

Tefillat Shav: The Limits of Prayer as a Means to Understanding its Transformative Nature

By: ARI BLEICHER¹

Prayer represents a paradoxical situation for man. On the one hand, there is nothing more natural for man than to recognize his sorry state and articulate his needs before his Creator. Upon whom else should man rely? On the other hand, who is man to stand before the *melekh malkhei ha-melakhim*, the King of kings? To resolve this seeming contradiction, a system of *tefillah* was established by the *Anshei K'nesset HaGedolah*, the Men of the Great Assembly who included the last prophets, that allows man freedom to express his emotional needs within the strictures of *halakhah*, so as to keep those emotions in line with man's intellect and with reality. The power of *tefillah*, constructed as such, is nearly without limit. It can transform man, so that the supplicant is now a different person from who he was prior to the prayer experience. He may now be worthy of *hashgahah*, Divine providence, to meet physical and/or emotional needs that he may not have been worthy of having met in his previous state. With this in mind, one may ask, are there needs, physical or emotional, that cannot be expressed in prayer? Is man limited by external restrictions, or can he express every need he truly feels in his heart? The answer to this question, as presented

¹ The ideas contained in this article are not just theoretical for me. I began to delve into this area after being diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. As I shall elaborate below, not only is the structure of prayer itself a source of inspiration and transformation, but the foundational ideas upon which that structure is based are equally inspiring and transformative.

Ari Bleicher is Assistant Professor of Radiology and is the Medical Director of the MR Research Center at the University of Pittsburgh and University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

in *Shulḥan 'Arukh Orach Hayyim, siman 230*, is definitive, but somewhat unclear, if not contradictory.

Section 230 of *Orach Hayyim* is entitled “The Law Concerning a Few Specific Blessings,” and is subdivided into five subsections. They may be summarized as follows:

Paragraph 1: The prohibition of *tefillat shav*, prayer in vain, is exemplified by two cases of someone who prays for past events. The first case is a person who hears a scream emanating from the city, and he prays that it did not come from his house. The second case is a person who prays that his pregnant wife should deliver a baby boy. Rather than offer a *tefillat shav*, the person should pray for the future and give thanks for what has already happened. For example, a traveler entering a dangerous village should pray that he arrive safely, and give thanks when he does indeed arrive safely.

Paragraph 2: Continuing the theme of *tefillat shav*, this paragraph deals with the case of a farmer who is about to measure his produce. Before the actual measuring, he is to say, “May it be Your will *HaShem*, my God, that You send a blessing upon this pile,” and during the measuring process he is to say, “Blessed is He Who sends blessing to this pile.” If he were to measure first and then pray, his prayer would be considered a *tefillat shav* since “blessing is to be found only in that which remains hidden from the eye.”

Paragraph 3: Upon entering a bathhouse, one should say, “May it be Your will *HaShem*, my God, that You bring me in in peace and bring me out in peace, and spare me from this fire and similar things in the future.” Upon leaving he should say, “I thank You *HaShem*, my God, for having spared me from this fire.”

Paragraph 4: Before bloodletting one should say, “May it be Your will *HaShem*, my God, that this activity should be therapeutic for me, for You are a free Healer.” Upon completion of the bloodletting, one should say, “Blessed is the Healer of the sick.”

Paragraph 5: In completing the laws of these specific prayers, the authors of the *Tur* and the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* note that one should always be accustomed to say, “All that the Merciful One does, He does for the good.”

There are two questions that emerge from the compilation and positioning of these laws in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*. First, in what way are these subsections related such that they make up a holistic unit?² Further, at the end of this chapter in the *Tur*³ the author states that “I will now return [from a series of digressions] to [the topic that I left,] the *seder ha-yom*, the prayers of the Order of the Day.” The implication of this statement is that despite the diversion of these blessings from the topic at hand, they are worthy of investigation within the main discussion concerning prayer. Why is this so?

