

~ All I ask of You ~

An in-depth essay on the purpose and paradox of prayer

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We spend a lot of time on Rosh Hashona and Yom Kippur davening. But what should we be davening for? What should be the focus of our prayers on these most holy days as we stand before Hashem?

~ That the Cows Give Milk ~

The answer usually given actually seems counterintuitive. Let's look at some teachings on this topic.

A famous Chassidic story relates how the great Chossid, Reb Shmuel Munkes ended up in a small village for Shabbos Selichos, hosted by a simple elderly Jewish couple. In the middle of the night his host knocked on the door. "Reb Shmuel! Wake up, it's time for Selichos."

Reb Shmuel replied, "Why are you waking me in the middle of the night? What is Selichos?"

The simple Jew could not understand how his seemingly scholarly guest did not know what Selichos was. He proceeded to explain. "On the Motzai Shabbos before Rosh Hashona we gather in the Shule at midnight to cry out to Hashem and beg Him for a good year."

"What's so urgent that cannot wait till morning? What are you asking for already?" asked Reb Shmuel.

The simple host replied "I pray that the cow should give enough milk and that the crops should grow well and sell at a good price."

"I've heard of babies waking in the middle of the night to cry for milk, but since when do grown men do the same?" Reb Shmuel retorted.

Reb Shmuel was trying to teach his host that davening on the Yomim Noraim should be much more than asking for our physical needs.

~ Davening for our personal needs ~

The Zohar teaches that someone who Davens on Yom Kippur for their own personal needs, such as Parnoso, or even for forgiveness and to be inscribed for life, are like dogs who call out to their master *Hav Hav*, Give! Give! They think only about themselves and not about Hashem.

The Maggid of Mezritch offers a parable to illustrate the logic of using davening to ask Hashem for our personal worldly needs;

There was once a king (because every Jewish parable must have a king) who announced that on a particular day he would be granting the requests of all of his subjects. In the kingdom lived a leper. The lepers who could not live amongst the rest of the populace would live in rubbish heaps. This leper had a problem, all of the trash heaps were already occupied, leaving him nowhere to sleep. Finally the day arrived and his turn came to stand before the king. The leper approaches and beseeches "Please your majesty, could you provide me a rubbish heap to sleep in".

This, says the Maggid, is akin to using the opportunity of standing before Hashem to Daven for our own personal needs. When we stand in Hashem's presence, crowning Him as King, we should be thinking about Him alone and not ourselves. To ask for anything else is an affront and is trivial.

~ Paradox of prayer ~

But here in lies the paradox.

In Davening we are *supposed* to ask Hashem for our needs. A significant portion of the Yomim Noraim Tefillos is focused on our *Gashmius*; who will or will not live, who will be wealthy and who will be poor. We ask to be inscribed for life and we beseech for forgiveness. It is a tradition that when saying *L'Dovid Mizmor* after Maariv, one should specifically have in mind for their *Gashmius*.

The same paradox is found within prayers itself. The 13 middle Brachos of our weekday Shemoneh Esrei, established by the great sages of the Anshei Kneses Hagedola, are all *Bakashos*, requests for our personal needs. Indeed, the Biblical Mitzvah of prayer is to cry out to Hashem at a time of need.

So how does this fit with the Zohar, the parable of the Maggid and Reb Shmuel's chastisement that during Prayer we should be focused on Hashem and no on ourselves?

Prayer (Tefillah) is related to the word *Tofel*, which can mean to connect. When we Daven we are connecting to Hashem, standing as a servant before his Master. We strive to reach beyond our human limitation to connect with the infinite. So why are we coming before Hashem with a wish-list?

~ Achas Shaalti – The greatest request ~

In the lead-up to and throughout the Yomim Noraim, we recite the Tehillim *L'Dovid Hashem Ori*. Within this *Mizmor* lies a deep lesson as to what should be the focus of our Tefillos and what above all we should be asking for.

Dovid Hamelech asks Hashem *Achas Shaalti Me'eis Hashem*. "One thing I ask from Hashem, this I request. Let me dwell in the house of Hashem, to gaze at the pleasantness of Hashem and to visit His sanctuary".

There is a very enigmatic Midrash on this posuk. Hashem asks Dovid what's going on? You said that you are asking only one thing and here you come with a string of requests. Dovid responds I learned this from You! First You said *V'ata Yisroel, Mah Hashem Elokecha Shoel Me'imach*, "Now Yisroel, what does Hashem your G-d ask from you? Only that you fear Hashem your G-d. But You too did not stop with that one request but continued "to go in His ways, and to love Him and to serve Hashem with all of your heart and all of your soul, to guard the Mitzvos of Hashem".

Dovid doesn't seem to take responsibility for his manner of request. Rather like a child he deflects the accusation by responding "but you did it too!"

The Maggid of Mezritch explains that Dovid was in fact truly asking only one thing of Hashem. But this one thing was so deep and so powerful that this one request contained them all.

What was this magical request which was the key to everything?

The Malbim¹ comments that this passage of Tehillim teaches us that of all the requests that a person can make, the most appropriate request is for one thing alone and that is *Dveikus*, to be connected to Hashem.

