First, get me back on track by gently teaching me Torah and making me aware of the principles of life, like a compassionate Father teaching His son. Hopefully, I will understand the work I need to do. But if that doesn’t work, then please use a little more authority, like a King instructing His subject, and bring me closer to the exact work. But, if I still don’t take action, then take me into Your hands and completely return me to living in Your presence.” We prefer that God give us a chance to rise to the challenge, but if we don’t take action on our own, then we ask Him to do whatever it takes to get us to do *teshuva*.

We address God as our Father when we ask that He return us to the Torah because the Torah encompasses the ideals and values that establishes our relationship with God as His children. To be true to ourselves as God’s children we aspire to carry on His ideals and value. Therefore we infer, “God, my Father, You gave birth to me. As Your child, I’m an extension of You and Your essence. Bring me back to Your Torah—the core ideals and principals that You abide by. Bring me back to the ideals and values which empower me to be holy like You—a reflection of Yourself.”

However, when we ask God to bring us close to the work we address Him as

our King because as His royal subjects we are responsible to work hard and transform this world into His kingdom.

### **Complete Teshuva—Responding to God’s Voice**

After we have requested to return to Torah and God’s work, why do we still need to ask “return us in complete *teshuva* before You”? Why doesn’t Torah and God’s work constitute complete *teshuva*?

The sages teach that complete *teshuva* takes more than learning Torah and doing *mitzvot*. We can meticulously follow every *Halacha* (Jewish law) in the *Shulchan Aruch* (Jewish Code of Law) and still not achieve complete *teshuva*.

What, then, is complete *teshuva*?

The process of *teshuva* not only requires us to return but also to respond. The Torah refers to the Jewish people as a “stiff-necked people.” A stiff-necked person is someone who doesn’t turn around and say, “Yes,” when you call his name. Complete *teshuva* requires us to be able to respond to God’s voice when He calls. When our forefather Avraham heard Hashem calling, he always responded, “*Hineni*” (Here I am). Now that’s *teshuva*. We have to be able to be completely present in our relationship with God to not only hear Him calling but also to respond.

Proverbs teaches, “As the face is to the water, the heart is to the heart of another person.” People mirror each other. If I see someone yawn, I yawn. If I see someone smile, I smile. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro, the rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto, explains that this verse also refers to our relationship to God. If we are present for God, then God is present for us.

Complete *teshuva* is hearing the call of God, facing Him with complete presence and being ready to respond. Complete *teshuva*, therefore, is the true meaning of the word “responsibility”—the ability to respond. We not only live the *mitzvot* that are written in the Torah, but we are also constantly attuned to God’s call in every unique situation.

Being continuously in synch with God is one of the meanings of the Torah verse that reads, “And it will be [that] if you hear, then you will hear the commandments that I command you today (Deut. 11:13).” In other words, if we truly tune into what God asked of the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai over 3,000 years ago, and we fulfill the 613 commandments in a responsive way rather than by habit, then we will be able to hear what He is commanding us today. Every day God communicates to each of us. But if we perform the *mitzvot* habitually, without trying to connect to God, we will not be able to hear what He is asking of us today. Living Torah by rote does not result in a responsive relationship with God.

Although God first gave us the *mitzvot* over 3,000 years ago, He continues to give us *mitzvot* every day. *Halacha* – Jewish Law-- doesn’t tell us exactly what God wants each of us to do with our lives; it just gets us into the ballgame. What God wants is for us to live a holy life. But the *kind* of holy life he wants each individual to

live is the real question. Should we be a holy doctor? A holy lawyer? A holy contractor, mother or teacher? Complete *teshuva* is having an ongoing responsiveness with God. We not only hear what was spoken and recorded in the Torah thousands of years ago, we also hear the call of God within our soul this very moment guiding us as individuals in our unique daily challenge.

God is calling us all the time. We hear Him in the inner voice erupting within our souls, the conscious tugging on our heartstrings tells us that we should be doing something. But do we listen? Are we able to respond to this voice and say, "Here I am?" After Avraham responded to the voice that told him, "*Lech lecha* - Go for yourself" (Bereishit; 12:1), the voice intensified and became more clear, and eventually turned into real prophecy.

Complete *teshuva*, therefore, is more than knowing the Torah's principles and doing God's work -- putting those principles into action. Complete *teshuva* means achieving an authentic, personal relationship with God, feeling ourselves in His presence, hearing Him calling us and guiding us everyday, and being responsive to His requests in every unique situation.

### **Getting Real With Our Relationship**

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's critique of Jewish law was that it gets in the way of a genuine "I-thou" relationship with God. He believed that the *mitzvot* interfere with us having a personal and direct encounter with God. He claimed that the standardization of religious life undermined a spontaneous and responsive with God. He made a good point; this is a real danger that one should beware of. Therefore, we ask God, "*Return us in complete teshuva before You.*"

Contrary to Buber's opinion, traditional Judaism claims that without the laws, there is no relationship at all. Indeed, there are rules to relationships. For instance: "You can not do 'x' to your spouse and you must do 'y' for your spouse." While these laws may not entirely fulfill a marital relationship, they create the necessary context within which the personal and spontaneous can happen.

When we ask God for complete *teshuva* we are asking for a daily personal and responsive relationship with Him.

The story of the binding of Yitzchak provides an important understanding of how we can develop a responsive relationship with God. There are a few takes on this story. The Rambam, the great Torah sage from the 12th century, states that Avraham knew without a doubt that God wanted him to offer his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice; otherwise, Avraham wouldn't have attempted it. However, the Chasidic Master, the Rebbe of Itzbish, takes the opposite view. He explains that Avraham did not know if God meant for him literally to sacrifice his son or to symbolically offer him as a sacrifice. In essence, the Itzbisher says, Avraham did not know what to do. He was in doubt and had to make a choice. Avraham's test was to put aside his fatherly love for Yitzchak and decide from a pure place what he truly believed God wanted from him. Taking a risk is the greatest test of love.



If you are sure about what your beloved wants, it is no great show of love to acquiesce. The challenge is when you do not know and you have to take a risk.

Let's take a common scenario. A husband asks his wife what she wants for her birthday, and she tells him, "Surprise me."

At this, the husband says, "But I don't want to disappoint you by getting you something you don't want."

She comes back with, "Whatever you want is fine with me."

If he plays it safe and buys her a gift certificate, she won't be happy.

It is in the areas of doubt where our greatest love is expressed. A wife wants her husband to figure out what she wants without her telling him because that is an opportunity for showing her greater love.

The greatest moments of love happen in doubt. We have to take a leap of love and make a choice. Our actions have to be pure; they must come from within us. It is easy to ask someone what they want for their birthday and then to buy it. But when someone is in doubt and forced to make a choice, his gift will truly come from him.

The Itz'bhisher teaches that Avraham's test was in the doubt and the courage to do what *he* thought God wanted from him. The test of love for *tzaddikim* (righteous people) is never within an issue of *Halacha* that is stated and clear. It is no problem for them to do what they surely know God wants them to do. Their test of love is taking a risk for God and courageously choosing what they believe is God's will.

This was also Noach's challenge. Was he supposed to argue with God over His decision to destroy the world, or surrender to God's decision? As we see in the Torah, Noach decides to surrender and accept God's decree. Our sages, however, tell us that he should have petitioned against God's decree as did Avraham, later on regarding the city of Sodom.

The answers to some of the greatest tests in our lives are not written in *Halacha*. The *Halacha* puts us in touch with God so that when the tests come we will be ready to make courageous decisions and take risks for God. Our deepest relationship with God happens in the problems we face outside the realm of *Halacha*. We cannot always find our answers in the *Shulchan Aruch*. It is precisely in moments of doubt when the greatest show of love can be expressed.

Therefore, when we ask God to "*Return us in complete teshuva before You,*" we are really asking Him, "Please, God, I want a close, personal and responsive relationship with You. I want to be doing more than learning Torah and doing *mitzvot*. I want to be able to hear your call in every situation and courageously respond in love."

## **God's Desire for Teshuva**

We end this request with, “*Blessed be You, God, He who wants teshuva.*” This concluding blessing reminds us that our desire for *teshuva* is really rooted in God’s own will for *teshuva*.

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist known as the Arizal, explained that in the beginning of existence there was just the endless presence of God. God removed His presence from the center and created a void, wherein He created vessels. He then infused these vessels with a ray of His endless presence, but they were not able to withstand the intensity and they broke down. The rest of the story of life is thus *tikun*—the fixing of these vessels. God intentionally caused this breakdown so that throughout history there would be a dynamic process of growth and return, the process of *teshuva*.

Because our will is rooted in God’s will, our desire to do *teshuva* -- improve our lives and the world around us -- comes from God’s own desire for *teshuva* to be the theme of life. Therefore, what we are really intimating at the end of this request is, “May You, YHVH, be abundantly manifest as the One who wants *teshuva*. And therefore, may I, in every following request, embody and channel into the world Your will for *teshuva* in its full detail, from the personal to the national, global and divine aspect.”

## Summary and Paraphrased

*The overall theme of the Amidah is our desire for teshuva – to return and reconnect with God. The subsequent requests are rooted in this one basic desire; expounding upon it in detail. We pray for a personal, national and global return to God, as well as, God’s return to us.*

*In this request we address God as our Father and our King, expressing a sense of greater significance and stature in God’s presence than before. If God is our Father, then we are His children. And if God is our King, then we are His kingdom. Since there is no such thing as a king without a kingdom, we and our prayers are indeed important to God. With each passing request of the Amidah we feel more and more confident to stand before God and ask of Him. To pray effectively, we need more than belief in God—we also need to believe in ourselves, that we are worthy to pray*

***Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah.*** As our compassionate Father, get us back on track by gently teaching us Your Torah so that we can actualize ourselves as Your children and live in tandem with Your ideals and values. Hopefully, we will choose to do the work we need to do. But if we don’t, then ***bring us close, our King, to Your work.*** Use a little more force. As our King bring us closer to the exact work. Show us what we need to do to actualize ourselves as Your royal subjects, empowered to do Your work, put Your Torah into action and transform this world from a wild jungle into Your holy kingdom. However, if we still don’t change to take action, then ***return us in complete teshuva before You;*** do whatever it takes to get us to do complete *teshuva* before You. More than just knowing the Torah’s principles and doing Your work, we want to achieve complete *teshuva* and always experience ourselves as ‘before You,’ fully present in Your presence. Empower us to be completely attuned and lovingly responsive to Your call to us in every situation so that we will not only

live the commandments given at Sinai but also fulfil the unique service of each moment of our lives.

***Blessed be You, God, --*** May You, YHVH, be abundantly manifest as -- ***the One who wants teshuva***; the One and Only Wellspring from where the desire for *teshuva* flows this very moment -- individual, national, global and divine return. We acknowledge that the very desire for *teshuva* that we are expressing now and will express in the upcoming requests is really a manifestation of Your own will for *teshuva*.

*The more we believe that God is the source of all will for teshuva and we sincerely want personal, national, global and universal teshuva, the more our prayers will channel His will to affect change.*

-6-  
**Forgive Us**

The third request reads, “*Selach lanu Avinu, ki chatanu* (Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned). *Machal lanu Malkeinu, ki pashanu* (Pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned), *ki mochel v’soleiach Ata* (because You are one who pardons and forgives). *Baruch Ata YHVH, chanun hamarbeh l’seloach* (Blessed be You -- May You be abundantly manifest -- YHVH, the abundant gracious forgiver).”

As we learned, the first request of the *Amidah* is *da’at*, the power to realize what we want. Without *da’at*, we have no *tefillah*. The second request is *teshuva* (returning to God), the root of all other requests and the theme of Judaism in its entirety.

The first step in the journey of *teshuva* is to ask for *selicha* (forgiveness) and *mechila* (pardoning). Our misbehavior has strained and possibly even damaged our relationship with God, and for this, we need to ask forgiveness. However, our wrongdoings have also incurred consequences and some form of correction may be in order. For that forgiveness is not enough we need to be pardoned.

When somebody wrongs us, two things happen: they damage their relationship with us, and they incur consequences. Let’s say someone dents your car. First, he should apologize and ask for forgiveness for stressing you and straining the relationship. But despite you forgiving him, unless you pardon him you will expect him to either pay you money or fix your car. Forgiveness fixes the relationship, but pardoning forgoes the consequences.

When we recite, “Forgive us, Father, for we have sinned,” what we are really saying is, “Although we are your children, we have been disrespectful and ungrateful. Although we are extensions of You and created in Your image, we have not acted accordingly and betrayed that privilege.” When a child does something wrong, it also reflects poorly on the parents. People often think, “What kind of parent raised this child?” By virtue of being God’s children, we are expected to act in a way that is honorable and becoming of Him. When we don’t, our actions reflect poorly on God. For all this we must ask for forgiveness.

Unbecoming actions are one thing. But certainly, we have all done things that are even worse—we’ve done *pesha*, we rebel and intentional do wrong. And for this we deserve to suffer the consequences of our actions. When we ask to be pardoned for *pesha*, we refer to God as “King.” A father can forgive his child for stealing a car and giving him a bad name and violating their relationship, but he can’t prevent him from going to jail. Only the king—someone with the power to pardon—can override a jail sentence. God is our father and our king, so not only can He forgive us for violating our relationship and the bad name we’ve caused Him, but He can overrule any legal consequences we’ve incurred.

As children of God we ask Him to *forgive* us for violating our parent-child relationship. However as subjects of the king, we ask God to *pardon* us because we have caused damage to the kingdom and should rightfully pay the consequences. Our

wrongdoings are not just a matter of relationship. We have broken the law, which must be enforced. Only God as our King has the jurisdiction to pardon us.

Knowing that our father is the king should fill us with tremendous relief and joy.

### **Making Our Case**

It is interesting to note that unlike the first two requests for *da'at* and *teshuva*, here we offer justification for our request: “because You are one who pardons and forgives.” To give God a reason is a bold move. Our words here indicate that we have progressed in confidence and assertiveness regarding our right to request and the power of our prayers. We are no longer humbly asking. We are now making a case, emphatically presenting a reason why God should do what we have asked.

This change in stature signals an added degree of self-worth, enabling us to stand more confidently and comfortably before God. With each request, we sense more and more of our own godliness. The *Shechina*--the divine presence--becomes more present in our voice. With each request we feel more empowered and more able to fulfill the purpose of the *Amidah*—to confidently stand in God’s presence and enjoy a direct and loving relationship with Him.

Actually, the case we make for our own forgiveness and pardoning is odd. “Because You are one who pardons and forgives” doesn’t sound very compelling. What we are claiming is, “God, forgive and pardon us because that is what You do and the kind of God You are. Consider our wrongdoing as an opportunity for You to make manifest Your attributes of forgiveness and pardoning. We are not asking You do it for our sake—we know we don’t deserve that. Rather, forgive and pardon us for Your sake.”

This reasoning is similar to what Moses offered God when he thought He considered abandoning the Jewish people in the desert after their terrible sins. Moses argued, “If You destroy the people, consider how it will look in the eyes of the Egyptians. They will conclude that You took the Jews out of slavery but then couldn’t handle them. This will make You look bad. Forgive and pardon them for Your sake. This is an opportunity for You to manifest Yourself as the God of forgiveness and pardoning.”

The great master of Kabbalah Rabbi Isaac Luria, commonly referred to as the Arizal, explains that God’s purpose for creating the universe was to manifest His attributes. In other words, the challenges in this world afford God the opportunity to reveal Himself. For example, if we never sinned, how could God manifest His power for forgiveness and unconditional love? Therefore, in this third request we ask God to do it for His sake.

We will see, however, that in the upcoming requests we will gradually feel more empowered and worthy to ask God to fulfill our requests for our own sake.

We conclude our third request with, “Blessed be You -- May You be abundantly manifest -- YHVH, the abundant gracious forgiver” The more we believe this truth about God and truly acknowledge it, the more we will experience this truth in our life (For more in this see Chapter Four of my book *Seeing God*).

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*Our first request was for da'at, the power to realize what we want. Without da'at, we have no tefillah. The second request is teshuva (returning to God), the root of all the other requests. We now ask for selicha (forgiveness) and mechila (pardoning) which are the first steps in the journey of teshuva. Our misbehavior has violated our relationship with God, and for this, we need to ask forgiveness. However, our deliberate wrongdoings have also incurred consequences which need pardoning.*

*Unlike the first two requests for da'at and teshuva, here we make a case for our right to request: “because You are one who pardons and forgives.” This bold move indicates a change in stature; an added degree of self-worth and empowerment. We feel more able to fulfill the purpose of the Amidah—to confidently stand in God’s presence and enjoy a personal loving relationship with Him.*

***Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned.*** As Your children, we are expected to act in a way that is honorable and becoming of You. When we do wrong, our actions reflect poorly on You. Although we are an expression of Yourself, created in Your image, we have not acted accordingly and betrayed that privilege. We have been disrespectful and ungrateful; we have violated Your love for us. ***Pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned.*** We have not only done wrong but intentionally rebelled and, therefore, also deserve to suffer serious consequences. We ask You as our Father to forgive us for violating Your love and giving You a bad name. We also ask You to pardon us as our King because we have caused damage to Your kingdom and should rightfully pay the penalty but because You are the King You have the power and jurisdiction to overrule any legal consequences incurred. We know that we can make these requests ***because You are one who pardons and forgives;*** this is who You are, this is what You do. Consider our wrongdoing as an opportunity for You to make manifest Your attributes of forgiveness and pardoning. We are not asking You do it for our sake—we know we don’t deserve that. Rather, forgive and pardon us for Your sake, to reveal Yourself. Our sins afford You the possibility to display Your power to forgive and pardon; to show us Your unconditional love. ***Blessed be You, YHVH, -- May You, YHVH, be abundantly manifest as, the abundant gracious forgiver.***

*The more we believe that God always seeks to forgive us and we sincerely want His forgiveness, the more we will experience His loving forgiving presence embracing and filling us.*

***Grant Us Personal Redemption  
Restore our Self-Respect***

This next request reads, “*R’ei v’anyeinu, v’riva riveinu*”(Behold our afflictions, take up our grievance), “*u’galeinu maheira lemaan shemecha*” (and redeem us quickly for Your namesake), “*ki go’eil chazak Ata*” (because You are a strong redeemer). “*Baruch Ata YHVH, go’eil Yisrael*” (Blessed are You, God, who is redeeming Israel).

This request for *geulah* - redemption - addresses the next step in the process of *teshuva*. When we do something wrong, we not only violate our relationship with God and break a particular law for which we need forgiveness and pardon, but we also wrong ourselves and damage our self esteem.

Sin is an act of self-betrayal. The Talmud teaches that we cannot do wrong unless a spirit of insanity enters us. Indeed, we have to be out of our minds to transgress God’s will; who only wants the best for us. Therefore, when we do wrong we have lost ourselves, at least temporarily. We become estranged from our Godly essence, and we are no longer at home with our true selves. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, God asked them, “Where are you?” Likewise, when we do wrong we put ourselves into a state of personal exile; we become strangers to ourselves.

When we become lost in our own spiritual exile, forgiveness and pardoning are not enough—we need redemption.

**Restoring Our Godliness**

When we transgress God’s will, we violate our God-given potential. We experience a schism between who we are and who we ought to be; we feel fragmented and conflicted. Divorced from our inner self and from God, we suffer psychic pain and feel spiritually homeless.

Jewish mysticism metaphorically describes sin as taking holy sparks of ourselves and throwing them into exile. *Teshuva* is the retrieving of those sparks. God’s forgiveness and pardoning cannot fix the damage we have done to our self-worth. For that we need God to redeem us.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a great Jewish thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, describes redemption as restoring our sense of personal adequacy. When we sin, we first ask God to forgive us because we have violated our relationship. Then we ask God to pardon us of the consequences we should pay. But wrongful acts also take a toll on our self-worth. Our failings cause us much loss of self. When we do wrong we are not only being disrespectful to God but also to ourselves.

The prophet Hosea (14:2) calls, “Return, Israel, unto God, for you have failed in your transgressions.” Hosea did not say, “you have fallen,” but rather, “you have failed.” Rabbi Soloveitchik explains this to mean, we are not just sinners, but we are

failures. Our sins have made spiritual cripples out of us. We failed existentially, not just religiously. When we do wrong we wrong ourselves. When we do bad we end up feeling bad about ourselves.

The story of Esav is a good example of how transgression causes us to feel like failures. When Esav returns from the field and sees Yaakov brewing a bean stew, he says to him, “Pour that red stuff down my throat because I am tired” (Bereishit; 25:30). The commentator Rashi points out that the Hebrew word for pour – *halitani* – is a term used for describing the feeding of a horse. In other words, Esav referred to himself in a derogatory manner. Rashi also highlights that Esav said that he wanted the stew because he was tired rather than hungry. Quoting a Midrash, Rashi explains that Esav was tired because that whole day he was busy raping and killing. In other words, sin exhausts a person.

Behaving in ways that contradict our Godly inner-self is exhausting. A person may work in a comfortable air-conditioned office, but if he feels that his work does not fit him, he will feel exhausted. On the contrary, acting in ways that befit our Godliness brings us vitality. It is likely that Esav was tired because he was depressed. When we behave in ways that are contradictory to our divine soul, we feel inadequate, depressed and tired. It is at these times that we do insane things like Esav did when he ended up selling Yaakov his birthright for a pot of beans (Bereishit; 25:31-34).

Redemption means restoring our personal worth and feeling at peace within ourselves and with God. Therefore, redemption is a vital stage in the *teshuva* process.

### **A State of Conflict**

Let’s now look at this request in more detail—what we ask and how.

After we ask God for forgiveness and pardoning, we still do not feel good about ourselves. We are failures, dwarfed by our sins and suffering spiritual torment from our dark past. For this reason, we now ask God to remove us from this self-imposed exile, to relieve our afflicted grieving soul and redeem us.

Therefore, we say, “*Behold our afflictions, take up our grievances.*” Personal afflictions and grievances are the psychic pain we have caused ourselves by living conflicted lives; when what we think, do and say do not match our true selves.

