

Blessings and Thanksgiving
Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue



Gladys Neustadter *z"l* Edition

BLESSINGS and THANKSGIVING

Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik

Edited by Shalom Carmy and Joel B. Wolowelsky

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Blessings and Thanksgiving
Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue

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אנו מתכבדים להשתתף ביוזמה להוציא לאור את הספר הזה
לכבוד הורינו

נחם צבי בן מרדכי אברהם וחיה רחל
חווה לאה בת חיים יצחק וחיה גיטל
מרים בת יחיאל וגלי
אהרון אשר זליג בן יעקב יצחק ומיימי
צביה רייצל בת פייבל ומלכה

מאת

משה זאב, מלכה בריינדל
גבריאלה טובה, בצלאל יחיאל, יונתן מנשה ויוסף מרדכי

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Our parents' lives together, devoted to family, community, and Klal Yisrael, and the especially close relationship our parents maintained with the Rav, have been a wellspring of inspiration to our entire family.

Dedicated by

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In Honor of

RABBI HASKEL LOOKSTEIN

for his sixty years of dedicated leadership of
and selfless devotion to Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun.

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גיטל שרה בת ר' זלמן זאב ז"ל

She was a devoted student of the Rav and a dedicated teacher in the Maimonides School for 30 years. Her detailed notes of the Rav's Saturday night shiurim in Brookline demonstrate her love of learning and still serve us well. She lived a life dedicated to the Rav's worldview and values.

Dedicated by

Joseph Abelow
Dr. Arthur and Rebecca Abelow
Gerald Abelow
Akiva and Esther Tekuzener



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Editors' Introduction

Although the volume before you is, at one level, a complement and continuation to *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer* (published by the Toras HoRav Foundation in 2003), in content and form it is a very different kind of book.

Worship of the Heart was intended to provide a comprehensive philosophical framework for prayer and contained an analysis of human nature as it pertains to the experience of prayer. Most of the volume was composed as part of a unified whole. Additional manuscripts incorporated in the book were written during the same period as stand-alone lectures on the same fundamental themes. Much of the book therefore dealt with the ethical, the exalted, and categories of experience related to the human encounter with God. The vocabulary and mode of exposition reflected major trends in European philosophy and theology dominant in the early and mid 20th century. The Rav was concerned with the fundamental building blocks of man's relationship with God and with the prayer experience in particular: such as petition, praise, and commitment (i.e., accepting the yoke of Heaven).

The halakhic and textual analysis in *Worship of the Heart* was devoted almost entirely to the two central institutions of the prayer service, the *Amida* and the *Shema*, with some attention to the prefatory blessings to *Shema*. Halakhically, these subjects are among the most important and they illustrate the rigorous integration of halakhic insight and philosophical anthropology that is one of the hallmarks of the Rav's thought.

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Blessings and Thanksgiving, to a large extent, grows out of the analysis in *Worship of the Heart*. The chapter on the Morning Blessings is, in fact, part of the lecture series at the core of the previous book. Other chapters introduce new halakhic and experiential building blocks and concepts essential to Jewish prayer: for example, the distinction between two types of praise in *Pesukei DeZimra* and Hallel, or the concept of divine sovereignty at the root of blessings in general, and the Grace after Meals in particular. Without these essays, the Rav's philosophy of prayer would be drastically incomplete.

At the same time, *Blessings and Thanksgiving* does not repeat the abstract philosophical analysis produced in the earlier book. Despite the significant theoretical contributions referred to in the previous paragraph, it is more concerned with the text and texture of prayer than with its underlying structure. In these lectures the Rav plumbs many of the details of prayer instead of restricting himself to examples that further his systematic argument. He addresses individual prayers and blessings in their particularity, like the blessings recited for physiological functions or upon rising in the morning; he comments on the institution of the synagogue that brings the community together; he considers particular questions that affect prayer, such as praying for the eradication of evil.

The differences in content between the two books are also manifest in their respective style and tone. *Blessings and Thanksgiving*, which makes use of manuscripts and edited transcripts of public lectures, reflects the intimacy of oral discourse where *Worship of the Heart*, for all its searing passion, is very much a book conceived and executed in the solitude of the study. The earlier book presupposes philosophical sophistication. Here, however, Western culture is employed primarily to illustrate and dramatize ideas, rather than to formulate a philosophical case. In *Worship of the Heart*, the Rav hedges his occasional utilization of Aggada with a host of methodological caveats; personal anecdotes are absent. In *Blessings and Thanksgiving* there are no such reservations.

The selections presented in this volume were delivered by the Rav in a variety of circumstances:

The first chapter, "The Morning Blessings," was transcribed by Jonathan Gross, and edited by Rabbi Steven Weil. As noted above, this

chapter was part of the Rav's lecture series which formed the basis of *Worship of the Heart*.

The second chapter, "*Pesukei DeZimra* and Kaddish," is a translation of the first two sections of a *yahrzeit shiur* published in Hebrew under the title "*Pesukei DeZimra*" in *Shiurim LeZekher Abba Mari*, volume 2. The translation was prepared by Joel Linsider, z"l.

