

Focusing on Tefilla

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SIM SHALOM: THE PERFECT PRAYER

We end the Amidah — both on weekdays and holy days — with a tefillah for peace. This is in keeping with the tradition of concluding our prayers with the hope for shalom:

אמר ר' יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי גדול השלום - שכל הברכות והתפלות חותמין בשלום: קריית שמע - חותמה בשלום - "ופרוס סוכת שלומך". ברכת כהנים - חותמה בשלום - שנאמר "וישם לך שלום". וכל הברכות - חותמין בשלום - "עושה שלום במרומיו".

Said R' Yehoshua of Sachnin in the name of R' Levi: All the blessings and prayers are sealed in peace. The recital of Shema ends in peace with "spread over us a shelter of peace,"; the priestly blessing ends in peace, as it says, "and he will place upon you peace"; and all the blessings end in peace, as it says "He who

makes peace in His heights."

Masekhet Derekh Eretz, Perek Shalom no. 19

There are, however, multiple reasons to question whether Sim Shalom is a mere request for peace.

Indeed, the first half of the berakhah asks for more than peace:

שִׁים שְׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים
עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמְּךָ: בְּרַכְנוּ, אָבִינוּ, כְּלָנוּ
כְּאֶחָד בְּאוֹר פְּנִיךָ כִּי בְּאוֹר פְּנִיךָ נִתְּתָ לָנוּ ה'
אֱלֹהֵינוּ תּוֹרַת חַיִּים וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְצַדִּיקָה וּבְרָכָה
וְרַחֲמִים וְחַיִּים וְשְׁלוֹם:

Grant peace, goodness, blessing, grace, lovingkindness and mercy to us and unto all Israel, Your people. Bless us, our Father, all of us as one with the light of Your face; For by the light of Your face, You have given us, L-rd our

G-d, the Torah of life, love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, mercy, life and peace.

Moreover, the closing (and opening) berakhot of Shemoneh Esreh — Retzei, Modim, and Sim Shalom — are not supposed to be requests at all!

אמר רב יהודה לעולם אל ישאל אדם צרכיו לא בג' ראשונות ולא בג' אחרונות - אלא באמצעיות:

R' Yehudah said: A person should not ask for his needs — not during the first three blessing [of the Amidah] and not during the last three blessings. Instead, he should ask during the middle blessings.¹

Berakhot 34b

Instead, Sim Shalom is supposed to be a blessing of thanks. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:2) states:

... חיוב מצוה זו [של תפילה] כך הוא: שיהא אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום. ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא. ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחנה. ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו - כל אחד לפי כחו:

*This commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer each day and utter praises of G-d, then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications, and finally give praise and thanks to G-d for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him; each according to his ability.*²

The *nosei keilim* of the Rambam struggle to identify the source that the final three berakhot are expressions of thanksgiving. Nonetheless, the Rambam's opinion is widely accepted. Sim Shalom, however, doesn't give the impression of gratitude. After all, how are we *thanking* G-d by saying Sim Shalom? Of the three final berakhot, only Modim is an expression of thanks!³ With Sim Shalom, we have fallen back on asking Hashem for more!

Finally, why are the critical requests in Sim Shalom — so central to our lives — *not* included in the middle section of the Amidah? Are peace, goodness, and mercy less imperative than knowledge, forgiveness, health and wealth? If anything, the requests contained in Sim Shalom are more fundamental, more impactful than anything mentioned in the middle section of the Amidah.

The evidence indicates that Sim Shalom is no unassuming request for peace. Instead, as we shall see, it is a fitting culmination of our silent "meditation" with G-d.

The Mishnah in *Rosh Hashanah* (4:5) lists the nine berakhot that comprise the Musaf Amidah on Rosh

Hashanah. Most of the berakhot are listed as expected. Yet Sim Shalom is nowhere to be found!⁴

סדר ברכות: אומר (1) אבות (2) וגבורות (3) וקדשת השם ... (4) קדשת היום - ותוקע. (5) זכרונות - ותוקע. (6) שופרות - ותוקע. ואומר (7) עבודה (8) והודאה (9) ... וברכת כהנים

The Order of the blessings is as follows: (1) Fathers, (2) Might, (3) Sanctity of the Name, (4) Sanctity of the day (and the shofar is blown), (5) Remembrances (and the shofar is blown), (6) Shofar (and the shofar is blown)... (7) Temple Service, (8) Thanks, and (9) The Priestly Blessing.

