

OURS AND OUR FOREFATHERS

by Ben Goldberg

Last class we started looking at the first bracha of Shemonah Esrai, focusing on the first few words of the opening blessing. Today we will continue looking at the first bracha, taking a closer look at the next phrase. 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 – "[O]ur G-d and the G-d of our forefathers." Before we attempt to mine the actual words for insight, an initial question must be answered. The Talmud tells us (Avoda Zara 7b) that prayer must begin with praise. We certainly start the blessing with praise, beginning with "Blessed are You, Ha-Shem" and we know that eventually we continue that praise, later noting that G-d is "great, mighty, and awesome..." We seemingly interrupt our praise, however, to note that Ha-Shem is our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers. How does this constitute praise? And, if it is indeed not praise, how can we open our first bracha with that phrase?

Rabbi Yitzchak of Volozhin offers an apt analogy in answering our question. Imagine a man is in desperate need of money and has the opportunity to ask a major benefactor in his town for some assistance. As the man approaches the benefactor, he realizes that he should not simply ask for money but should begin by praising the man. "I know that since you have been a young man, you have selflessly helped others," the man says to the benefactor. "The stories of your generosity and kindness are many and I would ask that you find it in your heart to continue giving." To offer praise, the man first tells the benefactor that he knows of his previous kindness and his previous instances of giving. So too, as we begin to pray before G-d, we note that He is the G-d of our forefathers. He has been helping us for generations past and we ask that He continues helping us in the future.

Another reason we mention Ha-Shem as the G-d of our forefathers is to fortify our faith. As we make our way through life, we will encounter questions that we cannot answer and may encounter situations that test our faith. However, we cannot let these tests erode our belief in G-d. We therefore remind ourselves three times a day that He is the G-d of our forefathers, the G-d whose existence has been taught throughout our history, giving us faith in the tradition that has been transmitted for so long.

Of course, we cannot go through life on faith alone. We must actively forge our own path. That is why we also proclaim that He is *our* G-d. We must, through questions and study and experiences, embark on our own personal journey to discover our own relationship with G-d and determine how we want to live our lives. We start this journey with faith, with the knowledge that G-d is the G-d of our forefathers, but we take this faith a step further and develop our own unique relationship with our G-d.