



ישיבת הר עציון

Yeshivat Har Etzion – Israel Koschitzky VBM Parsha Digest, Year II, #32 Parashat Tazria-Metzora – Yom HaAtzmaut 5780

Selected and Adapted by Rabbi Dov Karoll

Quote from the Rosh Yeshiva

In our parasha [Tazria], the command concerning circumcision follows the ‘torah of the animals,’ along with other commands relating to the physical body. A well-known midrash records an exchange between R. Akiva and Turnus Rufus: “The wicked Turnus Rufus once asked R. Akiva, ‘Whose works are finer – those of God or those of mortals?’ He answered him, ‘Those of mortals.’... [Turnus Rufus] then asked, ‘Why do you [Jews] practice circumcision?’ He answered, ‘I knew that that was what you were asking about, and for that reason I said at the outset that man’s works are finer than those of God.’ R. Akiva brought him sheaves of wheat and fresh-baked rolls, and said: ‘These are God’s works, and those are man’s. Are those not better than these? Turnus Rufus asked him, ‘If God wants circumcision, why does a newborn not emerge from the womb already circumcised?’ R. Akiva answered, ‘And why is he still attached at the navel to the umbilical cord, such that the mother needs to cut it? [With reference to] your question as to why he is not born already circumcised – it is because God gave Israel the commandments in order that they might purify themselves through their performance, as David declares (Tehillim 18), ‘God’s word is pure.’” (Midrash Tanchuma, Tazria 5:5)

The baked rolls are indeed finer – but there is no denying that they come from wheat, from nature. Likewise, the special status awarded to man distinguishes him from the animal kingdom, and the covenant forged with the Jewish People distinguishes Jews from other nations, but man nevertheless has his source in nature. One who devotes himself to the study of Torah and observance of its commandments fulfills and combines the ‘torah of animals’ and the ‘torah of man.’

-Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein

Sicha for Yom HaAtzmaut “This is the Lord’s Doing – It is Wondrous in Our Eyes!”

Based on a Sichra by Harav Yehuda Amital zt”l

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lords-doing-it-wondrous-our-eyes-0>



Every year at the beginning of the month of Iyar, we experience Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day for fallen soldiers) and Yom HaAtzmaut (Independence Day) one right after the other. It is usually quite difficult to celebrate joyous occasions so soon after commemorating mournful ones, but Rashi teaches us a profound lesson in this regard in his commentary to Bereishit (6:6): “In a time of joy – there shall be joy, and in a time of grief – there shall be grief.”

When I read these comments of Rashi, I cannot help but recall the wedding of my eldest daughter, which took place in the yeshiva immediately after the Yom Kippur War. After all the pain resulting from that war – both the pain of the nation and the pain of our yeshiva, which lost 8 students – I found it very difficult to listen to the band, and I almost did not join in the dancing. But then I was approached by Justice Zvi Tal, whose son’s wedding I had performed on Rosh Chodesh Elul, right before the war. His son went out to battle and never returned. Justice Tal mentioned to me these words of Rashi – “In a time of joy – there shall be joy, and in a time of grief – there shall be grief.”

Rashi’s comments also bring to mind the day of 5 Iyar 5708 (May 14, 1948), when 2 very significant events transpired. On that day, we received the tragic news of the fall of Gush Etzion and the massacre of its defenders, but on that same day Jewish statehood was declared. It seems that ever since that day, the Jewish Nation has found it difficult to draw a complete separation between bereavement and celebration.

This pattern has repeated itself in recent years [2000-03], as we witnessed brutal terror attacks on an almost daily basis. Nevertheless, we insist that “in a time of joy – there shall be joy, and in a time of grief – there shall be grief.” Indeed, there can be no doubt that despite the pain, there is something to celebrate. In 1948, I learned the dreadful news of the fall of Gush Etzion, and today we see Gush Etzion flourishing and prospering; I simply have no words to describe how this stirs the heart, and we can declare wholeheartedly, “This is the day that the Lord has made – we shall exult and rejoice on it!”

