THE WISDOM IN REQUESTING WISDOM

by Ben Goldberg

Last class, we focused on an introductory review of the middle section of the Shemoneh Esrai, where we make our personal requests to G-d. Today, we will take an in-depth look at the first blessing of this section and the fourth blessing of the Shemoneh Esraei overall – the request for intellect and wisdom. As always, let's first review the actual text of the fourth blessing:

"You graciously endow man with intellect and teach insight to a frail mortal. Endow us graciously from Yourself with intellect, insight, and wisdom. Blessed are You, Hashem, gracious Giver of intellect."

As we discussed last class, these requests are recited in order of importance. Of all the things we might request of G-d, it might seem odd then that our first request is for intellect, insight, and wisdom. Granted, wisdom and intellect are important but is this truly the most important request we can ask of G-d?

While everything we ask for in the Shemoneh Esrai is important, it is indeed this request for wisdom that rises above the rest, as it sets the baseline for the rest of our prayers. Without the proper intellect and wisdom, a true understanding of prayer is impossible. We therefore pray for wisdom first so that we have a better understanding of the rest of our prayers.

As we pray for G-d to bestow wisdom upon us, we should also pledge to use that wisdom properly. In Proverbs, we are told "Know Him [referring to G-d] in all your ways. Do not be wise in your own eyes." What is the connection between knowing G-d and the refrain against becoming too arrogant about one's intellect? Rabbeinu Yonah offers a fascinating explanation, providing us with a lesson we can easily apply to our prayers. How often in life do we turn to G-d in a time of need, exclaiming our total faith that He, and only He, can help. As the popular saying goes, there are no atheists in a foxhole. Once salvation arrives, though, and we are no longer in desperate need of Divine assistance, how often do we forget to look back and gratefully acknowledge G-d's assistance? How often do we instead attribute the outcome to natural means or even to our own actions? These verses in Proverbs exhort us to approach life with the knowledge that G-d is totally in control and to continue to acknowledge that even after our need for immediate assistance has ended.

Rabbi Yechiel Spero further elucidates this point in his wonderful book, Touched by a Prayer. There, he notes that that the phrasing of this request is rather unusual. In this fourth blessing, we first praise G-d as the One who is able to provide wisdom and then ask for Him to grant it to us. Usually our

requests are reversed – we first exclaim our need for something and then praise G-d as the One who can provide it. Rabbi Spero explains this unusual phrasing by citing the Rinas Chaim, noting that there is nothing man attributes more to his own ability than intellect. It is so easy for one to be proud of his own knowledge and wisdom and forget where that wisdom is coming from.

Perhaps that is why this request for knowledge comes right after the third blessing, where we discussed G-d's holiness. We are not merely requesting the intellectual ability to succeed in the classroom or to win an argument at the dinner table. Rather, we are asking for the wisdom required to determine what the right choices – the holy choices – in life are.

As we recite this fourth blessing, let's remember to focus on why we're asking for wisdom and insight and pledge to use these tools as we strive to grow closer to G-d.