The first we time we choose to transgress, our choice is simply to sin or not to sin. But once we sin, the choice becomes a greater struggle of whether to continue to sin or to stop sinning. The more we succumb to our *yetzer hara*, negative urges that are in conflict with our Godly soul, the more stressed and self-afflicted we become.

One of the classic answers to why good people suffer while evil people seem to be living well is that God reserves the reward of the good for the eternal world (in the afterlife), while the evil get rewarded in this world and punished eternally. However, the Chofetz Chaim, one of the greatest rabbis of the last generation, explains that even when evil people receive their rewards in this world they are not able to enjoy them because they are conflicted souls and have no inner peace.



## Standing A Little Straighter

As compared to the meek and humble formulation of the three previous prayers for knowledge, *teshuva*, forgiveness this request for redemption is a bold expression of a heightened sense of self. How can we dare demand of God, “*Behold our afflictions, take up our grievances*” when we feel so low and embarrassed by our misdeeds? Because we are asking for God’s own sake, as the verse continues, “and *redeem us quickly for Your namesake.*”

At this point of the Amidah – we stand a little straighter. Although we are asking God to restore our lost self worth we nonetheless feel worthy enough to assertively ask that God pay attention and empathize with us because we are making our request on His behalf. We are asking that God redeem us for His name sake.

We learned in an earlier chapter that God has a name only so that others can call to Him. Indeed, God wants a loving relationship with us. He created the world for the sake of His name so that others can call to Him and enjoy a loving relationship with Him. If we are afflicted souls and feel unworthy to call to God, then His name becomes irrelevant and the purpose of our existence is lost. Therefore, we ask God to help us regain our self-respect and stature so that we can confidently and comfortably call to Him, stand in His presence and fully return to Him in love.

“*For Your namesake*” also implies a responsibility. We also have a mission to spread the name of God to the rest of the world, to promote His name and teach others that they too can call to Him. But if we feel like failures, where will we get the confidence to fulfill our destiny? Therefore, we ask God to redeem us for His namesake so that we can not only enjoy a relationship with Him but also accomplish our mission of promoting His name in the world.

We end this request with a reason why God should acquiesce to our request—“*because You are a strong redeemer.*” Essentially, we are saying, “This is an opportunity for You, God, to make known this truth about Yourself that You are a powerful redeemer.”

It is important to remember that these prayers were written with the intention to inspire us. We are not trying to coax or manipulate God into responding or acting. We express these prayers in this way because this is how *we* need to hear them. The *Amidah* is a well-crafted script that is meant to evoke from within us the right feelings about who we are, who God is and the loving relationship we share. The *Amidah* empowers us to stand in God’s presence, feel love for God and loved by God.

We conclude the request with, “*Blessed be You, God, who is redeeming Israel.*” Note that it does not say, “*who is redeeming His nation Israel,*” as we will see at the end of the next request. This request addresses an essential step in our process of personal *teshuva*, the need for personal redemption. The next request, however, begins to express our concern for a national *teshuva*.

## Summary and Paraphrased

*Even though we've asked for forgiveness and pardoning, we still do not feel good about ourselves. We are failures and suffer self-inflicted spiritual pain by living conflicted lives; when what we think, do and say do not match our true selves. Therefore, we ask God to relieve our afflicted grieving soul, redeem us and restore our self-respect.*

*As compared to the meek and humble formulation of the three previous requests here we boldly assert, "Behold our afflictions, take up our grievances." Although we are asking God to restore our lost self-worth we nonetheless feel powerful enough to assertively say to God, "Behold." This is because we are asking for God's own sake, as the prayer continues, "and redeem us quickly for Your namesake," which means, "so that we can confidently stand before You and call to You."*

**Behold** (pay attention and empathize with) **our afflictions**. We not only betrayed You but also ourselves. We were not only disrespectful to You but to ourselves. Because we did bad we now feel bad about ourselves. Who we are on the outside is not who we really want to be from the inside – connected to You. Therefore, we are conflicted and afflicted. **Take up our grievance**; Estranged from our soul's natural desire we now suffer much inner torment and psychic distress. We are no longer at home with our inner selves; we are lost in our self-imposed spiritual exile. **And redeem us quickly** (forgiveness and pardoning cannot fix the damage we have done to our self-worth—we need personal redemption; recovery and renewal of our self-respect and self-esteem). We ask that You do this **for Your namesake**. If we remain afflicted souls and feel unworthy to call to You, then Your name becomes irrelevant and the purpose of creation is lost. You created the world for the sake of Your name so that others can call to You and enjoy a loving relationship with You. Therefore, we ask You, God, to redeem us, help us regain our self-respect and stature so that we can confidently and comfortably call to You, stand in Your presence and fully return to You in love. We also have a mission to spread Your name to the rest of the world and teach others that they too can call to You. If, however, we feel like failures, where will we get the confidence to fulfil our destiny? Therefore, we ask You, God, to redeem us for Your namesake so that we can not only enjoy a loving relationship with You but also accomplish our mission of promoting Your name in the world. D this **because You are a strong redeemer** and this is an opportunity for You to reveal this truth about Yourself. **Blessed be You, YHVH**, --May You be abundantly manifest as one-- **who is redeeming** right now **Israel**.

*The more we believe that God is always restoring our self-worth and we sincerely want personal redemption, the more His blessings for renewal and empowerment can penetrate us.*

### *Heal Us, Your Nation*

Healing and health are the next step in the *teshuvah* process. The Talmud teaches that *teshuvah* brings healing to the world. In this request, however, we transition from personal matters concerning our *teshuva* as individuals and we ask for our personal healing but as matter of concern for national *teshuvah*. Our transgressions not only create within us feelings of failure, incompetence and inadequacy, they also cause disease and sickness that weaken ourselves and the nation in general. In the previous blessing, we addressed issues relating to our personal *teshuva* but now we include in our prayers matters that concern the well being of nation at large. Therefore, in this next blessing we ask:

*“Refa’einu, YHVH, v’neirafeh”* (Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed), *“hoshi’einu v’nivashei’ah”* (save us and we will be saved) *“ki tehilateinu Ata”* (because You are our praise). *“V’ha’aleh refuah shleima l’chal makoteinu”* (And bring complete healing to all of our wounds) *“ki Eil Melech Rofeh ne’eman v’rachaman Ata”* (because You are a Divine King, Healer, who is committed and compassionate). *“Baruch Ata YHVH, Rofeh choleh Amo Yisrael”* (Blessed be You, YHVH, the Healer of the sick of His nation Israel).

In the previous request for personal redemption, we addressed God as the *“Redeemer of Israel.”* Here we ask for healing as members of His nation as a matter of national concern, thus we address God as *“Healer of the sick of His **nation** Israel.”* We also address God here as a king and healer. Essentially, we are intimating, *“God, You are not only our Healer, but also our King. For You to be manifest as a King, You need us—Your nation—to be healthy and strong.”*

We’ve realized that our wrongdoings damage us as individuals; now we recognize that they weaken our connection to the entire Jewish nation. We have not only failed as individuals, but also as members of the Jewish people. Once we have requested personal redemption, we can then ask for health and wholeness in order to partake in and complete our role in the national mission of the Jewish people.

Asking for our own health and well being in the interest of God’s nation puts us on a new level of stature and self-confidence in God’s presence. Let’s take a look at what this request fully addresses.

### **Physical vs. Spiritual Health**

In this blessing, we acknowledge two types of illness—spiritual and physical. This is reflected in the two reasons we offer as our case for God to fulfill our request: 1) *because You are our praise*, and 2) *because You are a Divine King, Healer, who is committed and compassionate*.

Let’s take a closer look. The first part, *“Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved because You are our praise,”* refers to psychological and spiritual health. The continuation, *“And bring complete healing to all our wounds because You are a Divine King, Healer, who is committed and*

*compassionate*,” refers to physical health. Why do we ask for spiritual health before we ask for physical health? The Torah teaches that without spiritual health, our physical health is jeopardized.

A friend of mine once worked as an intern in a city hospital emergency ward. Just as she was about to receive her medical degree, she had a personal crisis and gave up her aspirations to be a doctor. The turning point in her career was when she realized that the same drunken man would continually show up in the emergency ward. Each time he came, she would bandage him and send him back into the world, only to hurt himself again and return to the hospital. She felt incompetent as a healer, realizing that all she could do was bandage his wounds but not heal his ailing soul. Because the man was psychologically unhealthy, she was simply empowering him to repeat his self-destructive pattern. Next time, she always worried, he would do himself or others even greater harm.

This example clearly demonstrates the logic of first asking for mental and spiritual health before physical health. When our insides are fragile, our outside is easily broken.

### **Complete Healing**

The particular formulation of this prayer is very significant. Here, we address God by name for the first time: “*Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed.*” We are actually calling to God using the *Shem HaEzem*, His personal name. Equate this to calling your mother or father by their first name! The use of “YHVH” in our request indicates that we have taken another step up in our stature and self-confidence, now standing even straighter and stronger in the presence of God.

The wordiness of this request requires some clarification. Why do we say, “*Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved*” instead of simply saying, “*Heal us and save us, YHVH*”? What do the words, “*and we will be healed and we will be saved*” add to the request?

Before offering an answer, we need to remember the lesson we learned in Chapter 1. When someone helps you, your stature is diminished. As we mentioned, this idea is reflected in the laws of *tzedakah*, charity. When you give *tzedakah*, you take away a bit of the recipient’s self-worth. The ideal way of helping someone, therefore, is giving him a job. Working empowers the recipient to help himself, restoring his confidence and self-esteem. The same goes when someone heals us and even more so when someone saves our life. The debt we owe a doctor is so tremendous that we are left with diminished self-worth.

This concept reminds me of an episode of the TV comedy show “I Love Lucy,” in which Lucy saves a man’s life. According to his tradition, he was obligated from then on to be Lucy’s slave. The skit, although exaggerated, accurately portrays human nature. God, however, heals and saves us completely without us losing ourselves. As we saw in the first blessing, God helps, saves and also shields us from the harmful affects that His helping and saving can have on our self-worth.

Therefore, “*Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved*” acknowledges that God, in His great kindness, completely heals *us* and saves *us* without damaging in the least our self-worth.

In addition, when we ask, “*Heal us, YHVH, and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved*” we acknowledge in our request that only if God heals us we will be healed, only if God save us we will be saved. Some people think that their doctor or the medicine will heal and save their life. This is incorrect. God is the only source of healing and salvation. Of course, God has many agents and instruments through which He works. But it is not the pen that writes the poem but the poet who yields his pen. The poem was written through the pen but not by the pen. We never put our faith in the doctor or in the medicine but in God the Master of all healing. Of course, we must seek the best medical practitioners, experts in their field, however, we must never forget that only God heals and this expert is merely a channel for God’s healing power.

### **Healing for Everyone’s Sake**

We justify our request that God should heal us and save us “*because You are our praise.*” In other words, “God, if we are psychologically and spiritually sick, we cannot not praise You properly or promote Your name successfully. Make us well and strong because we are important to You. We can then fully sing Your praises and promote Your name.”

Stepping up the stakes, we then make our case for complete healing of all our wounds “*because You are a Divine King, Healer.*” Here we are intimating, “God, You are our King and we are Your nation. If Your nation is wounded and weak, then this reflects badly on You as our King. Do this because You need us to be healthy and strong. Without us, You cannot be manifest in all Your splendor and Kingship. Heal us so that we can fulfill our mission on earth--to promote Your truth and make Your majestic presence known to all.”

The Psalmist expresses this same reasoning when he writes (Psalms), “Heal me, YHVH, save me for the sake of Your kindness. Because among the dead (spiritually), there is no one that mentions You. In the grave, who will acknowledge You?”

We end this prayer with, “*Blessed are You --may You be abundantly manifest --YHVH, Healer of His nation Israel.*”

### **On a Personal Note**

Take a moment during this request to contemplate how God is the source of all healing. Think of ways in which He takes care of you. For instance, have you ever cut your finger and watched it heal? This simply amazes me. In fact, I find the notion ridiculous. How does the skin know how to heal? We should remember this truth every time we address God as our healer.

As I write this book, I am watching my family heal after a near-fatal car accident. I have ceased to marvel at the wisdom of the body. Yes, I know that it is not the body that cures itself, but the wisdom of the universe being manifest in the body that brings about healing. Then, I wonder, does the universe have wisdom? What I am witnessing with my own eyes is the wisdom of God, a greater reality, made manifest in my family's healing bodies.

About a week ago, my wife had oral surgery to repair the stitches she received after the accident. The surgeon reconstructed her entire mouth using a laser. I saw actual smoke coming out of my wife's mouth, and it smelled like grilled liver. What is going on here, I thought. Do we really think this is our wisdom at work?

No, this is God's wisdom with which we have been graced. We are merely tools and instruments for God. When we see the healing power at work within us, we must realize that it is all God. Can we say that anything is our power, our strength, our research, or our surgical techniques and skills? We need to get real. We should be filled with gratitude to be instruments in the hand of God.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*Once we have asked for the power to know what to want (daát), the power to change (teshuva), forgiveness (selicha) and personal redemption (geula) we now ask for healing and health (refuah). We ask God to heal us from the spiritual and physical ailments our transgressions have caused us not only as a matter of personal concern. We now ask as members of God's nation in the interest of Israel's national strength and well-being so that we can fulfill our national destiny to spread God's name.*

*The particular formulation of this request is also very significant. Here, for the first time we address God by the name YHVH, His personal name "Heal us, YHVH" Equate this to calling your mother or father by their first name! The use of "YHVH" in our request indicates that we have taken another step up in our stature and self-confidence. We can now stand even straighter and stronger in the presence of God and fulfill the Amidah even more.*

**Heal us** of any mental disorders, **YHVH**, (and only You can) **and we** (without any diminishment to our self-worth) **will be healed; Save us** from any spiritual dangers (and only You can) **and we will be saved**. You are the Master of all healing and deliverance. Even the best of doctors and the most advanced medicine are only agents channelling Your healing power and deliverance. We can only be healed and saved through them but never by them. God, Heal and save us **because You are our praise;** our health and well-being is vital to You. When we are mentally or spiritually sick, we cannot not properly praise You and successfully spread Your name in the world. **And bring complete healing to all of our physical wounds, because You are a Divine King, Healer, who is committed and compassionate.** You are not only our Healer, but also our King and we are Your nation. If Your nation is wounded and weak, then this reflects badly on You as our King. You need us to be healthy and strong. Without us, Your Kingship cannot be manifest in all its' glory. Empower us with good health so that we can fulfil our national mission on earth--to make Your majestic presence

known to all. ***Blessed be You***, -- May You be abundantly manifest -- ***YHVH, as one who is healing*** right now ***the sick of His nation Israel***.

*The more we believe that God (and only God) is always healing us, spiritually and physically, and sincerely want to be healed, the more His blessings for health can penetrate us.*

***Revitalize the Land of Israel  
Prepare it for Our Nations' Return***

As we have already mentioned each request of the *Amidah* is a milestone on the road of return-the journey of *teshuvah*. After asking for Da'at knowledge the power to know what to ask for, we request *teshuva*, personal forgiveness, redemption, and then national healing and health. We now turn our attention to the land, asking that God, as part of our national *teshuvah*, restore its productivity in preparation for the return of the Jewish people.

*Our concern for teshuva extends beyond the damage we have caused to ourselves and to our nation, but also to the ecological well being of the land. Thus, we ask:*

“Bareich aleinu, YHVH Eloheinu” (*Bless on our behalf, YHVH, our God*) “et hashana hazote v’et kal minei t’vuatah letovah (*this year and all its produce for good*). “V’tain bracha” (*Give blessing*) [or] “V’tain tal u’matar livracha” (*give dew and rain*) “al p’nei ha’adamah (*on the face of the earth*). “V’sab’einu mituvecha” (*May we be satiated with Your goodness*) “u’vareich shanateinu kashanim hatovot” (*and bless our year like the good years*). “Baruch Ata YHVH, m’vareich hashanim” (*Blessed be You, YHVH, who is blessing the years*).

After Adam and Eve sinned, God said to them, “Cursed is the ground for your sake, in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles...” Later in the Torah God tells the Jewish people that if we live the *mitzvot*, “Rain will come... and you will gather in your grain, vineyards and olives. I will put grass in your field for your cattle. Otherwise, there will be drought and the fields will not yield their produce.”

These verses make it clear to us that living the *mitzvot* affects the climate and the productivity of our fields. Our wrongdoings damage the fertility of the land and create an imbalance within the conditions of nature. Therefore, after requesting personal *teshuva* and national *teshuva*, we pray that God repair the damage to the ecological balance caused by our wrongdoings and prepare the land of Israel for the return of our nation.

The prophet Yechezkel prophesized, “Mountains of Israel, you will give off your produce, for your people are soon coming” (36:8). The Talmud teaches that there is no clearer sign of the coming redemption than the blossoming of the fruits of the Land of Israel. When the Land of Israel yields its produce, it is a sure sign that the land is preparing itself for the return of the Jewish people.

It is interesting to note that when the Jewish people lived in the Land of Israel, the land was fertile and flourishing. Yet whenever the Jews were expelled from the land, it would become desolate. Mark Twain, writing about his trip to Israel in the year 1902, described it to be “a no-man’s land,” affirming that it is “understandable that no one would want to live here.” Today, however, as you travel south and north, you will see the lush vegetation of Israel. If you want to see the redemption



happening, just go to *Machane Yehuda*, the fruit market of Jerusalem, and behold the abundance of sweet, juicy fruits and vegetables of the land.

Whenever the Jewish people and the Land of Israel unite, they both blossom. This is because the Jewish people and the Land of Israel are soul mates. We know that we've met our soul mate when he or she brings out the best in us.

### ***Increasing Our Stature***

The graduating boldness and confidence in our voices as we return, through prayer, to our God-given sense of self-worth, itself is a sign of a successful *teshuvah* process. The Midrash, part of the Oral Torah, teaches that before Adam and Eve sinned, they stood comfortably before God. But after they sinned they hid from Him because they lost their stature and felt embarrassed to be in His presence. Likewise, when we do something wrong, we feel embarrassed and lose our confidence to stand before God. After the Jewish people sinned by worshipping the golden calf at Mt. Sinai, they could not even look at the Godly radiance that shone from Moshe's face. Our transgressions damage our self-confidence and dwarf our stature in God's presence.

Let's now look at how the particular formulation of this request reflects an important upgrade in our personal stature, empowering us to stand even straighter and pray more confidently.

The very beginning of the blessing is remarkable: "*Bless on our behalf, YHVH Eloheinu...*" This is the first time we have asked God to do something for us without any hint that it would be in His best interest. We assert that God "*bless on our behalf*" and not "*for Your namesake,*" as we did in the previous requests.

This powerful nuance affirms our heightened sense of worth in the presence of God. In the previous request, we asked God to bless us for His sake, to heal us because we are important to Him, because He is our praise; if we are weak, we can't praise Him. We then asked God to heal us as a King, hinting to the fact that we are His kingdom and a sick kingdom doesn't reflect well on its king.

This request expresses a whole new level of self-appreciation and personal significance, we ask God here to bless us "*on our behalf.*" We now confidently assert that God will lovingly do things for our sake, not just for Himself.

Also in this blessing, we address God for the first time as "*YHVH Eloheinu.*" Already we hold a significant place in our relationship with God when we address Him in the previous request as "YHVH." However, it's a marked step up in our relationship to also address God with the double name of "*YHVH Eloheinu.*" When we say the Divine name YHVH, we acknowledge God's infinitude and all encompassing oneness. He is the ultimate reality. But when we say "*Eloheinu,*" we recognize that He is also our personal God, the one who created us in His image – *b'tzelem Elohim* - and the one who judges us. The name *Elohim* indicates that we make a divine difference. We are judged for our deeds because what we do matters to

God. Calling God by these two names together adds a new level of power to our request. We have turned up the volume of the *Shechina*, the Divine presence, speaking through us.

### **Food for the Soul**

Let's now look at the continuation of the request: "...and may we be satiated by Your goodness." It is not food that satiates us; it is the recognition that food is God's gift that satiates us. Think about the difference between your mother's homemade soup and soup from a can. The love and care you taste in your mother's soup nourishes more than just your body; it nourishes your soul. Here, we are asking God to bless this year and its produce so much so that we can fully recognize that it comes only from God and taste in it His divine presence. Only this satiates the soul.

It's important to understand that we are not simply asking for rain, fruits and vegetables. We want God's goodness to become manifest in the fruit and vegetables and thus truly satiate us. We want to remember that it is God's presence in the apple—not the apple itself—that will fulfill us. For this reason, the Kabbalah teaches that if we eat without first reciting the appropriate *bracha*, the food will nurture only our body but not our soul. Likewise, if we don't recite the appropriate *bracha* after we eat the food, the energy in the food will not go to our soul; the energy will go only to our body.

As we pray for God to bless this year with prosperity, we also ask that we should not get confused and think that it is the prosperity that is satiating us, but rather God's goodness. In essence, we are saying, "It is the taste of Your goodness, God, that is coming through this food, and this is what I want to be satiating me."

Think back to the manna that God gave to the Jewish people during their 40 years in the desert. The manna did not look nourishing yet it fully satiated the Jews' bodies and souls. If the manna had looked like food, then the people would have thought that the nourishment came from the food rather than from God. Imagine that every day bagels would fall from the sky, perfectly cut in the center, with 2 millimeters of cream cheese and 5 millimeters of lox. Now that would have been a Jewish experience! But, of course, it would not have delivered the message.

Nourishment comes only from God, in whatever form He chooses. If God had wanted pens to nourish us, then He would have made pens nourishing. With the manna, God was teaching us that it is not from food alone that we live, but rather from anything that comes from the word of God.

Therefore, in this request for prosperity we qualify that we don't want the prosperity to lead us astray. We beseech God to enable us to truly experience, taste and be satiated by God's goodness alone, which is manifest in the prosperity. In this way our national return to the land will truly be part of our return to God.