The third chapter, "*Keriat Shema* and the Blessings of Torah," is based on a lecture delivered by the Rav on February 2, 1957, as well as an undated manuscript by the Rav transcribed by Rabbi Dov Karoll.

The fourth chapter, "*Birkat HaMazon*, the 'Grace after Meals,'" conflates a *yahrzeit shiur* delivered by the Rav in 1961, transcribed and translated by Arnold Lustiger, and a 1969 *shiur* transcribed by Ariela Goldsmith.

The fifth chapter, "Grant Us Understanding to Know Your Ways," is a transcription of a lecture delivered by the Rav at the Rabbinical Council of America's Midwinter Conference on February 7, 1968.

The sixth chapter, "Praying for the Defeat of Evil," was a lecture the Rav delivered in Boston on March 7, 1970.

The seventh chapter, "*Berakhot* in Judaism," was the aggadic portion of a *yahrzeit shiur* delivered on January 15, 1956. The Hebrew manuscript of the lecture was published in *Yemei Zikaron*, edited by Rabbi Moshe Krona. The English translation in this volume was prepared by Elli Fischer; the final section of this *shiur*, which does not relate to the subject of this book, was omitted.

The eighth chapter, "Communal Prayer and the Structure of the Synagogue," is a translation of the final section of the *yahrzeit shiur* "*Pesukei DeZimra*" published in *Shiurim LeZekher Abba Mari*, volume 2. This translation too was prepared by Joel Linsider, z"l.

The penultimate chapter in this volume, "The Synagogue as an Institution and as an Idea," is the text of a lecture given by the Rav at Kehillath Jeshurun in New York City on December 6, 1972. Originally intended for a volume celebrating Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein's jubilee year in the rabbinate, his death before publication turned the book into the *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume* (ed. Leo Landman, Ktav 1980).

The Rav's comments regarding Rabbi Lookstein, in which the Rav responded to cries to "modernize" the Orthodox synagogue, can also

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serve as background for the final chapter in this volume, “Old Prayers and ‘New’ Jews”:

When I came to the United States so many years ago, Orthodoxy was at low ebb... We were met with laughter and ridicule, not with opposition. The situation is different now. And the change is due to a few people, among whom Rabbi Lookstein is the most outstanding pioneer. He showed the American Jew that it is possible to have a synagogue conform to the *Shulhan Arukh* both architecturally and ritually...and at the same time, this *Shul* excelled as far as good behavior, cultivated manners, and beautiful sermons were concerned. Rabbi Lookstein contradicted the accusation hurled at us—and I heard this accusation many times—that Orthodoxy is synonymous with slovenliness, vulgarity, ignorance, lack of culture, lack of refinement. I believe we owe Rabbi Lookstein a *yasher koah* for it.

“Old Prayers and ‘New’ Jews” is a translation of the fifth, sixth, and the first section of the seventh essay, in a ten-part series of articles the Rav wrote for the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog-Morgn Zhurnal* (40:14,548 [December 13, 1954]: 5–6; 40:14,555 [December 20, 1954]: 5; and 40:14,562 [December 27, 1954]: 5, respectively), originally published with the titles “In What Manner Should a Jew Pray?” “Old Prayers and ‘New’ Jews,” and “Where are the Reform Jews Taking Our Ancient Prayer Book?” Edited versions were reprinted in the Rav’s *Droshes un Ksovim*, ed. David E. Fishman (Jersey City, NJ: Published for the Toras Horav Foundation by Ktav Publishing House, 2009), 281–299.

The present translation was prepared by Shaul Seidler-Feller based primarily on the *Der Tog-Morgn Zhurnal* originals, having taken some liberties with respect to both the punctuation of sentences and their division into paragraphs in order to render the pieces more easily understandable for the English reader. References to biblical and rabbinic sources cited did not appear in the original and were added by the translator.

The first of these columns was presented as a response to the following question: “In certain Jewish circles, it has been argued that the manner of prayer in Conservative temples, which feature organ

music, mixed choirs, and a good deal of decorum, is more progressive than is the traditional order of worship. Perhaps the service in Orthodox synagogues can also be modernized?" The Rav began his reply as follows: "In order to answer this question, we will need to plumb the depths of how Judaism understands the institution of prayer generally. Once we have clarified that matter, the answer may become self-evident."

While this volume is not a publication of the Toras HoRav Foundation, it is indebted to the work of the Foundation, which was established by family members and former students with the aims of enhancing both our grasp of Rabbi Soloveitchik's philosophy and our understanding of the diverse topics he addressed. Most importantly, we value the work of Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Director of the *MeOtzar HoRav* Archives, who organized and supervised the transcription of voluminous manuscripts of the Rav, reviewing the material and providing valuable editorial comments and suggestions. *MeOtzar HoRav* has published eleven volumes in English with David Shatz as Series Editor, all made possible by a generous grant from Ruth and Irwin Shapiro.