The Priestly Blessing refers to the three-sentence berakhah recorded in Parshat Naso (Bamidbar 6:22-27):

יברכך ה' וישמרך; יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך; ישא ה' פניו ה' אליך וישם לך שלום.

May the L-rd bless you and keep you. May the L-rd make His countenance shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the L-rd lift up His countenance to you and give you peace.

It is one of the most famous berakhot in our tradition. But we do not consider it to be one of the blessings of the Amidah!

According to the Rambam (*Hilkhos Temidim uMussafin* 6:4), this "*Birkat Kohanim*" refers to the berakhah of Sim Shalom.⁵ The Gemara (*Megillah* 18a) already makes a connection between *Birkat Kohanim* and Sim Shalom:

ומה ראו לומר שים שלום אחר ברכת כהנים - דכתיב ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם. ברכה דהקדוש ברוך הוא - שלום, שנאמר ה' יברך את עמו בשלום.

Why did they institute saying Sim Shalom after Birkat Kohanim? Because it states "And they will place My name on the Jewish people and I will bless them." The blessing of the Holy One Blessed be

Tefillah Insights: Zochreinu L'Chaim

During the ten days from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur, we insert the phrase *zochreinu l'chaim* — remember us for life — in the first blessing of the Amidah. In general, we don't have any requests in the first three blessings of the Amidah, because we must first praise God and then ask for our needs. How is it that we are permitted to pray for life in the first blessing? Furthermore, why do we pray for life in the first blessing, but in the insertions at the end of the Amidah, we ask for "*chaim tovim*" — good life? R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, *Meshech Chochma*, Devarim 33:2, answers that *zochreinu l'chaim* is not a request, but rather a praise of God. Jewish people, by their nature, praise God. Therefore, we request that He provide life, not for our sake, but for His (*l'm'anacha Elokim chaim*). We don't ask for a good life in these blessings, rather we reserve that for later, because in these blessings, the focus is on God, and Jewish people praise God even in difficult times.

Torah To Go Editors

He is peace, as it states, "The Lord will bless His nation with peace."

Sim Shalom and *Birkat Kohanim* are integrally linked and form a single unit. The Gaon of Vilna spells out the thematic connections between the two:⁶

שים שלום טוב וברכה ... הם כנגד ששה ברכות שבברכת כהנים: שלום - כנגד "וישם לך שלום"; "טובה" - כנגד יאר ה' ... כמ"ש "וירא אלקים את האור כי טוב" ...;

"ברכה" - כנגד יברך ה'; "חן" - כנגד ויחנך;
 "וחסד" - כנגד וישמרך - כמ"ש (דב' ז:יב)
 "ושמר לך ... את החסד" - כדי שלא נאבד
 בעונינו...; "ורחמים" - כנגד "ישא ה פניו
 אליך" - כי הוא נושא עון - וכובש ונושא פנים
 אלינו...

"Sim shalom tova u'veracha" corresponds to the six berakhot contained in Birkat Kohanim: "Shalom" corresponds to "and give you peace."; "Tova" corresponds to "may the L-rd shine His countenance upon you" — as it is written: "And G-d saw the light and that it was good." ...; "uVeracha" corresponds to "may the L-rd bless you."; "Chen" corresponds to "and be gracious to you."; "Chesed" corresponds to "And he should guard you," as it says "to keep for you ... the kindness," in order that we will not be lost through our sins...; "veRachamim" corresponds to, "may Hashem lift up His face unto you" for He carries our sins and conquers [His anger] and turns His face towards us ...

Sim Shalom is part and parcel of Birkat Kohanim. The kohanim bless the people (or, for Ashkenazic Jews in the Diaspora, the chazzan recalls the Priestly blessing), and the chazan, representing the people, accepts that berakhah by reciting Sim Shalom to conclude Chazarat HaShatz.