### ***Summary and Paraphrased***

*Our transgressions not only damaged our personal and national well-being, they also damage the fertility of the land. We, therefore, ask God to revitalize the productivity of Land of Israel in preparation for our national renaissance as we return from the exile.*

*Here, for the first time in the Amidah, we ask God to do something just for us. We ask, "bless on our behalf" with no mention of benefit to Him -- "for Your namesake." We also for the first time in our requests address God as "YHVH Eloheinu." The Divine name "YHVH," reminds us that God is the Ultimate Timeless Reality. "Eloheinu," however, tells us that He is our personal God and He care about us. These textual nuances reflect a significant increase in our experience of self-worth and God's love for us.*

***Bless on our behalf, YHVH Eloheinu, this year and all its various produce for good;** but only if it will bring us true goodness. Let not prosperity corrupt us and lead us away from You. **And give blessing [or give dew and rain as a blessing] on the face of the earth.** But again, only if we are ready and it will lead us to true abundance **and we are satiated with Your goodness;** only when we experience prosperity as Your goodness, as Your loving gift to us, will it truly satiate us otherwise it's a curse. **And bless our year like the good years. Blessed be You,** -- May You, **YHVH,** be abundantly manifest as the one **who is blessing the years.** So that we always feel satiated by Your goodness manifest in the prosperity. In this way our nations' physical renewal and return to the land will truly be part of a national spiritual return to God.*

*The more we believe that prosperity is always and only coming from God and the more we sincerely want it to lead us back to God, the more blessings of prosperity penetrate our lives to inspire national teshuva and redemption.*

### *Bring Us Back to Our National Home*

Before moving on, let's see how far we've come in our *tefillah*. We have asked for personal and national *teshuvah*, for personal health and the health of the Jewish nation, and the preparation of the Land of Israel for the nation's return. Throughout our *tefillah*, we have grown in stature and confidence in God's presence, now calling Him by His personal name, "YHVH," and proclaiming confidently that He is our God as we use the name "Eloheinu."

In this next request, we stand before God eagerly anticipating the end of our exile. After thousands of years living outside our land, we yearn for our homecoming. Therefore, as we stand firmly in God's presence, we ask Him to bring us back to our homeland in a spirit of pride and celebration.

Thus, the blessing reads: "*Tekah b'shofar gadol lechairuteinu*" (Blast the great *shofar* for our freedom), "*v'sah neis l'kabietz galu'yoteinu*" (lift up a banner and gather in our exiles). "*V'kabetzeinu yachad mei'arbah canfot ha'aretz*" (And gather us in from the four corners of the earth. "*Baruch Ata, YHVH, m'kabeitz nid'chei Amo Yisrael*" (Blessed be You, God, who gathers in the dispersed of His nation Israel).

### **The Call to Freedom**

We begin this prayer with the words, "*Blast the great shofar.*" Note how in this request we offer no reason, we just state it. In fact, it sounds somewhat like a decree rather than a humble request. And we ask for no less than a fanfare accompanied by a great *shofar* and a flying banner. This is much more than just a simple request for God to bring us back to our land.

Just as we experience each Rosh Hashanah--the Day of Judgment, the blast of a *shofar* spiritually awakens us to our true inner selves. When we sleep, we are passive, but when we are awake, we are active, able to take control of our life and express our true selves. Living in the Diaspora compared to living in Israel is like sleeping compared to being awake.

The blast of a *shofar* signals freedom. Returning to the Land of Israel is true liberation for the Jewish people. It means having the freedom to be who we are in our own land rather than strangers in a strange land. Outside of the Land of Israel, we're displaced, like an uprooted tree replanted in the wrong atmosphere. Only in the Land of Israel can a Jew naturally be who he or she was meant to be.

"*Lift up a banner...*" we continue. The thought of returning home is so joyful that we are envisioning a parade with great fanfare. This idea parallels the verse in, "He will lead us with an upright stature to our land." With this request we affirm that we do not want to leave the exile because the nations do not want us in their land, and thus we have no choice but to go to Israel. Rather, we want to return home with excitement and joy, reclaiming our right to independent nationhood and fulfill our mission and destiny. We ask that we leave the exile proudly, not as bent over Jews

who would have preferred to stay in the Diaspora. No, we want our return to be a celebration of self-actualization.

Now, we are not talking about the Manhattan “Israel Parade,” where thousands of Jews march in support of Israel but don’t actually go there. We are talking about the ultimate Israel parade, where we actually parade ourselves out of Manhattan (and everywhere else, for that matter) and board a flight to Israel. To go home is what we are praying for because the Land of Israel is where the Jews are supposed to be. Only in Israel can we reach our potential and be free to be who we are meant to be.

Coming home to Israel is a dream come true. As long as Jews are in exile, we represent just a religion, but not the priestly nation we were meant to be. Only in Israel, our homeland, can our people fulfill our national destiny. Just as an individual cannot exist in this world without a body, so too, a nation cannot exist without its own land. As the body is to the soul, the Land of Israel is to the collective national soul of the Jewish people.

### **The Zionist Dream**

Among the early Zionists, there was an ideological dispute. Some Zionists felt that the return to Zion was an “ideal,” an opportunity to actualize our unique national identity, to take our rightful place among the nations and fulfill our national mission. There, in our homeland, we would finally be free to be who we are and develop our unique Jewish culture. There were other Zionists, however, who believed that the Jewish people needed an asylum in times of danger. To them, the Land of Israel was important only as a place where Jews could flee for refuge from countries that sought to oppress them. But in countries where Jews were treated as equals, there was no need to leave.

Neither of these approaches is the Torah approach. The Land of Israel, according to the Torah, is not a place to run away to and not a place to merely create and establish a unique Jewish culture of art, literature, music, etc.. If either of these were the case, then the geographical location of the land would not matter.

When Britain offered the famous Zionist leader, Theodore Herzl, land in the largely undeveloped area in Uganda as a Jewish homeland, he was ready to take it as a temporary solution to the plight of the Jews. To his chagrin many of the delegates at the 1903 Zionist congress rejected the proposal. But even after a raging debate the congress voted to check out the option. World Jewry, however, opposed the plan, fearing it would turn into their permanent residence. Herzl, the plan’s leading proponent, died of heart failure within less than a year and so did the Uganda proposal.

The Jewish dream could have never been fulfilled in Uganda because we were not simply looking for a place to run or a place where we could create the ideal Jewish political or cultural society. The Jewish dream and destiny can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel because, metaphysically, this is our home, and no other place is our home. This land is the body of our national soul.

When Peter Jennings, the newscaster, was doing a show about Jerusalem, he sent researchers to Israel to gather facts. I don't know how he found me, but I received a call from one of the researchers. She said to me, "So many people over the years have come to Jerusalem. What is it about Jerusalem that draws you to its walls, to this place?"

"I don't know," I responded simply.

"How do you not know?" she asked.

"Honestly, I can't explain it," I told her. "How do birds know where to fly? How does salmon know where to spawn? Jews just know that this is our place. It has a spiritual character that just fits us like no other land."

Returning to our land is a great celebration of self-actualization for the Jewish people. In this request, we are not asking God to return us because the other nations of the world do not like us and we need to run for our lives. Just the opposite. Living in the Land of Israel would not only be the best thing for the Jewish people, it would benefit the entire world, as the verse states, "From Zion will go out Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem." We inspire and impact the world the most when we broadcast our message from the Holy Land.

### **Getting Out of Exile**

Unfortunately many Jews pray for the ingathering of our people and yet they themselves have never even visited the Land of Israel. Some do not even send funds to support those who are living in the Land of Israel, or even invest money to build the country. How many of us actually want to live in Israel?

Of course, each of us must make our own decision about when to return to our homeland. But the Jews who live in the Diaspora must remember that they are in exile, they are not home, and they should yearn to get come home as soon as possible. Sadly, however, this is not always the case.

Remember the story from Chapter 4, of the woman in Los Angeles who was raving about her community's new *glatt* Kosher restaurants and state-of-the-art *mikveh*? She admitted that she hopes to be able to stay in California after the *Moshiach* comes. This woman is a good example of how confused and inconsistent some can be; for them this prayer is just lip service.

For this reason, we pray for God to "*blast the great shofar.*" Many Jews living outside of the land don't hear the *shofar* blowing, the call for national *teshuva*. Just before the Holocaust, there were rabbis throughout Europe who told the people to leave their communities quickly. Unfortunately, many people did not listen. Some Jews even referred to Berlin as "Little Jerusalem." These Jews did not hear the *shofar* blowing.

Once when I was in Monsey, New York, I was praying in a *shul* where there was a beautiful light peering through an adjacent forest. The sun was rising over the horizon, and it was absolutely gorgeous. I was admiring the surroundings when a man approached me and said, “You know, Monsey has a *shtickle of a maimed of Eretz Yisrael* (a little bit of the status of the Land of Israel).”

I turned to him and said flatly, “No, it doesn’t. You are in exile. Don’t pretend that Eretz Israel is here when it is not. Monsey is a very holy Torah community, but, nonetheless it is in the exile. It is not our national home.”

Another story comes to mind. I was at someone’s home, and he was saying, “*Im Yirtzeh Hashem* (God-willing), I can’t wait to be in *Eretz Yisrael*, *Im Yirtzeh Hashem*, for my son’s Bar Mitzvah, *Im Yirtzeh Hashem*, *Im Yirtzeh Hashem*...”

I said, “Great! So you’re coming to Israel for the Bar Mitzvah?”

He responded, “When *Moshiach* comes, yes. I hope he comes before the Bar Mitzvah.”

I did not understand. Why wouldn’t this man come to Israel for his son’s Bar Mitzvah if *Moshiach* did not come? The Land of Israel is ready and waiting for its people to return. What are we waiting for?

So I asked him, “What do you think about living in Israel?”

He became very defensive. “What, and tie down two jobs?”

A friend of mine recently shared with me his response to a person who asked him how he is making a living now that he’s living in Israel. He told the person, “I have never made so little and felt so rich in my life.”

Like the man in Monsey and the woman in California, there are many people who believe that the Land of Israel is simply a state of consciousness that one can experience anywhere in the world. Indeed, the Midrash states that after *Moshiach* comes, the holiness of the Land of Israel will extend to the rest of the world. But this Midrash is describing a metaphysical experience. The Torah, however, is not talking philosophy or metaphysics when outlines the exact borders of the Land of Israel. The Torah gives us real physical borders, and this is what we must establish and defend. Simply, we have a *mitzvah* to develop the land and settle the land. The Torah does not tell us to live in California. The Land of Israel is our home, where we can fulfill our life mission.

True, some of us may have good reasons why we cannot return to our homeland just yet. It is not easy to uproot oneself or a whole family. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, the Chief Rabbi of Israel (at that time called Palestine) in the 1920s who was known as a passionate Zionist, had a surprising response to a letter that someone wrote him, asking him about making *aliyah* (moving to Israel). Rabbi Kook responded, “Be sure that when you make *aliyah*, you are able to succeed. Plan carefully and do not be too hasty in your planning. Make sure your timing is right.”

Even Rav Kook did not say, “jump.” But it is important to understand that if we are praying to God for the ingathering of the exiles to the land, then we must be sincere and really want that. We have to recite this blessing with *da'at*, with realization.

Returning to our homeland, the land of Israel, is the next step in our national *teshuva* process. Only when we return to the land are we able to completely come back to ourselves and to God.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*We continue to focus on matters concerning national teshuva and ask God to return us to our homeland. Only in the Land of Israel can we fulfil our national destiny to be a holy nation (not just holy individuals) and a light unto the other nations.*

*We begin this prayer with, “Blast the great shofar.... Lift up a banner.” We offer no reason, we just state this. This phrase sounds a little more like a demand compared to the humble requests we started with. And we want our return to be no less than a fanfare celebration accompanied by a great shofar and a flying banner. We want to leave the exile proudly, not as bent over Jews who would have preferred to stay in the Diaspora. We want to joyfully return in anticipation of reclaiming our national independence and fulfilling our mission.*

***Blast the great shofar for our freedom;*** awaken us to our national identity and purpose. As long as we are in exile, we are a religion, but not the priestly nation we were meant to be. Only in Israel, our homeland, are we free to fulfil our national destiny. ***Lift up a banner and gather in our exiles;*** Not as unwanted fugitives but as proud Jews leaving in a joyous parade and great fanfare; celebrating our long awaited return to our home where we can finally actualize our national dream. ***And gather us in from the four corners of the earth*** to finally take our rightful place on earth to become a light unto the nations; a model state inspiring global change. ***Blessed be You,*** -- May You, **YHVH**, be abundantly manifest as one ***who is*** right now ***gathering in the dispersed of His nation Israel.***

*The more we believe that God is always redeeming us from our exile and we sincerely want to return as a nation to our land, the more the blessings for national redemption can penetrate and become manifest in the events of history.*



*Restore Our Statehood*

The order of the requests throughout the *Amidah* makes sense. In the interest of national *teshuvah* we first asked that we, as members on the nation, be healthy, we then prayed that the land of Israel yield its produce and prepare for our nation's return home and now we express our longing for the re-establishment of the Jewish State where God's supreme reign is obvious; guided by His values and ideals.

*"Hashiva shofteinu k'varishonah"* (Restore our judges as at the start) *"v'yoatzeinu k'vatechila"* (and our advisors as in the beginning), *"v'haseir mimenu yagon va'anacha"* (And remove from us sorrowful sighing and groaning). *"U'meloch aleinu, Ata YHVH, levadecha b'chesed u'vrachamim"* (And You, God, alone, reign over us with kindness and compassion), *"v'tzaddekeinu b'mishpat"* (and may we be justified through justice.) *"Baruch Ata, YHVH, Melech oheiv tzeddakah u'mishpat"* (Blessed be You, God, King who loves righteousness and justice).

*Restore our judges as at the start and our advisors as in the beginning.*

*Shofteinu*, the Hebrew word for "our judges," alludes to the time of the prophets, when the Jewish State was governed by leaders who embodied Torah ideals and values; leaders who humbly acknowledged God as the true head of state. There is an entire book of the Prophets, called *Shoftim*, dedicated to this period of Jewish history.

*And remove from us sorrowful sighing and groaning.*

Without monarchy there can only be anarchy. Without law and order there can only be chaos, conflict and anguish. The re-establishment of judges and advisors who properly lead and direct us will also relieve us of the sorrowful sighing and groaning we suffered in the exile under the tyranny wicked rulers.

After the destruction of the second Temple, the Jewish people were exiled from their land and thus subject to the rulers of the various nations in which they lived. No longer was the Torah consulted in matters of politics or federal law—a state of affairs that remains common to this day in Israel. Since the beginning of the exile, this prayer has expressed the Jewish people's longing for the re-establishment of the Jewish State where God's supreme reign is obvious; guided by His Torah.

This, however, can only happen if it is clear to us all that God is the head of state. Therefore we qualify: *And You, God, alone, reign over us*. We do not want to return to the land of Israel to build an ordinary secular state governed by irreverent rulers and man-made laws. We want the State of Israel to be a Holy Kingdom under the reign of God; guided by His Torah.

And we ask that God govern us in the unique way that only He can; with both *kindness and compassion*.

However, we acknowledge that our ultimate aspiration is that we be *justified through justice*.

### **Under God's Reign**

Only God, who can see every moment within the context of all of time, can rule over us with both kindness and compassion and yet eventually justify us through justice. We want no freebees; instead, we want to get what we deserve; merit what God gives us.

There is a Torah principle that states that God is not a *vatran*, one who concedes and surrenders the requirements of justice. In other words, God would never say, "Forget it, your misdeeds don't matter." God's compassion in judgment is like an easy layaway plan—He lets us pay off our debts over time. Judaism teaches that if God were to overlook our wrongdoings this would damage our self-respect and self-esteem. Justice is the ideal.

The Midrash teaches that God created the world based on the principle of pure justice—you only get what you deserve. However, He saw that the world would not last under such strict conditions. Therefore, He added *rachamim*, compassion, to the recipe. In other words, if we don't deserve something, God may give it to us in such a way that we can earn and deserve it later. We can pay over time.

Strict justice, however, is the ideal because it establishes our full sense of self. Think back to the example of giving *tzedakah*. When we get something that we did not earn and don't deserve, we lose a bit of our self-worth. However, because of God's great love for us, He may sometimes temporarily override judgment. He then patiently guides us with compassion but His goal is to enable us to eventually fulfill the ideal of justice and truly earn our keep. Because God loves us, He orchestrates a way for us to work off any debts in increments over time and merit what He gives us.

It is only fitting that we end this request acknowledging the purpose of our statehood. *Blessed be You, God, King who loves righteousness and justice.*

May You, God, be abundantly manifest as a lover of righteousness and justice through the example of Your Kingdom, the State of Israel, built upon Torah values and ideals.

### ***Summary and Paraphrase***

*In the interest of national teshuvah we first asked that we, as members of the nation, be healthy, we then prayed that the land of Israel yield its produce and prepare for our nation's return home and we now express our longing for the re-establishment of the Jewish State where God's supreme reign is obvious; guided by His values and ideals.*

***Restore our judges as at the start and our advisors as in the beginning;*** when the State of Israel was governed by leaders and guided by advisors who embodied Torah ideals and values; people who humbly acknowledged God as the Supreme Sovereign. ***And remove from us sorrowful sighing and groaning;*** the grief we endured in the exile under the reign of wicked tyrannical rulers, as well as, the anguish we suffer from corrupt leadership in Israel. ***And You, God, alone, reign over us.*** Bless the State of Israel to be a Holy Kingdom under Your reign; guided by Your Torah. Protect us from becoming just another secular state governed by irreverent rulers and man-made laws. And You, God, alone, govern us in the unique way that only You can; with both ***kindness and compassion.*** ***And yet ultimately may we be justified through justice.*** We are not asking for freebees. We want to get what we deserve; merit what You give us. However, when we are unworthy, please be kind. And when we fall so low and deserve just the opposite of what we ask, then please, God, be compassionate; overrule Your justice and give it to us anyways. However, in the end, we want to be justified through justice and retroactively earn what we previously received in kindness or compassion. Let us make up for our debts over time so that we can restore our national self-worth, stand before You with integrity and fully enjoy a relationship with You. ***Blessed be You, -- May You, be abundantly manifest -- YHVH as a King who loves righteousness and justice.*** May Your Kingdom, the State of Israel, be a model state that makes it abundantly clear to all that You are a lover of righteousness and justice, law and order; inspiring all others to act in kind.

*The more we acknowledge God as our Sovereign Leader and a Lover of righteousness and justice the more His loving presence and guidance will become manifest in the daily affairs of our national life.*

*Subdue Insurgents Who Threaten Our  
National Independence*

After requesting the re-establishment of the Jewish State, exemplifying God's love for law and order, we ask God to protect the state from rebels who seek to destroy it and sabotage our national redemption. This request is said with tremendous love for God and not hate for people. It expresses our hope that evilness—not evil ones—be cast from the earth; that our enemies and sinners be subdued and do *teshuva*.

“V’le’malshanim al t’hi tikvah” (*And as for the slanderers, may they not have hope*) “v’chal harishah keregah toveid” (*and may all the evilness in one moment be lost*). “V’chal ovecha maheira yikareitu” (*And may all Your enemies be quickly cut off*) “v’hazeidim maheira t’akeir v’teshabeir v’tachniah bimheira v’yameinu” (*and all the deliberate sinners, quickly uproot, break down, crush and subdue, quickly in our time*). “Baruch Ata, YHVH, shoveir ovim u’machnia zeidim” (*Blessed be You, YHVH, who breaks enemies and subdues deliberate sinners*).

This blessing is the famous 19<sup>th</sup> benediction of the *Amidah* even though the *Amidah* is called the *Shemoneh Esrei*, which means “18”. The sages added this blessing later in Jewish history, when many Jews were collaborating with the Romans who were ruling the country at that time.

It is difficult to imagine that when the sages first composed the *Amidah*, there was no prayer that God protect us from our enemies. After all, the Jewish people have had enemies since the beginning of our history. As we recite in the Passover Haggadah, “In every generation they come upon us to destroy us...” Why, then, did the sages not include this blessing from the very beginning?

At that time in our history, there arose a new enemy—the *malshanim*, slanderers. These were not Non-Jews. They were Jews who were undercover apostates and slandered their fellow Jews to the foreign government ruling in Israel, causing disastrous problems for the community. There were so many *malshanim* at the time that almost every Jew was suspect. The Gemara recalls that if a cantor leading the prayer service began to stutter at his recital of this blessing, he was immediately suspected of being an enemy of the people.

We can still see this problem today. The missionary situation in Israel is quite bad. In fact, a group of missionaries was recently exposed in Meah Shearim, one of the most religious areas of Jerusalem. They were dressed as Chassidim, donning *peyos* (side locks) and taking part in all facets of community life, but they were really there to infiltrate their message of Christianity. There is a similar story about a secretary working in a yeshiva who was actually a missionary. The problem of *malshanim* is not a typical one of outsiders who threaten the Jewish community. It is much more diabolical because these people appear to be our own.

## Compassion on the Enemy

As we learned, the sages and prophets of the Great Assembly wrote the *Amidah* with great precision. Therefore, it was a critical matter to choose the right person to write this additional blessing. After serious deliberation, the Great Assembly chose Shmuel *HaKatan*, “Little Shmuel.”

Why couldn’t any one of the sages write this request? Is it really that difficult to express the desire to wipe out our enemies? Yes, it should indeed be difficult to express such thoughts.

Shmuel *Hakatan* was known in *Pirkei Avos* (part of the Mishna called “Ethics of the Fathers”) for saying, “When your enemy falls, do not take joy.” Someone who finds any joy in destroying another person could not have written this blessing with the necessary precision. Shmuel *HaKatan* had the right intention—love for God, not hate for people. Through the teachings of Shmuel *HaKatan*, we learn that a Jew should want our enemies to do *teshuva* and ascend higher in their service to God.