In addition, from within the subsections themselves, several questions emerge. In Paragraph 1, there is a description of a person who has a psychological need to allay a fear. He is concerned that the scream he heard emanating from the city may have come from his household or he is overwhelmed by the still indeterminate gender of his unborn child. Nonetheless, the *halakhab* insists that these and other situations like them are inappropriate for *tefillah* because they relate to fixed events that have already passed. In contradistinction, in Paragraph 2, when a person is about to measure the produce in his silo, the *halakhab* informs us that this is indeed an appropriate opportunity for prayer. But how does this situation differ from the situation of the scream or the unborn child? The pile of produce is not going to change! In fact, at the conclusion of this Paragraph in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, we learn that if one prays after the measuring is complete, **then** it is a *tefillat shav*, this despite the fact that nothing in the produce has changed one iota.⁴

² Indeed, one could argue that the title of this section in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, “The Laws Concerning a Few Specific Blessings,” does imply that its contents are a compilation of disparate laws, grouped together for convenience. However, I believe that a common thread traverses all of the subsections.

³ From which the chapter in the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* itself was modeled.

⁴ This issue is complicated further by the suggestion of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* that not one, but two prayers are appropriate regarding the produce in the silo—one prayer before and another during the measuring process. It is only when the measuring is complete that prayer becomes absolutely inappropriate. This although nothing in the silo has changed at all; only the knowledge of the measurer has changed. How is this different from the lack of knowledge of the father-to-be?

Perhaps in an attempt to address this line of questioning, the author of the *Shulhan 'Arukh* cites a Talmudic maxim⁵ that states, “Blessing is to be found only in that which remains hidden from the eye.” This lesson is derived from the biblical verse⁶ “God will command the blessing for you in your storehouses and your every undertaking...” The Talmud explains that this language, specifically the word *asamekha*, storehouses, limits the blessing from items that have already been weighed, measured, or counted; blessing is to be found only in that which is not observed. While this may be reminiscent of the adage “a watched pot does not boil,” the formula is rather enigmatic, and is certainly in need of an explanation. Scientifically speaking, watched pots indeed do boil.

It is worth noting that there is something of an interruption between the first cases of *tefillat shav* (the scream from the city and the unborn child) and the second case of *tefillat shav* (the silo’s produce after the measuring is complete). That interruption is a detailed exposition of the *tefillat ha-derekh*, consisting of four parts, a request before entering the city, a thanksgiving after entering the city, a request before departing the city, and a thanksgiving after departing the city.⁷ Why is this prayer, in all of its details, presented here, interrupting the segments concerning *tefillat shav*, particularly since the author of the *Shulhan 'Arukh* notes explicitly that all of these details have already been delineated in the primary source that deals with *tefillat ha-derekh*.⁸

While we can well understand the need for prayer in the situations depicted in Paragraphs 3 and 4—the baths were situated over fire sources, and traversing them was dangerous; the process of bloodletting itself involved some health risks—nevertheless the prayers for the two cases are different from each other. Why should there not be one uniform formula for both, the only difference between the two cases being a reference to the specific instance of “bath” or “bloodletting”?

⁵ *Ta'anit* 8b, *Bava Metzia* 42b.

⁶ *Devarim* 28:8.

⁷ The elaborate structure of these prayers itself requires explanation.

⁸ *Shulhan 'Arukh Orach Hayyim* section 110.

Finally, what has the attitude of “All that the Merciful One does, He does for the good” to do with this entire section of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*? The source for this maxim emerges from a story involving Rabbi ‘Akiva⁹ who traveled to a city but could not find lodging, and while staying in the fields had his candle extinguished and his chicken and donkey eaten by animals of prey. As a result of the cloak of darkness and the absence of noise that his chicken and donkey would have made, Rabbi ‘Akiva was spared from the notice and attack of armed robbers who were near him. What has this to do with the idea of *tefillat shav*, prayer before entering a bathhouse or a bloodletting session, etc.?

The key to answering these questions lies in the distinction between prayer before and during the measuring of the silo’s produce, versus prayer after the measuring is completed. The former is considered appropriate prayer while the latter is considered *tefillat shav*, since blessing is to be found only in that which remains hidden from the eye. As mentioned in the opening of this article, prayer is a unique opportunity for man. He can recognize his place in the universe, his abilities to determine his destiny, and his limitations in satisfying his needs. In recognizing the gap between his needs and his abilities, he identifies the place of prayer. The meaning, then, of the dictum “blessing is to be found only in that which remains hidden from the eye” is that “where intervention is still needed and the results are indeterminate, that is where blessing resides.”