This is emphasized in *Nusach Ashkenaz*, in which Sim Shalom is said

only during Shacharit, when *Birkat Kohanim* is (at least theoretically) recited. At other times, we recite Shalom Rav, a shorter request for peace which does not correspond to the multi-faceted *Birkat Kohanim*.

Due to the concern that a kohen might have consumed an alcoholic drink, *Birkat Kohanim* is not recited later in the day (*Taanit* 26a). The only exception is a fast day. On a *taanit*, kohanim can recite *Birkat Kohanim* until sundown. Therefore, Sim Shalom is recited as well.

This clarification — that Sim Shalom is coupled with *Birkat Kohanim* — requires further examination. Everything about *Birkat Kohanim* indicates that the priestly blessing should be offered *after* the Shemoneh Esreh — not *during* the Shemoneh Esreh. Yet Sim Shalom, which follows, *concludes* the Amidah!

In Parshat Shemini (*Vayikra* 9:22), Aharon blesses the people *after* he completes the sacrificial service. Wouldn't it make sense to do the same in tefillah, by inserting *Birkat Kohanim* *after* the Amidah is finished? After all, isn't *Birkat Kohanim* a *hefsek* in the Amidah? Why not wait for one more berakhah — Sim Shalom — to finish before introducing *Birkat Kohanim*?

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein (*Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion*)⁷ offers textual support for *Birkat Kohanim* to *follow* the Amidah — rather precede its conclusion. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 14:14) states this clearly:

במקדש מברכין ברכת כהנים פעם אחת
 ביום - אחר תמיד של שחה... אבל במדינה
 - מברכין אותה אחר כל תפלה - חוץ
 ממנחה....

In the Temple, the priests recite the priestly blessing once a day: After the Morning offering... But outside of the Temple, the blessing is said after every tefillah [Shacharit, Mussaf and Neilah] — except for Minchah.

A similar idea, claims Rav Lichtenstein, is expressed by the Behag (at the end of his commentary to *Berakhot*, chapter 5). The Behag claims that adding the berakhah of Sim Shalom to the Amidah is less problematic than insertions made earlier in the Shemoneh Esreh:

ואפילו זכרנו לחיים במגן לא אמרינן וכל שכן
 זכור רחמיך וכבוש כעסך במודים לא אמרינן
 אבל ובספר חיים אמרינן בשים שלום דסליקו
 להו שמונה עשרה והוה ליה כתחוננים.
We do not say even 'Zokhreinu le-chayim' in Magen [Avraham]. All the more so we do not say "Zekhor rachamekha u-khevosh ka'askha" in Modim. However,

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we do recite “Be-sefer chayim” in Sim Shalom **since Shemoneh Esrei has been completed**, and it thus resembles tachanunim [additional prayers recited after the formal Shemoneh Esrei].

Contrary to everything we have learned to this point, Rav Lichtenstein suggests that the Amidah *truly ends* at the conclusion of Modim — “hatov shimecha ulecha na’eh lehodot.” *Birkat Kohanim*, as suggested by the aforementioned sources, is pronounced *after* the formal Amidah is finished. His father, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt”l, concurred with this approach.

This idea finds further support in the fact that we bow at the beginning and end of Modim, just as we do at the beginning and end of the first berakhah — *Birkat Avot*. Bowing for both the first and last berakhot of the Amidah, an encapsulating symmetry, is unequivocally significant.

If Modim marks the end of the Amidah, and *Birkat Kohanim* follows the Amidah, then Sim Shalom necessarily comes *after* the conclusion of the Amidah. This explains both the language of the Rambam and the formulation of the Behag. It also, according to Rav Lichtenstein, explains the phenomenon where the text of the final blessing diverges for Mincha and Maariv. If Sim Shalom is recited *after* the Amidah has been completed, it allows for more flexibility beyond the set nusach. But this all further deepens the mystery of Sim Shalom. What is this prayer recited after the conclusion of the Amidah? What is Sim Shalom?

Let me summarize our questions and issues to this point:

- Sim Shalom is known as a prayer for peace. It, however, asks for considerably more.

