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In the first blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, the *halachah* is that a person straightens up after he says the word *atah* so that he is erect when he says the word “Hashem.” There is an argument in the *halachah* whether a person has to bend with his head or with his entire body. Let us try to understand the concept that lays behind the word *atah* — You.

The word *atah* (You) implies that Hashem is an open reality. According to the *Rashba*, it can also mean to be face-to-face with Hashem in first person, which means to be “*nochach p’nei Hashem* — opposite in front of the Face of Hashem.” According to this interpretation, *atah* is really another term for *nochach*, to be “opposite” Hashem.

Throughout *Shemoneh Esrei*, we say the word *atah*. We say *Atah gibor*, *atah kodesh*, and *atah chonein*. In addition, we also say at the end of each blessing, *Baruch atah Hashem* The simple understanding is that every time we say *atah*, it means the same thing every time — “You, Hashem.”

Atah implies facing Hashem in first person. There are two ways to have a vision of Hashem — one is through an unclear kind of glass [which is what most of the prophets saw] and the other way is through a clear kind of glass [which is what Moshe *Rabbeinu* saw]. *Atah* implies facing Hashem directly, through a clear kind of glass. It implies closeness. The closer a person is to his friend, the more he speaks to him in first person.

There are many levels to *atah*. The highest level of *atah* is when a person clearly recognizes Hashem, as is it written, “*Atah hu mishenivve ha’olam* — You existed before the world was created.” But we live in the lower plane of Creation, and thus there are many barriers that get in the way of this recognition. The more we purify our heart and intellect, the more we recognize Hashem as *Atah*.

Each time we find the word *atah* in *Shemoneh Esrei*, it is revealing a different facet of recognizing Hashem, reflected in the essence of each of the nineteen blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* — so there are really nineteen different ways of revealing how Hashem is *atah*. There are different forms of recognition of Hashem. There is a kind of recognition of Hashem in which a person recognizes His simple reality, and there is a kind of recognition in which a person realizes *hashgachah peratis* (Divine Providence), how Hashem runs the world. But *atah* is always about revealing the Face of Hashem, which is the concept of *he’ras panim*, the “illuminating countenance of Hashem,” when Hashem shines His Face upon us.

There are different levels to how much we reveal Hashem’s Face. To illustrate, in the physical world, the more you recognize a person, the more you get to know him. The less you see his face, the less

you recognize him. The recognition you have toward your friend deepens the more you get to know him and recognize him; the way you recognize him a year later is much more clear than the way you recognized him a year ago. In the same way, there are levels to how much we recognize Hashem. It keeps deepening, and there are more levels we can uncover.

For example, in the fourth blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, *atah honein*, a person is revealing Hashem's Face through the means of asking Him for understanding. Each blessing of *Shemoneh Esrei*, when we say *atah*, we are revealing a new facet of recognizing Hashem, through the means of that particular blessing.

Chazal say that when a person sees the blue color of *techeiles*, he is reminded of the sea, which reminds him of the sky, which reminds him of the Heavenly Throne. Is the Heavenly Throne the apex of recognition? No, the point is not about the Heavenly Throne. It is rather because by being reminded of the Heavenly Throne, one is able to keep ascending higher in his recognition of Hashem — his perception of the concept of *atah* keeps deepening.

The *Mesilas Yesharim*, in the chapter about *yiras cheit* (fear of sin), writes that to purpose.

The purpose of every request in *Shemoneh Esrei* is to realize how each request can bring us to a greater perception of *atah* — “You, Hashem.” We must realize that all spiritual growth must be directed toward this purpose — to deepen our sense of *atah* towards Hashem.

And when we say a *berachah* over food, the purpose is also to be able to say “*Baruch atah, Hashem.*” Besides the fact that the purpose of a *berachah* is to give thanks to Hashem, we should know the purpose of why we have to give thanks in the first place: we are giving thanks to the One who created this fruit or vegetable. The purpose is always *atah* — You, Hashem.

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