

# THE FOURTH BLESSING: GIVE US THE WISDOM TO KNOW HOW TO ASK

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

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

A person may view prayer as an opportunity to freely beg Hashem for whatever his heart desires. Yet from the Talmudic story, we learn that the act of opening our mouth in prayer requires Heavenly assistance to ensure that the appropriate words will emerge. Even when the great Sage stood in front of a king who was willing to grant any request, Hashem did not give him the wisdom to know what to ask and he did not make the most of that opportunity.

Atah chonen, the fourth blessing of Shemoneh Esrei, was composed with the above concept in mind. Prayer gives us the chance to ask Hashem for what we want, and we can easily squander this opportunity by asking for the wrong thing. Before starting to ask for our personal needs, we must first beg Hashem to give us enough understanding to know what we should ask for (Shulchan Aruch 115,1).

Since our Sages set down the precise wording for each request of the Shemoneh Esrei long ago, we may wonder why we are concerned whether we will ask for the right things. The answer is that even with the firm guidance of the words printed in the siddur, we still need assistance from Above. If we don't recognize that these blessings are exactly what we need, we will not put our heart into our prayers and we will not add personal requests in places where it is permitted.

Another insight comes from the words of our Sages, who tell us: "It is forbidden to have mercy on someone who does not have understanding" (Brachos 33a). Helping someone who will squander or abuse our assistance is a waste of resources. Therefore, before turning to Hashem for our other requests, we ask Him for the understanding that will help us to use His gifts properly and thus be worthy of receiving more (Birkei Yosef 115).

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