



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL

TEFILLA

BY REBBETZIN ZEMIRA OZAROWSKI

Director of OU Israel L'Ayla Women's Initiative



The First Section of Shemoneh Esrei

There's a very famous Gemara (Berachot 34a) which explains the structure of the Shemoneh Esrei.

א"ר חנינא- ראשונות דומה לעבד שמסדר שבח לפני רבו. אמצעיות דומה לעבד שמבקש פרס מרבו. אחרונות דומה לעבד שקבל פרס מרבו

Rabbi Hanina said: During the first three blessings, one is like a servant who arranges praise before his master; during the middle blessings, one is like a servant who requests a reward from his master; during the final three blessings, one is like a servant who already received a reward from his master and is taking his leave and departing.

To put it simply – the first section is praise, the second is requests, and the third is thanksgiving.

In this article, we will be focusing on the first section. According to the Gemara, before we can begin asking Hashem for all the things that we need, we must first praise Him. This idea always bothered me

– it sounds like the Gemara is saying that we need to “butter” Hashem up so that we get on His good side and then He will be more willing to give us what we want. That seems rather absurd. Perhaps if He were a human king, this might make some sense. But why would Hashem need our praise, why would that impact on His decision to grant our requests?

I think that we need to look at this idea from a different vantage point. Imagine, G-d forbid, you had a family member who was sick with an extremely rare disease. You managed to get an appointment to speak to the top specialist in the field and see if he could perform a very complicated surgery on your loved one. If you were under the assumption that he would be too busy to take on the case or if you weren't sure if this doctor really had the ability to cure your family member, you might not present yourself properly or have a very effective meeting.

In order to appeal to this doctor in the best possible way, you'd need to make sure emphasize *to yourself* three important points before beginning your request.

1. That there is a reason why this doctor might actually want to help you. You would remind yourself of the fact that your grandfather saved this doctor's father's life many

continued on next page...

years ago, that you have a family connection, that he feels indebted to you. 2. That this doctor is the top specialist in the field, that he has healed hundreds of people with this same disease, some in the most miraculous of ways. 3. That he is the only one who could help, no one else has the skills or experience able to do this complicated surgery. Once you've reminded yourself of these three facts, you will be able to focus all your energy into entreating the surgeon as passionately as possible.

Nothing we ask is too hard for Him. He has the ability to turn over the world to help us

Here too, as we begin our Shemoneh Esrei, we can't just jump into asking our personal requests. Why? Because we wouldn't do it effectively, because we don't yet believe in the power of our Tefilla. We need to prepare ourselves by reminding ourselves of three very important points –

1. אבות - We need to remember that our relationship with Hashem goes back many, many generations. We have “protexia” with Hashem because of our ancestors. Hashem is constantly looking out for us because of *Zchut Avot* – זכר חסדי אבות ומביא גואל לפני בניהם – Hashem remembers all of the *חסד* our Avot have performed and He “owes” us one. In their merit, He is waiting to bring redemption and salvation to us, the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

2. גבורות - We need to remind of ourselves of how all-encompassing Hashem's power is. Nothing we ask is too hard for Him. He has the ability to turn over the world to help us. Whether it be - מחיה מתים ברחמים רבים סומך נופי - לים ורופא חולים ומתיר אסורים He has the power to resurrect the dead, support the fallen, heal the sick, free those who are bound. It is worthwhile to pour out our hearts to Him because despite how desperate our situation might seem, He really and truly can fix it.

3. קדושה - We then go on to remind ourselves that not only does Hashem have the ability to grant us all our requests, He is actually the ONLY one who can. He is *קדוש*, which technically means *מבודל ומופרד*, He is separate, removed, in a different realm than any other being in the entire universe. Therefore, He is the only One we can place our complete trust in and the only One we can really turn to in our time of need.

We can now understand why the Gemara instructs us to begin our Shemoneh Esrei with this section of praise. Like a servant before his master or like a family member before the top specialist in the world, we need to take a few minutes reminding OURSELVES of these critical points. Only once we are sure that these ideas are all crystal clear in our heads, only then are we properly prepared to pour out our hearts to *הקדוש ברוך הוא*. It is this very real Tefilla - בקשות (requests) that are made with a real belief that they can and will be granted - that will be the most effective type of Tefilla. ■