

"OPEN MY LIPS": WHY AN INTRODUCTORY PHRASE?

by Ben Goldberg

OK, so we understand why we go through the ritual of taking three steps back and then three steps forward again. But why do we need an introductory verse? Why can't we just jump right our prayer? Furthermore, what is the meaning behind the verse itself?

Let's take another look at this introductory verse, which comes from Tehillim:

HaShem Sefasai Tiftach U'fi Yagid Tehilasecha – HaShem, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise (Tehillim 51:18).

Before beginning our Shemoneh Esrai prayer we make an impassioned plea that HaShem allow us to open our mouths so that we can properly praise Him. Talilei Oros on Prayer, an incredible compendium of divrei Torah, cites the author of the Sefer HaFla'ah in noting that, if one truly believes that they are praying before G-d, they should be so awestruck that they are essentially frozen with fear. If we truly believe that we are standing before G-d, who can help with any request, we will be so frozen with awe and fear that we won't even be able to open our mouths! Therefore, we need this introductory verse to plea to HaShem that our mouths be able to even say the forthcoming prayer.

Furthermore, speech itself is a miraculous thing. We too often speak of open miracles and forget the everyday miracles of life. The fact that our mouths open when we want to speak is a miracle in and of itself. We should not take this for granted and therefore start the Shemoneh Esrai as a reminder that even the everyday occurrence of speech is truly a miracle.

The introductory verse can also be viewed as a plea to HaShem for concentration. It's no secret that most of us struggle to properly concentrate during prayers. Our minds constantly drift to other thoughts – what's on the agenda for today, what should I have for breakfast, how did my team blow that game last night. Therefore, as we take our steps back to begin the prayer, we send out a heartfelt request to HaShem to please assist us in concentrating, even for just a bit, on the words in front of us.

Another potential view is that we are asking for the *kochos*, for the strength, to use our mouths for the correct purpose and to ask for the right things. There's nothing wrong with asking for material pleasures and one should always know that *no* request is too silly to ask of HaShem. That being said, we should all hope to rise to the level that our requests are truly for the enhancement of our Judaism. We may ask for more money but we ask for it so we can use it for more tzedakah. We may

ask for nice weather but we ask for it so that our moods are enhanced and we treat people more pleasantly. Of course, this is not an easy level to obtain and so we introduce the prayer with a plea to HaShem to help us rise to this lofty level.

Lastly, we should note that the text itself offers some fascinating insights. Rabbi Avraham Chaim Feuer makes an interesting point regarding Sefasai (lips). He notes that the Ramban says Sefatai, my lips, is related to Sefat HaNahar, the river bank. HaRav Mordechai Gifter elaborates by noting that man's soul is restricted and stifled within the very narrow confines of his finite body but when we stand in prayer, our soul surges until it overflows the restrictive banks of the body. Sometimes we are so down on ourselves because of mistakes we have made in the past. With our introductory verse, however, we declare that we believe we can overcome the mistakes we've made.

In our next lesson, we'll dive into the first blessing of the Shemoneh Esrai and talk about it in-depth. As we can see here, though, the introductory phrase we first say, and the steps surrounding it, offer some important lessons on how to approach prayer.