With this in mind, let us turn to the subdivisions of our section of the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, sequentially. The section begins with the case of a man who hears a random scream emanating from the nearby city. He is overcome by fear that the scream may have come from his home. He is overwhelmed by the uncertainty, and is powerless to control the situation. In this state of panic, he turns to God. However, in reality the particulars of the situation have already been established. Somebody screamed because of an unfortunate situation that already occurred. While this particular individual who wishes to pray does not know the details behind the scream,

⁹ See *Berakhot* 60b. It should be noted that Rabbi ‘Akiva’s attitude was undoubtedly influenced profoundly by his teacher, Nachum Ish Gamzu, who was famous for pronouncing “*gam zu le-tovah*.”

other people in the city are all too familiar with those details. There are thus two factors present that preclude prayer for this situation: [1] the scream has already occurred, and no prayer will render it non-occurred;¹⁰ and [2] this is not a situation subject to blessing, since it does not “remain hidden from the eye”—some people do indeed know what has occurred.¹¹ Since prayer is precluded from this situation, any prayer offered is considered *tefillat shav*.

The *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* then proceeds to the next case in the progression, i.e., that of the man whose wife is pregnant. People who have lived through this experience know that there is joy mixed with uncertainty that sometimes leads to fear. Even in the modern ultrasound era, there are concerns that the baby may not be healthy or will not fulfill the parents’ dreams. Insofar as the fetus is still developing, the parents feel that this is the opportunity for prayer. The *halakhah*, however, places a limitation on this prayer. To a large extent, the parents’ inclinations are correct. However, to a certain extent, some features such as the gender of the baby have already been established and are beyond influence. In this case, the feature of the baby’s gender is unknown to everyone;¹² but this lack of knowledge¹³ does not reflect any potential to effectuate a change in the fetus,¹⁴ just the inability to ascertain the gender. There is thus one factor that precludes prayer for this situation: the gender has already been established, and no prayer will render it non-established. With this, we may infer a clear progression from the first case to the second. The *halakhah* begins with *tefillat shav* as characterized by the presence of two factors, and then the *halakhah*

¹⁰ This precludes the notion of “where intervention is still needed...”

¹¹ This precludes the notion of “...the results are indeterminate...”

¹² Noting, of course, that in the eras of the Talmud, the *Tur*, and the *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, the tools of modern obstetrics to ascertain the gender of the fetus were entirely unavailable.

¹³ The lack of knowledge satisfies the notion of “...the results are indeterminate.”

¹⁴ This precludes the notion of “where intervention is still needed...”

informs us that even in the presence of one factor, the prayer is still considered *tefillat shav*.¹⁵

The two factors of [1] intervention being needed and [2] indeterminate results have one thing in common: man's lack of control of the given situation. The fact that man requires assistance points to his lack of control, as does his lack of knowledge of all the factors in a given situation. It is this lack of control on man's part that impels him to pray. With this in mind, the final part of the first *se'if* in our section of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*, which had heretofore appeared superfluous, becomes clear. The paradigm of the wayfarer's prayers orients us to the correct perspective man should have regarding his emotions, his situation, and prayer. The key is "*yispallel adam 'al be-'assid la-vo ve-yitain hoda'ah 'al she-'avar*"—one should pray for the future, and give thanks for the past. Man has a tendency to exaggerate his fears as he faces them and to minimize them, along with the help he received, once they are in his past. Thus, the *halakhab* is uniquely structured to address the personality of man. When he experiences the fear of entering a new place, he recognizes the gap between his abilities and his needs, and he addresses himself to God, Who can bring him into the village in peace. Man is brought to the realization that he can indeed achieve his objective, but only with God's assistance, and this is the nature of his prayer. Once he arrives safely in the village, he is liable to forget how precarious his situation was and to attribute his fear to exaggeration of what were "really" small risks, or to somehow attribute his success to an expanded assessment of his own abilities. To combat either of these possibilities, the *halakhab* prescribes another prayer, wherein he correctly attributes his current state to the rightful cause. When he prepares to leave, he is again facing danger. Once again, he must estimate his abilities and his needs, and calibrate the gap between them. Once he has left the village safely and his travels are nearly over, it is time for reflection on the entire experience. His prayer is a combination of where he has been and where he is going. At each stage of travel, the *halakhab* recognizes the emotional state of man

