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## Tefillah - 006 Bowing in Shemoneh Esrei

### ***Bowing and Standing in Shemoneh Esrei***

The halachah is that a person bends his knees and bows as he says the word “*baruch*” in *Shemoneh Esrei*, and he must be erect in his position upon saying the word “Hashem.”<sup>[1]</sup> We bow three times during *Shemoneh Esrei* — once in the beginning, by the word “*baruch*,” in *Modim*, and in the end of *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Let us reflect on the concepts of bowing and standing up erect in *Shemoneh Esrei* in a way that applies to our soul.

Why do we bow in *Shemoneh Esrei*? It is written, “*For to You, every knee bows.*” There are two root reasons why we bow. One reason is to show subservience, such as when we bow to a king, or when the *kohen* would bow in the *Beis Hamikdash*. Another reason is to bend ourselves down to someone who is lower than us, for example, when a person leans downward to be able to give to someone who needs something from him.

The *Gemara* says that when a person bows, he has to bend until his head is positioned opposite his heart. The depth behind this is that we have to integrate our “head” — our mind’s knowledge — with our heart; we must extend our mind’s knowledge *into* our heart. That is the message behind bowing.

Thus, when we bow in *Shemoneh Esrei*, we are trying to impress upon ourselves two things: we want to nullify ourselves to the Creator in subservience, and we want to extend our mind’s knowledge into our heart.

*Shemoneh Esrei* is all about standing in front of the King. Now that we have explained the concept behind bowing, what is more important — standing in front of Hashem or bowing to Hashem? We find in *halachah* that some would have the custom during Yamim Noraim to bow the entire *Shemoneh Esrei*. So we see that there are two forms in which one can daven *Shemoneh Esrei* — to stand the whole time, and to bow the whole time. We will explain the two different forms of *tefillah*.

### ***Standing during Shemoneh Esrei: Spiritual Pleasure versus Recognition of Hashem***

Standing the whole time during *Shemoneh Esrei* represents how one must constantly be connected to the Creator. The purpose of Creation is to come to recognize Hashem, in a palpable sense; however, the *Mesilas Yesharim* says that man was created to bask in the spiritual bliss of Hashem. If so, what is the purpose of the world — to recognize Hashem, or for man to have spiritual pleasure? The answer is that the spiritual pleasure is only a “garment” covering over the main goal; it is only a tool to reach

the goal. When a person has true recognition of Hashem, he enjoys the connection, but that is not the goal. The goal is the actual recognition.

Usually, a person thinks that recognizing Hashem is the tool to get to a greater goal — to have the spiritual pleasure. People think that pleasure is the goal of life. But it's really the other way around: the spiritual pleasure that one has from his connection with Hashem is merely the tool to get to recognition of Hashem.

Our soul is not really interested in the pleasure; it wants the recognition of Hashem. However, the soul cannot survive without spiritual pleasure, so it needs to get spiritual pleasure. Simply speaking, one should derive pleasure from spirituality, from his Torah and mitzvos, which will prevent him from searching for inappropriate kinds of pleasure that are forbidden. That is why we need spiritual pleasure — when we are satisfied from spirituality, we won't search for pleasure elsewhere. For example, if a person does two acts of *chessed* each day, and he feels vitality from this, he has a good and healthy kind of pleasure and he is utilizing his need for pleasure in the right way.

However, spiritual pleasure is not the goal. It is written, "Those who grasp the Torah do not know Me." The meaning of this is that even if a person derives pleasure from Torah and *mitzvos*, if he thinks that spiritual pleasure is the goal, he is really far from Hashem, because the goal is not about pleasure.

Thus, there are two kinds of people who stand in front of Hashem during *Shemoneh Esrei*. One kind of person does so because he has recognition of Hashem, while another person does so because it's enjoyable. The first kind of person is the one who fulfills the goal.

What is the purpose of spiritual pleasure? It is because without it, a person wouldn't be able to survive. He would learn Torah and do *mitzvos* simply because he has to, and he would never find pleasure in it; indeed, there are people who learn Torah and do *mitzvos* simply because "I have to," and they don't enjoy it. Thus, we need to have spiritual pleasure. Spiritual pleasure from our Torah learning and *mitzvos* enables us to continue our *avodas Hashem*. Without pleasure in our *avodas Hashem*, we wouldn't be able to get very far. But we must be aware that it is not the goal.

So we need to have both pleasure from spirituality and recognition of Hashem — but we must be aware that pleasure is the tool to get to the goal, which is to recognize Hashem.

### **Examples of "Tools" to Get Closer to Hashem**

So what are some of these tools that help us to get closer to Hashem?