- The requests made in Sim Shalom are for notions omitted during the middle section of the Amidah, the section reserved for requests.

- The final three berakhot of the Amidah are reserved for thanksgiving. Sim Shalom (and Retzei, for that matter) are devoid of *hoda’ah*, serving instead as an opportunity to ask for additional needs.

- Sim Shalom is so integrally linked to *Birkat Kohanim* that the two are synonymous in the language of the Mishnah.

- There are multiple indications that *Birkat Kohanim* is said *after* the conclusion of the Amidah; necessarily, Sim Shalom forms an *epilogue* to the Amidah. What, then, is Sim Shalom?

- [Parenthetically, a meta-question: How many of these questions have bothered us before? And if the answer is “none of them,” how can we *not* ask these questions? How many thousands of times have we recited Sim Shalom and glossed over these problems? I will admit that, until my late 20s, I did not think much about these glaring difficulties with understanding tefillot. The search for answers to these questions is one of the most exhilarating aspects of my *avodat Hashem*.]

I will share first Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein’s approach to some of these questions. I will then suggest, in my humble opinion, an approach to all of the issues raised above.

Rav Lichtenstein suggests that *Birkat Kohanim* is the **divine response to our prayers**. It is the very blessing that we have been praying for! Whether that blessing comes through the spaces between the fingers of the Kohanim or is merely recited, as in the Diaspora, by the *shaliach tzibbur*, it is G-d’s

response to our requests. We, over the course of the Amidah, praised G-d as an introduction, asked him to satisfy a plethora of our needs, and then thanked Him for His “time” and “consideration.” His response is the blessing — or blessings — of *Birkat Kohanim*.

But aren’t the Kohanim the ones blessing us? No, says the Rambam (*Hilkhos Tefillah* 15:6-7), it is G-d Himself:

כהן שלא היה לו דבר מכל אלו הדברים המונעין נשיאת כפים - אף ע"פ שאינו חכם ואינו מדקדק במצות ... הרי זה נושא את כפיו: ואל תתמה ותאמר "ומה תועיל ברכת הדיוט זה?" שאין קבול הברכה תלוי בכהנים אלא בהקדוש ברוך הוא שנאמר "ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם" הכהנים עושים מצותן שנצטוו בה — והקב"ה ברחמיו מברך את ישראל כחפצו:

A priest who does not have any of the factors that hinder the recitation of the priestly blessings mentioned above should recite the priestly blessing, even though he is not a wise man or careful in his observance of the commandments... Do not wonder: "What good will come from the blessing of this simple person?" for the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He, as [Bamidbar 6:27] states: "And they shall set My name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them." The priests perform the mitzvah with which they were commanded, and God, in His mercy, will bless Israel as He desires.

It follows, then, that Sim Shalom is not to be understood as a request in the same way that the middle berakhot are requests. Rather, Sim Shalom is a **response** to G-d’s blessing. “Yes” we say, “May it be Your will to bestow these blessings upon us.” Thus, it is an expression of gratitude to G-d for bestowing His blessings upon us.

If Sim Shalom is a response to *Birkat Kohanim*, however, why is it said by the individual *mitpallel* in the silent Amidah — even before the blessings are bestowed? Perhaps we can argue that, for various reasons, the text of the silent Amidah should match that of the repetition. But then why recite Shalom Rav at Minchah and Maariv? If the Amidah has technically ended with the recitation of Modim, and there will be no mention of *Birkat Kohanim* — and thus no Sim Shalom — why not end the Amidah at that point?

Furthermore, if *Birkat Kohanim* is the divine response to our tefillot, shouldn't it correspond to our requests in the Amidah? We explained, according to the Vilna Gaon, how the requests in Sim Shalom correspond to *Birkat Kohanim*. But wouldn't it make sense to see a relationship between what we've asked for and what we've received?

Perhaps there is a more fundamental way of looking at Sim Shalom — and Shalom Rav for that matter. These berakhot serve as the culmination of our precious moments with G-d, and I believe they reflect a higher spiritual state of awareness than the berakhot with which I began.