The prophet relates in II Melakhim (14:23-27):

In the fifteenth year of Amatzya son of Yoash, Yarovam son of Nevat, king of Israel, ruled in Shomron for 41 years. He did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not deviate from all the sins of Yarovam son of Nevat, who had led Israel to sin. He restored Israel's border from Levo Chamat until the Arava Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord spoken through His servant, the prophet Yona son of Amitai from Gat-Chefer. For the Lord beheld Israel's very bitter suffering, that Israel had hardly a bound or free man, and the Lord did not declare that the name of Israel should be eradicated from under the heavens; and so He saved them through the hands of Yarovam son of Yoash.

A situation arose where there was “hardly a bound or free man,” and the Almighty decided to intervene so that the name of Israel would not disappear.

I do not wish to compare the situation of Jewish People at the time of the State's founding with the situation during the time of Yarovam ben Yoash, but there has never been a state of near destruction comparable to the one following the Holocaust. Had events unfolded according to their natural course, Heaven forbid, and had the well-arranged armies that invaded the Land of Israel on 5 Iyar and fought against untrained groups of Jews succeeded in overpowering us, we may have indeed reached the point of “the name of Israel would be eradicated from under the heavens,” God forbid.

We read at the end of Makkot:

Once [the Sages] were ascending to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, they rent their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a jackal leaving from the site of the inner sanctum [of the Temple]; they began weeping, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. They said to him, “Why do you laugh?” He said to them, “Why do you weep?”

They said to him, “Jackals now tread on the site regarding which it is written, ‘And the stranger who approaches shall die’ (Bamidbar 1:51) – shall we not weep?”

He said to them, “For this very reason I laugh... In the context of Uriya[’s prophecy] it is written, ‘Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed like a field’ (Yir. 26:18), and in Zekharya[’s prophecy] it is written, ‘Elderly men and women shall once again sit along the streets of Jerusalem’ (Zekh. 8:5). Until Uriya’s prophecy was realized, I feared that perhaps Zekharya’s prophecy would not be realized; but now that Uriya’s prophecy has been realized, it is certain that Zekharya’s prophecy will be realized.”

What unique promise did Zekharya’s prophecy convey? Did the Jews not know that the Almighty would rescue the nation? There are so many stirring prophecies of redemption in Yeshayahu. Why was it specifically Zekharya’s prophecy that provided consolation for Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues?

Moreover, once Rabbi Akiva chose – for whatever reason – to cite from Zekharya, why did he prefer this verse over the immediately preceding passage, which deals directly with the rebuilding of the Temple – “Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and I shall reside in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called ‘The City of Truth,’ and the mountain of the Lord of Hosts, ‘The Sacred Mountain’”? The rabbis wept upon seeing a jackal scurrying about on the site of the Mikdash. Why did Rabbi Akiva not draw their attention to a prophecy that foretells the rebuilding of the Temple ruins?

It seems that Rabbi Akiva’s colleagues would not have found consolation upon hearing the first prophecy, the promise of the Temple’s restoration, just as they would not have drawn comfort from Yeshayahu’s many prophecies relating to the same theme. Only Zekharya’s second prophecy – “Elderly men and women shall once again sit along the streets of Jerusalem” – provided a source of comfort. What is unique about this prophecy?

We find a debate among the Rishonim as to whether human nature will undergo a fundamental change in the Messianic era. The Rambam writes in his Guide of the Perplexed (III:32) that while God will alter nature in performing miracles, He will never change the nature of man. The Ramban, in contrast, presents a different approach in his commentary to Devarim (30:6), asserting that in the time of Mashiach the Almighty will change the nature of man.

In the 19th Century, R. Shmuel Mohliver suggested the possibility of rebuilding the Mikdash in his time, and he requested a letter of

approbation from R. Yehoshua of Kutna. R. Yehoshua, however, responded that rebuilding the Temple at that time would serve no purpose; as the vast majority of the Jewish people had no interest in offering sacrifices. R. Mohliver replied that a minority can bring the public sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation, and sacrifices could thus be offered even if most Jews were uninterested.

The Keli Chemda, a student of R. Yehoshua of Kutna, wrote that R. Mohliver's response did not address the Rav of Kutna's contention. The Rav of Kutna meant that if most of the nation has no interest in offering sacrifices, then there is no possibility of offering on their behalf. The sacrifices have no meaning or purpose if the people on whose behalf they are offered are not ready for them. The Keli Chemda thus concluded by claiming that rebuilding the Mikdash would not solve anything if the people are not ready for it; the Mikdash has no significance until the people show an interest in it.