We now can see the tremendous love for God this blessing required. Anybody can write a blessing that expresses the desire for our enemies to fall. The words “kill them,” “destroy them,” “wipe them from the face of the earth,” come to mind. Only someone with the purest of intentions—solely out of love for God, and without any hate whatsoever—could have the precise attitude required to express the ideal desires of generations of Jewish people.

A close reading of the blessing reveals its accuracy. It does not say, “Slice them into little pieces” or “torture them.” Rather, it describes a corrective process--*tikkun*. We first ask God to cause the “*malshanim al t’hi tikvah*”—to give up all hope that their diabolical scheming will have any impact. Then, “*v’chal harishah keregah toveid*”—within one moment all evil be lost from the earth. Note that it does not ask for “*rashaim*” (evil people) to be lost, but “*rishah*” (evilness).

In his book *Midot Haraaya*, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook explains that whenever Jews pray for God to deal with our enemies, we never pray for the destruction of the enemy himself, only his evilness. We do not want to see people die unless there is no other way to stop them from doing evil.

The continuation of the prayer is provocative: “*V’chal ovecha maheira yikareitu*”—and may all Your enemies be quickly cut off. Cut off from where? Why doesn’t it say, “Kill them”? There are many ways to define the phrase “cut off.” It can mean end their supply, discontinue their support or cause them to lose their footing (and perhaps even their funding), among other things. A careful reading of the *Amidah* reveals that we do not want our enemies to be killed, just defeated.

In the end, we ask God only to subdue them, *tachniah*. But the *teshuva* of our enemies is a long process. First, they must be uprooted so they have no grounding. Then they must be broken down and humbled. We could pray, “May You be abundantly manifest as one who kills and destroys our enemies.” But that’s not how the blessing ends. Instead, it exhorts, “*shoveir ovim u’machnia zeidim*”—May You be abundantly manifest as one who breaks enemies and humbles deliberate sinners.

Clearly, this blessing was written with tremendous love and sensitivity, in the hope that evilness—not evil ones—will be cast from the earth.

Indeed, Judaism teaches that we must not ask for the sinners to be lost from the land, but rather that the sins be lost from the land. We learn this lesson from the Gemara's story of Bruria. The wife of great sage Rebbe Meir, Bruria was well known as a *Talmidah Chachamim*, a woman possessing vast Torah knowledge. The story goes that a man shares with her that there is someone in his community who is harassing him, and he is praying for God to destroy him.

"You fool!" she admonishes him. "The *pasuk* (verse) in Tehillim says, "May the sins be cast off from the land, not the sinners." In other words, we pray that sinners do *teshuva*, not die.

There is a remarkable Midrash that relates that Pharaoh, the one of the greatest enemies of the Jewish people, suffered from leprosy. His advisors tell him that bathing in Jewish blood can cure the ailment, so Pharaoh orders his men to slaughter Jewish children for this purpose. Another Midrash, however, explains that after the exodus from Egypt, Pharaoh does *teshuva* and gets a new job as king of Ninveh. In the story of Yonah, God commands Yonah to go to Ninveh and tell the people there to do *teshuva*. When Yonah finally arrives with God's command, the king says, "I know this God. Let us not start up with Him." All the people of Ninveh then do *teshuva*.

Judaism has such a forgiving attitude toward our enemies that the greatest thing we can do for them is to pray for their *teshuva*. Imagine feeling this way about Arafat, the Jews' current enemy #1. It is an incredible testimony to Judaism that we are supposed to want those who kill us to do *teshuva* rather than die.

## **All for God**

The reason for our extraordinary compassion can be found in the middle of the blessing with the word "*ovecha*," Your enemies. Any enemy of the Jewish people is, more importantly, an enemy of God.

This is Judaism's most fundamental belief. Judaism centers on God's message, to which we bear testimony. This is why the Torah is called a testament. The Jewish people are witnesses of God, and anyone who tries to destroy us is essentially trying to eliminate the testament. A good example is Hilter, whose quest to eliminate God required the extermination of His witnesses.

However, *teshuva*, as we learned, is a long process. As we wait and pray for our enemies to do *teshuva*, we must follow the tenet of Judaism that says that if someone is trying to kill you, you must kill him first. We must protect ourselves from our enemies. For our sake and for God's sake, we must survive.

It is noteworthy, however, that this prayer was not written only for that specific period of Jewish history. The sages, in their wisdom and prophecy, knew that praying for the maintenance of a lawful land would be necessary throughout the

process of national redemption. Indeed, we have been reciting this blessing for hundreds of years.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*After requesting the re-establishment of the Jewish State, exemplifying God's love for law and order, we now ask God to protect the state from rebels who seek undermine our independence and sabotage our national redemption. This request should be said with tremendous love for God and not hate for people. It expresses our hope that evilness—not evil ones—be cast from the earth; that God's enemies and those who sin against Him be subdued and do teshuva.*

*And as for the slanderers, undercover apostates and those who vilify their fellow Jews to foreign governments, **may they not have hope** and therefore, stop scheming against us **and may all the evilness** (not the enemy himself, but only his evilness) **in one moment be lost**. Motivated by our love for You and not because of personal vendetta we ask: **and may all YOUR enemies be quickly cut off** from any backing or support that sustains their wickedness so that they will quickly capitulate in defeat; **and all the deliberate sinners, quickly uproot**, (cause them to lose their footing and falter) **break down, crush and subdue**, (progressively humbling them towards total surrender and teshuva) **quickly in our time. Blessed be You, — May You be abundantly manifest YHVH, who breaks enemies and subdues deliberate sinners.***

*The more we believe that God is always breaking enemies and subduing sinners and we sincerely want to free ourselves from their threat, the more the blessings for national stability can penetrate and become manifest in our national life.*

### *Restore Religious Leadership*

We prayed to return to the Land of Israel, establish government and the removal of anyone who threatens our national stability. Now we ask for the *tzaddikim*—the people of inspiration—to be among us. The request reads:

“*Al hatzaddikim, v'al hachassidim, v'al ziknei Amecha beit Yisrael, v'al pleitat sofreihem*” (On the righteous, on the chassidim, on the elders of your nation, on the House of Israel, and on the remnants of their scholars), “*v'al gerei hatzeddek, v'aleinu*” (and the righteous converts and ourselves): “*Yehemu Rachamecha, YHVH Eloheinu, v'tein schar tov l'chal habotechim b'shimcha be'emet*” (May your compassion be upon them, YHVH Our God, and give good reward to all those who trust in your name truly.) “*V'sim chelkeinu imahem l'olam, v'lo neivosh, ki v'cha b'tachnu*” (And put our portion among them forever, and we will not be embarrassed because in you we put our trust). “*Baruch Ata, YHVH, mish'an u'mivtach latzaddikim*” (Blessed are You, YHVH, who is a trust and an assurance to the *tzaddikim*).

In this blessing, we turn our attention to our nation's spiritual *teshuva* and redemption. Appointing judges and advisors to restore the nation's physical prosperity was the final step in our physical *teshuva*. Now we must ensure that there are leaders who can generate our nation's spiritual growth — the *tzaddikim* and *chassidim*.

### **Keeping the Faith**

*Tzaddikim* and *chassidim* are our inspirational models. They radiate the joy of living a life dedicated to actualizing divine values and ideals. They remind us that the State of Israel does not exist for the purpose of marketing Jaffa oranges. Rather, we have returned to our land to nurture within us and export to the world *emunah*—dedication to the ways of God.

One of the pitfalls in the courageous and difficult task of establishing the State of Israel is the possibility that some of us will believe this accomplishment is our own doing and deny the incredible divine providence that went into it. We need spiritual leaders to remind us that our worldly accomplishments are blessings from God, and we must always seek His partnership and providence. We pray that God have compassion upon them and give good reward to all those who trust in your name truly.

What epitomizes these spiritual models is not their trust in God but their sincere trust in the *name* of God. What's in a name?

Perhaps you've experienced sitting on a train next to a stranger. You are sitting there and he's sitting there, and a couple hours into the trip you start up a conversation. He mentions that he owns a small printing company, so you understand that he is a business man. Then you start talking about your families, and you find out that he has a wife and four children. So, he's a husband and a father. Then you ask



him why he's on his way to Philadelphia, and he tells you that he's going to visit his mother because she fell and broke her leg. So you find out that he's also a son, and a rather caring son. You're going on with this intense conversation for hours, and you realize that you don't know his name. You feel this awkward hesitation and you're wondering, "Should I ask him his name?" Finally you say, "What's your name?" And he hesitates for a bit, thinking, "Hmm, should I give him my name?" What's the big deal about a name? You already know that he's a businessman and a husband and a father and a son, and five years ago he and his wife did ten months of marriage counseling, which didn't help much, but he's hesitant to tell you his name.

Have you ever been in that situation, where you know seemingly everything about a person, but you don't know his or her name? Why is it that some of us feel uncomfortable asking a person his or her name? Very often people will start off a conversation asking, "Where are you from?" or "What do you do?" or "How long will you be here?" But most people are, for some reason, uncomfortable starting off a conversation with "Hi, what's your name?"

What's really in a name? When you tell someone your name you establish a direct relationship, essence to essence, soul to soul. Everything else you revealed until now -- that you are a businessman, father, husband, son -- add up to titles; they're not your name. They express formal relationships, but not a direct intimate connection.

One of the great mysteries about God and gift from God is that He has given us His name. He has committed to us that all we have to do is call and He will be there. He wants a relationship with us. He wants to be ever present in our lives.

The spiritual greats are people who trust in God's name. They constantly invite God into their life and commune with Him daily.

We ask God to give a good reward to all those who genuinely trust in His name -- "*V'tein schar tov l'chal habotechim b'shimcha be'emet.*" As straightforward as this prayer may seem, it begs a question: Is there really such a thing as a bad reward?

Some commentators explain that a good reward is one that we can all see as being good. Pain, for instance, does not look good to us. While the Torah teaches that everything God does is for our good, it is still very difficult for us to see pain as positive. Therein begs the eternal question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" The Torah teaches that "bad things" only look bad; they too are actually good although hidden. In this blessing, therefore, we pray for God to bring to all who trust in His name rewards that we can all clearly see as good. Then we will all feel inspired to be like them, counted amongst them, because we clearly recognize the benefits of a vibrant relationship with God. And we will naturally ask, "*V'sim chelkeinu imahem l'olam, v'lo neivosh, ki v'cha b'tachnu*" (And put our portion among them forever, and we will not be embarrassed because in you we put our trust).

Once we ourselves become counted amongst these greats, who sincerely trust in God's name, we will no longer suffer the embarrassment that we only trusted in God and put in no effort of our own. In other words, to only trust in God is really an

embarrassment to a Jew who should know better. God has established a relationship of covenant with us. He wants us to be powerful, confident and resourceful. He does not want us to just rely on Him and contribute nothing. Rather He wants us to participate, as His covenantal partners, in determining our future. We pray to be amongst those who trust in God's name and not just in God.

We benefit the most from our spiritual leaders when we live amongst them and encounter them in situations of everyday life. Just glimpsing a *tzaddik* can be an uplifting experience. Rav Avigdor HaLevi Nevenzhal, the chief rabbi of the Old City of Jerusalem, is a perfect example. Simply seeing him is an inspiration. First of all, he wears his *tefillin* all day long, rather than just during *Shacharit*, the morning prayer service. And wherever Rav Nevenzhal goes, he is always learning. When he walks down the street, you will see him peering into a Gemara, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings yet acutely aware of them. I once saw him giving *tzeddaka* as he walked through the Jewish Quarter. Long before he approached the person, he reached into his pocket and readied his money, saving the person the embarrassment of having to ask. It is an experience just to watch him buy milk at the supermarket. The way he relates to the cashier and the various people in the store is truly heart-warming and inspiring. Living amid this kind of spiritual greatness is what we are now praying for.

### **Form and Substance—The Natural Order**

After completing our request for our nation's physical come back, we are now able to fully address the need for a national spiritual revival. Interestingly, the order of asking first for physical *teshuva* and then for spiritual *teshuva* is exactly how the historic events have transpired for the Jewish people in the State of Israel.

According to the late Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, the return of the Jewish people and the establishment of the State of Israel mirror the building of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple). It was first built in the status of *chulin*, meaning in a secular, non-holy way. Only after the physical building was complete could the people sanctify it by giving it its spiritual purpose; dedicating it exclusively towards the service of God. So too, now that the secular State of Israel is firmly established we must ensure that it does not just provide our nations physical needs but serves to fulfill God's universal goals. The State of Israel is meant to be a state of consciousness and a wellspring of holy inspiration for the world.

From the order of the *Amidah* we learn an important lesson about the natural order of things. First comes substance, and then comes form. As Rav Kook explains, in spiritual terms, we start with the secular (*chol*) and then create the holy (*kodesh*). As substance and form are not opposites, neither are *chol* and *kodesh*. Rather, they are mutually exclusive. Imagine a plastic box: The substance is plastic, and the form is the box. Now imagine that you have a hunk of metal. Without form, it is practically worthless. Once you give the metal form, you are left with countless items of great use and value.

The same goes with the spiritual. The stronger the substance, the better the potential for holiness. According to Rav Kook, in the time of *Moshiach*, we will be tasked with bringing the form of holiness (*kedusha*) to the material state. We are

thrilled to see young robust Israeli, tall skyscrapers in Tel Aviv and shopping malls in Afula. This is all part of our national redemption. The physical substance of nationhood will become complete when it will receive the form of holiness and become a sanctuary for the living presence of God; the actualization of divine values and ideals.

### ***Summary and Paraphrased***

*After completing our requests for our nation's physical teshuva, (prosperity of the land, the in-gathering of the people, statehood and protection from rebels), we now express our concern for our nation's spiritual revival. The State of Israel does not just provide for our nation's physical needs it also serves to fulfil God's universal goals. The physical State of Israel is also meant to be a spiritual state of consciousness; a holy wellspring of inspiration for the whole world. Judges and advisors address our nation's physical prosperity but tzaddikim and chassidim are spiritual leaders who inspire us towards spiritual growth and the fulfilment of our national mission. Tzaddikim and chassidim remind us that the State of Israel does not exist for the sole purpose of marketing hi-tech, agricultural produce, etc.. Rather, we have returned to our land to nurture within us and export to the world **emunah**—dedication to the ways of God.*

***On the tzaddikim (righteous), on the chassidim (devout), on the elders of the remainder of Your people the family of Israel, on the remnants of the academy of their scholars, on the righteous converts – all who radiate the joy of living a life dedicated to actualizing Torah values and ideals and on ourselves -- may Your compassion be upon us, YHVH our God, and give visibly good reward to all those who trust in Your name truly; so that we can clearly recognize the benefits to those who enjoy a vibrant relationship with You, constantly calling Your name, inviting You into their lives and communing with You daily. And we will then naturally desire that You put our portion among them forever. And we will no longer feel ashamed over the fact that in only You we put our trust but not in Your name. Unlike the tzaddikim who trust in Your name, we just relied on You and, therefore, did not properly actualize ourselves to contribute efforts of our own. We forgot that You empowered us to call Your name, confidently stand before You and determine with You, as Your covenantal partners, our future. Blessed are You, -- May You, YHVH, be abundantly manifest as one, who is a trust and an assurance to the tzaddikim.***

*The more we believe that God is always supporting the tzaddikim and we sincerely want to be inspired by them and take our place amongst them, the more the blessing of the tzaddikim can become manifest to inspire a national spiritual renaissance.*

*Rebuild Jerusalem*  
*The Epicenter for Global Redemption*

It is strange that, after praying for our return to the Land of Israel and the establishment of statehood, we make a separate request for Jerusalem, Israel's capital and holiest city. But as we have seen throughout our analysis, the blessings of the *Amidah* seem to follow the same order as modern events have actually transpired. In 1948, we returned to the Land of Israel, but we didn't regain control of the Old City of *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) until the War of 1967.

The blessing reads: “*V’liYerushalayim Irecha b’rachamim tashuv,*” (And to Jerusalem, Your city, may You return in compassion), “*v’tishkon b’tochah ca’asher Dibarta*” (and dwell therein as You spoke of). “*U’vnei otah b’karov b’yameinu binyan olam*” (And build it, soon in our days, into an eternal building). “*V’kisei David, maheira l’tochah tachin*” (And the throne of David, establish within it). “*Baruch Ata, YHVH, bonei Yerushalayim*” (Blessed are You, YHVH, who is building Jerusalem).

What exactly is Jerusalem, and why is it so special to deserve its own prayer? Jerusalem isn't simply a city in Israel. Jerusalem represents the spiritual center of the Jewish nation—and indeed of the whole the world.

David ben Gurion, the State of Israel's first prime minister, described Jerusalem as “the heart of Israel,” and warned that if we lose the heart, we would lose all of Israel. In spiritual terms, we can imagine that half of Israel's heart is the *tzaddikim*—the people of inspiration, while the other half is Jerusalem—the city of inspiration. We see the connection between *tzaddikim* and Jerusalem in the very first word of this blessing: “*V’*,” which means “And.” This signifies that the prayer for Jerusalem is a continuation of the prayer for *tzaddikim*. First, we asked for the physical redemption of Israel, then its spiritual redemption. Jerusalem is the heart of our spiritual renaissance of the land and the *tzaddikim* are the heart of the spiritual renaissance of the people; they're inspiring the religious revival.

### **Jerusalem's Allure**

This request is full of hints to Jerusalem's uniqueness. Indeed, there is something about Jerusalem that makes it more special than any other city in the world. Let's first take a look at how the blessing ends: “*Blessed are You, YHVH, who is building Jerusalem.*” As we discuss earlier the concluding blessing is in the present tense. Therefore here too, God is always building Jerusalem. The question is, do we notice it? Even when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jewish people were banished into our current 2,000-year-old exile, it was all part of the building of Jerusalem. Compare it to planting a seed; the rotting is the beginning of the blossoming.

The blessing also describes Jerusalem as “Your city”—meaning, the city of God. People of every religion, from all over the world, come to Jerusalem to experience the city's nearly tangible spirituality. As the Torah teaches us, right behind the Western Wall, where the Moslems' Dome of the Rock currently stands, is the

Temple Mount—the site of both the first and second *Beit HaMikdash*. It is also the exact point where God created the world, and the spot where Jacob's ladder and the Binding of Isaac took place. The Western Wall itself, according to Jewish tradition, is a physical reminder for the Jewish people that God is still with us despite the exile. Clearly, Jerusalem is deeply identified with the presence of God. For even the most non-religious, the spirituality is so strong you can feel it even though you can't touch it.

Jerusalem has an aura of timelessness, which is reflected in its' architecture. In fact, Israel has an architectural law that requires all structures in Jerusalem to be built of Jerusalem stone. Both these physical and spiritual qualities give Jerusalem a special inspirational ambiance. The prayer attests to this unique quality when it expresses, "build it quickly as an eternal structure (*binyan olam*).” A *binyan olam* could signify a building that lasts forever, or a building of forever-ness, where we sense timelessness. The difference is that an "eternal building" lasts for eternity, while a "building of eternity" embodies eternity. When you come to Jerusalem, you feel the eternal.

While holiness of Jerusalem exceeds any other place on earth, it is true that other cities have their own unique energy. When I traveled to England, I remember thinking that London felt very majestic. There's something about the city and its people that gives off an ambiance of "the Queen lives here." Everywhere I looked—not only at Buckingham Palace, where the guards looked like regal Chassidim wearing *shtraimels*—there were hedges cut in perfect geometrical shapes. Even in Hyde Park, the ducks seemed to be on duty.

Paris has a completely different ambiance. Paris is romantic. It must be something about the cafes, museums and people strolling along the *Champs Elysee*. Then there's Los Angeles, where you feel that you are perpetually hearing the Beach Boys. Everyone there is relaxed, and it feels as though the California Raisin is going to surf right by you.

When you come to Jerusalem, the ambiance is *kedusha*, holiness. Although you can't touch it with your hands you can feel it with your heart and soul. And a holy city is exactly what we are now praying for. The psalmist praised that "from Zion will come forth Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem." The Torah is the word of God, His timeless message revealed over 3,500 years ago. However, the "word of God that comes from Jerusalem" refers to the personal ongoing connection to God that is happening right now -- transmitted to the rest of the world through Jerusalem.

According to our tradition, underneath the Temple Mount is something called *Even Shetiyah*—the drinking rock. The Zohar teaches that the word *shetiyah* stands for *Shat Ya*. *Ya* is one of the names of God, and the letters *shin taf* form the root of the word "drink." Therefore, we drink the waters of God from here. The entire world draws its spiritual sustenance from this place. There is an Oral Tradition that relates that *Shlomo HaMelech* (King Solomon) understood how the spiritual energies of the world emerged from the Temple Mount and traveled outward to the rest of the world. He planted around Jerusalem rows of various agricultural species—plants and trees—based on the unique vectors of spiritual energy emerging from Jerusalem to nourish the rest of the world.

## A Prayer for God

The return to Jerusalem, epitomized by the Temple Mount and the *Even Hashetiyah*, represents not only the religious return of our people, but the return of the *Shechina* (God's presence).

Think about how far we have come in our *tefillah*. We started the *Amidah* by humbly asking that God give us knowledge, and now we are saying, "And to Jerusalem, Your city, with compassion return (*tashuv*), and dwell within it as You said." These words essentially mean, "May You, God, do *teshuva*." Just as we were displaced by our wrongdoings, God too was displaced by our wrongdoings. We now ask that the *Shechina* also return from exile and come home.

This is amazing. Before we were praying to God and now we are praying for God. We're asking for God to come back to Jerusalem, to build, dwell there and establish the throne of David as a precursor to universal redemption.

