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How Can We “Bless” Hashem?

The first word of *Shemoneh Esrei* is *baruch* — “blessed.” Why does the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei* begin with the idea of blessing?

The Gemara recounts a story in which Hashem asked Reb Yishmael to bless Him. This is a puzzling phenomenon. How can a person bless Hashem? Blessing is only when someone is missing something in the first place; so how can one bless Hashem, who lacks nothing?!

The *Rishonim* explain that the concept of blessing Hashem doesn't mean that we actually bless Hashem; it means that we are continuing Hashem's sustenance to the world. The way Hashem reveals Himself to us is through the concept of “blessing” — which is when we “bless” Him.

That is the concept, and we will try to explain it.

Shema — A Request for Perfection

In *Shema*, it would appear that we have already arrived at the highest level of perfection. In *Shema*, we proclaim that Hashem is One. This would appear to be total perfection, as we know that the purpose of Creation is to reveal the unity of Hashem's Name in the world. It seems that we are describing the most perfect level possible, with *Shema*. How can there be anything more than this? What is there in *Shemoneh Esrei* that isn't in the *Shema*? Why do we need *Shemoneh Esrei* after we have just come to the purpose of all of Creation?

But the truth is that *Shema* does not represent our ultimate purpose. What is *Shema* about? It is describing a level of the future; only in the future will Hashem's Oneness be revealed to all. We are stating that in the future, Hashem's Kingship will be totally revealed. But this is not yet perfection. The rest of the world doesn't yet recognize Hashem as king, and that itself takes away from our own perfection. *Shema* is a request for perfection, the perfection of the future. But as we have already said previously, requesting is not the goal of *tefillah*. Thus, *Shema* is not yet the ultimate level we can reach.

Shemoneh Esrei: Reaching Perfection

Tefillah is like “a ladder that is footed on the earth, and its head reaches the heavens.” This is only through *Shemoneh Esrei*. The perfection of reaching the heavens is only expressed through *Shemoneh Esrei*.

The perfection of *Shemoneh Esrei* is thus not just one blessing after another blessing after another. It is the perfection we reach upon climbing to the top of the ladder, which is in Heaven itself.

“*Sof maaseh b'machshavah techilah* — The end of the matter is first in the thoughts.” First we need to understand the goal of *Shemoneh Esrei*, and only after that should we try to understand each of the levels described in each blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

The End of Shemoneh Esrei Teaches Us about the Beginning

Since the end of *Shemoneh Esrei* is the expression of our ultimate goal, we need to learn about the last blessing, *Sim Shalom*, in order for us to appreciate the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*. As we said before, *sof maaseh b'machshavah techilah*. We need to know about the goal of *Shemoneh Esrei* before we embark on the actual *Shemoneh Esrei* itself.

In this final blessing, *Sim Shalom*, we say, “For in the light of Your Face that You have given us.” This is referring to the time when we stood at Har Sinai, when Hashem spoke to us face-to-face. We were all prophets then; our souls were all present there and we all experienced the level of prophecy — the ultimate perfection. There is no better place to talk about perfection than in the blessing of *Sim Shalom*, the blessing of peace; Chazal also state that “Hashem did not find any other vessel for blessing other than peace.”

After knowing about our end goal, we will then be able to understand better the difference between the level expressed in the recital of the *Shema*, and the greater level we are aspiring towards, which is achieved by *davening Shemoneh Esrei*.

Knowing and Then Internalizing

In all of our *avodah*, we have two steps: “And you shall know today” — to know about Hashem, as well as “And you shall return the matter on your heart” — to internalize this knowledge in our heart.

“There is nothing else other than You.” First we must acknowledge that we know nothing other than the clear knowledge that only Hashem is in charge of Creation. This is the purpose of Creation — recognizing Hashem — and this describes the ultimate perfection. But how do we come to recognize Hashem in our very souls? By entering the knowledge of Hashem into our hearts.

“Words that come from the heart enter the heart.” How is this done? It is done through the power of speech. It is written, “I believed, for I spoke.” Speaking causes believing. We are referring to speaking through *tefillah*. The way we internalize the knowledge of Hashem into our hearts is through *tefillah*.

A Heart Recognition of Hashem

There are two fundamental points about using our ability of speech, the essence of *tefillah*. First, we need to talk to Hashem like one who talks to a friend, as it is written, “And I poured out my soul.” Second, through speech, we internalize our recognition of Hashem in our hearts.

Generally speaking, internalizing our knowledge of Hashem can be done in two ways (mentioned in *sefer Chovos Halevovos*):

- 1) To see Hashem through the “eyes” of one’s intellect.
- 2) To recognize Him through the heart.

We will clarify which way is the most practical for us to work with.

