

THE VIRTUES OF OUR FOREFATHERS

by Ben Goldberg

Last class we continued looking at the first bracha of Shemonah Esrai, focusing on the second phrase and why we state that Ha-Shem is both our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers. 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 – "G-d of Abraham, G-d of Isaac, and G-d of Jacob." We have just stated that Ha-Shem is our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, and now we list out those very forefathers. Of course, a few questions jump out at us. First, why do we need to list out Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Didn't we just say that Ha-Shem is the G-d of our forefathers? Why do we then need to name them? Secondly, why do we repeat G-d's name before each Patriarch? Would it have not made more sense to say, "G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"?

There are numerous commentaries dealing with both of these questions but one of the most popular explanations is that we mention each forefather and repeat G-d's name to note that each emphasized a different *middah*, or virtue. Abraham is the epitome of *chesed*, of kindness. Abraham lived his life constantly searching for the next opportunity to dispense kindness, attuned to the needs of all those around him. Isaac represents *gevurah*, strength. This is not referring to physical strength but to inner strength. Isaac mastered internal strength, dedicated to ensuring that his life was one of total purity and service to G-d.

Jacob balanced those two traits together and was dedicated to *emes*, truth. Drawing on both *chesed* and *gevurah*, Jacob was able to find the middle course, ensuring perfect harmony (that Jacob was able to take the virtues of his father and grandfather and seamlessly blend them together is one explanation as to why the verse adds the word "and" before "G-d of Jacob"). As we say each name of the forefather in our prayer, we should commit ourselves to working on these traits. As we say Abraham, we should think of the various ways we can offer a helping hand to others and as we say Isaac, we think of ways we can improve on our relationship with G-d. Of course, unbridled love and unrelenting self-criticism can do more harm than good. Therefore, as say Jacob we remember

the need to balance the two traits to achieve perfect harmony.

Additionally, it may be helpful to have one more thought in mind as we say this phrase in the first blessing. The Saba of Kelm notes that the Patriarchs were able to find G-d in an idolatrous world. How did they do this? They looked at the world around them, at nature, and could not fathom that something so beautiful and so miraculous could happen by chance. The wondrous world around them, they realized, could only come from G-d. As we leave the morning prayer and rush off to work or school or the myriad other commitments we may have throughout the day, let's try and remember to take a minute to notice the world around us. Let's take a minute to savor the sun shining down or the smell of a flower and remember to be grateful for the miraculous world world we live in.