### Summary and Paraphrased

*Jerusalem isn't just another city in Israel. Jerusalem is the spiritual wellspring for the Jewish nation—and indeed for the whole the world. We say "And Jerusalem" because our request for the restoration of Jerusalem is a continuation of the prayer for tzaddikim. Whereas the tzaddikim inspire our people to become a Torah nation, Jerusalem inspires our people to become an exemplary spiritual nation; a light unto the nations of the world. And through Jerusalem the whole world enjoys a personal ongoing connection to God, as the psalmist praised "from Zion will come forth Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem."*

*Until now we prayed to God but in this request we begin to pray for God. We ask God to come back to Jerusalem, dwell there and establish the throne of David as a precursor to global redemption.*

***And to Jerusalem, Your city*** where Your presence was once most manifest, ***may You return in compassion, and dwell therein as You spoke of.*** We know that just as we were exiled by our wrongdoings, God, You too were exiled by our wrongdoings; Your presence is no longer manifest. We now ask that You also come home; that Your presence once again be manifest in Jerusalem and from there to the whole world. ***And build it, soon in our days, into a 'binyan olam'*** -- an "eternal building" that lasts for eternity and a "building of eternity" which embodies eternity; where we sense Your timeless presence. ***And the throne of David, establish within it*** as a precursor to global redemption when the whole world will feel Your presence everywhere. ***Blessed be You*** -- May you be abundantly manifest ***YHVH***, as one ***who is building*** right now ***Jerusalem.***

*The more we believe that God is always building Jerusalem as His centre from where global redemption will unfold and we sincerely want to Jerusalem to be that spiritual epicenter, the more the blessings for global redemption can become manifest.*

*Expedite the Messianic Process  
for Your Salvation*

We have asked for God's return to Jerusalem and that the city house the throne of David -- ready to become the launching headquarters for a worldwide spiritual renaissance. Now we ask for the *Moshiach* (Messiah). This blessing reads:

“Et tzemach David Avdecha maheira tatzmiach” (May the offspring of David, your servant, quickly flourish). “V’karno tarum biYeshuatecha” (And enhance his pride through Your salvation). “Ki liYeshuat’cha kivinu kal hayom” (Because for Your salvation, we have hoped for all the day). “Baruch Ata, YHVH, matzmiach keren yeshua” (Blessed be You, God, who is causing the flourishing of salvation).

With this request for the *tzemach*, offspring of David, we shift our attention away from national *teshuva* and now focus on universal *teshuva*. Let's take a look at who the *Moshiach ben David* really is and what his presence means for the world.

### **Judaism's Two Messiahs**

According to our Oral Tradition, there are two Messiahs: *Moshiach ben Yosef* and *Moshiach ben David*. The concept of two separate *Moshiachs* is not often discussed in Judaism in order to minimize the confusion that people may have between the Jewish belief and the Christian idea of a second coming. The Jewish concept of the Messiah has nothing to do with the Christian version, as we will see.

There is an opinion among our sages that *Moshiach ben Yosef* will be killed. (It does not, however, say that he will be revived for a second coming.) Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook explains that *Moshiach ben Yosef* is a nationalistic *Moshiach*, tasked with bringing national redemption to the Jewish people. In fact, any person that participates in the building of the Land of Israel, Rav Kook explains, embodies some of the spirit of *Moshiach ben Yosef*.

So why must *Moshiach ben Yosef* be killed? Rav Kook explains that when our nationalistic redemption evolves to an extreme level, in which we become preoccupied with ourselves and forget about our universal mission to be a light unto the nations, then *Moshiach ben Yosef* must give way for the coming of *Moshiach ben David*. When we care only about our own redemption and we lose our concern for the redemption of the rest of the world, *Moshiach ben Yosef* must be eliminated.

*Moshiach ben Yosef* accomplishes, as God's agent, national redemption. At that time we will enjoy full sovereignty over the entire land of Israel and live in peace. *Moshiach ben David*, however, comes to achieve universal redemption. At that time nations will no longer war with each other. They will beat their swords and spears into plows and world peace will reign supreme.

Rav Kook also explains that *Moshiach ben David* “will connect all other religions into the *Etz Chaim*” (the Torah is often referred to as “The Tree of Life”). At

that time, the truths within the various religions will shine through and the falsehoods will be exposed. He explains that all the religions of the world are rooted into the Torah. However, because these traditions have been severed from the Torah they read out of context and many falsities arose. When *Moshiach ben David* comes, these falsifications and perversions will be corrected and the entire world will live according to the Torah's values and ideals.

### **God's Own Redemption**

A close look at the prayer reveals other remarkable concepts: 1) the *Moshiach* does not appear suddenly, and 2) God Himself is in exile.

The Hebrew word *tzemach* (offspring) literally means, "sprouting," suggesting a process like a flower growing. Therefore, the words "*Tzemach David*" indicates that the coming of *Moshiach ben David* is a growth process. The continuation of the prayer, "*maheira tatzmiach*," is translated as, "cause it to quickly grow." The prayer conveys that, like personal *teshuva*, national *teshuva* is a process, and one that we ask God to beget quickly.

Next we say, "*Ki liYeshuat'cha kivinu kal hayom*" (Because for Your salvation we have hoped for all the day). There are two ways of reading the phrase "Your salvation." It could mean, "salvation that comes from You," or "salvation that happens to You for Your sake;" in other words, "You, God, need to be saved."

Imagine, according to this second understanding we are actually praying for God to be saved. How can this be? Judaism explains that God is in exile. When we do not acknowledge the presence of God in our lives and in the world around us, God is exiled from the world, as we perceive it. Although God is omnipresent, He is like a stranger among us—no one recognizes Him as the King.

The Midrash teaches that Avraham Avinu was the first person to redeem God. He acknowledged God's presence and served to make God manifest in the world.

In this blessing, we are not only praying for universal redemption, but for God's own redemption. At this point in the *Amidah*, our stature in God's presence has evolved to a very high level. We began the *Amidah* requesting salvation for ourselves then progressed to asking for redemption of our nation and the world at large. Now we are praying for salvation of God Himself.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*In the last prayer we asked that Jerusalem house the throne of David to become the launching headquarters for a worldwide spiritual renaissance. We now request for Moshiach, the offspring of David, who will bring about global teshuva; nations will not longer war with each other and everyone will live according to the Torah's values and ideals.*



*In this prayer, however, we not only express concern for global salvation, but also for God's own redemption. At this point in the Amidah, our stature and confidence has evolved to a very high level. We began the Amidah requesting personal redemption. We then turned our concerns towards national redemption and then the world at large. But now we pray for the salvation of God Himself.*

***May the offspring of David, your servant, quickly flourish,** but not appear suddenly. May his coming be like a growing flower; giving us time to appreciate the process and be prepared. **And enhance his pride with Your salvation** (our salvation that comes from You and Your salvation that happens to You) **because for Your salvation** (and not just our own) **we have hoped for all the day.** Because we transgressed Your will we banished Your presence from our lives. May the pride of Moshiach be enhanced with Your salvation, when Your exiled presence will be restored on earth and acknowledged by us all. **Blessed be You,** -- May you be abundantly manifest **YHVH,** as one **who is causing right now the flourishing of salvation** (ours and Yours).*

*The more we believe that God is always causing the flourishing of salvation and we sincerely want to salvation, His and ours, the more the blessings for an all-inclusive salvation can become manifest.*

### *Hear and Receive Our Prayers*

So far in the *Amidah*, we have asked for *teshuva* on several levels: for ourselves as individuals, for the Jewish nation, for the whole world, and even for God's own presence. Now, in this next request, we ask God to assure us that He is attentive to our prayers and present in our lives.

The blessing reads: "*Shema koleinu, YHVH, Eloheinu, chus v'racheim aleinu*" (Listen to our voices, YHVH, our God, have piety and compassion upon us). "*V'kabel b'rachamim u'veratzon et tefillateinu*" (Receive with compassion and with will our prayers). "*Ki Eil shomei'ah tefillot v'tachanunin Ata*" (Because You are a Divine Power who hears prayers and supplications). "*U'milfanecha Malkeinu reikam al tashiveinu*" (And from before You, our King, don't send us away empty-handed). "*Ki Ata shomei'ah tefillat Amecha Yisrael b'rachamim*" (Because You listen to the prayers of Your nation Israel with compassion). "*Baruch Ata, YHVH, shomei'ah tefillah*" (Blessed are You, YHVH, who hears prayer).

Note that we do not say to God, "*aneinu*"—*answer* our prayers. Rather, we are asking that God *hear* our prayers and not send us away empty-handed. Even if God does not give us specifically what we are asking for, we still hope that He will give us something as an indication that He is listening. All that really matters to us is to know and feel that God is relating to us; that He is ever present in our lives.

In other words we are asking, "Please God, whether or not You give me what I have requested, all I really want is to know and feel that You are listening; that You are with me. My requests until now are all rooted in just one fundamental desire -- to bond with You. My greatest joy in life is to have You in my life. So whether You bless me with health, wealth, children etc.... all that really matters to me is to feel Your presence. This is Your gift to me. So please don't send me away empty-handed."

Knowing that God is listening is the only answer we really need to our prayers. His specific answers should not be our concern. We must remember that God knows better than we do about what we need and when we need it.

### **The Power of Voice**

Rather than starting with, "Listen to our words," the prayer begins, "*Shema koleinu*—Listen to our *voice*." This statement sounds somewhat like a demand. To say to God "Listen to our voices"—is quite assertive. We are telling God, "Regardless of what I say, listen to me. My voice should be enough for You to give me Your attention." This is indeed a bold statement. After all, it is difficult to imagine that our little voice holds any significance to God. And yet this prayer reminds us that it does--because God loves us.

We can liken this to the story in *Bereishit* when God says to Avraham, “Listen to the voice of your wife.” The Midrash explains that Sarah had greater *ruach hakodesh* (Divine intuition) than Avraham did. With this statement, God was telling Avraham, “If your wife voices her opinion, listen to it whether her words make sense to you or not.” *Shema koleinu* is the same assertion. We are telling God to listen to us as His beloved children, whether or not what we are ready or worthy to receive what we have asked for.

## **The Gift of Prayer**

The prayer continues, “*V’kabeil b’rachamim u’veratzon et tefillateinu*” (Receive with compassion and with will our prayers). The word *kabeil*, receive, connotes that prayer is something we give God and He desirously accepts. In other words, our prayers are our gift to God. In fact, the oral tradition teaches that prayer, which is referred to as *avodah*, or work, is of lofty necessity to God. God needs our prayers. This is because without our prayers, God cannot give us His presence. Such is the dynamic of all loving relationships. Unless I truly value and want your love I will not be receptive to it. Even if you were to shower me with endless gifts I will not feel your love unless I open my eyes to it, value it, want it and ready myself to receive it.

The Kabbalah teaches that God wants to give us the joy of bonding with Him. But unless we value and want that experience and properly prepare ourselves to welcome God into our lives we will not be receptive to His gift. Even though God is always showering us with His love and is forever near to us unless we want to feel that connection we won’t.

For example, let’s say I tell you that I need to talk and invite you to come by my house tonight around 8:00. On your way over you think, “Hmm, I usually eat dinner at 8:00, and David didn’t invite me for dinner. Maybe I should first grab a bite to eat so that I’m fully able to hear what he wants to discuss with me.” So you stop for a burger and fries and then make your way to my house.

Meanwhile, I am preparing a surprise party for you, complete with a gourmet meal of everything that I know you love to eat. When you arrive, I rush you into the house, fling open the dining room doors and yell, “Surprise!” There, on the table, is an incredible feast of all your favorite delicacies. But you’re not hungry.

Because you don’t want to hurt my feelings, you eat what I have prepared for you. But you really did not get the pleasure I intended because you were not hungry. In fact, not only did you not enjoy the food it made you sick.

So too unless we are hungry for God we do not appreciate His presence. When you pray you are telling God – I’ve got to get You into my life!

## **Building Our Will**

We find a peculiar verse in the book of Genesis that reads, “No vegetation of

the field had yet sprung up because Hashem had not caused it to rain on earth and there was not a man to till the ground.” The great Torah commentator Rashi explains that in order for God cause rain, there had to have been a human being who recognized the goodness of rain and prayed for it. In other words, our desire for rain is the necessary receptacle to receive it.

The purpose of prayer is to express and establish our will to receive God’s intended blessings. The more we want God’s presence and abundance in our lives, the more God is able to give it to us. The *Amidah*, therefore, guides us towards awakening and aligning our will to want what God has always wanted to give us.

The have heard Kabbalists give some interesting advice to men and women who are looking for a *shidduch* (marriage partner). A woman should buy a *tallis* (prayer shawl) for her future husband, and a man should buy candlesticks for his future wife. It may seem odd to buy a gift for someone we do not know, but doing so arouses our will and anticipation for our life partner. Demonstrating our earnest will to get married creates the space for it to happen. This applies to everything in our life.

There is a famous story about a couple who did not have children after many years of marriage. Every year they visited their Rebbe to receive a *bracha* for children. One day, some friends, who also did not yet have children, came to town. Although these friends were not followers of the Rebbe, the couple convinced them to get a *bracha* from him to have children. They agreed to see the Rebbe, and that year they had a child.

Of course, the first couple felt quite challenged. “Wait a second,” they said. “We are devotees of the Rebbe and every year we go to him for a *bracha*, and yet we haven’t had a child. Our friends, who don’t even know the Rebbe, came only once for a *bracha*, and already have a child!”

On their next visit, they ask the Rebbe, “We don’t understand. Why were our friends blessed with a child and we were not?”

The Rebbe said, “In all these years that you have come to me for a *bracha*, did you ever go out and buy yourself a baby carriage?”

“No,” they admitted.

“Well, your friends did,” the Rebbe told them. “They decided, ‘That’s it! We are preparing ourselves for a child.’ They expressed their confidence and burning desire to receive. This became their receptacle for children.”

You now may be wondering whether such actions may just set yourself up for disappointment. The answer is, no.

God knows what is best for us. Therefore, if God decides not to grant someone children, then being childless is what that person needs. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, as an example, did not have children. On the other hand, he had thousands of students who he loved like his own children. We must remember the goal is not to have children but

to bond with God and God will always give us what we need to reach that goal.

When we pray, we are building our will into the receptacle to receive God's blessings. For example, the more we acknowledge that God is always building Jerusalem and we truly want Jerusalem rebuilt, the more we will see God building Jerusalem. The more we acknowledge that God heals the sick and truly want health, the more we are going to see God's healing power become manifest in the world.

Our gift to God is our earnest will to receive God's gift to us. Therefore, we pray that He accepts our prayers.

The Talmud teaches that Sara, Rivka and Rachel were barren because God desires the prayers of the righteous. It was not until they each prayed fervently to God that they were blessed with children. To those new at learning the Talmud, this reason may sound harsh and even faulty. After all, what kind of God withholds something from a person to make him pray? Does God seek to boost His ego? Clearly, this is not what the Talmud means. God desires our prayers because without us asking, God cannot bless us with the gifts He longs to give. The more we anticipate and more hunger God's presence and abundance, the more He can give it to us. Until we crave for what God has been waiting to give us we will not appreciate it nor enjoy it.

Rav Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch, illuminates the verse in *Tehillim* (Psalms), "He will make the will of those who revere Him, and He will hear their cry and will save them" (145:19). God "makes" our will, Rav Dov Baer explains, by orchestrating situations in life to get us to want what He wants to give us. To do so, He withholds from us or gives us challenges to help us embrace what is truly worth desiring.

As a friend of mine once explained to me, people are unhappy because they want what they cannot have, and they don't want what they already have. We can alleviate this cycle of negativity in two ways. First, we must learn to want what we already have and be grateful to God. And if we don't, then we will not be ready to receive anything more. Next, we need to learn to desire what God wants to give us. When our will is aligned with God's will and we sincerely ask for what God has wanted to give us all along then His blessings flow freely into our lives.

### ***What's in it for God?***

Why should God receive our prayers with will? "*Ki Eil shomei'ah tefillot v'tachanunin Ata*—because You are a Divine Power who hears prayers and supplications." In other words, this is who You are and this is what You do. Here is an opportunity for You to manifest Your presence in our lives which is the purpose of creation.

There is a distinct tone of humility here because we are saying, "We have no reason for You to listen to our prayer for our own sake, but please do it for Your sake.

We then, however, confidently continue and request, "*U'milfanecha Malkeinu reikam al tashiveinu*" (And from before You, **our King**, don't send us away empty-

handed). “*Ki Ata shomei’ah tefillat Amecha Yisrael b’rachamim*” (Because You listen to the prayers of **Your nation Israel** with compassion).

In other words, “God, You our King and, therefore, as Your royal subjects we are important to You. If You send us away empty handed it will appear as if You don’t care about Your own kingdom, which will reflect poorly back on You.”

We are not asking that our prayers be answered for our sake. Rather, we want God to answer our prayers for His sake. We are praying for Him to listen to us and accept our prayers so that He can be who He is—a compassionate King who gives us a small sign that shows the world that He indeed listens to and cares about His nation. It doesn’t matter to us if God responds to our particular requests because we know that what we are specially asking for may not be what we need or are ready for right now.

### **Reaching the Peak**

The essence of our request is about listening and being attentive to us. We are praying for a manifestation of God as one who listens, but not necessarily as a God who answers. We humbly acknowledge that it may not be the right time to get the answer. We are simply seeking a sign so that the world can see that God is indeed listening.

People mistakenly think that God serves them. God is our waiter; we put in an order for this, we put in an order for that. This confusion is what the words *shema koleinu* clarify. *Shema koleinu*—the request for an intimate relationship with God in which we experience His attention and care—is the peak of our previous requests.

The prayer ends, “Blessed Be You, YHVH, Who hears prayers”—not “who answers prayers.” To know that God cares and hears our prayers is redemption itself.

Just as King David said in the Psalms, “I have one request and only this I ask, to sit in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to be involved with the delight of God and visit His chamber.”

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*This request is the culmination of all our previous requests. The prayer ends, “Blessed Be You, YHVH, Who hears prayers”—not “who answers prayers.” To know that God hears our prayers and cares about us is redemption itself. We only ask that God not send us away empty handed; that He assure us that indeed He is our compassionate King. Our only real request is, “God, I just want to feel close to You. I know that You’re listening and I know that You’ll answer. I don’t know if I’ll get the answer I asked for, but that doesn’t matter, because all I want is to feel You in my life.”*

*Rather than starting with, “Listen to our words,” we assert, “Shema koleinu—Listen to our voices.” In other words, “Regardless of what we say, listen to us. Just our*

*voice should be enough for You to give us Your attention.” This is indeed a bold statement. It is difficult to imagine that our little voice holds any significance to God and yet it does -- because God loves us.*

***Listen to our voices, YHVH, our God, have piety and compassion upon us. Receive*** as our gift to You, ***with compassion and with will, our prayers.*** Our gift to You, God, is our earnest will to receive Your gifts to us. Because the more desirous and receptive we are to Your blessings the more You can give them to us. And please listen and accept our prayers ***because You are a Divine Power who hears prayers and supplications.*** We ask that You hear our prayers for Your sake – not ours. Because when Your love for us is manifest Your purpose for creation is fulfilled. ***And from before You, our King, don’t send us away empty-handed;*** even a small indication that You are with us is enough because all along we really have but one desire -- to feel Your presence. Our King, answer our meagre request for Your sake; ***because You listen to the prayers of Your nation Israel with compassion.*** Otherwise, it will appear as if You don’t care about Your own kingdom. ***Blessed be You,*** -- May You be abundantly manifest ***YHVH,*** as one ***who hears*** right now ***prayer.*** The only answer we really need to all our prayers is to know that You listen and care.

*The more we believe that God is always hearing us and caring for us and we sincerely want to feel His loving presence in our lives, indeed the more this truth becomes manifest.*

*Empower Us to Give Ourselves to You  
& Behold Your Presence*

We have thus far asked God to help us accomplish personal *teshuva* as members of the collective Jewish community. We then expressed our concern for national *teshuva*; that our people return to our homeland and establish a state. We next prayed for a global *teshuva*; that Jerusalem, command central for Moshiach, be restored and that Moshiach come. After we have expressed our desire for individual, national and global return to God we now pray for God's *teshuva*, "May we see with our eyes Your return to Zion." In other words, we pray that God be redeemed from exile and return to us. This follows, in fact, what God promises us, "Return to Me and I will return to You." We also express in this prayer our concern for God's pleasure. Let's take a look at this peculiar request.

*"Retzeih, YHVH, Eloheinu, b'Amecha Yisrael uv'tefillatam"* (Take pleasure YHVH, our God, in Your nation Israel and their prayers), *"v'hasheiv et ha'avodah lidvir Beitecha"* (and return the service to the chamber of Your house). *"V'ishei Yisrael u'tefillatam b'ahavah tekabeil b'ratzon, u'tehi l'ratzon tamid avodat Yisrael Amecha"* (And may the fire of Israel and their prayers, with love, be received with will. And may the service of Israel, Your nation, always be according to Your will).

*"V'techazena eineinu b'Shuvecha l'Tzion b'rachamim"* (And may we see with our eyes Your return to Zion). *"Baruch Ata, YHVH, hamachazir Shechinato l'Tzion"* (Blessed be You, YHVH, who is returning His Divine Presence to Zion).

*Retzeih* can be translated in two ways. According to the Rav S.R. Hirsch Siddur (prayer book) it means "take pleasure." However others translate it as, "May You be pleased." In either case, we are essentially saying, "God, we hope that we and our prayers have been pleasing and pleasurable to you. We hope that You have enjoyed our prayers because we did not pray just for our own sake but also for Your sake; to give You pleasure."

Judaism considers prayer to be an *avodah*—a service to God. How could our prayers be a service to God when, in fact, our whole prayer is asking Him to do for us and serve our needs? What pleasure could our prayers give God when, in fact, we are asking God to give to us?

And yet Judaism teaches that God desires our prayers and, so to speak, enjoys them. How so?

