

Three Elements of Prayer

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The Rambam tells us that *shemone esrei* is the key prayer of the three *tefilot* we pray every day. It consists of three sections, *shevach*, *bakasha*, and *hodaah*. *Shevach* is praise of Hashem, *bakasha* refers to requests, and *hodaah* is thanks. These three segments are fundamental to the way we view the world. The most fundamental principle in Judaism is belief in the existence of Hashem. David Hamelech says in Tehilim, "Ha'shamayim misparim k'evod Kel. The heavens proclaim the glory of Hashem." If we open our eyes, we cannot help but be inspired by the beautiful world Hashem created. The brilliant sun, the clear moon, the twinkling stars, the intricate cloud formations, and cool breezes stir within us an inescapable urge to sing the praises of the Being that fashioned all this. We know there's only one source, the Almighty who created this amazing world. We

give *shevach*, praise for all the good He bestows upon us every day.

Much of our prayers are *shevach*. In Shacharit, the *pisukei d'zimra* is full of praise for Hashem. *Perek Shira*, an early form of prayer attributed to David Hamelech, speaks about all the different creatures and how they each sing Hashem's praises. The earth, water, springs, insects, fish, birds, and animals all laud Hashem in their own way. It's important to recite *pesukei d'zimra* with a lot of *kavanah* (intention). In many shuls, the congregation uses a special *nigun* (tune) when reciting this section, just as every creature has their unique song.

The second section of *shemonei esrei* is *bakasha*. Human needs are almost infinite and only Hashem can really provide for them. We

request many good things and hope that our fears will be allayed so we that we will not have to face suffering. Our requests include physical hopes and spiritual hopes, hope for forgiveness for our sins and hope for the redemption for the people of Israel.

The third section is *hodaah*. After Hashem responds to our needs, we thank him for everything He gives to mankind, and to us personally. We thank Him for the food we eat, for giving us the strength to get out of bed, and for being able to put on our shoes. We thank Him for the small miracles and for His constant presence in our lives.

May Hashem help us to pray with renewed vigor every day, with the right intention and fervor, so that our prayers will be accepted in heaven *l'tova*.

Elul & Rosh Hashana-Merciful Judgement

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Avishai David

One of the most beautiful and powerful *piyutim* on Rosh Hashana is the prayer of *Unesaneh Tokef*. The first part of the hymn is imbued with tension. Hashem sits on the throne of judgment and we are passive and forced to watch while our deeds pass before Him, and our verdict is determined.

Then a lifeline is thrown out to us and the tone of the *piyut* is transformed to mercy. The Chazan intones, "Uteshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah..., repentance, prayer, and charity annul the evil decree." We become active. Our ability to do *teshuva*, to pray, and to give *tzedaka* can turn Hashem's *din* easily to *rachamim*. In fact, the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva writes that even a *rasha* on the day of his death can do *teshuva* and Hashem will accept it.

After this injection of hope, the *piyut* portrays Hashem as the architect of man who is privy to his weaknesses. Ultimately, life is like a passing dream and man's existence on this earth is fleeting. The Chayei Adam, in Tefila Zaka, gives expression to this concept. Man confesses that he did not sin to provoke Hashem but rather the *yetzer hara* ensnared him and the travails of life combined with the innate failings of man led him off the proper path.

There is a dialectic tensile balance between judgment and mercy, which is essentially at the heart of what Rosh Hashana is all about. It is a day of *din* tinged on both sides with *rachamim*. Before *tekiat shofar*, we say, "Ashrei h'aam yodei

teruah. Happy is the nation that knows *teruah*," the secret of taking *midat hadin* and engulfing it with *rachamim*. The Ramban terms this *hamtakat hadin*, sweetening the judgment.

In the prayers of Rosh Hashana, there is a recurrent theme of transforming judgment to mercy. On the first day of Rosh Hashana, the Torah reading is about the birth of Yitzchak who represents *din*. On the second day, we read about *akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of *din* replaced by *rachamim*. Anyone who recites the *piyut* of *Unesaneh Tokef* with proper concentration can sense the atmosphere change from tense truth to joyful mercy which breaks through the barriers of nature. May we merit Hashem's *rachamim* and be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Parshat Ki Tavo: The Source of Self-Effacement

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

Parshat Ki Tavo begins with the *mitzvah* of *bikurim*, bringing the first fruits to the *kohain* and dedicating them to Hashem. At the conclusion, the farmer prostrates himself before Hashem, a requirement unique to *bikurim*. The Shaarei Derech cites the *Midrash* that the world was created in the merit of three *mitzvot*, referred to as *reishit*, beginning, and for which there exists a Rosh Hashanah to commemorate the beginning of the world. They are *challah* (the first of your dough), tithes, and *bikurim*. What was so special about *bikurim*? The *Midrash Tanchuma* tells us that today, since we no longer have a *beit hamikdash* and *bikurim*, we have the *mitzvah* of praying three times a day instead. What is the connection? The *Meirosh Tzurim* mentions another rather cryptic association with this passage. *Perek Shirah* records the praise of the dog which is the verse alluding to this passage, "Come let us prostrate ourselves and bow down and bless Hashem our Maker." The *Moda Labinah* quoting the *Zohar* states that the key *mitzvah* of Rosh Hashanah is *Yoma Dedinah*, the Day of Judgment. While we understand that judgment is the essence of the day, how is that a *mitzvah*?

