

AN OPEN HAND

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

After concluding Hodu (or after Baruch She'amar, according to Nusach Sephard and Sephardim), we say Psalm 100, "Mizmor l'sodah," thanking Hashem for the untold hidden and open miracles that He performs for us on a daily basis (see "Small Sacrifices" chapter). Afterwards we say Yehi Chevod, a compilation of verses where we mention G-d's name eighteen times. We then proceed onto Ashrei, which marks the beginning of the main section of Pesukei D'zimra.

Our Sages promised that anyone who says Ashrei three times a day is guaranteed a place in the World to Come. Why is Ashrei so important? The Talmud offers two reasons: First, each verse of Psalm 145, the main part of Ashrei, starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Secondly, it contains the verse "pose'ach es yadecha"(You [Hashem] open Your Hand, and sustain the needs of all living creatures), which affirms Hashem as the Source of all sustenance (Brachos 4b).

"Pose'ach es yadecha," which attributes all worldly sustenance to Hashem, is the most significant verse of Ashrei. A person must recite the verse with proper concentration, and he should repeat it if he failed to do so (Shulchan Aruch 51,7). If one only realizes after he has gone further in Pesukei D'zimra that he failed to have the proper concentration, he should say it again, and then continue with the verses that follow it (Mishna Berura 51,16).

These aspects of Ashrei make it the most critical section of Pesukei D'zimra, so much so that if a person came late to prayers, he may skip all of the Pesukei D'zimra in order to recite Shemoneh Esrei with a minyan, but Ashrei (in addition to Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach, as well as Nishmas on Shabbos) must be said first. Because it is so important, halachic sources suggest a number of active gestures that can be made in order to promote concentration at this critical point in prayer.

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