### **Feeling God's Presence**

As we learned in the last chapter, God wants to give us the greatest pleasure—His presence in our lives; to feel connected to Him. We are therefore, commanded, "To love the Lord your God, listen to His voice and bond to Him because He is your life (Deut 30:20)." In other words, you should love God because "God is your life": the very life force within every fiber of your being. Loving God is, therefore, synonymous with loving life. The Torah teaches, "You who are bonded with the Lord, your God, are alive, totally, today" (Deuteronomy, 4:4). The more connected we feel



to God the more alive we feel. How can we know if we are truly bonding with God? It's when we feel totally alive; when our entire being is filled with a phenomenal vitality that we know we cannot honestly call our own or refer to as *my* life.

We feel God's presence when we realize that our willpower, wisdom, insights and love are really not ours but His and experience ourselves as merely serving to channel His powers into the world. In this state of connectivity we feel the joy of purposeful and meaningful living. We also experience God's presence when we encounter His mastery in the wonders of nature and see everything as a divine masterpiece—a piece of the master. (For more on experiencing God's presence, read my book *Seeing God*).

However, God cannot give us this great gift of His presence, unless we want Him in our lives. We must first know in our hearts that God's presence is, indeed, the greatest gift we could ever hope to receive; that it is pure ecstasy. We give God pleasure, so to speak when we want to receive what He wants to give us. The kabbalah correlates this to the sexual dynamic between a man and woman. A man's sexual pleasure is intensified to the extent that his wife wants sexual intimacy with him and desires to be with him.

Our problem is that we often get distracted from what's eternally real and pleasurable and pursue temporal things. Not only does this not give God pleasure, it causes Him, so to speak, much pain.

There is an odd verse in *Bereishit* (Genesis), appearing just before the generation of the flood, which says that God was "saddened in His heart." The commentator Sforno explains that God is sad when we are not ready or interested in receiving the goodness He wants to give us. God wants to give us a connection to Him and shower us with His loving presence. But we do not want it. Instead, we want money, property, clothing, sex, fame and power. This is similar to the sadness and pain a nursing mother feels when her baby does not want to suck. As the saying goes, "More than the baby wants to suck, the mother wants to nurse." When a baby does not want to nurse from its mother, the mother experiences intense emotional and physical pain.

A story is told about a Rebbe who hires a horseman to take him to a *shtetl*. On the way, they hit a storm. Shabbos is quickly approaching, so the Rebbe says to the horseman, "Please, I will give you a big portion in the World to Come if you get me to the *shtetl* on time."

The horseman agrees and drives his horse very hard. Unfortunately, the horse falls ill and dies. The horseman is so devastated by the death of his horse that he also dies. In heaven, God fulfills the Rebbe's decree and gives the horseman a huge portion in the World to Come. But the horseman is depressed; he misses his horse. God wants to give him the ultimate pleasure of closeness to Him in the World to Come, but the horseman only wants his horse. God sadly fulfills the horseman's wish and sets him off riding on his horse for eternity. God wanted to give the horseman the ultimate pleasure of divine presence, a joy that is simply out of this world and yet he only wanted a horse.

This story is true for many of us. We can, however, remedy this problem by reciting the Amidah daily. With each of its requests, we arouse within us the desire to receive what is truly worth wanting; what God wants to give us. We give God great pleasure, when we hunger to receive His gift of presence and all the blessings it entails.

When we want what is truly worth wanting, we give God pleasure and enable His blessings to flow into our lives. We then connect not only to God's presence but also to our true self because our true self, the soul, is only interested in God. This is how King David so eloquently expressed it, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire none on earth... As for me, God's nearness is my good" (Psalm 73:25-28); "My soul thirsts for You, my flesh longs for You" (Psalms 63:2); "To God alone my soul waits silently, from Him comes my salvation." (Psalms 62:2). "Yes, I will bless You all my life, in Your name I lift my hands. It is as if my desire is sated with fat and abundance, when with joyous language my mouth gives praise" (Psalms 63:5-6). In other words, to praise God and recognize His glory satiated King David like abundant delicacies.

The soul is not attracted to things, but rather to the presence of God manifest within them. Let's use a work of art as an example. When we see a magnificent painting, we are not attracted to a canvas smeared with paint. Rather, we are attracted to the beauty of God that is channeled into the world through the painting. But we often get confused and think it is the painting. We see a gorgeous person and we feel drawn to him or her, not realizing that it is not the person who is gorgeous but rather God who is gorgeous. Beauty is an attribute of God, and this person is only the conduit for that that beauty.

The requests of the Amidah until this point have empowered us to clarify and awaken our soul to desire want what we truly want and what is truly worth wanting. With each request we attuned our will to God's and thereby channel His blessings into our lives. For instance, God wants healing to be manifest. When we want and pray for God's healing to be manifest, we align our will with His will and the truth of God's ever-present healing becomes more manifest in the world, through us and our prayers. God wants the Jewish people to be redeemed. When we want and pray for redemption, we align our will with God's will and the truth of God's perpetual redeeming becomes more manifest in the world, through us and our prayers. This is our service to God.

We are, therefore, able to say, "Take pleasure YHVH, our God, in Your nation Israel and their prayers."

### **From Praying to Offerings**

After completing the entire exercise of prayer, building and attuning our will to God's will, we now ask for an even greater manifestation of God's presence accomplished by the sacrificial offerings in the Temple. Even if we already feel satiated and fulfilled by our prayers, we must acknowledge that prayer is only a prelude to an even greater connection we can feel with God and an even greater pleasure we can give Him. We, therefore, ask that God restore the Temple service so

that He will receive pleasure from both our prayers and our sacrifices.

*And return the service to the chamber of Your house, and may the fire of Israel and their prayers, with love, be received with will.*

In other words, we are essentially saying, “Right now, God, we can only ask You to enjoy our prayers, but may we soon bring You the sacrificial offerings in the Temple which will increase our ability to receive Your presence and intensify our pleasure and Yours.”

The daily sacrificial service in the Temple inspired quite a dramatic spiritual awareness. The Talmud records that in the First Temple, 12 miracles occurred daily. Everyday people beheld a fire in the shape of a lion descend from the heavens and consume each sacrifice. Then they watched as the smoke rose from the altar and ascended in a straight line, even on windy days. While the Temple stood, the powerful and loving presence of God was obvious.

Therefore, when we pray for the return of these services, we ask for God’s presence to be literally visible again. We want to see God with our very eyes. “*V’tchazena eineinu b’Shuvecha l’Tzion b’rachamim*” -- And may we see with our eyes Your return to Zion.

### **Achieving At-one-ment**

According to the Kabbalah, at this point in the *Amidah*, if we have prayed properly, we will experience *mochin d’gadlut*—expanded mind. In this heightened state of consciousness, we experience ourselves as an instrument of God. Our will fills with the presence of God’s will. The Kabbalah teaches that our purpose on earth is to experience two types of *yichudim* (unifications) -- truths about God’s oneness: 1) His single rule, and 2) the singularity of His existence—that nothing exists but God.

Prayer reveals that only God’s will rules supreme. When we pray we testify that God is in control of everything. We acknowledge that He is the one and only true Master of life and source of all blessing; only His will rules. Through prayer we accomplish what it says in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers), “Make your will God’s will, and God will make His will your will;” our will becomes a channel for God’s will to be manifest in the world.

The Temple sacrifices, on the other hand, affirm the truth that nothing exists but God. Not only is God the sole ruling power, but He is all there is. This is what the Torah means when it teaches: “Unto you it was shown that you would know that the Lord, He is God. There is none else besides Him” (Deuteronomy, 4:35); “Know this day and bring it to your heart that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and the earth beneath; there is none else” (Deuteronomy 4:39).

Rav Chaim of Volozhon, the great sage from the 18th century, states in his book *Nefesh HaChaim Sha’ar* (3), “Apart from Him, blessed be He, there is nothing else whatsoever, in reality, from the highest of the high to the lowest depth of the earth ..... all is filled with the essence of His pure unity, blessed be He.” In other words,

we do not exist independent and separate of God. Rather, we exist *within* God, as part of Him. Every moment of our existence is completely dependent upon Him, enveloped and permeated by Him alone. The sacrificial services in the temple acknowledged this awesome truth and enabled us to experience it.

For instance, when the High Priest would utter God's name on Yom Kippur, everyone present would drop to the floor and prostrate themselves. Although the Temple was packed to capacity, miraculously everyone suddenly had plenty space to fully prostrate. They experienced unlimited space - expansive and all-inclusive - because they experienced God's boundless presence as the true space wherein they truly exist. (For more on the God's all-inclusive oneness, see my book *The Secret Life of God*.)

The Hebrew word for sacrifice is *karbon*, which is derived from the word *karov*—to come close. The incense burnt in the Temple was called the *ketorit*, which means to tie. The goal of the Temple service was to feel close and tied to God. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar, said of himself, “I was bound to Him with one knot” (Zohar III, 288a, *Idra Zutra*).

When we ask, “may the fire of Israel and their prayers, with love, be received with will,” “the fires of Israel” not only refer to the sacrifices but also our burning desire to experience ourselves completely subsumed within God's all-encompassing oneness, as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai also said, “My soul was united to Him, burning for Him” (Zohar III, 292a).

This passion is what Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady the founder of the Chabad (Lubavitch) movement wrote in *Liqqutei Torah Beresheit* (Vilna 1884 pg. 98): “The many waters of concern regarding one's livelihood and worldly thoughts cannot quench the love (for God) that is in the category of hidden love in the soul of every Jew by nature. This is the category of the divine soul, whose nature is to ascend and be consumed upwards, as the flame flies upwards of its own accord.”

When we tap our innate love for God we feel a burning passion to give ourselves over to God and experience our eternal connection. Think about those times you have felt one with someone. You bond with another person when you give yourself over to that person. The more completely we give of ourselves to each other, the more we feel connected.

The ability of two people to give mutually is the gift of love. When we love someone, we not only give ourselves to the person, we also give him/her the opportunity to give him/herself to us.

I once heard a story about a man who gave himself completely to his wife, but nonetheless she wanted a divorce. He could not understand it—isn't love about giving? While he had the first part of the equation correct, he forgot about the second part: He did not give her the opportunity to give to him. He felt deeply connected to his wife, but she felt none in return because he never allowed her to do for him. We feel connected to people through giving. If we do not allow people to give to us, we do not give them the opportunity to love us.

The relationship between parents and children is a good example. Parents feel much closer to their children than children feel toward their parents. As parents, we remember how we changed their diapers, cleaned up their mess, wiped their tears when they scraped their knees and rushed to the doctor to get stitches. Most children do not remember any of these things. As adults, we never remember how much our parents gave us. Parents give to their children constantly and therefore feel deeply connected to them. The more we give to somebody, the more we invest ourselves in them, the more they become part of us and the more we love them.

This is the basic purpose of all mitzvot; our true joy in serving God. The greatest gift that God gives us is the opportunity for us to give to Him. And the more we are able to give of ourselves to God the more we experience our eternal bond.

The sacrificial service gave expression to our burning desire to give our lives completely to God, to remove the physical barriers of flesh that set us apart from God and experience at-one-ment. God, of-course, does not want us to give up our lives. He rather us give expression and outlet to our burning passion to bond with Him by offering up the life of an animal instead of our own life. However, today, most people are disconnected from their true self and do not feel any deep yearning to give their life to God. This is probably why the Holy Temple and the sacrifices have not yet been restored.

## **Holy Smokes**

The sacrifices that gave expression to our burning desire to bond with God were offerings of thanksgiving. However, many of the sacrifices were sin offerings directed at reigniting for us our lost passion for God to achieve atonement and restore at-one-ment. How does this work?

When we sin, we violate our loving bond with God and abuse God's greatest gift to us—life. In fact we are out right ingrates. Let's say that I give my son a ball, with the one condition that he does not play with it in the house. The next thing he does is bounce it around the house, and it breaks my computer, a lamp and a window. It is understandable for a child to break something by accident, but for my son to break something with the gift I gave him? In essence a transgression is this type of blatant violation of love, disrespect and complete ungrateful behavior. And this is really what we need to atone for.

For example, God gives us the power to speak, and we use it to gossip and slander. He gives us the ability to see, and yet we use it to look at obscenities. He gives us the ability to hear, and yet we are not attentive to His will and rather listen to our petty egos. He gives us the ability to taste, and yet we taste forbidden fruits. He gives us the ability to touch, and yet we reach for things that do not belong to us.

All sins are rooted in the foolish thought that this is my life and these are my powers and I can do with them as I please. When we realize our mistake and understand that we have abused God's gifts, we would naturally seek ways to counteract our ungracious attitudes and overcome our embarrassment. We would want to demonstrate to God and ourselves, in the most dramatic and radical way, that

that our life and all our life skills really belong only to God. Everything we thought we own we really owe to God. We want to show that all life is His. We should kill ourselves, forfeit life and restore it to its rightful owner. But of course, God does not want us to die. Instead, He gives us animal sacrifice as a way to express our burning desire to acknowledge that life and all life powers are His which He lovingly shares with us under the condition that we use them properly. And when we would do the sacrifice we would experience ourselves as if we are the sacrifice; offering and returning our entire self to God.

The sacrifices, however, did more than help us psychologically atone for our sins. They demonstrated how flimsy and transient the physical truly is. Because we gave our flesh too much attention and substance we deluded ourselves and concluded that we exist independent and separate of God. This illusion, however, quickly went up in smoke by the flames of the altar.

A friend of mine gained a deeper understanding of the Temple sacrifices from her experiences in India, where she witnessed people doing actual sacrifices. Before they offered a sacrifice, they put their own head on the chopping block, imagining that they were the animal. After the animal was sacrificed, they took its blood and smeared it on themselves. The sacrificial service in the Temple was an effort to experience becoming the sacrifice and removing the person's feeling of alienation and separation from God.

Consider why, when we love someone, we want to squeeze the person as hard as we can. Or why we hear parents say of their children, "Isn't he delicious? I could just eat him!" We do and say these things because we can't handle the separation and distance; we feel that our body is getting in the way of our desire to be one with them.

Through animal sacrifice we tear down the conceptual walls we created out of our body and physical desires; we burn the flesh that falsely suggested we exist separate of God and act independent of His will. The sacrifice reminded us that our body is not a barrier that sets us apart from God. It is really only a smoke screen that hides our eternal oneness.

There are different opinions regarding the actual meaning of the animal sacrifices. The Rambam understood the sacrifices as a divine concession. God recognized that when the Israelites left Egypt they were steeped in a religious culture that brought sacrificial offerings to their gods. God decided, so to speak, to allow the Israelites to express their religious passion in a somewhat similar way that they were accustomed to with some limitations which were meant to help wean them off this approach towards the eventually annulment of animal sacrifices. In other words, although God was not at all interested in sacrifices He conceded to the needs of the people understanding where they were at. However, this concession is nonetheless with an eye towards the future when the ideal Temple worship will be prayer.

Over time the Temple services will evolve and ultimately animal sacrifices will be nullified. Rav Kook elaborates that when the Temple is reinstated, there will be a period of time when we will no longer be slaughtering animals for consumption or pleasure, and eventually we will only bring meal offerings. But even the meal offering will be nullified until finally the Temple will be strictly a house of prayer.

In other words, when we reach the point when we no longer need the sacrificial service, we will be on a high enough spiritual level to experience “giving ourselves completely to God” through prayer alone. We will put our entire souls into our words of prayer - recite them soulfully -- and thus no longer need sacrifices to experience God’s absolute oneness and our oneness with God.

## Seeing God

The prayer ends, “*V’tchazena eineinu b’Shuvecha l’Tzion b’rachamim*” (And may we see with our eyes Your return to Zion). Upon giving ourselves over to God and removing the obstacles that seem to separate us, we can next ask and expect to literally see God’s presence with our very eyes.

We want to see that God is not only the supreme ruling power but that God totally permeates everything and everyone. He is all that exists—the one and only reality. We have already prayed for our return as individuals, the return of the Jewish people as a nation, a global return to God. However we also pray for the return of not only the reign of God but also the full presence of God on Earth where we can literally see with our eyes the Shechina; when everything and everyone will be permeated with divine presence.

## Summary and Paraphrased

*Each request of the Amidah clarifies and awakens our desire to receive God’s goodness. Our prayers, so to speak, give Him pleasure, because only when we hunger His goodness can His blessings flow into our lives. However, more than His blessings for wisdom, health, prosperity etc., God greatest gift to us is His very Presence – to know that He is all there is and feel completely one with Him. The sacrificial offerings empower us to awaken and express from deep within us our desire to completely give ourselves over to Him and experience His loving presence embrace and fill us.*

*After we asking for individual, national and global return to God we now pray for God’s complete teshuva, “May we see (literally) with our eyes Your return to Zion.” This follows what God promises us, “Return to Me and I will return to You.”*

**Take pleasure YHVH, our God, in Your nation Israel and their prayers;** Your pleasure comes from giving Your goodness to us and that is only possible when we truly want and pray to receive Your goodness. **And return the service to the chamber of Your house and may the fire of Israel and their prayers, with love, be received with will.** We know that prayer is only a prelude to an even greater pleasure we can give You because of a even greater gift that we are able to receive from You. Therefore, please restore to us the sacrificial service of the Temple which ignites within us -- **the fire of Israel** -- our innate burning desire to not only receive God’s blessings but Your presence. The sacrificial service gave expression to our flaming passion to give our lives completely to You, to remove the physical barriers of flesh that set us apart from You and enjoy at-one-ment; that there is nothing but You; that we exist *within* You, a part of You. We will then experience ourselves completely

subsumed and filled with Your loving presence. ***And may the service of Israel, Your nation, always be pleasing;*** always wanting Your loving presence. ***And may we see with our eyes Your return to Zion.*** We have already prayed for our personal return, the return of our nation and a global return to You, God. However we now pray for Your complete return, the manifestation of Your complete presence in Zion, so much so that we will literally see You with our very eyes; everything and everyone filled with Your presence. ***Blessed be You, YHVH, who is returning His Divine Presence to Zion.***

*The more we believe that God is always returning His Divine Presence and we sincerely want to see Him in our lives, indeed the more this truth becomes manifest.*



**Thank You**

***Just to Call Your Name is the Highest Good***

As we mentioned earlier, Judaism (in general) and the Amidah (in specific) empower us to stand before God and enjoy a loving relationship with Him. With every request we experience an increased sense of inner strength and divine significance; we become more and more confident and assertive. Not only do we express more confidence in what we ask for and for who we ask for, but even the tone of each request becomes more and more assertive almost decree like. We hit our peak with the previous blessing when we prayed for God. We asked that He take pleasure and that He return to Zion from His exile. And we assert that we want to see Him, no less, with our very eyes and receive His presence within our midst. At this point we hit the danger zone and the time has come for a nice dose of humility. Therefore, we now bow and humbly give thanks.

*Modim anachnu Lach She'Ata Hu, YHVH Eloheinu V'Eilohei Avoteinu* (We thank You that You are He, YHVH, our God, and the God of our forefathers). *Tzur chai'einu, magein yish'einu, Ata Hu, ledor vador* (Rock of our lives, shield of our salvation, You are He, from generation to generation).

*Nodeh Lecha un'sapeir Tehillatecha, al chai'einu ham'surim b'Yadecha* (We thank You and we speak Your praises, for our lives are in Your hands), *v'al nishmoteinu hapekudot Lach* (and our soul is in Your charge). *(V'al Nisecha shebechal yom imanu* (And for all Your miracles everyday that are with us) *v'al Niflotecha v'Tovotecha shebechal eit, erev, vavoker v'tzaharayim* (and for Your wonders and Your goodness in every time—morning, evening and afternoon). *HaTov, ki lo chalu Rachamecha* (The Good, because Your compassion has never ended), *V'HaMeracheim, ki lo tamu Chasadecha* (And the Compassionate, because Your kindness has never ended). *Mei'olam kivinu Lach* (We have always put our hope in You).

*V'al kulam, Yitbarach v'Yitromam Shimcha, Malkeinu, tamid l'olam va'ed* (And above all, may Your name be blessed and exalted, our King, forever and ever). *V'chol ha'chaim Yoducha selah* (And may all life thank You forever) *v'hallelu et Shimcha b'emet* (and genuinely praise Your name), *HaEil yeshuateinu v'ezrateinu sela* (the Power, who is our salvation and our help). *Baruch Ata YHVH, haTov Shimcha u'Lecha na'eh lehodot* (Blessed be You, YHVH, 'the Good' is Your name and it is a pleasure to thank You).

After 17 benedictions, growing in stature in God's presence and standing more and more erect, we finally bow again in this blessing, referred to by its first word, *Modim*. There is a cryptic oral tradition that says that if we do not bow down at this point in our prayer our spine turns into a snake. The snake in the Garden of Eden seduced Adam and Eve with delusions that they could become independent gods. The snake appealed to the divine potential we all sense within.

As we learned in an earlier chapter, Rav Kook explains that we bow in order to stand humbly in God's presence. However, we bow only a limited amount of times

so as not to damage our healthy sense of self. The goal is to stand humbly yet also confidently before God. But now, in this next blessing, we balance out the possible dangerous side effect of the previous blessings and humbly bow. In fact, if we do not bow at this point in our evolving sense of inner godliness, then our stature, symbolized by our spine, will over-evolve into ego—symbolized by the snake. We may over exaggerate our self importance.

### **The Jewish Balancing Act**

Our relationship with God is dialectical dance between assertion and surrender. We first learn about the need for this delicate balance from our forefather Abraham. Although Abraham aggressively petitioned against God's decision to destroy Sodom when it came to God's request to sacrifice Abraham's son Isaac he did not utter a word of protest; he silently surrendered. Abraham knew that in the case of Sodom he needed to assert himself and to actualize the power that God had vested in him. But when it came to following the command to sacrifice his son, Abraham understood that the right response was total submission.

This spiritual quest to balance assertion and surrender was passed down from father to son, reaching the perfect measure in our forefather Jacob. As the Torah describes Jacob's conflicts with his brother Esau and his tribulations with his sons, we see how Jacob prayed yet fought, surrendered yet asserted, let go and yet aggressively accomplished.