We can now understand Rabbi Akiva's remarks to his colleagues. Had Rabbi Akiva attempted to console them by citing prophecies about the restoration of the Mikdash, his attempts would have been to no avail. After all, the Rambam maintains that human nature will not undergo any intrinsic change in the times of Mashiach, and the rabbis would not have believed that in the near future Am Yisrael would repent and earn the rebuilding of the Temple. Rabbi Akiva therefore mentioned the promise that "elderly men and women shall once again sit along the streets of Jerusalem;" Zekharya conveys here a different prophecy, one which does not hinge on the previous prophecy of the Temple's restoration. Upon hearing this prophecy, the rabbis felt consoled; they understood that this prophecy could, indeed, unfold already in their time, even before the repentance of the entire nation.

At weddings and sheva berachot, we recite a blessing which mentions 5 sounds: "May there again be heard in the cities of Judea and in the markets of Jerusalem the sound of jubilation, the sound of joy, the sound of a groom, the sound of a bride, the sound of the rejoicing of grooms from their canopies and young men from their feast of dancing." The origin of this text is a prophecy of Yirmeyahu (33:11). The first 4 sounds are identical in both texts. However, whereas in the berakha we describe the fifth "sound" as the sound of young men celebrating, Yirmeyahu speaks of a much different "sound:" "The sound of people saying: 'Give thanks to the Lord of Hosts, for the Lord is good, for His kindness is eternal' – and of people bringing thanksgiving offerings to the House of the Lord." What a beautiful sound – people expressing thanksgiving to God and bringing sacrifices in the Beit HaMikdash! Why did the Sages change the text in formulating this berakha? Why did they not include the sound of people offering sacrifices among the "sounds" that we pray to God to restore?

The Sages instituted this berakha in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction. They sought to console the people by telling them that although the ideal state of a rebuilt Mikdash will not likely be achieved in the near future, there is another prophecy that can be fulfilled in the near future – the promise of joy and security. Rabbi Akiva similarly consoled his colleagues in this fashion, insisting that even if the Temple's return does not appear on the horizon, there is still something to anticipate and to give thanks for. Even if the supreme ideal has yet to materialize, we still owe a debt of gratitude to the Almighty for the blessings He has bestowed upon us.

During the Hallel service, we say, "This is the Lord's doing – it is wondrous in our eyes." Indeed, everything that takes place around us is "wondrous in our eyes." Everything that has taken place in the State of Israel since its founding until today has unfolded in a miraculous fashion. The United Nations' decision to establish a Jewish state occurred before East and West had united on any other issue. The War of Independence was also a miracle; it is difficult to describe to you what it was like when organized armies with modern weaponry fought against a nation whose weapons were obtained from secret caches. After the war came the great miracle of immigration, the result of which is today's population of over 5 million Jews in Israel [as of 2003]. The most anti-Israel countries opened their doors and allowed their Jews to emigrate to Israel – an unfathomable irony. The Arabs had fought relentlessly against Jewish immigration to Israel – how did they suddenly allow their Jewish citizens to move to Israel? Each time, a window of opportunity miraculously opened, and the Jews were quickly taken to Israel. The Jewish immigration from the Communist nations and the immigrants' absorption in Israel is likewise a remarkable phenomenon. And we have not even begun to discuss the Six Day War and the economic, military, and scientific strength of the State of Israel today.

In conclusion, I would remark that "independence" implies acting upon the stage of history and reaching decisions responsibly. Along with the State, God gave us several options, and we now face one main concern. Although the State of Israel is strong and will survive, the question remains whether it will be a Jewish state, or simply the State of Israel, in a number of years. We must work to guarantee the Jewish character of the State, as well as the Jewish majority of its population. The "solution" of bringing people of questionable Jewish status here in order to make us the majority does not help - it adds to the problem. I never believed in religious coercion, but I have always believed in a State with a distinctly Jewish character, and right now that character is fading. We cannot

fulfill our obligation by simply saying, “God will help;” we have to stand up and act!