We thank the OU Press and its General Editor Rabbi Menachem Genack for inviting us to bring these essays of the Rav to publication. We are grateful to Rabbi Simon Posner, Executive Editor, and Rabbi Eliyahu Krakowski, Associate Editor, for their important suggestions and editorial comments throughout the process of publication, and to Rabbi Genack for carefully reviewing the final volume.

* * *

The Rav brought his teachings to a wide range of audiences, committed Jews, *talmidei hakhamim*, rabbis and *amkha* who were not fully involved in Torah life. Many personal assessments of the Rav and his legacy attempt to classify him as either the austere Rosh Yeshiva and thinker, ensconced in and intensely preoccupied with the precise analysis of Talmudic law and human experience, on the one hand, or the genial teacher who cast his rhetorical and homiletic spell over thousands, not all of whom were privy to the full range of his religious and intellectual quest, on the other hand. Both aspects were

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in evidence in his variegated teaching career and both find expression in some of his most memorable literary output. It is fitting that the Rav's teaching in the area of prayer, perhaps the most important interface between halakha, philosophy and daily life, so crucial to the existence of both the sophisticated religious personality and the unlearned practitioner of Judaism, should also exhibit that fruitful mixture of content and style.

Shalom Carmy
Joel B. Wolowelsky

Publisher's Preface

At the beginning of his *Hilkhot Tefilla*, Maimonides establishes his view that *tefilla* constitutes a biblical obligation: “There is a positive commandment to pray each day, as it is written [Deut. 11:13], ‘and to worship Him with all your heart.’ Said the sages, What is worship of the heart? This is prayer.” Likewise, in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Maimonides writes: “The fifth mitzva is that which He has commanded us to worship Him... Although this is a general commandment, it has a specific component, which is the commandment to pray...” According to Maimonides, the obligation to pray derives from the Torah, and this obligation applies every day.

Nahmanides, on the other hand, in his glosses to *Sefer HaMitzvot*, disagrees. Basing himself on the Gemara (Berakhot 21a), Nahmanides maintains that prayer is only a rabbinic obligation. In his words, “The concept of prayer is not a [biblical] obligation at all, but rather one of the attributes of kindness the Creator has bestowed upon us—that He listens and responds when we cry out to Him... And if [there is] a Scriptural foundation [for the obligation], we would count it [as a mitzva] as Maimonides does, and explain that it is an obligation for times of distress—that we should believe that God, may He be blessed and exalted, listens to prayer and saves us from distress through our prayers and cries.”

According to Nahmanides, there is no biblical obligation to pray every day; at most there is an obligation to pray in times of distress. Maimonides, who maintains there is a biblical obligation to pray every

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day, counts the obligation to pray in times of distress as an independent mitzva. In the beginning of *Hilkhot Taaniyot*, he states: “There is a positive commandment to cry out and sound an alarm with the trumpets, as it is written [Num. 10:9], ‘[And when you go to war...] against the adversary that oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets,’ which means that for any issue that distresses you, such as famine, plague, locusts, and the like, cry out and sound an alarm...” According to Maimonides, the prayer of every day and the prayer of times of distress are two distinct obligations, derived from two separate verses. Nahmanides, on the other hand, maintains that there is only one such obligation, prayer in times of distress.

The Rav explained that, in fact, all agree that the obligation of prayer depends upon a feeling of distress—Maimonides too agrees to this principle. The dispute between Maimonides and Nahmanides is about the kind of distress which creates the obligation to pray: According to Nahmanides, the obligation to pray is prompted by the external crises which arise from time to time, but according to Maimonides it is not only the external crises, but the internal, existential crisis which afflicts mortal man throughout his entire life. Man’s life in this world is what *Sefer HaYashar* refers to as “*neveh hatelaot*,” the abode of hardships. The foundation of prayer lies in our recognition that without divine assistance we are in a state of constant crisis, that but for God’s everlasting kindness we could not survive, as we say in *Modim*: “for Your miracles which are with us every day.” Even according to Maimonides, then, prayer emerges from the feeling of distress which man experiences daily.

There is a fundamental link between prayer and distress. The prayers to which we find that God responds are those prompted by inner distress. A prime example of this is Hannah’s prayer for a child, which serves as the model of what prayer should be. Yet surely Hannah had been praying for a child for many years—why did God respond to Hannah’s prayer only after so long? The Rav explained that in all of Hannah’s earlier prayers, her husband Elkanah stood alongside her as a companion in her suffering. Only once her husband said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat, and why is your heart grieved? Am not I better to you than ten sons?” (I Sam. 1:8) did Hannah realize that her husband had given up on her having children. Now, in her utter loneliness, she recognized that she had no one to rely on but

God. Thus, her prayer at this point was different from all of her previous prayers, and with this prayer she was answered.

Based on this, we can understand the terminology *Hazal* use for prayer, “*avoda shebalev*.” The “worship of the heart” of prayer refers not merely to intention, but to prayer which emerges from deep within the heart, from the experience of inner turmoil that accompanies man throughout his life, from the internalization of the fact that without God’s kindness we are always in a state of despair. Such a prayer is answered by God.