Although with each request of the Amidah we become more forceful and confident the time has come to bow—nullify any snake-like self-delusions and protect ourselves against any trace of arrogance.

When we began the *Amidah*, we first bent our knees with the word *Baruch*, then bowed at *Ata* and finally stood erect with God's name, *YHVH*. But now, as we near the conclusion of our prayer with *Modim*, we bow without bending our knees. This quick abrupt bow is more suggestive of our urgent need for nullification and surrender. It expresses more than simple humbleness.

With each request we felt more comfortable in His presence. However, we now say: *Modim anachnu Lach She'Ata Hu* (We thank You because You are He). Although we have been addressing God as "You," suggesting closeness and familiarity we remind ourselves that God is still a "He." Despite our comfort in God's presence, we must remember that He is beyond us. We thank God for this paradoxical closeness and distance because if He were too close we would lose ourselves, and if He were too far we would lose Him. This is the mysterious dynamic that happens in our relationship with God. Just as we start feeling God near to us, He suddenly feels so far, and yet just as soon as we feel God as far, He is revealed as close.

The prayer further addresses God as *Tzur chai'einu, magein yisheinu* (Rock of our lives, Shield of our salvation). In other words, "Although You are our Rock upon which we are completely dependent, You are also our Shield who protects us from losing our sense of self." This too is the mystery of our relationship with God. To understand this we must reexamine the different names of God, *YHVH* and

*Elohim/Eloheinu*. As we saw in Chapter 1, *Elohim* is the name associated with the attribute of judgment. God judges us because our choices make a divine difference and He cares about us. The name *YHVH* indicates that God is the all encompassing ultimate reality; there is none else. Because we exist within Him we have no independent existence. God, however, as *Elohim* lovingly shields us from His overwhelming all encompassing presence (*YHVH*) so that we too can have presence and enjoy a relationship with Him. This is what the Psalmist teaches, “*YHVH Elohim* is like the sun and shield” (84:12). In other words, God as *YHVH* is like the sun but God as *Elohim* is like a shield and protects us for the overwhelming radiance of Himself as *YHVH*.

God, therefore, is not only manifest as *YHVH*—“our rock” that we are completely dependent upon, but also as *Eloheinu*—“our shield,” protecting and maintaining our sense a valued personal existence; that we matter (pun intended). The Hebrew word *yesh* which is contained in the word *yisheinu* (our salvation) means to exist or to be. In other words, salvation is the sensation of valued personal existence; a feeling of real substance to our being. God lovingly promises to “inherit to my beloved *Yesh*” (Proverbs 8:21).

### **The Feminine—and Masculine—Mystique**

There is additional meaning to this first phrase of thanksgiving. The first time we say, “Thank You,” we use the feminine form for the word “You” (*Modim anachnu “Lach”*), while the second time we use the masculine form (*Nodeh “Lecha”*). What is the significance of this transition from addressing God as feminine and then masculine? What difference could genders has when it comes to God who is beyond all gender?

The feminine aspect of divinity corresponds to God’s power to receive and be affected. The masculine aspect of divinity corresponds to God’s power to give and to affect. For any relationship to be fruitful there must always be give and take. There cannot be one without the other. Although the couple is constantly switching roles, at any given moment one plays the giver while the other the receiver.

Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik explains that during prayer, God would be described metaphorically as the female, and we who are praying as the male; we are the benefactors, and God is the beneficiary. We affect and God affected. Remember, for God to be manifest in the world, we must want to Him present in our lives. (For more on this see Chapter 4 of my book *Seeing God*.) With each request—“Blessed be You who is bestowing knowledge,” “Blessed be You who is redeeming,” “Blessed be You who is healing”—we affect, through the our power to acknowledge and want God, an increased manifestation of God’s presence.

God is described as receiving our prayers because our prayers are a gift to God. When we pray, acknowledge God’s goodness and request that His blessings pour into our lives we are giving God the opportunity to give to us. Therefore, we say *Modin anuchu Lach* (using the feminine form of “You”); we are thanking God for being feminine -- receptive to and affected by our prayers. This is quite a phenomenal idea. In fact, during the *Hallel* service (recited on holidays) we praise, “*Ma’ait YHVH*

*haytah zot, he niflaot b'ananu!*" From *YHVH*, who became a she, this is awesome in our eyes."

However, even though we say, "We thank You" (in the feminine form), we further qualify that, in fact, "You are He" (a male). In other words, "You, God, are ultimately *the* benefactor, and we are the beneficiaries. Even our power to affect You in our prayers comes from You. Every moment of our lives we are totally dependent on You, the *Sur* (rock) of our lives." Interestingly, the word *sur* also hints to the word *siare*—artist. We therefore, intimate God is the artist of our lives, God is the true giver, not us.

### **The Fear of Heaven**

We continue to thankfully acknowledge to God our total dependence on Him and recount the daily wonders and miracles that fill our lives: *We thank You and we speak Your praises, for our lives are in Your hands and our soul is in Your charge. And for all Your miracles everyday that are with us, and for Your wonders and Your goodness in every time—morning, evening and afternoon. The Good, because Your compassion has never ended, and the Compassionate, because Your kindness has never ended. We have always put our hope in You.*

This seems to contradict all the requests we have made so far. If we actually believe that our life is in God's hands, that our soul is in His charge; if we truly believe that miracles and wonders are happening everyday, and that God gives us never-ending goodness and compassion, then why pray at all? What was the purpose of all the previous requests?

It is a paradox. Even though we know that God is always in control and that whatever He sends our way is only in our best interest, we nonetheless, pray according to what we perceive to be our needs; what is good and pleasant from our limited perspective.

We really should be thanking God when we are sick in the same way we would when we are feeling great. However, God commanded us to request of Him according to our needs as we perceive them.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook explains that there are two ways to relate to our life situation: There is the way of the *tzaddikim* (righteous people), and the way of everyone else. *Tzaddikim* trust God completely. From their perspective they know that it's all good even when it feels bad, therefore, they do not ask God anything for themselves. Others, however, ask for improvements when their life situation feels bad.

The goal of Jewish life is to enjoy daily God's presence, with all its implicate blessings. This can only happen when we acknowledge God, as our Almighty Provider and invite Him and His blessings into our life.

We get sick when God's presence is not sufficiently manifest in our lives. Healing, however, can come through increased acknowledgment of God --

demonstrated through what we think, say and do. God's presence is then increased and we become filled with vitality and health.

There are, however, two different ways we can acknowledge God's presence in our life. The way of the *tzaddikim* is trust and constant thanksgiving. The other way is to use pain and discomfort as a catalyst to seek God's presence; pray and request change.

When the *tzaddik* is sick he demonstrates His unwavering trust in God's goodness and only thanks God for providing him with all that He needs. Rather than ask God to make changes, he accepts his problems with love. The trust itself augments his awareness of God, increases the presence of God in his life and he ends up becoming revitalized and healed. Others, however, pray that God heal them. They use their health challenge as a catalyst to acknowledge and invite God's intervention. Their heartfelt prayers generate greater acknowledgement of God and an increase in His healing presence in their life. They turn pain and discomfort into an opportunity to come closer to God through prayer.

Much of the Amidah is obviously built upon the second approach of request for change and improvement. However, as we come to its conclusion we must, nonetheless, remind ourselves that in truth God is in control, He is the Good, the Compassionate and His kindness is never ending. He always loves us and only seeks our best interest. Although we have prayed we must remember to also trust and be thankful. We must remember to add a little trust to our prayers; see the all the good and not only the problems.

*Modim* affirms our trust in God. On one hand, we use our struggles and pain to grow closer to God through our prayers. On the other hand, we acknowledge that everything God gives us is good; our life is in His hands and we simply give thanks.

The Amidah reflects the paradox of Jewish life. Throughout our history, we have called out to God for help and yet trusted that everything is fine. We balanced making our best efforts to change our lives with a profound trust in God. We do our utmost to change the world, yet humbly trust that God is the One in control. This is the dialectical dance of the Jewish people.

*Modim*, therefore, is not a contradiction. It simply reflects the paradox of Jewish life. In the *Modim*, we affirm, "Yes, God, we have asked for many things, but we also know that everything in life is exactly on target and completely good. Thank You."

## **Creating Gratitude**

I'd now like to share with you a strategy that I have been using to make my recitation of *Modim* more meaningful. For each phrase, I have created what I call an "experiential dictionary," essentially triggers, to help me focus on the feelings I want to elicit. This strategy has proved so powerful that it often moves me to tears of joyous gratitude.

To explain, I will begin with an analogy. Imagine that a person tells you that he is thirsty and asks for some water. You respond, “W-a-t-e-r.” Of course, you cannot quench someone’s thirst with a word. This is the very thing that often happens with prayer. The words do not correlate to concrete experience, remaining instead in the realm of lifeless intellectual concepts.

Triggers can help you enter higher states of consciousness and experience. Sometimes you are impacted by a trigger without even knowing it. Let’s say you are in a good mood, enjoying a leisurely drive. Suddenly, out of nowhere, you have a mood shift. One of the theories behind these common occurrences is that something in your proximity triggered the new mood. In this case, for example, a song on the radio could have propelled you ten years back to the time your girlfriend or boyfriend was breaking up with you. You were in a café, and you did not consciously notice the background music because you were busy being devastated by your failing relationship. Ten years later, you could be happily married, driving your car and feeling great, when suddenly you hear the same song and get depressed for no reason. The culprit is the song. Your mind associated the song with the painful experience and it becomes a trigger causing you to relive the pain.

Triggers are very powerful. In fact, background music, for example, is also used to train bears to dance. Animal trainers play nice music while they put the bears on hot coals, which make them jump around in agony. Whenever the bears hear that music, they feel the pain of the hot coals and start “dancing.”

So too, we can create triggers in our lives to relive an experience or elicit a feeling. For instance, before I got married, I decided what *niggun* (melody) I wanted to hear as I walked toward my wife under the *chuppah* (marriage canopy). I did not want to use the traditional *niggun* most often used at weddings, so I chose Rav Shlomo Carlebach’s “Lecha Dodi,” a popular and moving melody about Shabbat. My hope was that the *niggun* would trigger my wedding experience each Shabbat for the rest of my life. And that is exactly what has happened every week. Like data on a computer chip, our experiences are stored in our brains. It is a shame not to access the best files.

To help my *kavanah* during *Modim*, I have identified the words of the prayer with vivid moments in my life. For instance, besides my wedding, my most powerful and joyous moments have been the births of my children. When I watched our babies being born, God’s existence was utterly clear to me. God becomes most believable when life becomes unbelievable.

Therefore, when I pray I associate the key words and phrases with real experiences in my life that capture the meaning of what I am saying. The words “Rock of our lives” conjure a time when I truly felt that my life depended on God, and that every detail was perfectly placed by the work of my Master Artist. At the words, “Shield of our salvation,” I think of a situation when I literally felt that God was my shield and protected my sense of self. When I say, “My life is in Your hands,” I think about a terrible car accident I was in. I could have been easily killed, yet I walked away with bruises. When I picture myself flying into the windshield and not getting hurt, the fact that my life is in God’s hands becomes a visceral truth.

Take a minute now to do this exercise with the following phrases:

- *My life is in Your hands:* Remember a time when your life was in danger and you truly felt that God saved you.
- *And my soul is in Your charge:* Think back to when you were spiritually at risk. Then vividly imagine the moment you had a spiritual salvation in which you felt that your spiritual life was in God's charge.
- *And for the miracles:* Think of a miracle or a wondrous event that has happened in your life.

With each subsequent phrase, try to feel the gratitude you felt during those powerful moments in your life. These memories will give you much inspiration and will continue to elicit the powerful feelings that you felt during those moments. Creating triggers not only gives your prayer real meaning, it is the best way to truly feel the thankfulness that *Modim* is expressing.

## **Praises For God**

We conclude the *Modim* with the following request:

*And above all, may Your name be blessed and exalted, our King, forever and ever. And may all life thank You forever. And genuinely praise Your name, (acknowledging You to be) the Power who is our salvation and our help. Blessed be You, YHVH, 'the Good' is Your name and it is a pleasure to thank You.*

*And above all, may Your name be blessed and exalted, our King, forever and ever.* In other words, "May all the wonders and miracles in our lives not only fill us with gratitude but always inspire us towards greater awareness of Your name; may we always remember that we can readily call to You and You are always be here for us.

*And may all life thank You forever and genuinely praise Your name.* We hope that that the whole world acknowledge and thank You; that everyone join us in genuine praise of Your name. Our universal dream is that the whole world also acknowledge God and receive the joyous gift of His presence in their lives.

*You, who are the Power, who is our salvation and our help:* Note that we do not say, "who saves and helps," but rather, "who is our salvation and help." In other words, God's very presence itself is our salvation. Imagine that you are drowning and someone jumps in and pulls you out of the water. That person is the source of your saving, the one "who saves." Now let's say that you are drowning and someone jumps in, and you feel saved simply because the person is there, whether he pulls you out or not. This is the meaning of this phrase. We acknowledge that whether or not God answers our specific requests, just to feel His presence is "our salvation."

*Blessed be You, YHVH, 'the Good' is Your name and it is a pleasure (na'eh) to thank You.*

*'the Good' is Your name* could mean that He is referred to as the “Good One,” or that His actual name is what is good. In other words, the very ability to call out to God and feel His presence in our lives is the real goodness. As we discussed in Chapter 16, when we examined the blessing *Shema koleinu* (Hear our voice), whether or not God answers us is not what is important. Just the power to pray, connect with God and know that He is listening is the ultimate answer to our prayers. Our relationship with God is all that matters; calling God’s name and feeling His loving presence is the greatest good. It is what our life is really all about. The Zohar teaches that the entire Torah is actually one word: God’s name. In fact, in the morning blessing *Bircat HaTorah*, we recite, “Make Your Torah sweet in our mouths so that we and our children’s children will know Your name.” The whole goal of Judaism is to know that God has a name, we can call upon God and feel Him ever-present in our lives.

*and it is a pleasure (na’eh) to thank You.* In other words, to thank God is an enjoyable experience. It is not always a pleasure to thank someone, however. To acknowledge dependence to someone is very humbling. But here we affirm that giving thanks to God is itself our pleasure; to recognize our dependence on God and His involvement in our life is the greatest joy.

The word *na’eh* also translates as befitting. According to this understanding we conclude *Modim* with an acknowledgment that although most of the *Amidah* was requests it is befitting that we would have only give thanks. God is “the Good” and, in truth, everything we encounter in our lives is only and always His goodness. Therefore, as we near the end of the *Amidah*, we affirm, “Despite the fact that we feel things are missing in our lives, we know that in truth is it befitting that we only and always thank you. In fact, we should be grateful even for those very things that we feel are missing.”

This idea correlates to a blessing recited at the beginning of our morning prayers: Blessed be You, YHVH, King of the universe, *sheassa li kol tzarchi* – Who has made for me all my needs. In other words, even what I lack is what I need. Even my needs are a gift from You because they motivate me to turn to You, acknowledge You and seek Your presence in my life.

A good friend of mine is a striking model of this truth. She only found her life partner for marriage when she was in her late forties. One day after she was married, I said to her, “You know what is amazing about you? I know how hard it is to be single, yet I never felt any bitterness from you all those years. I always felt that you were happy with your portion. In fact, I was worried that you wouldn’t get married because you never appeared unhappy about being single.”

She said to me, “Rabbi, how could I be unhappy when I’ve always had so much in my life? I have God, Torah, a career that I love, and I live in *Yerushalayim*. So I had a few percent missing.”

“A few percent missing?” I exclaimed. “Most women would not describe being single as a few percent.”



“Because I had so much in my life,” she added, “I actually felt embarrassed asking God for a *shidduch* (marriage partner), but I asked anyway.”

“Maybe that’s why you got the *shidduch*,” I told her.

If we are thankful for what we have and understand that our ultimate joy is God’s presence, then our vessel will be open to receive more. But if we are not thankful for what we have, why should God giving us more else?

Too often I encounter people who finally realize their dream of getting married, and the very next day they are arguing with their spouse. Not only are they not thankful for what they have, they do not realize that the purpose of marriage is only to come closer to God. In fact, the only reason for anything we have or do is to feel connected to God.

Therefore as we begin to bring closure to the Amidah, after our long list of requests, we acknowledge that it is truly befitting that we only give thanks to God and never complain. We must genuinely appreciate that our lives are filled with constant miracles. To simply call God’s name is itself the greatest wonder; the highest good.

When you embrace this attitude then your prayers always are answered because your real prayer was just to pray. Your only request is, “God, I just want to feel close to You. I know that you’re listening and I know that you’ll answer. I don’t know if I’ll get the answer I asked for, but that doesn’t matter, because all I want is feel You in my life.

### **Summary and Paraphrased**

*As we begin to bring closure to the Amidah, after our long list of requests, we acknowledge that it is truly befitting that we only give thanks to God and never complain. We remind ourselves that God is always in control, He is the Good, the Compassionate and His kindness is never ending. He forever loves us and only seeks our best interest. Although we prayed for what’s missing we now affirm our trust in God and express our gratitude. We know that our lives are filled with constant miracles and that the opportunity to simply call God’s name is itself the greatest wonder; the highest good.*

*As we previously discussed the Amidah empowers us to stand before God and enjoy a loving relationship with Him. With every request we experience an increased sense of inner strength and divine significance; we become more and more confident and assertive. After 17 benedictions, growing in stature in God’s presence and standing more and more erect, we finally bow again in this blessing. We hit our peak with the previous blessing when we prayed for God. We asked that He take pleasure and that He return to Zion from His exile. And we asserted that we want to see Him, no less, with our very eyes and receive His presence within our midst. However, at this point we must balance out the possible dangerous side effect of the boldness expressed in previous blessings and humbly bow to nullify any trace of possible arrogance. The goal of the Amidah is to stand confidently yet also humbly before God.*

*The Amidah reflects the paradox of Jewish life. Throughout our history, we have called out to God for help and yet trusted that everything is fine. We must balance ambitious efforts to affect change with humble acceptance and trust in God. Life is a dialectical dance between assertion and surrender.*

*Modim, is not a contradiction. It simply reflects the paradox of Jewish life. In the Modim, we affirm, “Yes, God, we have asked for many things, but we also know that everything in life is exactly on target and completely good. Thank You.”*

***We thank You because You are He.*** (Because we feel and comfortable with the divine we address God as “You,” but we now must acknowledge that God is still a “He” beyond us. We thank God for this paradoxical closeness and distance because if He were too close we would lose ourselves, and if He were too far we would lose Him.)

***We thank You*** (using the feminine form of “You” - *lach*); we thank You for being feminine -- receptive to and affected by our prayers. ***because You are*** really ***He*** - masculine. You, God, are ultimately the one who affects, and we are the affected recipients of your blessings. Even our power to affect Your presence in our lives through our prayers comes from You. You are the ***Rock of our lives***, upon which we are completely dependent [Create triggers that will make these words viscerally meaningful. Try to feel the gratitude you once felt during a moment when you felt totally dependent upon God] and yet also the ***Shield of our salvation*** protecting us from losing our sense of personal significance [Picture a real situation when you literally felt that God was your shield and protected our sense of self]. ***We thank You and we speak Your praises***, [identify each phrase with vivid joyous moments and events in your life] ***for our lives are in Your hands*** [Remember a time when your life was in danger and you truly felt that God saved you] ***and our soul is in Your charge*** [vividly imagine a time when were spiritually at risk and had a spiritual salvation in which you felt that your spiritual life was in God’s charge]. ***And for all Your miracles*** [Contemplate a small miracle or an wondrous event that happens everyday in your life like seeing, hearing feeling etc.] ***everyday that are with us, and for Your wonders and Your goodness in every time—morning, evening and afternoon. The Good, because Your compassion has never ended, and the Compassionate, because Your kindness has never ended. We have always put our hope in You. And above all, may Your name be blessed and exalted, our King, forever and ever.*** May all the wonders and miracles in our lives not only fill us with gratitude but always inspire us towards greater awareness of Your name; may we always remember that we can readily call to You and You are always here for us. ***And may all life thank You forever and genuinely praise Your name.*** We hope that that the whole world acknowledge and thank You; that everyone join us in genuine praise of Your name and receive the joyous gift of Your presence in their lives ***You, who are the Power, who is our salvation and our help*** - just to feel Your presence is “our salvation.”

***Blessed be You, --*** May you be abundantly manifest ***YHVH***, who ***‘the Good’ is Your name*** -- the very ability to call out to You and feel Your presence in our lives is the real goodness ***and it is pleasurable and befitting (na’eh) to thank You*** -- to recognize our dependence on You and Your involvement in our life is pleasurable. Despite the fact that in our prayer we asked for things we felt were missing in our lives, we know

that in truth is it befitting that we only and always thank you. In fact, we should be grateful even for those very things that we feel are missing.

*The more we believe that just to call God's name is the ultimate good and we sincerely want to feel His presence feel, indeed the more this truth becomes manifest.*

***Bless Us with the Peace of Mind  
to Enjoy Your Blessings***

We end the *Amidah* with a request for peace. Without peace, within ourselves and with others we are incapable of enjoying the many blessings we have asked for throughout the *Amidah*. As the Talmud teaches, peace is the only container that can receive and hold our blessings.

The final prayer reads:

Sim shalom, tova u'vracha, chein v'chesed v'rachamim (*Place upon us peace, goodness and abundance, grace and kindness and compassion*) aleinu v'al kal Yisrael Amecha (*upon us and all of Israel, Your nation*). Barcheinu Avinu kulanu k'echad b'or Panecha (*Bless us our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your face*), ki v'or Panecha natata lanu, YHVH, Eloheinu, Torah't chaim, v'ahavat chesed, u'tzedakah, u'vracha u'verachamim, v'chaim v'shalom (*because it is with the light of Your face that You gave us, YHVH our God, the Torah of life and love for kindness, righteousness, abundance, compassion and life and peace*). V'tov b'Einecha l'vareich et Amecha Yisrael, b'chal eit u'vechal sha'ah b'Shalomecha (*And may it be good in Your eyes to bless Your nation Israel in every time, every moment with Your peace*). Baruch Ata, YHVH, haM'vareich et Amo Yisrael b'shalom (*Blessed be You, YHVH, who is blessing His nation Israel with peace*).

