

THE SIXTH BLESSING: COMPLETE FORGIVENESS

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"Forgive us, our Father, for we have erred; pardon us, our King, for we have willfully sinned; for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, Hashem, the Gracious One who pardons abundantly."

The sixth blessing of Shemoneh Esrei is Selach lanu, in which we ask for complete forgiveness. We beg Hashem to wipe away our misdeeds, and pardon the dishonor we caused Him by transgressing His will. In doing so, we hope to do away with any barriers between us, so that nothing will prevent us from receiving His kindness.

"A king may not forgo his honor, but a father may forgo his honor" (Kesubos 17a). In both this blessing and the previous one, we address Hashem as our Father before calling Him our King. In doing so we hope that Hashem will focus on the father-child aspect of our relationship to Him, and overlook the dishonor to Him caused by our actions (Beis Yosef 115).

While saying the word "selach," we should think about any specific transgression we may have done that day, and turn to Hashem in repentance. Some have the custom to tap twice on the area of their hearts with their fists, once when saying the word "chatanu" and once when saying "pashanu." This gesture reminds us of vidui, confession, and helps arouse one's heart to repentance while reciting these words.

On days when Tachanun is not recited (e.g. Rosh Chodesh or chol hamo'ed), one should not tap the chest while saying this blessing. Since this gesture resembles vidui, it is improper to do so on happy days when vidui is not said (Shelah, as cited in Siddur Yavetz; Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, as cited in Halichos Shlomo 11,45). Some authorities maintain that one should not tap the chest during evening services either, since Tachanun is not said at night (Shaarei Halacha U'Minhag, Orach Chaim 69).

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