Let's take a step backward:

The recitation of the Shemoneh Esreh is more than an act of prayer to fulfill a religious obligation. It is a thrice-daily encounter with the Divine that is meant to serve as a transformative experience. The process of saying the Amidah, especially the weekday Amidah, with its long list of requests covering the gamut of personal and national life, is meant to reorient our priorities and our outlook on the world. Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, following in the footsteps of

Rav David Kimchi (quoted in *Sefer Avudraham, Seder Tefillot shel Chol*), points out the word *l'hitpallel* means “to judge oneself.” The text of the Amidah allows me to compare the mindset with which I enter the state of tefillah to an ideal crafted by our sages. By reading this sacred text, authored by the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah — among them prophets — I am challenged and uplifted on many levels.

Would I, on my own, make my requests in the plural? Probably not. Given a chance to plead before the King of Kings, I would focus my own needs and the needs of my family.

Would I start my list of requests with intellectual and spiritual requests for knowledge, repentance and forgiveness? Almost certainly not.

Would I use more than half of my requests to pray for the unfolding of the national redemption of the Jewish people (from *Teka b'Shofar* through, and in the opinion of some including, *Shema Koleinu*)?

Similarly, would I choose to join my fellow worshippers in a minyan, emphasizing the fact that we come to G-d as a community, or find a quiet spot to have a spiritually uplifting moment on my own?

The recitation of the Amidah is a process that refines us as it reorients us. For this reason, personal requests precede communal requests in the middle section of the Amidah. We are drawn into a conversation with the Divine about our most basic needs. As we stand before Him, we broaden our perspective, turning to national needs.

The final berakhot of the Amidah take this a step further. Though a true understanding of Retzei and Modim are beyond the scope of this article, let

us make do with a quote from the Rav, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik:

When a Jew says Retzei, he does not refer to the satisfaction of needs and the fulfillment of the desires about which he poured out his heart in the middle, petitionary section. For this he has already prayed in the previous benediction, Shema Koleinu. When he reaches Retzei these 'petty' matters no longer concern him. His soul asks G-d to accept the great sacrifice he has just offered, to accept his being that is returned to G-d, cleaving unto the Infinite and connecting itself to the Divine throne. G-d is 'satisfied' with this offering. He receives it and restores it to the one who has offered it. The praying individual annuls himself in order to acquire himself. From his prayer man emerges firm, elevated and sublime, having found his redemption in self-loss and self-recovery...⁸

Having asked Hashem for all of our needs, we then thank Him in Modim, recognizing that everything we have is from Him. Our needs have connected us back to our Creator and allowed us to remember that everything is from Him. It is likely, for the hours between our prayers, we forgot, at least on the level of active awareness, that our daily lives were so dependent on Him. We emerge from our encounter reconnected to Him, His people and the truths underlying His world.

But there is still one more step. The final lesson in priorities, and the final step in our transformation, comes from G-d Himself.

If I could only ask for three things (or six, as explained before in the three pesukim of *Birkat Kohanim*) what would and should they be? Only my Creator truly knows. The final refinement of our requests comes from His own words in *Parshat Naso*:

יברכך ה' וישמרך; יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך;
 ישא ה' פניו ה' אליך וישם לך שלום.
*May the L-rd bless you and keep you.
 May the L-rd make His countenance
 shine upon you and be gracious to you.
 May the L-rd lift up His countenance to
 you and give you peace.*

What is the sum total of these blessings? I believe that there are three main themes here, none of which have received much attention until this point in the Amidah:⁹

1. The ultimate blessing is (or includes) a feeling of connection to G-d. *Birkat Kohanim* emphasizes blessing that is accompanied by an awareness of G-d's "face."

2. A request for the ultimate blessing doesn't need specific details. G-d knows us better than we know ourselves. Occasionally, that which we pray for isn't even for our good. In *Birkat Kohanim* we are blessed with berakhah as only He knows to give it.

