

A PERSONAL TOUCH

by Ben Goldberg

Last class, we reviewed the third bracha of Shemoneh Esrai, focusing on the blessing's theme of holiness. That class also finalized our review of the first set of three blessings praising G-d. Moving forward, we'll now take a look at the next set of thirteen middle blessings, where we ask G-d to fulfill our personal needs. Before looking in depth at each of the thirteen blessings, I thought it might make sense to first take a look at this next section as a whole.

There's an immediate question that jumps out when considering these blessings. The middle blessings make up the bulk of the Shemoneh Esrai prayer - if that's the case, why not begin here? Why do we spend the first three blessings praising G-d? The Talmud in *Brachos* provides an answer, noting that when we pray we are like a servant approaching his master. Only after we've appropriately praised our Master do we feel comfortable asking for a personal supplication. As we begin to transition to these personal requests, we should continue to remember all of the praise we so recently offered.

Although I have described this middle set of brachos as those touching on our personal needs, the blessings aren't truly just about our own needs. As Rambam notes in his *Hilchos Tefillah* that these middle blessings include all the needs that human have, both on the individual and communal level.

And indeed, these requests for personal needs can either be mundane or spiritual – the level and intent behind the request is solely up to the individual. For instance, when we request greater knowledge, we can do so hoping the knowledge helps us achieve success in business or we can ask for knowledge to help us in our service to G-d. How we choose to view the need determines how powerful the request can truly be. This is not to suggest, of course, that we should refrain from asking for any personal desires. As this class has detailed in the past, prayer offers us an avenue to ask anything of G-d. Rather, we should strive to one day reach the level where our requests are made solely in order to improve our service to G-d.

As Rabbi Yitzchak ben Asher (the Riva) notes, we can also use prayer as a guide post for our priorities in life. He notes that the personal requests in the Shemoneh Esrai are listed in descending order of importance. Our requests for knowledge, repentance, and forgiveness are therefore listed first, as we should remember that these requests should always be on our lips before we ask for material prosperity.

Lastly, there's one thought I want to leave you with before we turn to our in-depth review of each

individual blessing. Rabbi Paysach Krohn offers a wonderful insight into Shemoneh Esrai as a whole, though the lesson is particularly poignant as we begin to turn to our personal requests. Rabbi Krohn points out that the entire prayer is written in the plural – when we ask for knowledge, we ask G-d to “[e]ndow us graciously...”, when we ask for forgiveness we state “[f]orgive us”, and so on and so forth. If we are asking for these requests as an individual, why are we stating them in plural form? The plural form is the key, Rabbi Krohn notes, to having our prayers answered. If we are able to think of others when we pray, to think about who needs healing and who might need more luck at work, we can guarantee that G-d will make sure to think of our own needs.