Dovid, says the Malbim, was not asking for the many specific needs which arise in a person's life; healing, Parnoso and salvation. Dovid was asking for the one request which supersedes and incorporates all others and that is to *Dveikus*; to constantly cleave to Hashem. To be connected. Dovid was asking for Hashem's help to be able to actualise and sense this connection. When one is connected to Hashem, they need not worry about anything else.

The Tzemach Tzedek similarly explains that Dovid's request, *Achas Shaalti* (literally I asked for one), was a request for *Achas*, oneness with Hashem. This oneness exists within each one of us, at the very core of our Neshomo, the Yechida. The Yechida, as its name suggests, is the part of us that, no matter what, remains one with Hashem. It represents the state of absolute surrender (*Bittul*) and devotion to Hashem, the desire for "You alone".

Tiferes Shlomo on this Posuk, suggests that on Rosh Hashana one may only be able to Daven for one specific request. If so, one should be careful what the Daven for, to ensure that they are Davening for something meaningful, for something which will include within it all types of success and all of a person's needs. With this in mind, a person should Daven to be able to serve Hashem and have Yiras Shamayim. When this is all we desire, Hashem will fulfil all of the other things that we need in our lives.

~ Why we ask for our physical needs ~

But what about all of our requests for our physical needs that our sages included in the text of the prayers?

When Reb Shmuel came to the Alter Rebbe and relayed his Selichos episode, the Alter Rebbe rebuked him; not just because his approach was unkind or too sharp for the simple Jew, but because the elderly man was right. Achieving *Achas*, oneness and *Dveikus* to Hashem should be our deepest desire. But our *Gashmius* requests are important because it is through them that our deep connection to Hashem is expressed and that Hashem's Kingship is manifest within the world.

On the first day of Rosh Hashana, before we come before Hashem in prayer, we read the Haftorah of Chana and her prayer for a child. According to the Shela^h, this prayer itself took place on Rosh Hashana. Chana's prayer was so powerful that our sages derive many 'great halachos' of prayer from the manner in which Chana Davened.

¹ Tehillim Chapter 27

Chana entered the Mishkan and poured out her heart to Daven for a child. Eli, the Kohein Gadol mistook her for a drunkard because of the manner in which she was praying; “only her lips were moving but her voice was not audible.”

How could Eli, the Tzaddik Hador, mistake a woman in sincere, heartfelt prayer for being a drunkard?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that Eli did not mistake her for being drunk. Rather he thought that she was drunk on her own sense of self. Standing before Hashem in the holiest place in the world, on the day of Rosh Hashana, instead of thinking about Hashem, all she could think about was herself and her desires; her maternal cravings, her need for a child.

Chana replied that Eli was mistaken and that her request was not about herself and her personal desires. She was asking for a son who would be great, on par with both Moshe and Aharon, who she would give to Hashem for all of the days of his life. She was asking for a son for Hashem’s sake, not for her own.

Eli was satisfied and blessed her that her request should be fulfilled. Her son Shmuel was born and at the age of two she dedicated him to a lifelong service of Hashem.

Oneness with Hashem and serving Him is the ultimate objective, but it is manifest in how we connect to Him on a daily basis within our world and all of the things in our physical worldly lives. Our Gashmius; our health, families and Parnoso are the vehicles by which we serve Hashem and reveal His presence within the world. We want to be blessed with good health and Parnoso so that we can live serve Hashem. We ask for children so that we can raise them to serve Hashem.

The Zohar and Maggid’s perspective, that Davening for our physical needs is negative, refers to someone who requests Gashmius as an ends in itself, like the dogs who cannot think beyond themselves and their needs. Such requests are truly inferior in comparison to what we should really be searching for.

But when our request for our Gashmius needs are an offshoot and manifestation of our deep desire to be connected to Hashem and to serve Him, these requests are sublime and G-dly themselves.

This is alluded to in the commentary of the Malbim discussed above. The Tehillim teaches “to You my heart says ‘search for My face’, I seek Your face Hashem”. The Malbim says that whilst in our mouths we make all manner of requests; salvation and the like, our heart, the inner dimension of those requests is to ‘seek Your face Hashem’, to be connected to You.

When we stand before Hashem these Yomim Noraim to Daven for our physical needs, we come before Him like Chana. We do not view our physicality as an end in itself for our own fulfilment and enjoyment. Rather they are a reflection of our sole (soul)-desire for connection to Hashem because our physical blessings are the *Keilim* through which we channel and express our devotion to Hashem.

We don’t need to go to the extremes of Chana who dropped off her two year old son in the care of the Kohanim in the Mishkan. But we should stop to reflect; When we Daven for our needs, it’s not so much about what we ask for, but what we live for and how we will use Hashem’s blessings. How will I use all of the blessings in my life to serve Hashem and turn them towards a higher purpose?

When Hashem sees that our prayers are not for ourselves, our own needs and wants, but for Him, to devote ourselves to Him and to serve Him better, we are sure that our Tefillos will be answered. Our one request of *Achas Shaalti*, for a deep and meaningful relationship with Hashem, will bring with it all of His infinite blessings for the New Year, for everything good, both materially and spiritually.