Let us conclude with the David’s stirring words in Tehillim (144:9, 15): “God, I shall sing to You a new song; I shall sing praises to You with a ten-stringed harp... Fortunate is the nation who has it so – fortunate is the nation for whom God is Lord!”

(This sicha was delivered on Yom Ha-Atzmaut 5763 [2003]. Adapted by Shaul Barth; translated by David Silverberg.)

Parashat Metzora

Metzora vs. Tamei Met

By Rav Amnon Bazak



Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/lmetzoravstamei-met>

A. “The Metzora is Considered as Dead”

The process of purification and atonement prescribed for the metzora, one afflicted with the symptoms of the spiritual disease called tzara’at, is described in verses 1-32 of chapter 14. This process, which is mysterious and leaves many questions unanswered, is reminiscent of the process of purification prescribed for a tamei met, one who has contracted impurity through contact with a corpse. We may point to the following main points of similarity:

1. Both processes require the same accessories (cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet) and are set forth in similar language (compare 14:4 to Bamidbar 19:6).
2. In both parashot, an animal is taken and slaughtered, and parts of its carcass are placed in a vessel containing “living waters.” All of these actions involve the kohen (compare 14:4-5 to Bamidbar 19:2-3, 17).
3. In both instances, the living waters are sprinkled on the person undergoing purification, using a branch of hyssop (compare 14:6-7 to Bamidbar 19:18).
4. Both purification processes conclude with the washing of clothes and immersion on the seventh day (compare 14:9 to Bam. 19:19).

What is the meaning of this parallel? It seems that the connection between the 2 cases can be understood in light of Chazal’s teaching that “a metzora is considered as though he is dead” (Shemot Rabba 1:34). This idea is implied by the text in our parasha but is made explicit in the story of Miriam. After she contracts tzara’at, Aharon tells Moshe: “Let her not, I pray you, be as one who is dead, whose flesh is half consumed upon emerging from his mother’s womb.” (Bamidbar 12:12)

Just as a tamei met requires a specific process of purification, the metzora needs a similar process of purification from the “temporary death” that has settled on his body.

The perception of the metzora as having the status of one who is dead is also reflected in the behavior of the metzora while he must remain outside of the camp: “And the one with tzara’at, who is plagued – his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall grow long, and he shall have his upper lip covered...” (13:45).

Growing one’s hair long and tearing one’s clothes are customs of mourning. This we learn from Moshe’s command to Aharon and his sons, following the death of Nadav and Avihu on the eighth day (10:6-7), where Aharon and his sons are commanded to continue with their Divine service and not to follow the customs of mourning. In contrast, the metzora is commanded to follow the mourning customs – essentially, to mourn for himself, for the temporary death of his body, just as one mourns the death of a close relative.

B. Purification and Atonement

However, along with the similarity between the purification of a tamei met and the purification of the metzora, there is a great difference between them. The purification of the tamei met is concluded with the immersion in water on the seventh day. For the metzora, in contrast, the immersion on the seventh day completes only the first part of what he must do – the purification. This is followed by the second part – the sacrifices, which bring atonement. In the purification of the tamei met, the concept of “atonement” is not mentioned, while in our parasha the root “k-p-r” (to atone) is a key word, appearing 7 times.

This difference reflects the real difference between the metzora and the tamei met. Tzara’at is treated in Tanakh as a punishment for sin, and the impurity that it entails is the result of that sin. For this reason, it is not sufficient that the metzora undergo purification to restore his state of purity; he must also undergo a process that atones for his evil actions and bring about the necessary change within himself. The tamei met, in contrast, is not regarded negatively; the impurity contracted through contact with a corpse is an unavoidable part of reality

(and in some cases even the inevitable side-effect of fulfilling a mitzva). While this state requires purification, no atonement is necessary.

This fundamental difference between the metzora and the tamei met may also explain some of the discrepancies in the process of purification, which, on the whole, is common to both of them.