In the first way — seeing Hashem through “eyes” of one’s intellect — we are trying to recognize Hashem. If we already believe in Hashem, why do we need to recognize Him? The *Sefer Chareidim* answers that it is not enough to just believe in Hashem; we need to actually “see” Him. We “see” this through our intellect, which are like “eyes” that “see” Him. This is not so practical for us.

But the second way is closer to home by us. It is to recognize Hashem through our hearts. When someone loves another, he loves him even though he doesn’t see the other; he can love the other in his heart. Of course, love is complete only when they are face-to-face, and they can see each other. But there is most definitely love between them, even when they don’t see each other. If a son never saw his father, and he is informed that his father is alive — he is filled with a love for his father even though he never saw him.

Loving Hashem, Even Though We Can’t See Him

The final blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, *Sim Shalom*, is the love between *Klal Yisrael* and Hashem in its most perfect form. But the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei* is a love that is not as complete — a love only in the heart; we are not face-to-face with Hashem then.

To love Hashem in the heart — without “seeing” Him — is like what is written, “And in its love you shall go after.” All of us are able to feel this love for Hashem. This level of love is the level present in *Shema* and in the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

To summarize, there are three levels of *tefillah*: the level of *Shema*, the level of the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*, and the level at the end blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, the blessing of *Sim Shalom*.

Two Levels of Love

In *Shema*, we come to the recognition that Hashem is in control of everything, and this comes from an inner love for Hashem that we possess. This is a level of *daas* — an awareness of our love to Hashem. It is written, “Just as water reflects a face to a face, so does the heart of man reflect another.” When we show love toward Hashem in *Shema* — through our *daas*/awareness, Hashem reciprocates the love. From this, we proceed onward to the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*, which is the word “*baruch* — *blessed*.” In “*baruch*,” Hashem reflects His love back toward us.

“Blessed are You, Hashem.” We are not just asking for livelihood or health; we are revealing that Hashem is next to us, by declaring “*baruch*.”

So the first level we reach is in *Shema*. This is an awareness in the mind that comes from our love to Hashem — but it is only in the mind. In the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*, which is *Bircas Ha’avos* — we are utilizing the level of Avraham *Avinu*, who represents the *middah* of *ahavah*/love of Hashem. In the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei*, we reveal a love toward Hashem, a love that is there even though we don’t see our Beloved. It is like the level of “My back you may see, but My Face you may not see.” Although we cannot see Hashem face-to-face, there is still a love between us and Hashem.

We can also understand the two kinds of love based on the difference between the two types of giving — *tzedakah* (charity) and *ahavah* (love). In *tzedakah*, we give privately so as not to embarrass the collector; it is better if he doesn’t know who the benefactor is. But the kind of relationship we are referring to is not the level of *tzedakah*; it is a relationship of *ahavah*/love, a love that exists even though we can’t see our Benefactor.

Thus, the purpose of the beginning of *Shemoneh Esrei* is to have a palpable sense of Hashem. It is to know Him more than in our minds; it is to internalize Him in our heart.

Sim Shalom: A Mind Changed by the Heart

After this, we can come to the pinnacle of *Shemoneh Esrei*, *Sim Shalom* — in which we return back to our minds. But this time, our minds can sense Hashem as well! Now even our intellects can feel Hashem — not just our hearts.

This concept — that we can now return our heart knowledge back to our minds, re-internalizing our sense of Hashem in our minds — is not new. The Rambam writes that in order to achieve *d'veykus* in Hashem, we first need thoughts of the heart — and then thoughts of the mind. *Sefer Hamaspik L'Ovdei Hashem* and *Sefer Habris* are all *sefarim* that can bring a person to the purpose of *Shemoneh Esrei* in the order that we have mentioned; it is imperative to learn these *seforim* if one wants to reach the purpose of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Tefillah Is Empowered through Torah and Mitzvos

The level of *Shema* — awareness of Hashem in the mind — is easier for us to attain. But the second level — a palpable sense of Hashem — is very far from us. What can we do to achieve it?

Our *seichel*/intellect is a tool that we need to learn Torah. When we internalize our sense of Hashem back from our hearts into our minds as well, our intellect becomes a tool as well to store a palpable sense of Hashem's existence.

The Sages say, "If only a person would pray the entire day." This implies that really, our whole way of life should be *tefillah*.

Tefillah is a ladder that ascends Heavenward; how do we climb it? We don't climb it through the Torah, or through the *mitzvos*, or through doing acts of *chessed*; that should not be our attitude. Our attitude should be that from the power of our learning Torah, *mitzvos*, and *chessed* — that is how we are enabled to climb the ladder upward until we reach the top of the ladder — a real sense of Hashem.

It is thus apparent that *tefillah* is not something we do just to understand what we are saying (although it is true that we must understand what we are saying). The first thing we must understand about *davening*, before anything else, is to get rid of the notion that *tefillah* is all about requesting what we need (although it is also true that we need to ask Hashem for our needs). *Tefillah* is in essence our bond with Hashem!

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