

AVODAH: TEFILLAH: FRONT AND CENTER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Tefillah: Front and Center¹

What would we not give to trade the poverty of our spiritual lives for the richness of the company of R. Chaim Vital? Yet his depiction of the spiritual context of his generation leaves us wondering whether he was looking at us when he composed it. "An atmosphere of coarseness has taken hold of our times. Through it, heresy abounds. Left to our own devices, we routinely fail to stand up to the *yetzer hora*. Because the *nefesh* [2]- the lowest of the three parts of the soul [3] - is tightly linked to and mired in the physical body, *aveirah* seems inescapable."

HKBH never demands of us what is unreasonable to achieve. There must be an exit strategy from the vise-grip of the *yetzer hora*! R. Chaim Vital finds it in davening with concentration and focus.

Bais Avraham fleshes out the thought for us. Tefillah is called *avodah she-balev*, the service of the heart. *Avodah*, in turn, alludes to the *avodah* of coaxing sustenance from the ground. Before the earth yields anything of value, we must generally perform three activities. We first plow and ready the soil, then we plant and sow, and finally we water. Davening properly requires the same three processes. First we plow through the accumulated underbrush of our minds, opening our hearts to *tefillah*. Next, we plant words of prayer within our hearts. Finally, we drench those words with the tears of our fervent entreaties to Hashem.

Tefillah is successful because, in large measure, our *yetzer hora* gains a foothold in our lusts and desires. We defeat it by elevating those desires through turning them on Hashem Himself, making Him their object! *Bais Avraham* described how we do this, employing the words of pesukim that are familiar to us. "Hashem, my G-d, I cried out to You and You healed me." [4] Crying out to Hashem in *tefillah* is itself the largest measure of the healing we seek. Through it, we replace the deficiencies of soul and flesh with "My soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You," [5] reaching a point of "My heart and my flesh sing to the living G-d." [6] Whereas we may feel sinful in our very bones, tefillah changes our attitude to "All my bones will say, ??Hashem, who is like You?" In place of the faintness we feel from head to toe, we are invigorated through tefillah, until we say, "Every eye shall look toward You; every knee shall bend to You; every erect spine shall prostrate itself before You; all the hearts shall fear You; all innermost feelings and thoughts shall sing praises to Your name."

Tefillah must become an experience akin to immersion in a *mikveh*, albeit a *mikveh* of fire! Similar to the laws of purging utensils of non-kosher absorption, where items used through fire are purged

through fire, our fiery desires within us can be purged through the heated intensity of our davening. This holds out our only real strategy for survival in times of spiritual coarseness such as the time we live in. Even Torah and good deeds will not defeat the pumped-up *yetzer hora* of contemporary times. Only the elevated spiritual desire that is expressed in *tefilla* is a match for this *yetzer hora*.

We know that the three daily *tefillos* correspond to the order of the *korbanos* in the *Beis Ha-Mikdosh*. [7] Reduced to a single image, the function of the regular *korbanos* was to renew the closeness between a Jew and his Creator. *Devekus* is the all-important central pillar of our *avodah*; in turn, the blandishments of the *yetzer hora* are chiefly aimed at separating a Jew from his holy source, and creating a wedge of distance where only union should exist. *Korbanos* aim at restoring the closeness. (Maharal [8] points out that the word *korban* derives from the word *karov*, or close.)

Some *aveiros* are largely products of the evening hours. If a Jew stumbled in one of them, the morning *tamid* would restore his equilibrium. Other *aveiros* belong to the daytime activities; the afternoon *tamid* would address them. In the evening, we are often freed of the more elevated and focused pursuits of the day. We are left with our higher selves dormant, and our animal natures intact. The large limbs brought up to the altar to burn through the night dealt not with actual *aveiros*, but the shortcomings that owe to the coarseness of the part of us that is more animalistic by nature.

In all cases, it is the holy fire that burns constantly atop the altar that lights the fire of holiness within us. That fire overpowers the evil fire of lower desires in us, and brings us back to where we belong.

After the destruction of the *Beis Ha-Mikdosh*, Chazal ordained that the daily *tefillos* should fulfill the role of the *korbanos*. If we failed during the evening hours, we could pour our hearts out to Hashem in the morning, and beg and entreat Him to be brought close once again. Mincha affords us the same opportunity for our daytime failures. Maariv, which the gemara terms non-obligatory, or *reshus*, corresponds to our shortcomings in the arena of permitted (*reshus*) activities in which we overindulge, becoming contemptible with the permission (*reshus*) of the Torah.

We find this correspondence between *davening* and the restoration of our closeness to Hashem in early sources. Rabbenu Yonah [9] writes: "*Korbanos* and *tefillah* are of the same nature. A person draws closer to his Creator through them, enabling him to cling completely to Him, without any barrier intervening between them." R. Yehudah Ha-Levi in *Kuzari* [10] writes: "You should look with desire to the hour of prayer as the choicest of times of the day. At its time, a person becomes more like the spiritual beings, and less like the animal ones. The three prayer periods provide food for the soul like physical food feeds the body."

A key motif of our *tefillah*, therefore, must be our supplication to Hashem when we find ourselves in difficult spiritual straits, i.e. when our hearts ache from our having moved away from Him; when we do not feel His closeness.

We have it on the authority of earlier *tzadikim*, that no accusatory force stands in the way of a prayer for spiritual elevation and its Heavenly address. Such forces sometimes block the way of other

prayers - when we seek material benefits that we do not really deserve. There can be no such objections to seeking spiritual elevation. When we make them a key component of our *davening*, we are assured that there is nothing but open highway between ourselves and the Place we want our *tefillos* to reach.

[1] Based on Nesivos Shalom vol. 1 pgs. 180, 188-191

[2] Typically, the part of the soul that mediates action, and that is therefore implicated in the active transgressions

[3] The other two elements that are accessible to most people are ruach and neshamah

[4] Tehillim 30:3

[5] Tehillim 63:2

[6] Tehillim 84:3

[7] Berachos 26B

[8] Nesiv Ha-Avodah

[9] Sha'arei Teshuvah, Sha'arei Avodah, section 8

[10] Kuzari 3:5

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