First, the purification of the metzora includes one law that does not apply to the tamei met – the shaving of the hair, which is set forth with emphasis and in detail (see 14:8-9). The shaving of the hair is apparently the outward expression of the change that the process of purification and atonement brings about inside the metzora. His healing is a sort of rebirth, emerging from the process like a newborn infant, with no hair on his body. A tamei met, in contrast, is not required to create a “new identity” for himself.

We noted above that both processes involve mixing parts of the carcasses of animals with living waters and sprinkling the water on the person who seeks purification. Once again, there are significant differences in the details. In the purification of a metzora, one of the birds is slaughtered in an earthenware vessel, its blood is mixed with the water, and the hyssop and other items (including the living bird) are dipped in this mixture (see 14:6).

In purifying the tamei met, it is the ashes of the red heifer, rather than its blood, which is mixed with water. Even if we are unable to understand the full significance of the items used in these processes, it would seem that the inclusion of the blood of the bird in the purification of the metzora shows that it includes a dimension of atonement, as we are taught: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” (17:11)

For a tamei met, who requires no atonement, the process of purification involves no blood.

A third difference pertains to the number of sprinklings. A tamei met requires only 2, on the third day and on the seventh day (see Bamidbar 19:12). The metzora needs 7 sprinklings (see 14:7). Chazal emphasize this point: “Purification from a state of tzara’at requires 7 sprinklings, while a tamei met does not require 7 sprinklings.” (Torat Kohanim, Metzora, parasha 2).

This difference can also be explained in light of our discussion above. 7 sprinklings usually occur in the context of atonement for sin, as, for example, in the sin offering of the anointed kohen (4:6); the ox offered for a sin committed unknowingly by the entire nation (4:17); and, of course, the sprinkling of the blood as part of the Yom Kippur service (see 16:14-16).

Thus, the metzora, who requires atonement, needs 7 sprinklings, while a tamei met, who requires purification but no atonement, suffices with the sprinklings carried out over a 7-day period, on the third day and on the seventh day, but he does not need 7 sprinklings each time.

C. Sending Away From the Camp

There is another important difference between the metzora and the tamei met, but here the comparison is somewhat complex. In Parashat Naso, we read: “Command Bnei Yisrael that they shall send away from the camp anyone with tzara’at, and anyone who is a zav, and anyone who is impure through [contact with] the dead” (Bamidbar 5:2). In other words, anyone who is impure is sent away from the camp.

However, the parashot concerning purification which we discussed above convey a different impression. With regard to the metzora, we are told that he is to dwell alone, outside the camp (see 13:46), and in our parasha, we are told that in his purification process we are told that even in that stage he is to “remain outside of his tent for 7 days” (see 14:3, 8).

In the unit discussing the tamei met, there is no mention of his being sent outside of the camp. This absence is especially remarkable in view of the fact that other people mentioned in the same parasha – those who carry out all the operations pertaining to the red heifer – are indeed sent out of the camp (see Bamidbar 19:3-9).

What is the relationship between the unit on the banishment of those who are impure in Parashat Naso and the units on purification? Why is it that in the latter units, the Torah draws a distinction between the metzora and the tamei met, while the unit on sending away those who are impure makes no distinction between them?

It seems that the 2 parashot express 2 different perspectives on the sending away from the camp. Parashat Naso discusses the obligation that Am Yisrael has to send out those who are impure, “So they do not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell” (Bam. 5:3). The sanctity of the camp requires sending out those who are impure, and from this perspective, there is no distinction between the various impurities.

The units on purification, in contrast, deal not with the nature of the camp (i.e., the environment) but rather with the metzora and the tamei met themselves. The metzora is sent away from the camp as part of the process of atonement for his evil ways which caused him to contract tzara’at. The tamei met is regarded differently, having committed no transgression. Looking at the 2 units together, we can see that the tamei met is sent out of the camp only from the perspective of Parashat Naso – that is, as part of the general requirement to maintain the purity of the camp. The metzora is sent away for an additional reason: his process of atonement requires that he be isolated from society.

In practice, there is a significant difference between the metzora and the tamei met. The latter is barred only from the Mikdash, while the metzora is sent out of Jerusalem (see Rambam, Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash 3:1-5).