3. All of the blessings in the world are meaningless without conditions that allow us to enjoy and capitalize on them. Each of the three pesukim starts with G-d showering a blessing, but continues with a critical secondary clause. The Kohanim help us not simply to receive divine bounty, but to receive G-d's help in protecting and appreciating it. As Rashi comments on the word *veyishmerecha*:

שלא יבאו עליך שודדים ליטול ממונך שהנותן מתנה לעבדו אינו יכול לשמר מכל אדם וכיון שבאים לסטים עליו ונוטלין אותה ממנו מה הנאה יש לו במתנה זו אבל הקב"ה הוא הנותן הוא השומר

"That no thieves shall attack you and steal your money. For when one gives his servant a gift, he cannot protect it from all other people, so if robbers come and take it from him, what benefit has he [the servant] from this gift? As for the Holy One, blessed be He, however, He is the One who [both] gives and protects. Similarly, "Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: The Blessed Holy One found no vessel which could hold Israel's blessing except peace." (Mishna, Uktzin 3:12)

What then is Sim Shalom? **The perfect prayer.** The tefillah that we weren't ready to offer when we first started. After standing with and engaging the Divine in dialogue, we are now different people from those who begged "G-d, please open my lips and may my mouth say Your praises." We have aligned *our* will with *His*. We thought we knew what we needed. We thought we knew what was important. But we were, certainly before the Amidah — even during the Amidah — misguided, just moving closer to the ideal.

We have grown — even since saying the beautiful berakhot of the middle section. We now introduce more sublime requests: "Grant peace, goodness, blessing, grace, lovingkindness and mercy ... Bless us, our Father, all of us as one with the light of Your face; For by the light of Your face You have given us, L-rd our G-d, the Torah of life, love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, mercy, life and peace."

What are the true goals of those many blessings? One thing: Peace. Though

many details are mentioned in the blessing, the berakhah's conclusion, the *chatimat ha-berakhah*, is clear: "May it be pleasing in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel with peace. Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, who blesses the People of Israel with peace."

This is more than just a prayer to be spared the horrors of war. The peace that we long for in this berakhah serves as the basis for an idyllic existence, unencumbered by the crippling distractions and hurdles of envy, competition, hate and persecution. Of course we want peace. But what is the ultimate goal? *A peace of mind* that gives us the opportunity to focus on serving the *Ribbono shel Olam* while enjoying His many gifts. As Chazal tell us (*Midrash Rabbah, Vayikra* 9:9), "Great is peace, for it encompasses all other blessings."

The details of our earlier request fall to the wayside. After all, we now feel that G-d is caring for us. Rav Yosef Albo, in the *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim* (4:24), fleshes out this approach to tefillah:

ולוה יהיה מבחר התפלה מה שהיה מתפלל החכם ואומר: רבונו של עולם עשה רצונך בשמים ממעל - ותן נחת רוח ליראיך מתחת ... ואח"כ אמר והטוב בעיניך עשה - כלומר: ובכל דבר שאני מתפלל לפניך - אל תפן לדברי - ולא לבקשתי לעשות מה שלבי חפץ או מה שאני שואל. שפעמים הרבה - אני מבקש ומתפלל על דבר שהוא רע לי - לפי שאני מדמה וחושב שהוא טוב. ואתה הוא היודע יותר ממני אם הדבר ההוא טוב אלי או רע. ועל כן: אתה תבחר - ולא אני. עשה מה שאתה יודע שהוא טוב ...

The best kind of prayer is therefore that of the wise man, who said: "O L-rd, do



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Thy will in heaven above, show kindness to those who fear You here below” ... Then he says: “And do what is good in Your eyes,” that is, whatever it is that I pray to You for, attend not to my words or request, to do what my heart desires, or what I ask, for many times I ask and pray for something that is bad for me, thinking it is good. But You know better than I whether the thing is good for me or bad. Therefore, decide You and not I; do what You know is good.

Sim Shalom is thus a *second chance* at *tefillah*. The sources above indicate that the *tefillah* ended at the conclusion of *Modim*. Perhaps so. But though we are finished with our *tefillah*, and even “heard” from G-d Himself, we are not yet ready to leave His presence. “One more thing!” we say. “Of course, I and the Jewish People need everything I mentioned before. But if there is one thing I can ask for, *achat sha’alti*, it is true peace. I may, even as I request in this perfected *tefillah*, appear to be asking for a multitude of things. But it all comes down to peace. *May it be pleasing in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel with peace.*”

Is our perfect prayer a request? Yes, it is. But in a significant way, it is not. We are once again requesting, but now we do so on His terms. We have moved on from our petty requests and yearn to see the world as He sees it. Through the process of asking, thanking and receiving, we give him the greatest thanks that any child can give to a parent: The expression of desire to follow in their ways and adopt their world-view.