Rabbi Leff asks, why did the Torah command us to bring the first fruit instead of the best fruit? Because the first, the beginning, lays the foundation for all that is to follow, and like the foundation of a building, it must be without blemish if what follows is to be sustainable. If one wants to infuse sanctity into a project, one must begin with sanctity. As the *Tolna Rebbe* explains, although it appears that our work and nature have partnered to produce this fruit, all nature comes from Hashem. Therefore we dedicate the first fruits to Hashem so that all the rest of our endeavors will be equally holy. The *Shaarei Derech* citing the *Baal Haturim* notes that there is no letter *samech* in the entire passage of *bikurim*. The *samech* is a circular letter implying that nature makes things happen cyclically. Bringing *bikurim* to Hashem belies this philosophy and "gives back" to Hashem that which is rightfully His. What then is the connection between *bikurim* and prayer? Rabbi Frieman continues. We pray because even when all is well we have no guarantees that the status quo will continue. Everything can change in one

moment. We start our day with *Modeh Ani*, we continue with declaring that Hashem renews creation each day, and we daven two more times in the day. Dogs, extremely brazen creatures, still recognize their masters and obey their commands. They acknowledge Hashem's mastery over their very nature in the verse they sing to Hashem, writes the *Tzabeni Rav*. Since Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of a new year, everything can change. Therefore one should approach it as one who is poor and downtrodden. As the *Sifsei Chaim* writes, if you want a good year, realize with full clarity that we have nothing, and we must beg anew for everything. We have no guarantees that what we have we will retain. We are completely dependent on Hashem. Therefore, writes the *Tiv Hatorah*, we should train ourselves to say, "*Im yirtzeh Hashem*," or, "*B'ezerat Hashem*," – with God's will and His help, constantly in our conversations, because all could change in a moment. The *Talelei Chaim* reinforces this message. Rosh and *Reishit* mean not only head and beginning, but also source. On Rosh Hashanah we connect ourselves to our ultimate Source and are charged with revealing His presence in the world. It is the Day of Judgment when we have the ability to plug in to Hashem and recharge our batteries to do His will, for He is the One Who empowers us.

Perhaps we can better understand how our attitude on Rosh Hashanah can affect our lives by way of a parable from the *Matnas Chaim*. A boy was adopted by a man in the construction business. The father raised the boy with much love and gave him everything he needed. When the boy grew up, he decided he wanted to repay his father for all his kindnesses by building him a magnificent mansion. He presented his idea to his father who then gave him a letter to present at his warehouses giving him immediate access to all materials he requested at no cost. Other people waiting in line to fulfill their purchases had to pay full price for all their materials and were not only puzzled but also angry. After all, they did not know that all the materials this man was collecting were to be used for a home for the owner of the construction company himself. Similarly, on Rosh Hashanah we approach Hashem with the desire to coronate Him on earth and to do His bidding. We hope that in doing so, we will be granted all the blessings

necessary to accomplish our task.

Rabbi Roberts notes that the *Ramban* considered humility the greatest of all character qualities, and the *mitzvah* of *bikurim* is a model for humility. Although the farmer has invested so much into this crop, he nevertheless acknowledges that it all belongs to Hashem. The passage immediately preceding *bikurim* is Parshat Zachor, where we are commanded to remember how Amalek attacked us as we left Egypt. Amalek is also referred to as *reishit goyim*, the head, or chief, among nations. They were unafraid to challenge anyone, even God Who had already demonstrated His supremacy to every other nation. Amalek was the epitome of arrogance. Even their name is numerically equivalent to haughtiness, *ram*, both totaling 240. The Torah juxtaposes these two passages for us to note the contrast, and especially on Rosh Hashanah to distance ourselves from arrogance. We must recognize our own inadequacies to merit Divine grace. As Rabbi Reiss points out, when I pray before Hashem, it is because I realize my own nothingness and recognize that He is the Source of all. The essence of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is complete humility, writes the *Netivot Shalom*. That's why many have the custom to prostrate themselves fully and bow during *Aleinu* and the recitation of the *Avodah* as the *kohain* did in the *Beit Hamikdash* and as the farmer did when he brought the *bikurim*. We must efface the ego which stands between ourselves and Hashem. To this end, we substitute prayer three times daily for the *bikurim*. When we bow before Hashem, we are demonstrating our willingness to break our arrogance and acknowledge that our life energy comes from Hashem. The *Sifsei Chaim* notes that Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Teruah*, the day of sounding the broken notes of the *shofar*, for on this day we come before Hashem completely broken and humble. This is the proactive *mitzvah* of the day, notes the *Avodat Avodah*, to stand in humility before Hashem and accept His sovereignty over us. Perhaps a good way to incorporate this idea into our daily lives is to stop at the word *Melech* every time we say a *bracha* and to ponder the meaning of standing before the King. May we merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of revealed goodness and blessing.