In sum, the impurity of the metzora is more severe than the other types of impurity, which is understandable if we view tzara'at as a punishment. Translated by Kaeren Fish

Understanding the Shemoneh Esrei

Shiur #02: Getting Started

By Rav Ezra Bick



A. HaShem Sefatai Tiftach

Based on: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-getting-started>

Before we begin the Shemoneh Esrei (by which I mean reciting the first berakha), we recite a single verse – “HaShem sefatai tiftach u-fi yagid tehilatekha” (God, open my lips and my mouth shall utter your praises). One might assume that this is not necessarily significant, as it is a verse that was added as an introduction. But if you recall, last week we learnt that it is necessary to connect “ge’ula” to “tefilla.” We must avoid any interruption between the last berakha after the Shema – ga'al Yisrael – and the beginning of the Shemoneh Esrei. As I pointed out, many authorities do not even permit the answering of “amen” to the chazan’s berakha at this point. If we nonetheless recite this verse, there must be a very good reason to do so.

The Talmud asks why this verse does not constitute an interruption:

How does one connect ge’ula to tefilla in the morning? Did not R. Yochanan say: Before (Shemoneh Esrei) one says, “HaShem sefatai tiftach” and afterwards he should say, “Yih’yu le-ratzon imrei fi” (“May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be accepted before You, God my rock and redeemer”)? The answer is that since the Sages required one to say “HaShem sefatai tiftach,” (the verse) is part of one long tefilla (i.e., ge’ula is linked to tefilla, which begins from HaShem sefatai tiftach) (Berakhot 4b).

In other words, “Hashem Sefatai,” despite being outside the textual framework of the berakhot, is not merely an introduction to prayer, but an integral part of prayer itself. The Shemoneh Esrei BEGINS with “Hashem sefatai.” [Note: Based on this gemara, the Rav, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt”l, recommended that the chazan begin his repetition of Shemoneh Esrei with the verse “Hashem sefatai.” Since it is an integral part of Shemoneh Esrei, it should be repeated together with the repetition of the Shemoneh Esrei.]

We now have to try and understand why - why is this verse necessary?

1. Who can pray

“God, open my lips and my mouth shall utter your praises.” This is not, I think, a request of God to aid us to pray. Not that one does not need the assistance of God to speak, but one needs no more help in moving one’s lips than in moving one’s legs, in breathing, or in anything else. Everything needs God, who is the creator of all. But that would not justify prefacing prayer with this request. This is a request for permission rather than for assistance. Man, facing God, recognizes that he is unworthy to utter the praises of God, that the very thought of God’s praise, majesty and kingship, on his lips is inappropriate. To rephrase this idea within the context of the previous shiur, where I explained that the “avoda,” the service of God inherent in tefilla is in recognizing and declaring that all comes from Him and depends on Him, then we understand this opening verse as stating: Even my ability to serve You, to be counted as one of Your servants, is dependent on You. Only if you accept me and accept the words of my mouth can I enter into Your service. To serve God is also a privilege, and it too must be granted by God.

This verse reflects the paradox I described last time. To serve God is to receive from Him the contents of the tzelem Elokim, the “image of God.” By serving Him, we do not fade away, lose dignity and a sense of self, but on the contrary, we become truly human, in that to be human is to be in the image of God. Here too, to serve God through prayer is a status that can only be achieved through God’s grace. But there is more here – how shall I praise God, pray before Him? Not only by His permission, by His accepting me and allowing me to come before Him, but by His “opening my lips.” What does this metaphor indicate? I think we have here the basic meaning of the “image of God.”

By saying “open my lips and my mouth shall utter your praises,” we seem to imply that the praises are waiting inside us, bottled up, unable to pass the sealed portals of our lips. The words are bursting to come out but cannot. There is a tremendous difference between my inner depths and my outer expression, and only God can help me bridge the gap. What does this mean? The concept of the “image of God” means that man’s potential is unlimited by anything other than the divine – in other words, infinitely unlimited. In actual external expression, no

person can reach more than the finite state in which a camera would freeze him. But Man was not created in the image of man, according to a plan of what a man should be, but in the image of God. Man exists, by the word of creation, and that word was that he should be THUS! – an image of God, a being who is potentially more than he is, whose meaning is expressed in his striving to transcend himself. Hence, the praises of God, my infinite worth as His servant, is my potential, bottled up “inside” me, hidden, not objectively real. I want Him to open my lips, to let my potential flower and become objectively externalized. If I pray not, I can at most be equal to myself, flesh and blood, dust and ashes. If I pray, if I enter the service of God by recognizing Him as the source and font of all value for myself, I can become something of infinite value, growing closer to objective worth, expressing my true personality as a reflection of that objective truth, as a tzelem Elokim.