When a person is born, he does not yet recognize Hashem. All he recognizes are his parents, and then his family. When a person gets older and he grows up, he begins to face difficulties in life, so he works on his *emunah*, and he *davens* to Hashem to save him from his troubles. He has a "little" *emunah* and "a little" bit of recognition of Hashem. After his troubles pass, he stops *davening* so hard to Hashem, and he loses the closeness to Hashem he had when he was going through the difficulty. Why? It is because he didn't realize the purpose of the difficulty. He didn't use it as a tool to deepen his connection with Hashem.

Here is another example that illustrates how people forget about how our situations are really a "tool" to get to Hashem. A person is *davening* very hard for something, and he decides to go to a *gadol* to get a *berachah*. Soon after he gets the *berachah*, he might stop *davening* as much, because now he's content that he has connected with the *gadol*, so he feels like he doesn't need to connect with Hashem as much. He doesn't understand that the *gadol* is just a tool to help him get closer to Hashem....

It's very possible that a person spends a large amount of the day immersed in *davening*, whether it's for a *shidduch* or for *parnassah* — yet he's still far from Hashem! How? It's because his whole attitude towards life is incorrect. He doesn't see his difficulties as a tool to get him closer to recognizing Hashem. Even if a person derives a pleasurable feeling from *davening*, this is not necessarily leading him to the goal of life; he must understand that the pleasure is only a tool that can help him reach his goal. When a person forgets the goal, which is to recognize Hashem, then he remains far from being close to Hashem even if he's davening all day, and even if he is aware that the salvation can only come from Hashem.

The *Mesilas Yesharim* states that man was created to bask in the spiritual pleasure of Hashem. When a person only has an intellectual awareness of Hashem, then he thinks that spiritual pleasure is the goal. But the purpose of spiritual pleasure is not to be in it for the pleasure, but to come to the goal, which is to recognize Hashem.

When a person reviews the Thirteen Principles of Faith (*Ani Maamim*), does he do this because it's enjoyable, or because it gets him closer to recognizing Hashem?

In the *Shabbos zemiros*, in the song of *Koh Ribbon*, it says, "Even if man would live for a thousand years, he would not be able to describe Your strength." It's possible for a person to go his entire life yet never understand what the purpose of life is, even if he is a person who learns Torah all day and keeps all the *mitzvos*.

The true kind of life is to derive vitality from getting closer and closer to recognizing the reality of Hashem. This will result in the true kind of pleasure as well. When a person seeks other kinds of pleasure, he has the "branches" of pleasure without the "roots." There are altogether three sources of spiritual pleasure. One kind of spiritual pleasure is to have pleasure from loving Hashem and the Torah. The second kind of spiritual pleasure is to have a deep connection with Hashem and the Torah. The third, deepest, kind of pleasure to have is the pleasure from having a palpable recognition of Hashem. [But even then, the pleasure is not the goal, as we said.]

### ***The Depth of Bowing***

Now we will explain the depth behind bowing in *Shemoneh Esrei*. Standing in front of Hashem requires us to first nullify ourselves to Him. If a person stands in front of Hashem, but he doesn't feel nullified to Him, he cannot really stand in front of Hashem. He is still full of arrogance, and of an arrogant person Hashem says, "I and him cannot dwell under one roof."[\[2\]](#)

Thus, the first step of our *avodah* is always to first make room for Hashem in our heart so He can enter. Our heart is the source of both our physical and spiritual vitality. A person who is brain-dead is still considered to be alive, but a person whose heart has ceased to function is considered to be dead. So too, if we make space in our heart for Hashem to enter, then our heart becomes a source of life thriving with spirituality.

So when we bow, we are trying to impress upon ourselves that we need to extend our mind's knowledge into our heart [as we explained before]; this is how we make space for Hashem to enter our heart. We can then stand in front of Hashem.

"To stand in front of the King" in *Shemoneh Esrei* is a life-giving act. In *Shemoneh Esrei* there are eighteen blessings, and the number eighteen is the numerical value of the word *chai*, which means "alive." A person can gain life-giving vitality from the very fact that he is standing in front of Hashem during *Shemoneh Esrei*.

When a person lives life cognizant of recognizing Hashem, all his Torah learning and mitzvah

performance come as a result of this recognition.

In the *sefarim hakedoshim* it is explained that *Gan Eden* and *Olam Haba* are two different kinds of spiritual reward. *Gan Eden* is the place where a person gets rewarded for his good deeds, while *Olam Haba* is the place where a person gets rewarded for how much he recognized Hashem in this world.

### ***Making this Practical***

This is the question that a person needs to ask himself: “When I daven *Shemoneh Esrei* and I am standing in front of Hashem, do I feel more alive from this?”

Take some quiet time every day, for just a half a minute, and think about the purpose of life: that the purpose of life is to come to deepen our recognition of Hashem more and more. And we must realize that anything else besides this is from this “world of falsity” (*alma d’shikra*).

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**[1]** Berachos 12a.

**[2]** Sotah 5a.

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**Source:** <https://bilvavi.net/english/tefillah-006-bowing-shemoneh-esrei>