

STARTING WITH PRAISE

by Ben Goldberg

Last week we finished looking at the introductory phrase of Shemonah Esrai and today we can start to look at the opening bracha:

"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."

We're going to break down this first bracha piece by piece but, before we do, it's important to first look at the structure of the Shemoneh Esrai in general. The prayer comprises eighteen blessings and the first three brachot of Shemona Esrai consist of praises toward Ha-Shem. Why is that? Why can't we just jump right into asking for what we need?

One response is that this is the general structure one uses to make requests – first praise, then the request, and finally finish with an offer of thanks. As we start our prayer, we are like a servant approaching our Master. A servant wouldn't dare just begin to request something but would praise his master first. Similarly, we praise our Master before we make our personal requests. Furthermore, although the bulk of Shemoneh Esrai is indeed a request for personal needs, the purpose of prayer is truly about improving our relationship with G-d and becoming even closer to Him. Therefore, we begin with words of praise.

The very first words we utter, however, bear examination. We start by saying, "Blessed are You..." Could G-d possibly need our blessings? He lacks for nothing! What, then do we mean by starting every blessing with these words?

Rabbi Chaim of Vlozhim notes that in saying "Blessed", we are proclaiming that G-d is the source of all blessing and we are recognizing, and proclaiming, that everything comes from Him. We are not, G-d forbid, suggesting that He need our blessings but affirming that we need His and recognizing that we receive them.

It's important, as we say these words, to remember just how much we take for granted. For instance, we need the miracle of human speech to even say these words yet how often do we take the ability to speak for granted? Too often in life we tend to forget that even the rote everyday occurrences are truly miracles. Lighting a match, for instance, seems so simple but isn't that truly miraculous? Every

day we use the power of speech and we forget that even this act of speaking itself is a miracle. As we say this verse, remember to try and appreciate throughout the day all that Ha-Shem has done for us. So much in life is truly a miracle-can it therefore really be worth getting upset throughout the day at all the little things?

Before we move on, I want to share one more beautiful thought from the Chofetz Chaim. We begin the prayer with, "Blessed are You," referring to G-d with the familiar "You." How amazing is it, the Chofetz Chaim notes, that every Jew is so close with the Creator that, in just an instant, he can turn to Him and address Him as "You!" In the introduction to this course, we discussed how prayer is the opportunity to ask for whatever we may need and I used the example of a man who needs a job and happens to sit next to the CEO of the very company he had applied to. Not only do we have the chance to beseech the CEO of the world, we are close enough to refer to him as "You"!