In the passage in *Sefer HaMitzvot* mentioned above, Maimonides cites the *Sifrei* on the verse “to worship Him”: “to worship Him, this is prayer; to worship Him, this is study.” Likewise, Maimonides cites the midrash *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*: “Worship Him with His Torah, worship Him in His Temple.” Apparently, both prayer and Torah study constitute the same fulfillment of divine worship. The Rav explained that for this reason, *Keriat HaTorah* was instituted as part of the prayer service. For the same reason, Maimonides combines the laws of prayer with those of the Torah reading in *Hilkhot Tefilla U’Keriat HaTorah*, because both Torah and prayer combine to form one mode of worship.

On the surface, Torah study and *tefilla* are two completely distinct mitzvot. What is the common denominator between them? The answer is that both share the feature of *Amida lifnei Hashem*. Maimonides defines the intention necessary for *tefilla*: “He should clear his mind of all thoughts and see himself as if he is standing before the Divine Presence” (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:16). Likewise, the Divine Presence accompanies one who is studying Torah, as we find in the Mishna (*Avot* 3:7): “Ten who are sitting and studying Torah, the Divine Presence rests among them... and even one who sits and studies [alone]...” Both Torah and *tefilla* bring man closer to his Creator, and for this reason, both constitute *avoda shebalev*.

The Rav was a real-life example of Torah study which constituted divine worship. When the Rav taught, it was apparent to all observers that he was standing in God’s presence. I remember the Rav’s annual “*yahrzeit shiur*” for his father Rav Moshe, during the year in which the Rav had lost his mother, wife and brother. One can readily imagine the impact these losses had on the Rav’s state of mind. Yet, despite his grief, as soon as he began the *shiur* it was as if he was a different man. Those

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present experienced firsthand David HaMelekh's words, "Had Your Torah not been my delight, I should then have perished in my affliction." On this occasion, the Rav commented that when he was preparing a *shiur* alone he could feel a breath at his shoulder, the presence of the Divine, asking him, "Nu, Yoshe Ber, what do *you* think about this *sugya*?" Through the example of the Rav, we can understand how Talmud Torah too is a form of *avoda shebalev*.

OU Press is honored to present readers this volume of the Rav's writings on *tefilla*, which represents both of these forms of *avoda shebalev*, and we are grateful to Dr. Atarah Twersky, on behalf of the Toras HoRav Foundation, for allowing us to do so. Many individuals worked assiduously to bring this project to fruition, including Rabbi Shalom Carmy and Dr. Joel B. Wolowelsky, the volume's editors; Rabbi Simon Posner, Rabbi Eliyahu Krakowski and Debra Bree of OU Press; as well as Matthew Miller of Maggid Books and his dedicated staff, with special thanks to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler. Rabbi Shalom Rosner, Ram in Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh and Rav of Kehillat Nofei Shemesh, and a close associate of the family that endowed this edition in memory of Gladys Neustadter z"l, offered an important perspective from a generation that did not merit knowing the Rav personally. Special thanks go to my colleague Rabbi Steven Weil, Senior Managing Director of the Orthodox Union, who has consistently championed the dissemination of the Rav's works and the preservation of his legacy. This project could not have been realized without the generous support of those who endowed this volume in memory of Gladys Neustadter z"l, as well as the Abelow, Agus, Singer, Straus, and Wintman families. All those who participated in this project can be justifiably proud of their contribution to *Klal Yisrael* which this volume represents.

Menachem Dov Genack
General Editor
OU Press

Foreword

The Rav I Never Met

Fifteen years ago, my six-year-old daughter answered the phone in our home. “Is the Rav available?” was the request. Without batting an eyelash, she replied, “The Rav is on the wall, but my father is home.” That humorous exchange crystalizes the reality of my generation—the generation for whom the Rav was more of an institution than a personality in our lives.

When I first entered the hallowed hallways of Amsterdam Avenue, the Rav was already ill, and was no longer giving shiur. Our rebbeim are his talmidim, and we are considered *keli sheni*, secondary vessels, in terms of his *mesirat haTorah*. We hear the stories of the *yahrzeit shiurim* and *teshuva derashot*, where thousands of scholars and laymen alike would sit riveted to their seats for hours on end, absorbing the Rav’s creative genius in transmitting the secrets of the given *sugya*. We are told of the awe and trepidation, palpably felt, in the hearts of all those who were privileged to sit in the Rav’s classroom in the early years. We try to vicariously experience the emotional highs which were felt by those who merited being close to him. And yet, we recognize that we are a distant second generation, that *eino domeh shemia lire’iya*—hearing cannot compare to seeing.

