

A PLEA FOR FORGIVENESS

by Ben Goldberg

Last class we reviewed the fifth blessing of the Shemoneh Esrai, taking a close look at our request for repentance. Today, we will continue looking at the middle blessings and review the sixth blessing overall – the request for forgiveness. As always, let's first review the actual text of the blessing:

"Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, HaShem, the gracious One Who forgives abundantly."

This blessing and the last (our request for repentance) are the only two instances in the prayer that we refer to G-d as our Father– why these two blessings specifically?

A father loves his children unconditionally and will always welcome them home, no matter the circumstances that led to a departure. If man, full of human frailties and faults, can truly love another unconditionally, we cannot begin to fathom the love G-d has for us. Therefore, we refer to him as our Father when we request repentance and forgiveness to remind ourselves that just like a father will always welcome his children home, G-d will always leave the door open for our return.

If this is so, why do we almost immediately then refer to G-d as our King? The explanation above would seem to indicate that we should use the descriptive term Father throughout the blessing.

The answer, as the B'ohr HaChaim comes to teach us (as cited in Talelei Oros on Tefillah), can be gleaned from one of the lessons from our last class. We stated there that one meaning of a "perfect repentance" is repentance done only out of *Ahavas HaShem*, or love of HaShem. Similarly, we first strive to seek forgiveness solely out of love of G-d and, if we can reach that level, we are viewing G-d as a loving father. If, however, that level is still unattainable, we still seek to repent and beg forgiveness out of *Yirat Shamayaim*, or fear of G-d. In that case, G-d is viewed more as a king than a father.

Of course, though, G-d is different than mortal royalty, for He is "abundantly forgiving." No matter how many times we sin, HaShem does not lose His patience and declare we are beyond repair. He continues to forgive.

We spent the last few classes discussing why requests for wisdom and assistance with repentance were logical starting points for this middle section of personal requests. Similarly, it makes sense that a request for forgiveness would follow one regarding repentance. We must first repent and

promise to end our negative behavior. Only then can we truly and sincerely ask for forgiveness. To ask for forgiveness before attempting repentance flies in the face of any sincere request for forgiveness.

And, of course, we can only sincerely ask for forgiveness when it comes from the heart. That may be one reason that many have a custom to strike their chest while saying the words “we have erred” and “we have willfully sinned.” As we strike our chests, we hope to jolt our hearts awake as we plead for forgiveness.