

# THREE STEPS BACK AND FORTH

*by Ben Goldberg*

Before we begin our Shemoneh Esrai prayer, we do something unusual – we take three steps back, take three steps forward, and then, as an introductory verse, we say “My Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise.”

What is the purpose behind taking three steps back, only to take three steps forward? And why do we take any steps at all? Furthermore, what is the significance of the introductory verse that we utter?

Although this introductory portion of the Shemoneh Esrai prayer is quite short, there are a number of lessons we can glean from it.

## **Why the three steps?**

Let's start with the steps back and then forward that we take. What is the significance of these steps? Why can't we just jump right into the prayer?

The Ba'al Shem Tov offers one interesting insight. He says that when a father teaches his child to walk, he'll often first stand the child up and place him a few feet away. As the child begins to take his first tentative steps and walk closer to his father, the father begins to step back. In the eyes of the child, this must be very confusing. He is walking toward his father but, instead of remaining where he is, the father moves himself back and, in effect, further away! Of course, the mature mind realizes that the father is only doing this out of love. He wants his child to succeed and takes steps back so he can teach the child to walk.

Similarly, HaShem will sometimes take a “few steps back” from our lives and we may have trouble “seeing” Him. Perhaps things aren't going well and we wonder why. Or we are struggling in a certain area and can't seem to make any inroads or improvement. We must realize, however, that HaShem isn't “stepping back” because He doesn't care but because He cares so much! He desperately wants us to seek Him out. We therefore take three steps back to symbolize the times that it may seem like G-d is taking “steps back.” We immediately, however, take three steps forward to signify our understanding that to show HaShem that we will seek Him out.

There's also an important lesson in the steps themselves. The Shulchan Aruch states that the steps should not be bigger than the length of your big toe to the heel. Why is this and why does the size of the step matter? From this seemingly technical detail, however, we can learn an incredible lesson.

How often do we take on an improvement project in our lives and then, a month later, we discard the idea? If we would look at our failures, we'd likely notice that the issue was trying to do too much all at once. This is especially true when it comes to growth in Judaism. We must remember that growth occurs only when done step-by-step. One who tries to make a huge change overnight will eventually fail. Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch teaches us that the steps must be small ones – don't try and change everything overnight! Make small and meaningful changes first.