Given this disconnect, I ask what is it about the Rav’s Torah that is so powerful, so compelling that even as a *keli sheni*, we feel so

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influenced, so shaped, so molded by his thinking and teachings? Why, when preparing Shabbat HaGadol and Shabbat Shuva *derashot*, do I always first look into what the Rav has to say on the topic? How is it that when we read his writings, we each feel as if he is talking to each of us personally, spanning the generations and capturing the most modern issues with his perceptive and timeless insights? Maybe by reviewing three of his own thoughts will we be able to better appreciate how his Torah continues to impact and what his Torah symbolizes for all of us.

BAALEI HAMESORA

The Meiri, in his introduction to Pirkei Avot, outlines all of the great Jewish leaders in history, starting with Moshe Rabbeinu and continuing all the way until his own time. Maimonides, in his introduction to Mishneh Torah, also lists the leaders from Moshe Rabbeinu but stops at Ravina and Rav Ashi. Why didn't he continue until himself as the Meiri did? The Rav explained in the name of his father (see R. Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh HaRav*, p. 36) that Maimonides isn't simply informing us of historical facts, but rather is formulating a halakhic principle: Those who came after Ravina and Rav Ashi no longer shared the same status of *ḥakhmei hamesora* as their predecessors, and therefore they could no longer dispute the rulings of the Gemara. After Ravina and Rav Ashi, there was a fundamental change in the nature of the *mesora*.

Our *mesora* is based on the leadership of the *baalei hamesora*, those unique individuals who carry the torch of *Torah Shebe'al Peh* from generation to generation. In the time of Ḥazal, there was one league of *ḥakhmei hamesora*, and that is what Maimonides is emphasizing, but the concept of these cadre of leaders is one that applies for all times. They are people who learn, live, and breathe Torah, and represent our conduit to the true transmission of *Torah Shebe'al Peh*.

The Rav, in *Mah Dodekh MiDod*, his *hesped* for his uncle the Brisker Rav, delineates another inimitable element to our *ḥakhmei hamesora*. Ḥazal (Sanhedrin 59a) tell us that all Jews have *eirusin* with the Torah. The Rav highlights that it's only *eirusin*, the first stage of a Jewish marriage. But there are *yehidei segula* in every generation who have *nissuin*, a complete marriage, with the Torah. What does this mean?

On rare occasions, the Torah weds itself to an individual and becomes his companion. Its marriage to him establishes itself through seclusion (*yihud*) which brings togetherness (*yahdut*) and which culminates in complete unity (*ahdut*). The Torah becomes absorbed into the depths of his being and merges with him. One who merits this merits a *neshama yeteira*, the soul of Torah, from which flows the wellspring of blessing... This mysterious intuition is the source of halakhic creativity and *hiddush*.

A fully married couple lives as one unified whole, each with an intuition for the other's feelings, desires, and thoughts. That's exactly how the *baal hamesora* merges with the Torah. He merits a halakhic intuition, viewing the Torah from within, as an insider and player, and not just as a viewer and learner. His essence becomes blended with Torah values, and his presentations reflect a true sense of *hashkafat haTorah*. Rashi (Shemot 28:4), after acknowledging his lack of textual knowledge related to the description of the *ephod*, pronounces "*velibbi omer li*, my heart tells me," and proceeds with a lengthy comprehensive discussion of its colors, materials, and weaving. Rashi's heart was one with the Torah, thus giving him a halakhic intuition as to the *ephod*'s description.

The Rav said these words about his uncle, but we can naturally apply them to him as well. He was, and continues to be, the *baal hamesora* for so many of our generation. His Torah reflects an intense *libbi omer li*, which translates for us into an inspirational and universal leader, whose influence has not diminished with the passage of years. In appreciating his *lomdus* of Talmudic texts, his ingenuity in presenting biblical narratives, and his clarity of contemporary issues, we all relive our Har Sinai experience, the experience that started our national *mesora*.

THE CONNECTION OF THE JEW TO TORAH LEARNING

The Gemara (Bava Kama 82a) teaches us the roots of the rabbinic decree of *Keriat HaTorah*:

For it was taught: "And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water" (Shemot 15:22), upon which those who expound verses metaphorically said: water means nothing but Torah, as it says: "Ho, everyone that thirsts come for water" (Yeshayahu 55:1).

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As they went three days without Torah they immediately became exhausted. The prophets among them thereupon rose and enacted that they should publicly read the Torah on Shabbat... and read again on Monday and on Thursday... so that they should not be kept for three days without Torah.

The Rav (in a *yahrzeit shiur* entitled “*Takanat Moshe*,” *Shiurim LeZekher Abba Mari*, vol. 2) asked a simple question. How is it that they were thirsty for Torah? When did this story take place? In Marah, six weeks before they even received the Torah! What were they thirsty for? They didn’t yet have an obligation of Talmud Torah!

The Rav suggested that the *takana* was not enacted to fulfill an obligation, but to quench the natural thirst that every Jew has for Torah:

It was not concern for lack of fulfillment of the mitzva of Talmud Torah which led to the institution of *Keriat HaTorah* on Monday, Thursday, and Shabbat—for they were not yet obligated in Talmud Torah. Rather, it was the lethargy which possessed them, the fatigue and the discontent which stemmed from lack of Torah study and which brought the congregation to complain and rebel, which prompted the prophets among them to institute *Keriat HaTorah*.

