

A SHIELD FROM ALL HARM

by Ben Goldberg

Last class we continued looking at the first bracha of Shemoneh Esrai and discussed how G-d protects us in numerous different ways. Today we will complete our discussion of the first bracha, taking a deeper look at the final phrase of the blessing. As a reminder, the first bracha states:

"Blessed are You, Ha-Shem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, G-d of Abraham, G-d of Isaac, and G-d of Jacob; the great, mighty, and awesome G-d, the supreme G-d, Who bestows beneficial kindnesses and creates everything, Who recalls the kindnesses of the Patriarchs and brings a Redeemer to their children's children, for His Name's sake, with love. O King, Helper, Savior, and Shield. **Blessed are You, Ha-Shem, Shield of Abraham.**"

Today we will focus on the bolded text – "Blessed are You, Ha-Shem, Shield of Abraham"

As we end our first bracha, we declare that G-d is the Shield of Abraham. Where does this description come from? Why do we end the first bracha with this phrase? And why, after previously referencing each of our forefathers, do we now refer only to Abraham?

The source for the word "Shield" is found in Genesis 15:1, right after Abraham's miraculous victory over the four kings. G-d says to Abraham, "fear not, Abram, for I am your shield. Your reward is exceedingly great." The verse brings an immediate question – Abraham had just defeated the four kings. He was victorious! What, then, did he have to fear?

I've often cited Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer in these classes and will do so again here. Rabbi Feuer notes that the Yalkut Shimoni teaches us that the word for shield, *magen*, can also mean "free" in Aramaic. Abraham was worried that his miraculous victory meant his merits might be depleted. G-d therefore assures him that, because he fought exclusively for the glory of G-d, his merits would not deplete. As we finish our first bracha, we acknowledge that we are about to ask for many personal requests. Like Abraham, we hope to use these requests only in our service to G-d and, like Abraham, we ask that these requests not deplete our merits.

We can now understand why we would want to end the first bracha of the Shemoneh Esrai with this phrase. Why, however, do we refer only to Abraham? The Biblical verse we rely on is associated with Abraham, sure, but would it have been wrong to also note that G-d is the Shield of Isaac or the Shield of Jacob? Why the specific focus on Abraham?

In an earlier class, we discussed how each forefather epitomized a certain virtue. Abraham perfected

the quality of *chessed*, kindness, but there is something else Abraham had to contend with – solitude. Abraham practiced monotheism and recognized G-d in a world where everybody else stood opposite him. He was ridiculed, he was mocked, and he had no one else to stand with.

How often in life is the right thing also the difficult thing? How often does the right thing lead to social stigma or mockery? This is true of anything but is often true of religion as well. It's not easy to walk away from a group speaking *lashon hara* (gossip) or to refrain from speaking with others during prayers. We must always remember the example of Abraham, who stood against the entire world in his true belief.

There is one more lesson we can glean from this phrase. We have already discussed how to make sense of that fact that we seem to be blessing G-d in the phrase "Blessed are You," and noted that, in saying those words, we are proclaiming that G-d is the source of all blessings. Perhaps it's fitting, then, that we finish by repeating that phrase and then declaring that G-d is the Shield of Abraham. As we proclaim that G-d is the source of everything around us, perhaps we should also remember His promise to Abraham and remember that, no matter what difficulties lie ahead, G-d will act as our shield, protecting us from any and all harm.