

# The Superpower of Jewish Prayer

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**THE DAILY AMIDAH**, also known as the *Shemonah Esrei*, is the essential prayer of our liturgy. Every day, three times a day, we stand before the Almighty and address Him with this *tefillah*. It is formulated with an opening section of three *berakhot*, which focus on praise of G-d. There is a parallel ending section, which is made up of three *berakhot* of gratitude. The middle section is the section in which we make our requests of G-d, the time when each of us can focus on our own needs and ask for them directly from G-d. This pattern of praise, request, acknowledgement, is described by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (zt”l) as a the “fractal paradigm” on Jewish prayer.<sup>1</sup>

On weekdays, this middle section is comprised of thirteen *berakhot* of requests. As we know them today, the thirteen middle *berakhot* are prayers for:

- Insight
- Repentance
- Forgiveness
- Redemption
- Health and Healing
- Prosperity
- Ingathering of the Exiles
- Justice
- Against Slanderers
- The Righteous
- Rebuilding Jerusalem
- The Kingdom of David
- Response to Prayer<sup>2</sup>

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1. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Koren Siddur* (Koren, 2009), xxvi-xxvii.

2. Translation adapted from *The Koren Siddur*.

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Each *berakhah* constitutes a separate and distinct request, but the section of requests is, for many purposes, treated as one section, or even as one *berakhah*.<sup>3</sup> There is a discussion in the Gemara (*Berakhot* 34a) relating to the middle *berakhot* as regards the possibility of correcting a mistake in the recitation of the *Amidah*:

ורב אסי אמר: אמצעיות אין להן סדר.

*And Rav Asi disputes one aspect of Rav Huna's opinion, as he said: The middle blessings have no set order. If one erred in any of them he may insert it at whatever point he becomes aware of his error.*

מתיב רב ששת: מהיכן הוא חוזר – מתחלת הברכה שטעה זה. תיובתא דרב הונא.

*Rav Sheshet raised an objection based on a baraita: From where does he commence repetition of the Amidah prayer? He commences from the beginning of the blessing in which the former had erred. If so, this is a conclusive refutation of Rav Huna's opinion, as Rav Huna said that if one erred in one of the middle blessings, he returns to the beginning of the middle blessings, not to the beginning of that particular blessing.*

אמר לך רב הונא: אמצעיות כולו חדא ברכתא נינהו.

*Rav Huna could have said to you: The middle blessings are all considered one blessing; commencing from the beginning of the blessing means returning to the beginning of the middle blessings.*

אמר רב יהודה: לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו לא בשלש ראשונות, ולא בשלש אחרונות, אלא באמצעיות. דאמר רבי חנינא: ראשונות – דומה לעבד שמסדר שבח לפני רבו. אמצעיות – דומה לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו. אחרונות – דומה לעבד שקבל פרס מרבו, ונפטר והולך לו.

*Rav Yehuda said: There is an additional distinction between the various sections of the Amidah prayer: One must never request his own needs in the first three or in the last three blessings; rather, he should do so in the middle blessings. As Rabbi Hanina said: During the first three blessings, he is like a servant who arranges praise before his master; during the middle blessings, he is like a servant who requests a reward from his master; during the final three blessings, one is like a servant who already received a reward from his master and is taking his leave and departing.*

In contrast to this, there is a discussion in *Megillah* (17b) about the order of the *berakhot* of the *Amidah*, that prohibits reciting the *berakhot* out of their established order. The discussion continues to elaborate on the progression from one *berakhah* to the next:

תפלה מנא לך? דתניא: שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה. אמר רבי יוחנן, ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא: מאה ועשרים זקנים, ובהם כמה נביאים, תיקנו שמונה עשרה ברכות על הסדר.

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3. Translation adapted from The William Davidson Talmud (Sefaria.org).

The *baraita* cited previously taught that the *halakhah* against reciting a text out of order applies to the *Amidah* prayer as well. The *Gemara* asks: From where do we derive this? As it is taught in a *baraita*: Shimon HaPakuli arranged the eighteen blessings of the *Amidah* prayer before Rabban Gamliel in their fixed order in Yavne, which indicates that there is a specific order to these blessings that must not be changed. Rabbi Yohanan said, and some say that it was taught in a *baraita*: A hundred and twenty Elders, i.e., the Men of the Great Assembly, and among them several prophets, established the eighteen blessings of the *Amidah* in their fixed order, which also shows that the order of these blessings may not be changed.

At first reading, these *berakhot* seem to be a fairly comprehensive list of a person's needs. They also seem to follow a logical order, each building on the one before. However, on a closer reading, there are some connections that require a shift in perspective, and that may provide further insight into the special nature of Jewish prayer.

The first point of disconnection is the change from personal needs to national ones. We begin intensely personally, in our own heads and hearts. We pray for insight to know that everything comes from G-d, and that it is to Him that we direct our prayers and requests. We ask for repentance and forgiveness, in order to stand in His Presence and make our requests of Him. We need Redemption from personal and immediate threats, whatever they are at that moment. We pray for Health and Healing, for ourselves and for others. We also pray for Prosperity, for the ability to live without the crushing burdens of poverty. At this point, the individual's needs have been addressed. One could think that after these requests, we are ready to conclude the *Amidah*.