Every Jew, in his heart of hearts, thirsts, pines, yearns for a connection to the Divine through the Torah. The *tzelem Elokim* within us, often subconsciously, is sustained and nourished through our *limmud haTorah*, separate from any divine command. That is why they were thirsty, because their internal Torah compass was pointing them in the Godly direction.

This might also help explain the famous Gemara (Nidda 30a) where we are told that *in utero*, we are taught the entire Torah, and then caused to forget it at the moment of birth. The *mefarshim* are puzzled—what is the purpose of teaching us the entire Torah in the first place, if we will be made to forget it in the very near future? The Rav explained that that learning creates the natural connection, the *pintele Yid*, the spark of holiness, which every Jew has deep within them. Our *avoda* in life is to reconnect to that deep place within us, through our constant

dedication and commitment to *limmud haTorah*. [Also see *Eretz HaTzvi*, *siman* 12, citing the *Baal HaTanya*.]

The Rav taught us, through personal example and through his writings, how each and every Jew has that very special connection to Torah, and thereby to Hashem. He and his Torah were able to connect to both the scholarly Harvard professor and to the elderly survivor from Lodz, to the seasoned rabbinic leaders and to the novice layman just beginning to learn, to students whose native tongue was Yiddish and students whose native tongue was English. He helped American, and really world Jewry, link back to their *pintele Yid* in the deepest way possible. And he did it through a rigorous, honest, and engaging presentation of the halakha and the Talmud. Such an approach to Torah is imbibed voraciously by the student, and has a lasting and permanent effect on his mind and soul.

TEFILLA BE'EIT TZARA

The final element is related to the themes of the present volume. Maimonides (*Hilkhhot Tefilla* 1:1) tells that there is a biblical obligation to *daven* each day of our lives. Nahmanides (*Hasagot al Sefer HaMitzvot, aseh* 5) famously argues and holds that there is no biblical daily command to pray (he agrees on a rabbinic level), though he does admit to a biblical obligation under one specific circumstance—*eit tzara*. If there is a national calamity, or even a private time of difficulty, then Nahmanides agrees that one must turn to God in that circumstance. The Rav (*Worship of the Heart*) suggested a deeper understanding of this *mahloket*.

The controversy between Nahmanides and Maimonides does not revolve about the conjunction of prayer and *tzarah*. They are in agreement that *tzarah* underlies prayer. They differ, however, about the substance of the experience of *tzarah* itself... [For Maimonides,] the depth crisis addresses metaphysical, unknown, undefined and clandestine personal distress. The crisis is encountered in the strangeness of human destiny... Such a crisis is not brought about by extraneous factors, or precipitated by coincidental entanglements... [Prayer] emerges from seclusion, from out of the loneliness of the individual whom everybody save God has abandoned... Man is always in need because he is always in crisis and distress.

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The Rav taught us that prayer in particular, and life in general, is about recognizing our dependence on *HaKadosh Barukh Hu* each moment of our lives. The world is not on autopilot. Mother nature has a Father. He is *mehadesh bekhol yom uvekhil rega mamash*.

At the end of Masekhet Sota (49a), the Mishna teaches us that when R. Yehuda HaNasi died, the pure unadulterated trait of *anava* died with him. There were no more great rabbinic figures who excelled in humility. Rav Yosef (*ibid.*, 49b) comments, “Do not include [when reciting this Mishna] the word ‘*anava*,’ because I exist.” As worded, the Mishna is not true, because I am still alive. The question is obvious. That’s not exactly a comment that we would expect from a great *anav*! One answer suggested points us to review who Rav Yosef was, and what happened during his lifetime. Often in Shas (see Rashi, Ketubot 2a), Rav Yosef is reminded by his own students of ideas and messages that he himself had taught them, but had forgotten due to illness. What a tragedy, how awful Rav Yosef must have felt! Rav Yosef exclaims, “If you need a living image to teach you humility, if you need to recognize that you are not the masters in this world, look at my life! My life is a graphic illustration of the vicissitudes and surprises that life might have in store for us. *Anava* didn’t die with Rebbe. The message is loud and clear even today.”

Life is an *eit tzara*, or at least a potential *eit tzara*, and we need to be connected to and cognizant of Hashem at each stage. The Rav, so often in his writings, not just in the realm of *tefilla*, zeroes in on this central idea to our faith, being God-centric and God-dependent. Be it in context of *simhat Yom Tov* and *avelut*, of *Beit HaMikdash* and *Beit HaKnesset*, or even the laws of *tefillin* and *mezuza*, he called to our attention the need and privilege to use the religious experience to connect to the *Borei Olam*, which ultimately is the goal of our lives. He deepened our appreciation of all *maasei hamitzvot*, expounding on the hidden *kiyyum*, often found in the accompanying details, while all the while keeping us focused on the goal, to perform the action in a way that brings *nahat ruah leYotzrenu*.