The Oral Tradition teaches that a *rasha* (evil person) may sometimes be very successful in this world, while a *tzaddik* (righteous person) sometimes destitute because God rewards the *rasha* for whatever good he does in this world and saves his punishment for the eternal afterlife, while a *tzaddik* receives his punishment for whatever bad he does in this world and get his rewards in the eternity afterlife. Despite the fact the *tzaddik's* rewards are eternal, this principle still doesn't seem fair. Why should the *rasha* have a good life while the *tzaddik* suffers?

The Chofetz Chaim, one of the greatest Torah luminaries of the last generation, clarifies this teaching: Although the *rasha* receives his rewards in this life, he cannot enjoy them because he lives in sin and thus has no inner peace. Thus it state in the prophet (?) "There is not peace to the *rasha*." He may appear successful, but in reality he lives in misery. Indeed, having plenty and not being able to enjoy it is hell on earth. However, the *tzaddik* because he has inner peace fully enjoys whatever meager rewards he gets in this world.

This is a valuable lesson for our own lives. Sadly, we often meet people who appear to have everything, yet they have no peace within themselves, with their spouses or with other people. Therefore, they lack the calm and the necessary focus to enjoy their blessings.

Let's take a look at Judaism's recipe for peace expressed in this prayer.

**Recipe for Peace**

*Place upon us peace, goodness and abundance, grace and kindness and compassion*

Following the request “*Place upon us peace*” are the ingredients necessary for achieving true and lasting internal and external peace:

- *Tova* (goodness). The word *tov* (good) first appears in the Torah during the creation story. After God completes His work on each of the seven days, the verses read, “And God saw that it was good.” “Good,” according to the Torah, means that a destiny has been fulfilled. For example, God said, “Let there be light,” and then “God saw it was good,” meaning the light was what it was supposed to be. One of the ingredients of inner peace is to feel that we are who we are supposed to be.

- *U’vracha* (literally translates as blessing and abundance and suggests growth). Even though we feel good when we are who we are supposed to be, we also need to feel that we are growing and enjoying increased dynamism and novelty in our lives.

- *Chein* (grace and charm). *Chein* is a magnetic attraction people feel towards us when they can see themselves within us and feel that we can represent them. Joseph is described in the Torah as having much *chein*. Except for his brothers, everyone in Joseph’s life trusted him because they felt that he could represent their best interests. His spontaneous and inclusive disposition charmed even Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who entrusted Joseph to act on his behalf.

- *Chesed* (kindness) and *rachamim* (compassion -- the ability to overcome judgment). An example of *chesed* is when we take a friend out to dinner for no reason other than to simply be nice. *Rachamim*, however, is when we take a friend out to dinner even though he was nasty to us the day before. *Rachamim* is unconditional love. It is expressed when we overcome judgment and demonstrate love despite having good reasons not to love him or her.

To sum it up, our final request is for peace -- within our selves and with others. The ingredients are: personal fulfillment (*tova* - goodness)—being who we’re suppose to be and yet also enjoying continual growth (*bracha* - abundance), radiating inclusiveness such that people can see themselves in us and feel a natural connection and trust (*chein* – grace and charm), exuding kindness (*chesed*) and compassion (*rachamim*).

We ask that peace and all that it encompasses be *aleinu v’al kal Yisrael Amecha*—upon us and upon the entire Jewish people.

## **Face-to-Face With God**

We continue to ask, “*Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your face, because with the light of Your face You gave us Torat chaim.*” In other words, “Please, our loving Father, give us peace in the same empowering way that You gave us Torah – face to face. Our final request and ultimate “*Amidah*” aspiration is that we stand together in peace and experience You face to face just as we did when

we received Your Torah at Sinai. At that time our people stood united “as one person with one heart (Midrash)” and enjoyed a personal, direct, and empowering relationship with You.”

There is, however, additional meaning intimated in our request, “*Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your face.*” We are also asking, “Our Father, as Your children, bless us to resemble You and radiate the light of Your face so that we can each see within each other that we are all indeed Your children, created in You likeness -- *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God. And we know that our request is reasonable, “*because with the light of Your face, You gave us Torat chaim*” and all the positive qualities it encompasses --*ahavat chesed, u'tzedakah, u'vracha u'verachamim, v'chaim v'shalom*—the love of kindness, justice, blessing, compassion, life and peace. Torah (and all the divine qualities it engenders like love of kindness, justice, etc.) comes with the light of Your face. Embodied within the Torah’s wisdom and values is the light of Your face and the power to actualize our godly potential. We know that the Torah is our guide to godly living and that when we embrace its’ way of life we radiate godliness and resemble You, our Father.

Let’s take a closer look at the words *tzedakah* and *bracha* (*vracha*).

The word *tzedakah* translates into “righteousness” and “justification.” The root word *tzedek* is often understood as “justice,” although it can also mean, “to justify.” A *tzaddik*, therefore, is a person who justifies and sees the good in people, even when a person may do wrong. The ability to judge people favorably and focus on what is right about them (**righteousness**) is necessary for accomplishing and sustaining peace.

The word *bracha* (blessing) used in the context of this phrase probably refers to the power of *bracha*. The Torah tells us that when God blessed Abraham, He said, “And unto you will be *bracha*.” According to the Midrash, God informed Abraham that until that point, the power of *bracha* was only in God’s hands, but He was now turning over that power to Abraham.

The power of *bracha* is the ability to increase or decrease the light of God in the world. Each of us has our fingers on the dimmer switch, so to speak. When we exercise our power of *bracha* we turn up the light of God and reveal the divine splendor permeating everything in existence. As it is written, “*In your light, we will see light.*” However, when we diminish God’s light we see less and less of God’s presence and more and more randomness and chaos. For there to be peace and harmony amongst we must be able to see how God’s presence fills and unites us all; we must love the power of *bracha* and use it.

Inner peace and global peace are accomplished when we embrace the wisdom of Torah and all the divine qualities it entails and thereby actualize our godliness and see the godliness within others.

## **God’s Peace**

We also specify what kind of peace we want, “*May it be good in Your eyes to bless Your nation Israel ... with **Your** peace.*” Note that we ask for “*Your* peace” not “*our* peace.” Most people think that peace is tolerance, a state of non-war or cease-

fire. But cease-fire is not peace; it is simply not war. One of God's names is *Shalom*. Surely, this name does not mean "Not War."

God's peace is the power to create and sustain a uni-verse; the power to harmonize and unite all the diverse natural forces within the universe. God's peace respects, encourages and nurtures individuality and diversification, yet brings it all into a stunning synergy.

We conclude with, "*Blessed be You YHVH, who is blessing Israel with peace.*" God is actively blessing the Jewish people with peace at this very moment and always. When we acknowledge that God is constantly blessing us with peace and we truly want it, we are able to receive God's peace into our lives and channel it on to others.

### Summary and Paraphrased

*The Talmud teaches that peace is the only container that can receive and hold our blessings. Sadly, we often meet people who although appear to have everything lack the peace of mind to enjoy their blessings; they have no peace within themselves or with others. We, therefore, conclude with a request for peace – the power to receive and enjoy the blessings we asked for. We ask God to bless us with the light of His face because when we glow with godliness and see the radiance of godliness on the face of others we will feel inner peace and accomplish global peace.*

**Place upon us peace**, (inner peace and peace with others) **goodness and abundance** because inner peace requires a balance of feeling good about ourselves and yet also feeling abundant continual personal growth; **charm and kindness and compassion** because peace with others requires a character blend of charming inclusiveness that makes us attractive and trustworthy to others, a kind giving spirit and a warm compassionate heart -- bring all this **upon us and all of Israel, Your nation** (as Your nation may we embody the full meaning of Your peace). **Bless us our loving Father, all of us as one person with the light of Your face**, bless us in the same personal 'face to face' manner that you blessed us at Sinai when we stood united as one person with one heart. And bless us with the light of Your face so that our faces will be radiant with Your light and likeness; peace reigns supreme when it is obvious to each other that we are all Your children, created in Your likeness. We know we can accomplish this **because along with the light of Your face, You gave us, YHVH our God, the Torah of Life** -- instructions for living *and* all the divine ideals and values it empowers us to achieve -- **the love of kindness, righteousness** (the power to judge others favorably), **blessing** (the power to increase the Your light and reveal the divine presence that fills and unites us), **compassion, life and peace. And may it be good in Your eyes to bless Your nation Israel at every time** (good times and seemingly bad times), **and in each moment with Your peace** – not just tolerance or cease-fire but 'Your Peace' which is the power to respect, encourage and nurture individuality and diversification while bringing harmony and unity. **Blessed be You**, -- May you, **YHVH**, be abundantly manifest as one **who is blessing** right now **His nation Israel with peace.**

*The more we believe that God is constantly blessing us with peace and we sincerely*

*want peace, indeed the more God's peace becomes within us and with others. .*



***Concluding Prayers***  
**May I be Aligned and Receptive**

Now that we have completed our last blessing of the *Amidah*, we end with a final prayer: *Yihi 'u l'ratzon imrei fi v'hegyon libi Lefancha, YHVH, tzuri v'go'ali* (May it be in accordance with Your will, the words of my mouth (what I was able to put in words) and the meditations of my heart (emotions that are beyond words), before You, YHVH, my Rock and my Redeemer).

Another translation could read, "May the words of my mouth (what I was able to put in words) and the meditations of my heart (emotions that are beyond words) become will." Remember, genuinely expressing our will and aligning our will to God's will is the purpose of *tefillah*. The entire prayer service is an exercise in building will. God orchestrates the event of our daily lives to help us clarify what we really want so that our will be aligned with His; that we want to receive the blessings He wants to give us.

*Tefillah* is certainly not meant to be a recitation of meaningless words and hopeful thoughts, but rather an expression of our true desires. The Talmud promises: "the direction you want to go is where you are taken." Therefore, when we want to go in God's ways that is where God will take us.

Finally, we refer to God as our rock and redeemer. As we saw in the last chapter, God as our rock conveys our total surrender to Him. With some thought, most people can remember several times in their life when they could not take control of the situation and were forced to surrender to God. In fact, one of these times inspired my wife and me to name our son Tzuriel which means 'God is my Rock.' When we walked into the hospital on the day of his birth, a woman whose job was to welcome people to the hospital took one look at us (we were understandably nervous) and said, "It's time to surrender." I truly felt that the entire situation was out of my hands. Surrender became the theme of that birth.

*My redeemer*, on the other hand, suggests empowerment and self-hood. When God redeems us, He restores our sense of self. In the final paradox, we acknowledge that God is both our rock toward whom we are completely dependent and nullified, yet also our redeemer who empowers us to take action and pray.

***Paraphrased***

***May it become will and my it be in accordance with Your will*** (So that I am aligned with Your will, wanting what You want to give me), ***the words of my mouth*** (what I was able to put in words) ***and the meditations of my heart*** (emotions that are beyond words), ***before You, YHVH, my Rock*** (before whom I humbly surrender) ***and my Redeemer*** (before whom I stand empowered).

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### ***Empower Me to Put My Prayers into Action***

We end the Amidah with this concluding prayer.

*My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. And those who curse me may my soul be silent. May my soul be like dust to all and open my heart with your Torah. May my soul literally chase after and pursue mitzvot. Do this for your name sake*

“*Elokai- my God*” is quite shocking. This marks a spiritual climax reflecting the power of the Amidah and the effects it should have on us. Until now we referred to God as our God and as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, and now we are saying “my God”. To say *my God* expresses an incredible sense of intimacy and empowerment. Through *tefillah* we discover how personal and exclusive God is with each and every one of us.

*My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully.* During our prayers we can experience the incredible spiritual power to our words. We are able to pray for ourselves, the Jewish people, the world and even on God’s behalf. We offer our words of prayer as a sacred gift to God which He receives with love. With our words we acknowledge God, become receptive to His presence and enable Him to become manifest in our life.

What a pity it would be if after experiencing the sacred power of speech -- communicating to and communing with God --- we would then use it to express slander and deceit.

At the start of the Amidah we acknowledged the miraculous partnership between us and God that is manifest in very word out of our mouth; *God, open my lips and my mouth will speak your praises.* We now conclude with a request that God protects us from violating our partnership and wasting precious power of speech on bad talk.

*And those who curse me may my soul be silent.* In other words, “Please God protect me not only from instigating slander and lies but also from reacting badly to insults or verbal abuse. May my soul be quiet that I not get drawn into their negativity and feel any need to lash back.”

*May my soul be like dust to all;* so that no one will even bother to curse me. May I be humble and unnoticed (not seeking to draw attention to myself) like the dust of the earth. And yet like the dust of the earth if stepped upon I remain indestructible, strong and ever-present.

*May my soul be dust to all—* expresses not only our desire to stay humble in our relationship with others but also with God. This request especially appropriate now that we so bold to address God as *my God*. Note, however, that dust nonetheless has substance; we are not asking to be nothing.

*Open my heart with Your Torah and may my soul chase after Your mitzvot.*  
May my prayers inspire me to want to know more and do more; learn more of Your Torah and aggressively pursue opportunities to serve You more.

One of the critiques of the Chassidic movement was that prayer became more important than learning Torah. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov however, taught that we should pray, learn and pray. We should pray that we learn Torah, and after we learn Torah, we should pray that we put into action the Torah that we learned. Prayer is not meant to promote passivity. It's an active "psyching yourself up" to ambitiously go do something about what you're praying for.

We also conclude our prayers with a request that God open our hearts with His Torah because when we pray we are speaking to God but when we learn Torah God is speaking to us. The questions that arise within us and the unique insights we get when we grappling with the text is actually God communicating to us. When we properly learn Torah we will experience God teaching us, however, we ask that His Torah open our hearts and not simply challenge our minds.

*Open my heart with your Torah* also expresses our desire that God's Torah bust out of our heart. The Torah is already in my heart. As we read in the Shema: *And the words that I have commanded you today shall be on your heart.* Why does it say *on your heart* rather than *in your heart*? Because the words of Torah are already in our hearts our goal is to get them out of our heart and into our life.

*and my soul run after your mitzvot.* According to the Kabbalah *nefesh* is the lowest spiritual aspect of our self. There are five parts to our soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshama*, *chaya* and *yechida*. *Nefesh* according to some opinions is our biological life force. *Ruach* is our personality. *Neshama* is the conscious you - the individual self. *Chaya* is the collective national self and *Yechida* is the Universal Self. Therefore when we say '*my nefesh*' we are referring to the lowest level of the self as simple living creature. In other words, we ask God that even on the most elemental level of our self, driven by gut instinct alone regardless of sophisticated considerations, we chase after God's mitzvahs.

*As for all those who are plotting against me nullify their counsel and disrupt their plans.* In other words, we ask, "God to protect from those thinking negatively about us, plotting to harm us and seeking to derail us from our pursuits in Torah and Mitzvot."

*Do this for Your name sake.*

Without me, you have no name, God. What good is Your name if there isn't anyone here to call You? If there isn't anyone here to acknowledge you?

We are also asking, "God, for the sake of Your name, protect me from abusing the power of speech and reacting to the abusive words of others. And also, for Your name sake, inspire me to learn Torah, motivate me to do mitzvot and protect me from those plotting against me." In other words, "Protect me and empower me so that I can promote You, build Your name recognition and inspire others to acknowledge Your presence in their lives."

This is the meaning of the verse that reads “God’s name is upon you.” As God’s chosen people are mission is to be God’s PR agents. Every nation has its own mission—special calling to serve God; some through medicine, others through engineering, technology, commerce or agriculture. But our job is PR. We promote the name of God. We are meant to inspire others to do what they do as a serve to God.

For instance there is a guy Brian Epstein. He was the manager of the Beatles. Now if anyone recognizes the name Brian Epstein it is only because they know the Beatles. His job was to promote the Beatles. His job was to go around the world and to get everyone singing She Loves You. That was his job and he built the name of the Beatles. Then what happens, he killed himself. The question is why did he kill himself. Some say is that he realized that his success was his ultimate failure because he was now no longer necessary. His whole identity was wrapped up serving to build the name of the Beatles of the world. But once he did it he felt they didn’t need him anymore and his whole self worth crashed.

In a similar way our self worth is completely bound up with God. We are chosen by God to promote His name to the world. That is what Avraham did. He went around teaching people that God has a name and you can call to Him because He is ever present. So we pray that God protect us for His name sake—so we use the power of speech correctly and do a good job promoting the awareness of God to the world.

*Do it for the sake of Your right (hand).* According to the Kabbalah the right hand represents the power to do kindness. In other words, God protect me and empower me because this is an opportunity for You to manifest Your kindness.

*Your right*—may also refer to us as His right hand man; doing His work in the world.

*Do this for the sake of Your holiness;* for the sake of revealing Your holiness.

We discussed earlier that *kadosh* means transcendent. Precisely because God transcends the limitations of time, space and being, He is able to be manifest within every moment, place and person. This is the mystery of divinity and the miraculous power of transcendence. Therefore we ask, “God, for Your holiness to be fully expressed, Your presence has to be manifest on earth. And I want to be the sanctuary for Your presence. So please protect us and empower us to do our job to reveal Your holiness.

*Do it for the sake of Your Torah,* to reveal Your values and ideals.

*For the sake of releasing Your beloved (from all forms of bondage), save Your right (hand) and answer my prayers.* Until now we asked God to do it for His sake but now we ask that He do for our sake because we are His beloved.

*May the words of my mouth (what I was able to put in words) and the meditations of my heart (feelings that are beyond words) become will in Your presence, God, my rock and redeemer.*

### ***Paraphrased***

***My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully.*** Protect me from violating my partnership with You and wasting the precious power of speech on bad talk. ***And those who curse me may my soul be silent.*** Protect me not only from instigating slander and lies but also from reacting badly to insults or any form of verbal abuse towards me. May my soul be quiet that I not get drawn into their negativity and feel any need to lash back. ***May my soul be like dust to all;*** unnoticed like the dust of the earth (not seeking to draw attention to myself) so that no one will even bother to curse me. And yet like the dust of the earth if stepped upon I remain indestructible, strong and ever-present. ***Open my heart with Your Torah.*** May my prayers inspire me to want to know more and do more; learn more of Your Torah and aggressively pursue opportunities to serve You more. I also ask that I hear You speak to me when I learn Your Torah and experience Your Torah open my heart not just challenge my mind. ***And may my soul run after your mitzvot;*** driven by the most elementary force within me -- always anxious to do more. ***As for all those who are plotting against me nullify their counsel and disrupt their plans.*** Protect me from those who plot to harm me and seek to derail me from my pursuits in Torah and Mitzvot.

***Do this for Your name sake;*** protect me and empower me so that I can build and promote Your name recognition in order to inspire others to acknowledge Your presence in their lives.

***Do it for the sake of Your right (hand);*** see this as an opportunity to manifest Your kindness.

***Do it for the sake of Your right (hand);*** for the sake of the Jewish People who are Your right hand man ready to do Your work in the world.

***Do this for the sake of Your holiness;*** so that I can do my job to reveal Your holiness.

***Do it for the sake of Your Torah;*** to actualize Your values and ideals on earth.

***For the sake of releasing Your beloved*** from all forms of bondage, ***save Your right (hand) and answer my prayers.*** Until now I asked You to do it for Your sake but now I ask that You do it for my sake because I am Your beloved; Your right hand man.

***May the words of my mouth (what I was able to put in words) and the meditations of my heart (feelings that are beyond words) become will in Your presence, God, my rock and redeemer.***

### ***Final Bow***

We take three steps starting with our left foot to express our reluctance; that it is hard for walk away from this incredible experience. We then bow to the left and say, “*He who is (constantly) making peace in His highest realm.*” We then bow to the right and continue, “He will make peace for us.” And finally we bow straight ahead and conclude with, “and for the entire people of Israel. Amen.”

*He who is making in His highest realm*—From where God is at, so to speak, from His heavenly perspective, there is already peace. We are, therefore, confident that *He will make peace for us and the entire nation of Israel*, from our perspective, too. In other words, what we are praying for already exists and we know that it is just a matter of time before it becomes manifest for us in our realm.

I believe that we bow to the left and then right then center to express our desire for the unification of opposites. We bow to express our humbly acknowledgement of the right, left and center.

Since we are facing God when you bow to your left you actually acknowledging God’s right. When You bow to your right you are acknowledging God’s left. The center bow acknowledges the union of both right and left.

With His right hand (kindness), so to speak, God gives us the power to assert our selves. But when we acknowledge God’s left hand which represents His power to control we acknowledge that God is the all-powerful and we have to surrender. But then we bow in the center to acknowledge the mystery and the miracle of our relationship with God that is beyond the either/or.

### ***Summary and Paraphrased***

*Take three steps starting with your left foot to express your reluctance; that it is hard for you to walk away from this incredible experience.*

*Now bow to the left.*

***He who is (constantly) making peace in His highest realm...*** (From His heavenly perspective, there is already peace.)

*Bow to the right and confidently acknowledge:*

***He will make peace for us...***

*Bow straight ahead and conclude with:*

***...and for the entire people of Israel. Amen.***

I know that peace already exists and it is only a matter of time when it will be manifest for us on earth.

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### ***Final Final Prayer***

*As meaningful and uplifting our prayers can be they still fall short of the ultimate Jewish experience. We must remember that our Jewish life is incomplete until the*

*Temple is rebuilt when we will enjoy our unique and personal understanding of Torah and serve God with total awe.*

***May it be Your will, God, our God and the God of our fathers that the Temple be speedily rebuilt in our days, and give us our portion in Your Torah, so that we may serve You there with awe as in the days of old and as in former years. “And may the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant to the Lord as in the days of the past and as in former years.***

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 51:17.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 8:21.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 84:12.