¹⁵ The difference between this second case and that of the measuring of the silo's produce, where again only one factor is present, will be explained below.

and the risks that he is facing. Instead of forcing man to face his fears alone or to abandon his sense of self-worth and deflect his fears onto God, the *halakhah* gives man the chance to accurately assess the reality of his situation. He is neither powerless nor in complete control, but somewhere in between. At each stage, the system of prayer reminds man where he is on that spectrum, so that his emotions do not distort his self-assessment too far in either direction.¹⁶ This paradigm of prayer in general, expressed through the wayfarer's prayer in particular, thus finds its place in this section of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* as a natural outgrowth of the underpinnings of prayer as expressed in the beginning of the *se'if*.

With this understanding of prayer, we may now turn to the case of the person measuring his crops after the harvest. After a full year spent planting, fertilizing, watering, weeding, and finally harvesting his crops, the farmer comes to the silo to determine the fruits of his labor. Most of us, as regular wage earners, cannot imagine the sort of anxiety facing the farmer as he begins to measure his produce. The *halakhah* informs us that this situation is very appropriate for prayer. The question, of course, is how is this different from the case of the unborn child? In neither case will the outcome change; the amount of crops in the silo is already fixed, as is the gender of the fetus. Why is the case of the farmer still considered "hidden from the eye" while the case of the expectant parent is not?

In answering this question it is important to define what, exactly, is the "end goal" for which the person is praying. In the case of the baby, the objective of the prayer is a baby boy. In the case of the produce, one objective would be a plentiful crop; however another objective is a successful measuring. Accurate measuring, weighing, recording, and accounting are significant tasks in the farming process; they are the bridge between the production of crops and the usage of those crops, either for the farmer and his family or for marketing purposes. The measuring of the produce is

¹⁶ Rashi, in his commentary describing Yaakov's preparation for his confrontation with his brother 'Eisav, includes a similar assessment. Yaakov dealt with the things that were under his domain by preparing a gift and preparing for war, but then prayed to God to address those needs beyond his control. See Rashi on *Bereishit* 30:9.

subject to error, and any error can have serious ramifications, even though it does not change the actual amount of produce in the silo. Therefore, the *halakbah* informs us that the farmer prays that his tally should be favorable, that is—accurate. Insofar as the measuring is not a simple observation,¹⁷ the outcome is considered to be indeterminate, even in the midst of the measuring process, when a second prayer is recommended to focus on the bounty and good fortune he is experiencing. In contradistinction, in the case of the unborn baby, while the final result is not apparent yet, all that is missing before the birth is a simple observation—is it a boy or a girl?

There is, as well, another, complementary explanation for the different treatment of prayer in the case of the silo.¹⁸ For the farmer, measuring his crop is not simply a determination of his income for the year. His anxiety is not only whether he will end the year in debt or will make a profit sufficient to support himself and his family. In many ways, the process is a self-assessment, and the final number of the measuring is a number that determines his feeling of self-worth. In this sense, the farmer's arrival at the silo is part of a nerve-wracking experience where he will answer the question "Am I a success or a failure?" This, of course, is a relative question. Some people are very satisfied with meager incomes and others feel like paupers even with great bounty. Before the farmer begins his measuring, the *halakbah* recommends that he pray that God send him blessing. Indeed, the amount of the produce will not change; however, the farmer's prayer reorients him such that **he** will change, and find satisfaction from his harvest. During the measuring process, before the farmer has crystallized his feelings of self-worth, he offers praise to God Who sends blessing to the pile of produce.¹⁹ However, once the measuring is over, the farmer's feel-

¹⁷ That is, the measuring is a multi-faceted procedure.

¹⁸ I am greatly indebted to my revered teacher, Rabbi Yisroel Chait, for pointing out this approach to me.