In summation, then, the Rav, carrying the torch of Torah for our generation, was a living example of one of the *baalei hamesora*. His clear, profound, and compelling presentation of Torah helped so many connect to their “*pintele Yid*,” their moment created *in utero* with the angel. And

finally, the Rav's *hashkafa* of life being viewed as a continuous *eit tzara* allows us to inject Godliness and God-centrality in everything we do.

The Mishna (Avot 1:2) informs us of the three pillars upon which the world stands. Maybe the Rav was *the* pillar of our generation, carrying us on his shoulders in these three areas. His messages in Torah connected us to our core, his approach to *Avoda* allowed us to gain a God-centric view of the world, and his selfless leadership as one of *baalei hamesora*, representing a role model for the entire generation, was the greatest act of *hesed* that he could have bestowed upon us.

So yes, I never met the Rav, he is pictured on the wall in my house, but like many other students of his students, I feel deeply linked and informed by his Torah, shaped by his ideals, and molded by his principles. May we merit to continue in the path of his illustrious tradition, and remain true to his lofty standards of *limmud Torah* and *Avodat Hashem*.

Shalom Rosner

Chapter 1

The Morning Blessings

INTRODUCTION

We begin with three questions about the *Birkhot HaShahar*, the Morning Blessings that we say daily. First, why were these particular blessings selected? Each morning a person performs a variety of physiological functions, muscular movements and general activities—for instance, breathing and hearing—that are just as important for his or her survival as the activities to which these Morning Blessings relate. Yet no prayers were formulated in conjunction with these processes. What criterion guided our sages in giving preference to the physiological acts they chose over others?

Our next concern is that the formulation of the blessings seems hard to grasp at first glance. They could have been formulated in a more direct, more expressive and less equivocal way. For instance, the blessing (*berakha*) “Who gives sight to the blind” that we say when we open our eyes implies healing those deprived of vision, not the physiological opening and closing of one’s eyelids. Yet it is this physiological function of opening one’s eyes in the morning upon awakening that the *berakha* acknowledges.

Third, the meaning of certain blessings is obscure; the ideas expressed are far from being central motifs in Judaism. For instance, the *berakha* “Who gives the rooster understanding to distinguish between the day and the night” is puzzling. A general blessing over light should

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not have referred to the rooster and should not have been phrased “to discriminate between the day and the night”; it should have been “Who created” or “Who formed” light. Indeed, we have a *berakha* over light—“Who creates the luminaries,” the first blessing preceding the reading of *Shema*. Why was the instinct implanted in the cock to crow at daybreak, this mechanical discrimination, isolated by our sages and made the motif of this special blessing?

Similarly, the *berakha* “Who spreads out the earth upon the waters” is enigmatic. Of course, it is related to the primordial creation, the formation of the earth. But the question arises: why was the spreading of the earth upon the waters singled out from the other acts of creation as a specific theme for a blessing?

It is likewise with the blessings “Who girds Israel with strength” and “Who crowns Israel with splendor.” According to the Talmud (*Berakhot* 60b), these blessings are correlated with putting on one’s belt or girdle and binding one’s turban as part of one’s daily routine. But why are they relevant? The relationship of the blessings as formulated to the events mentioned in Talmud is vague and unconvincing.

THE NEED FOR A BIBLICAL MODEL

Before we can answer these questions, let us analyze the phraseology of the blessings. There is no doubt that our sages avoided as much as possible coining new idioms and phrases in the liturgy; they tried to draw upon biblical sources—familiar patterns and structural forms—and borrowed expressions and terms from the prophets when they instituted the Morning Blessings. Sometimes what they found in Tanakh did not meet their liturgical needs—indeed, some paragraphs are original constructions of our sages—but generally, the phrases and idioms have been taken from Tanakh.

The Morning Blessings were not an exception to the general rule adopted by our sages that prayer is something paradoxical bordering almost on the absurd. It is a performance whose meaning and justification transcend the bounds of human intelligence, possible thanks to a specific act of grace on the part of God the Almighty, who allows unworthy human beings to converse with Him. On our own, we do not know how to start the conversation. We are completely ignorant of the basic principles and criteria of prayer. We do not know how to

pray, what to say, how to address ourselves to God and how to implore Him, how to invoke His help or His presence. How can the simpleton, whose manners are coarse, whose language is inadequate, and whose appearance is vulgar, appear before the great and august King? We still do not understand why Abel's sacrifice went up in flames toward heaven while Cain, who probably tried his utmost to please the Almighty, received no sign of divine attention to his sacrifice. King Saul's prayers were not answered though his transgression was light (I Sam. 14:37). By contrast, King Manasseh "spilled very much innocent blood" (II Kings 21:16); yet when he was in affliction and prayed to God, God heard his supplication and brought him back to Jerusalem to his kingdom (II Chr. 33:13).