However, the next *berakhah* is for the Ingathering of the Exiles. "Sound the great Shofar of our freedom, hoist the banner to gather our exiles..." Then we ask for our independence, for Jewish self-rule. We ask for an end to those who have cooperated with our oppressors, for G-d to reward the righteous, for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. How are these prayers part of this section of individual requests?

One answer to this issue is that each individual prays not only for himself or herself, but for the needs of the community. All of the *berakhot* of the *Amidah* are phrased in the plural, and are intended, not merely for ourselves, but for our community, for the Jewish Nation, and for the world. In this context, it is possible to see the series of requests in the *Amidah* as a "Jewish Hierarchy of Needs." Both as an individual, and as a community, we need insight to understand that we have sinned. We ask for the blessing of repentance in order to be forgiven. We need pardon, absolution and forgiveness to be able to ask for our needs. Whatever the immediate threats are, physical, political or our own personal experience of oppression, it is only when the immediate threat is removed that we can plan and focus on long-term issues and goals. We need health, strength and sustenance to move forward and continue our existence.

In light of this, the second section of requests connects easily to the first section. The *berakhah* of "Bareikh aleinu," which is our request for prosperity and sustenance, includes,

during the rainy season in Israel, a specific request for rain. This *berakhah* is said with this addition all over the world, even in countries of the southern hemisphere, where the winter rainy season falls at the opposite time of the year. This request is not only phrased in the plural, in the way that a Jew always includes the entire community in his or her prayer.<sup>4</sup> This is now a national matter. Because no matter where in the world a Jew is physically located, this *berakhah* is a connection to the Land of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Having noted that connection, the next *berakhah*, for the Ingathering of the Exiles, follows very logically. Once we have established that we are all connected to the land and to each other, the realization of that connection is a logical next request. Once we are together in our land, national self-determination is of paramount importance, that we rule ourselves without the interference of foreign powers. When we return to Israel, it will be our greatest national goal to rebuild Jerusalem to its former glory, and to re-establish the Kingdom of David. Finally, in the *berakhah* of *Ritzei*, we ask that our prayers be heard, and that the *avodah*, the service of G-d in the *Beit Hamikdash*, return.

Another perspective on these *berakhot* may be found in the discussions in Tanakh of the dedication of the *Beit Hamidash*. The story is told twice, the first is in *Melachim I*, Ch. 8. The second is in *Divrei Hayamin II*, Ch. 6. The two are very similar, and both contain a prayer or proclamation of King Shlomo regarding the *Beit Hamikdash* as the centre of Jewish prayer forever. In both accounts, Shlomo declares that the *Beit Hamikdash* will always be a direct conduit to G-d. Even if we would be exiled, and unable to pray at the *Beit Hamikdash*, if Jewish people direct their prayers towards their land, towards Jerusalem, and towards the *Beit Hamikdash*, G-d will hear us and answer us. After the dedication of the *Beit Hamikdash*, G-d spoke to Shlomo and confirmed that He had chosen and sanctified the *Beit Hamikdash*, and His eyes and His heart will always be towards the *Beit Hamikdash* and towards the prayers that are directed there.

This would serve then as an explanation for why so much of our personal prayer is devoted to restoring us to the Land of Israel, to Jewish self-rule, to rebuilding the *Beit Hamikdash* and restoring the Davidic monarchy and the *Beit Hamikdash*. The declaration was made by King Shlomo, that even in exile, if we repent with sincerity and direct our prayers to the *Beit Hamikdash*, G-d will hear us and answer us. Naturally, we would want to emphasize this commitment at every opportunity, and in every *Amidah*.

An additional answer approaches this connection on a more self-reflective level. Praying the section of the *Amidah* that is supposed to be devoted to “personal prayer,” yet phrased in the plural, can also bring a very important perspective to these requests. We can understand why these requests are made by the community as a whole, perhaps even as part of public prayer services, but why are they prescribed as part of this intensely individual moment?

A similar change of focus can be found in Tehillim 102, which calls itself, “A prayer of the poor man, when he is enveloped in misery.” For twelve *pesukim*, this Psalm describes

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4. See *Berakhot* 29b-30a.

5. See *Beurei Ha-tefillah Institute*, Vol 3, No. 50.

utter dejection, abandonment and the petitioner nearly expiring. In *pasuk* 13 the psalmist declares: “But You, O L-rd are enthroned forever and Your Name is for all generations.” He then makes a demand: “You will have mercy on Zion, it is the time to be gracious to her, the appointed time has come.” This individual may be enshrouded in his personal misery, but his prayer and plea is not for himself, but for G-d to redeem his people and bring them to Jerusalem. This “poor man” who describes himself as “withered like grass” speaks to G-d and demands, not personal rescue, but national redemption.

This is a paradigm for every generation. We each face our own set of challenges. No matter how worn out and dried up, overwhelmed and wrung out, abandoned and isolated, we feel ourselves to be, we are a part of this great nation, and we have a responsibility to advocate for the Jewish people. No matter how insignificant we may think we are, we each come before G-d as individuals – but also as representatives of His nation. We plead before Him, not only for our own daily needs, but for the redemption that He has promised to us for every generation. Every Jew has the right, and the responsibility, to ask for the redemption of our nation and the return of our *Beit Hamikdash*. This transition, from the personal to the national, emphasizes the dignity of a Jew. It takes a downtrodden wretch of humanity, spurned and repulsed by every nation, and tells him to stand, every day, before the King of Kings, and remind Him that we await His redemption. This is the superpower of Jewish prayer.