¹⁹ Note that this case is different from all others, where one is to offer praise to God as a thanksgiving **after** the event is over. Here one is enjoined to offer praise even **during** the process. The reason for the difference is that

ings have been formed—they have been established—and any prayer at this point would be a *tefillat shav*.

These two explanations regarding the farmer's prayers address two complementary aspects of the human condition, both equally true. First, even if external reality does not change, our knowledge of it certainly does insofar as that knowledge is dependent upon imperfect processes of perception and investigation. In this sense, a person can certainly identify a gap between his limited ability to verify the facts and his need to act with perhaps unwarranted certainty on the information he has gathered. This gap is the opportunity for prayer—that God should assist him in gathering the correct information to make correct decisions. Second, different people can react to the same information in different ways. A person does not always understand the factors in play that will determine his emotional response to a given set of facts, and he cannot always predict or control his affect once it emerges. However, if he recognizes his state in advance, he can pray, asking God for assistance in deriving satisfaction from his harvest and achieving a positive sense of self-worth from his situation. With these explanations, we can well understand the progression in the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* from the first *se'if*, which deals with prayer regarding conditions external to the person, to this *se'if*, which deals with prayer regarding internal conditions.

The next set of *halakhos* deals with a person who has assumed a risk. Unlike the individuals in the first two *se'ifim*, who found themselves in fearful or anxious situations as part of something that life had imposed upon them, the person entering the bathhouse or the bloodletting clinic chooses to undergo the risk in order to gain the benefit.²⁰ One might think that such a person is responsible for his choices and as such, his fears are best left at his own feet. This, however, is not the case. It is very reasonable for a person to want to bathe and to assume the associated risk. At the same time, that person must recognize the risk and the gap between his needs and his own capacity to provide for himself. This, then, is the place for

as long as the farmer's feelings of self-worth are not finalized, prayer can help him to reorient himself.

²⁰ In the case of the bathhouse, the risk involves crossing over the fire.

meaningful prayer. A careful examination of the language of the bathhouse prayer²¹ shows that this is meant to be a paradigm for all similar situations, and is not limited solely to the bathhouse.

But if this is true, why mention the case of bloodletting in the next *se'if*? Is this case not similar to the bathhouse? In both cases, the person assumes a risk in order to achieve a benefit. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that the nature of the benefit is different in each case. With regard to the bathhouse, the benefit is readily apparent. In contradistinction, with regard to the bloodletting, the benefit is less clear. There are many different medical experiences. It is well known that some of these experiences have more positive results and others have less positive results. In the case of bloodletting, the person must recognize the uncertain benefits associated with the risks, and pray—not only that he be spared from untoward results, but that the experience actually achieve a therapeutic result. He must recognize the uncertain nature of medical practice in general, in which the most well intentioned and best informed physician can always have undesirable outcomes, as the fate of all men is eventual death, and God is the only true Healer, and He heals freely.

Given man's precarious state of being, as is clear from the progression of *halakhot*, and given man's tendency to distort his fears and accomplishments, which *halakhab* addresses through the system of *tefillah*, the section in the *Shulchan 'Arukh* ends with good advice to man. If a person consistently reminds himself that *kol mah de-'avid Rahmana le-tav 'avid*, he will always maintain a correct perspective toward his situation. He will not veer too far from reality, exaggerating neither his fears nor his accomplishments. He will recognize at all times his capacity, his limitations, and the gap between them—where God bestows His blessings. This is precisely where it is appropriate for man to express gratitude for the past and pray for the future.

As a result of the above analysis, one can easily infer that self-assessment is not just a prerequisite for prayer, i.e., a needed step in order to determine whether a situation is changeable—thus making *tefillah* worthwhile, or whether a situation is fixed—thus rendering

²¹ *Ve-satzileini mei-ha-or ha-zeh ve-kba-yotzei vo le-'asid la-vo.*

the *tefillah* as being *shav*. Rather, self-assessment is inherently part of *tefillah*, as the first step in addressing the Creator. This assessment, from man's perspective, is absolutely necessary in order to specify his own place on the continuum from powerless to powerful, and it allows him to identify his needs. Without this recognition, man's prayer—and indeed his entire vantage point in life—lacks perspective and meaning. ❧