

LEAVING HASHEM

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

After reciting Shemoneh Esrei, one cannot simply stroll off. Our Sages set down exact guidelines showing us how to take leave of the Divine Presence. Studying them allows us to perform this mitzva in a way that bespeaks the honor due to our Creator.

In order to understand any area of Torah, one must first be familiar with the reasons for the halacha. There are many explanations offered for these three steps, but halachic authorities focus on two in particular. Numerous practical ramifications are derived from these two reasons.

Some write that Shemoneh Esrei is like the offering of the Tamid sacrifice and the one praying is like a kohen performing the Temple service (Beis Yosef citing Rav Hai Gaon). After offering the Tamid, the kohen would pour a wine libation onto the altar. The kohen would then exit by walking backwards, placing the toes of each foot behind the heel of his other foot (Mor Uketzia 123).

Others write that the steps back show that one is like a servant departing from his master (Rashba, Responsa 1,381). Before a servant leaves his master's presence, he bows down to show his humility and then walks backward from the room. This shows that even as he gets ready to leave his master, he remains subservient to him and constantly alert for the moment when he will be summoned again (Mishna Berura 123,1).

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