2. How Does One Pray

I would like to make another point about the meaning of this verse, related not to my right to pray, but to my ability. There are 2 kinds of prayer. One is spontaneous, bursting from the heart, elementary, unsophisticated. When we are in trouble or in danger, our prayer does not reflect our service of God, but our immediate needs. It is not a recital but a cry. This is called “ze’aka” rather than tefilla. One goes to tefilla in the house of the king; one runs to ze’aka as to a refuge (Tehillim 142:1-6):

Maskil to David, when he was in the cave, a prayer: My voice to God I cry (ez’ak), my voice to God I beg; I shall spill before Him my words, My trouble before Him I shall tell.... I cried (za’akti) to You, O God; I said: You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.

On the battlefield, “in the cave,” in the depths of despair, from the midnight of the soul, man can cry out to God to save him. This requires no preparation, no formalities, no keeping to protocol. One need not be a great scholar to formulate such a prayer – in fact, one should not “formulate” it at all. You do not need a siddur, nor a minyan of 10; there are no set times, special locations, introductions, conclusions, or formulas. The legitimacy of ze’aka is in the heart of the individual.

But daily prayer is not like that. Tefilla is, as we have seen, avoda, service. The reason why the Sages composed the Shemoneh Esrei, according to the Rambam (Hilkhos Tefilla 1:3), is that the common man could not express himself properly. Here there are rules of procedure – what comes first, what last, how to stand, how to bow from the waist, how to bend the knees. The legitimacy of tefilla is the service of God, and this must be done properly, “by the rules” of the King’s house. Here the Sages weigh every word, searching for the biblical sanction and support, in order to produce the perfect tefilla. It is not easy to pray in this manner. I am unsure I know what to say. Shall I address God as “Merciful” or as “Mighty,” Judge or Father? Which of my needs are important enough to come first and which are worthy of mention at all?

One of the methods we shall utilize in this course is to search for the source of the phrases used in the Shemoneh Esrei. We shall see that the Sages carefully combined biblical phrases into a seamless whole. Every noun, every adjective, was chosen for its appropriateness. In the first berakha, as we shall see next time, the Sages claimed that without prophetic sanction, i.e., without God’s own sanction – they could not have composed the berakha as they did. If, in times of emergency, one can burst in before God and cry out whatever is in one’s heart, daily prayer, the daily service of God, demands that one say that which is proper before God, that which is service of Him, and not whatever merely reflects my most immediate and pressing feeling. If the standard of choosing what to say is what is appropriate before God, rather than what is appropriate to come out of me, then we do indeed need the help of God to open our lips so that our mouths utter HIS praises.

B. The Berakha

We are finally ready to start the Shemoneh Esrei proper. Before getting to what we say, it would make sense to devote some time to what we DO – 3 steps forward, standing erect, bowing on the first word of the first berakha. But we cannot do everything, and this course is meant to be devoted to the text analysis. So I leave it to you to think about – what do the 3 steps, the bowing, the erect position, all signify? In other words, what do they mean?

Next time, we shall analyze the first berakha, called “avot” (fathers), since it is based, in part, on the forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. But first a word on structure. Most of the berakhot of Shemoneh Esrei, with the exception of the first, do not begin with the word “barukh.” However, all of them end with the formula, “Barukh ata HaShem, who is ‘something-or-other.’” This is called the “chatima,” the closing of the berakha. There is a halakhic requirement to precede the chatima with a line that is “me-ein chatima,” the theme of the chatima. The minimum requirement of any berakha is the recitation of these 2 parts. On the logical assumption that the chatima expresses the central theme of the berakha, we shall always examine it most carefully, together with the “me-ein chatima,” which expresses the same theme, in order to extract the central motif of each section of the Shemoneh Esrei.

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