How can we say which prayer is appropriate and which prayer inadequate? It is one of the greatest mysteries in the history of the God-man relationship. Hence, we must not rely too much on our own talents and ingenuity in composing prayers and petitions. We are ignorant as to what pleases God and what is sheer impudence. Therefore, our sages were careful with regard to the composition and formulation of new prayers.

The main function of prayer consists in contacting God, in conversing with Him in dialogue, in establishing a community. The problem of acceptance is irrelevant; indeed, it is almost irrational. No human mind can grasp the criteria or the rules and principles of the Infinite Will, when He accepts prayer or rejects the petition of man. If we are guided in regard to God by rationality or rhetorical criteria or the amenities and rules of courtesy which man has invented, we may actually do something repulsive and our prayers may be rejected. That is why the only ones whose vocabulary and whose structural and idiomatic forms are reliable and authoritative are the prophets who conversed with God and to whom the Infinite Will was revealed. Our sages kept on borrowing expressions, figures of speech and idioms from the Tanakh. They preferred biblical expression to the succinct, direct expression they would have coined had they arrogated the license to introduce their own formulas. Since the prophets spoke of universal phenomena, the blessing that we now recite on performing or witnessing a specific act or a specific phenomenon is pronounced in such general terms taken directly from Tanakh.

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This principle of preferring the biblical model may explain the way several of the morning blessings are phrased. “Blessed are You, Hashem, Who opened my eyes,” would be closer to the event of daily awakening and the return of his full consciousness. This is not expressed precisely by “Who gives sight to the blind,” which denotes a therapeutic miracle: restoring vision to one who has lost this precious sense. What transpires each morning is not miraculous healing but the normal physiological process of rising. The same comment can be made regarding other blessings, for example, “Who straightens the bent... clothes the naked... releases the bound.” The connotation of these three blessings is a universal one. They do not directly refer to the ordinary performance of particular acts subsequent to rising.

“Who clothes the naked” does not seem to denote the routine ability to put on one’s shirt and jacket. It denotes more a deed of charity that consists in providing the needy person with clothes: “When you see a naked person, cover him, and do not hide yourself from your own flesh” (Is. 58:7). Yet when we pronounce it in the morning, the connotation is a not that we thank God that we are not deprived of garments, but for the muscular movements we perform: we are able to put on our garments. It could have been formulated more directly as “Blessed are You Who gives me strength to dress myself.”

The blessings “Who straightens the bent” and “Who releases the bound” denote literally elevating those who are downtrodden and liberating prisoners. These attributes refer to God’s intervention in man’s political community and His intercession on behalf of the weak, imprisoned, downtrodden, and oppressed. The attributes express the idea of divine justice and mercy, echoing Psalms (146:6–9): “Who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; Who keeps truth forever. Who executes judgment for the oppressed; Who gives bread to the hungry; God releases the bound. God opens the eyes of the blind; God straightens the bent; God loves the righteous. God watches over the strangers; He relieves the orphan and the widow; the way of the wicked He makes crooked.” Little in this text suggests the miracle of ordinary physiological performance such as capability of rising or standing up straight. The blessing in this connection could have been expressed simply and unequivocally: “Blessed are You, Hashem, Who raises me up in the morning.”

In summary: because our sages were reluctant to introduce their own phraseology, they had to avail themselves of biblical metaphors and forms of speech. Hence several blessings, referring to restoring the blind, clothing the naked, releasing the imprisoned, straightening the bent, spreading the earth upon the waters, making man's footsteps firm, giving the cock understanding (see Job 38:36), use biblical language.

THE ETHICAL THEME IN THE MORNING BLESSINGS

Perhaps our sages had another reason for following the biblical text when they instituted the Morning Blessings. Perhaps they actually preferred the general to the specific. Even if they could produce from the biblical text a particular alternative, they still might have chosen the general formula because the general idioms have an ethical connotation and a more comprehensive meaning.

Again we are confronted with an old unique Jewish liturgical motif. God in His exaltedness and transcendence is beyond our liturgical impulse. The mere offering of thanks to Him or singing His praise is a paradoxical act that is almost tantamount to arrogance on the part of man. The license to praise God or to offer Him thanks is a unique grant of grace whose prime purpose is to bring man in close contact with his Creator and to elevate him morally by revealing to him the divine attributes as ethical criteria that must guide him. Therefore, each divine attribute should connote an ethical norm.

As human beings extol their Master and Creator, each utterance of praise is filled with an ethical content to be realized later by man. Our sages therefore emphasized the ethical moment in our liturgy. They linked the Morning Blessings with ethical norms and imperatives. If these blessings had tersely described the pertinent physiological activities, the ethical moment would have been lost. The ethical pattern would have been submerged through an overemphasis on the individual private life and on isolated situations and events. Because our sages were more concerned with the moral-ethical aspect than with liturgical specificity, they may have selected prophetic metaphors whose significance transcends the thanksgiving program of the Morning Blessings.

When we pronounce "Who gives sight to the blind, clothes the naked, releases the bound, straightens the bent," we not only thank God for His kindness and benevolence in protecting us against fatal disease