I try to stop for a moment at several places in *Shemoneh Esreh*. One of them is at the end of *Modim*. I take stock for a moment and think about how distracted and unaware

of G-d I had been for so long before my *tefillah*. I am glad that I brought Him back into my consciousness and hope that I will stay in that state of awareness for as long as possible after I leave the *shul* or *beit midrash*. Then I accept that all that I thought so important just moments before, pales in comparison to the blessings that I received and pray to continue receiving from my Creator in the form of peace, goodness, blessing, grace, lovingkindness and mercy. Only now do I take three steps backward, reconnected to the Divine and in a peaceful state of mind.¹⁰

Endnotes

1. *Shibbolei Haleket* (*Siman* 28) explains that although the final *berakhot* do, obviously, contain requests, they differ from the requests in the middle section of the *Amidah*. The requests made in *Retzei* and *Sim Shalom* are for *communal* needs, whereas earlier requests are for *individual* needs. [Thus we are able to add special communal requests during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*.] Furthermore, it *praises* the Master when He is needed by the masses. It is not completely clear, however, how the needs expressed in *Retzei* are more “communal” than many of the needs listed in the latter half of the middle section. Cf. *Tosafot to Berakhot* 34a, s.v. *Al*. See as well *Sefer Or Hachamah* by Rav Zundel Krozer to *Berakhot* 34b who suggests several approaches to this issue.

2. The Rambam’s source seems to be *Bavli Berakhot* 34a. The Talmud, however, does not mention giving thanks. Instead, the last three *berakhot* are characterized as follows: “Rabbi Chanina said: In the first three, one resembles a servant presenting praise before his master; in the middle ones, he resembles a servant requesting a bonus from his master; in the final ones, he resembles a servant who received a bonus from his master and now takes leave.” See *Kesef Mishneh* and *Lechem Mishneh*. See also Rabbeinu Manoach who suggests a different source from the final perek of *Masekhet Berakhot*.

3. See *Shu”t Ridbaz* (8:15) who explains that the “*ikkar hoda’ah*” is *Modim*. Then, as with *Kriyat Shema*, Chazal were *metakein*

appropriate *berakhot* before and after. We will suggest a different approach.

4. The same phenomenon can be found in *Mishnah Tamid* 5:1. The *Mishnah* there describes the *tefillot* offered as part of the Temple service. The final *berakhot* are “*Avodah*” (*Retzei*) and “*Birkat Kohanim*.” Interestingly, this *Mishnah* seems to indicate that *Modim* was completely omitted in the Temple.

5. *Tosafot to Bavli Berakhot* 11a, s.v. *Birkat Kohanim*, however, disagree.

6. This comment appears in some versions of the Vilna Gaon’s commentary to *Shulchan Aruch* at the end of *Hilchot Rosh Chodesh* (*siman* 428).

7. R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, “The Blessing of Sim Shalom,” available at: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/blessing-sim-shalom>.

8. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, p.179.

9. See the many explanations of these *berakhot* as listed in the *Sifri*.

10. And what about *Minchah* and *Maariv*? We switch to *Shalom Rav* because there is no *Birkat Kohanim*. Rav Uri Weisblum, in *Sefer He’arat haTefillah* (p. 234) explains that while *Shalom Rav* is *shorter* than *Sim Shalom*, leaving out the multitude of requests found in the latter, it is actually a stronger request. We no longer ask merely for peace, but “*abundant peace*.” Rav Weisblum suggests that when we have *Birkat Kohanim*, we suffice with the simple request for peace. All of the things we ask for, *tova uvracha* etc., join to create the peace we are looking for. In the absence of *Birkat Kohanim*, we add a level of urgency — “grant *abundant peace*,” *Shalom Rav*.

