



70 Days for 70 Years

Remember the past to build the future

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Tefillah: A Unique Method of Communicating with God



We pray three times each day, but how often do we think about what prayer is or how it works? The exercise of prayer is fundamental in Judaism—it is, according to Chazal, “worship of the heart” and one of the pillars upon which the world rests. The Jewish concept of prayer is also extremely different from the universal notion of prayer.

Throughout Tanach, there are many sources that teach us about Jewish prayer. Let us look at five such examples that Chazal have analyzed. In each of these cases, prayer is given a different appellation, each illuminating a different aspect of acceptable and appropriate ways to approach God. Each appellation gives us an insight into what the proper mindset for prayer should be, and delineates for us what the real goals and expectations are when confronting the Ribbono Shel Olam.

1. The prayer of Pinchas is the source for the term tefillah (Berachot 26b). The English word “prayer” is derived from the Latin term for prayer, which literally means “to beg.” Begging God to fulfill our needs and desires, uncontrollably, in confusion, without thought, rhyme or reason is not tefillah. Tefillah is derived from the Hebrew word “pileil,” which means to judge, and the act of engaging in tefillah is described in the reflexive “lehitpaleil,” to judge or to analyze oneself. Self-evaluation and begging are very different enterprises with the former being a much more arduous, intellectual and constructive activity. Authentic Jewish prayer requires one to take a long, hard and honest look at himself in the shadow of God’s Presence where nothing can be hidden or denied. Have I been living up to my potential? Have I used the gifts that God has given me properly? Are there things that should be more important to me or less important to me? Haphazardly begging for whatever we want is, quite frankly, spoiled, childish behavior. But through sincere self-examination we will hopefully be able to discern between that which we want and that which we need, and truly have our priorities in order as we stand before God.

We say “Baruch Atah Hashem,” addressing God as “You” in the very familiar second person, and in the same breath, we say “Elokeinu Melech haolam,” Our God, King of the universe, recognizing that there is a much bigger picture of which we are a miniscule representation.

2. The prayer of Avraham is called amidah (ibid.) and the prayer of Yitzchak is called sichah (ibid.). These terms reflect the dual nature of our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu when we call out to Him in prayer. On the one hand, amidah requires that one know before Whom he stands, “da lifnei mi atah omeid.” This preamble to prayer reminds us that we are not just participating in any run-of-the-mill conversation. We are standing in the presence of the Creator of the World. This necessitates a state of awe, fear, and reverence. Standing in the Presence of God should humble us and help us recognize our own insignificance. Our whole perspective shifts when we realize that a mere speck of a being can approach Divinity. Yet, on the other hand, we have sichah, a quiet dialogue, an invitation to speak to God privately, exclusively and intimately. God is a loving father, a trustworthy confidant, an encouraging and loyal friend. Our challenge when we daven is to maintain a healthy balance between these polar opposites.

3. We say “Baruch Atah Hashem,” addressing God as “You” in the very familiar second person, and in the same breath, we say “Elokeinu Melech haolam,” Our God, King of the universe, recognizing that there is a much bigger picture of which we are a miniscule representation. We say Avinu, our Father, but we temper it with Malkeinu, our King. We must acknowledge that Hashem is Awesome and Omniscient, so that our prayer can be offered with a proper sense of respect, dignity and humility and that we can fully realize that we are not the axis around which the universe rotates. But we must also recognize that Hashem is as close as a father and a friend, so that our prayer can be intimate and personal, and we can attempt to close the gap between the finite and the Infinite.

4. The fourth term for prayer, describing Yaakov’s prayer, is “pegiah” (ibid.), which means a confrontation. We are able to confront God by appealing to His middat harachamim—attribute of mercy. To explain middat harachamim versus middat hadin, attribute of justice, allow me to use an analogy. If a person has a camera and it stops working, he has two choices. He can throw it out since it no longer functions in the way it was created to function. This is middat hadin, strict justice. The other option is to have it repaired. True, it no longer works as it is supposed to, but perhaps there is a part that can be fixed or replaced so that it can once again perform its function. This is middat harachamim.

When we confront Hashem through prayer, we admit that we are broken, that we have not been functioning in the way we were created to function. We ask God not to discard us but rather to give us a chance to self-diagnose and make the necessary changes. We confront Hashem with the alternate plans that show our sincerity and desire to rectify and perfect ourselves. For example, there are many things that we want and pray for: health, wisdom, peace, wealth, et cetera. Our job is to soul-search, and to confront Hakadosh Baruch Hu with the right reasons for wanting these blessings.

We ask for health, not just because we don’t like pain or doctors, but because if we are in good health, we are better able to keep the mitzvot. We ask for wisdom, not because we want to impress people with our high IQs, but because the greater our wisdom, the deeper our understanding of the knowledge of God. Channah, the trailblazer of authentic prayer, taught us about pegiah when she confronted God about the pain of her infertility.

She asked God for the child she so desperately wanted, but she perfected herself by recognizing that the child could play a more important role than just satisfying her maternal instincts. He could be raised to serve Hashem and Am Yisrael. Hashem accepted her plan, and Shmuel Hanavi was born.

The pious scholars of antiquities (Chassidim Harishonim—Mishnah Berachot, chap. 5) would prepare an entire hour before beginning their prayers. It was during those long, quiet stretches of time that they would contemplate ways in which the very desires they were about to ask for could be used to fulfill a higher spiritual objective. Through middat harachamim, Hashem allows us to confront Him with our own rationally devised plan for effecting change within ourselves, and for elevating our sense of worth and purpose in our own eyes, and in His.

5. The fifth term used to describe prayer is Moshe's "ve'etchanan" (Devarim 3:23), which Rashi explains is closely related to the word "chinam," free. Moshe taught us that whatever we pray for, we should view it as a "matnat chinam," a very generous gift that we have neither earned nor deserve. Moshe Rabbeinu spent the last forty years of his life taking care of the Jewish people. Every need, big or small, was his responsibility. Freeing the Jews from slavery, giving them the Torah, listening to their numerous complaints, defending and condemning them when they erred, Moshe was the teacher, the tour guide, the caterer, the judge, and the parent. Yet, despite everything he sacrificed for Klal Yisrael, when Moshe requested permission to enter the Land of Israel, he did not ask because he felt it was something he deserved or was owed. He asked for a gift. Likewise, this should be our attitude when we approach Hashem, to stand in His Presence with the realization that He owes us nothing, and that anything He gives us is due to His unfathomable magnanimity.

With the understanding of these five appellations of Jewish prayer, we gain a deeper appreciation of what makes Jewish prayer unique. We need prayer because prayer is the great means through which we speak with Hashem and feel the comfort of His closeness (sichah), attempt to appreciate and marvel at Hashem's greatness (amidah, ve'etchanan), do the hard work of judging ourselves (tefillah), and the even harder work of transforming and perfecting ourselves (pegiah). "Baruch Atah Hashem, shomeah tefillah—You, Hashem, are the Source of all blessing, who listens to prayers."