



TEENAGERS AND TEFILLAH: AN APPROACH TO TEFILLAH EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOL

The proliferation of commentary on the Siddur over the past decade speaks to the emphasis we, as a community, have placed on the importance of tefillah. Yet the need to focus on tefillah is not a new phenomenon. Over 2,000 years ago, Chazal described tefillah as “an area of critical importance, and yet people seem to disregard it.”¹ While this statement from the Gemara was made millennia ago and to the general population, it is still accurate and especially magnified within the world of adolescents. The challenges adolescents face in connecting with tefillah are many and varied, and are not unique to the Jewish community. Even so, we must find approaches that will help our

adolescents forge a relationship with tefillah and Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

Recently, there has been a strong communal emphasis placed on trying to improve our tefillah education, which is encouraging.² In considering methods of enhancing our tefillah, there are a variety of approaches. These range from a better understanding of the words to a deeper understanding of the tefillah structure to enhancing the experience. Recognizing that many educators have written extensively about these approaches, I am going to address ways to enhance the adolescent connection to tefillah by focusing on adolescent development in conjunction with tefillah.

Characteristics of Meaningful Tefillah

Chazal thoughtfully structured Shemoneh Esrei with three parts — *shevach* — praise, *bakashah* — request, and *hoda’ah* — thanks.³ Each aspect is fundamentally important in creating a meaningful tefillah. At the same time, each stands in contradistinction to adolescent development and the lifestyle of our generation, as will be explained.

Shevach — Praise of Hashem

During adolescence, teens are developmentally learning to move into the sphere of abstract thinking.⁴ They are grappling with an ability

to relate to an abstract Being whom they cannot see, touch or hear. As a result, they often struggle with their relationship with Hashem. Praising Hashem fundamentally hinges on an ability to recognize and appreciate Hashem. While we must try to educate toward the words being said, our students will also benefit from a general emunah and G-d awareness curriculum.⁵ By focusing on a greater perception of Hashem in the world, and recognizing Hashem's greatness and His involvement in our lives, our ability to then appreciate the *shevach* aspect of tefillah is enhanced. The notion of "*shivisi Hashem l'negdei tamid* — constantly perceiving Hashem in front of me," is an important and ancient tradition as general guidance for decision making, and also enhances tefillah.⁶

Last year, we initiated a religious growth program in MTA. In it, the sophomore grade focused on enhancing their awareness of Hashem through monthly programs, goal setting, and meeting one-on-one with their rebbeim. Each month, the specific application would shift, ranging from focusing on berachos before eating to other areas of beracha, such as Asher Yatzar, to seeing Hashem's hand in the world. The common theme was to perceive and appreciate Hashem's involvement in the world in general, and specifically in our day-to-day existence.

Bakashah — Requests of Hashem

The identity formation of adolescence includes a focus on developing independence from parents. It is a time when young men and women are more likely to rebel and less likely to ask their parents for help. Adolescents

want to feel they can do everything on their own. In contrast, meaningful tefillah results from a recognition of our complete dependence on Hashem.⁷ This dependence is epitomized through the requests we make of Hashem during tefillah.⁸ As a result, the "muscle" needed to make requests requires "exercise."⁹

Rav Dov Singer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Makor Chaim in Israel (with whom we share an exchange program), described a program in his yeshiva geared toward strengthening tefilla. In it, he grants permission to his talmidim to spend their birthday out of yeshiva, provided they come

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to him and request the day off, and explain why they believe their trip is worthwhile. The rationale for this policy, Rav Singer explained, is that it gives his talmidim an opportunity to prepare for something special in advance and to create a compelling request. Focus on the area of *bakashah* is particularly important, as noted, because it runs contrary to adolescent

development, but also because of the blessing of the current adolescent generation. The blessing of relative affluence our generation enjoys makes the desperation of *bakashah* less palpable. David Hamelech writes,¹⁰ "*Tefillah l'ani ki ya'atof, v'lifnei Hashem yishpoch sicho* — the prayer of a poor person when he wraps himself up, and in front of Hashem he pours out his conversation." The association of a poor person being better suited to pour out his heart in making a request is natural. Baruch Hashem, with our blessings, it is more challenging for an adolescent to perceive his dependence on Hashem, which underscores the importance of helping adolescents appreciate the need to make requests of Hashem. In order to inculcate a sense of *bakashah*, we should identify areas of request within the purview of our school setting and use them with intentionality.

Hoda'ah

Shemoneh Esrei concludes with an acknowledgement and expression of appreciation. After we make our requests, we thank Hashem for everything He does for us. Again, this rests on the previous sections in which we express a recognition that Hashem is involved in our daily lives. During the *hoda'ah* section, we focus on our ability to perceive Hashem's involvement and express our appreciation for it. These two aspects, recognizing Hashem's kindness and expressing our appreciation, are challenging for different reasons. In the busyness of life, it is often difficult to pause and recognize the good we are given. Furthermore, expressing appreciation can be challenging because of the implicit acknowledgement that we

relied on others for this success.¹¹ How can we teach these attributes to our adolescents? Like the other aspects, recognition of kindness, and appreciation of what we are given, are also muscles we can develop. Oftentimes, parents teach younger children to say thank you when given something. This lesson helps younger children learn how to say thank you. As children become adolescents, the goal becomes more substantive; we want them to *feel* the appreciation they are expressing.

Programmatically, this can be achieved by celebrating accomplishments and focusing on who helped us achieve these accomplishments. As we begin to recognize these milestones, as well as help our adolescents see who helped them succeed, they begin to more naturally articulate *hoda'ah* properly.

Each of these components requires a significant time commitment to formal and informal education, through class discussion, consistent individual conversation, and policy and programmatic development. Values education requires a holistic approach, which encompasses different modalities to enable the messages and lessons to transform our thinking and action.

Tefillah as a Relationship

Since tefillah is about creating and strengthening our relationship with Hashem, research has shown that meaningful tefillah has a strong correlation with other relationships.

Relationship with Peers

At its core, tefillah represents an opportunity to connect to Hashem,

to develop a relationship with Him. Unsurprisingly, there should be a strong correlation between a person's ability to connect with others and his ability to connect to meaningful tefillah. Studies have shown a strong connection between religious and social development.¹² Adolescents who connect with their peers, demonstrating positive social development, tend to display a stronger sense of religious connection as well.¹³ These findings can be explained in light of the importance that community and connectivity play within religious practice. The value of community in the context of tefillah is evident from a variety of halachot. The Mishnah¹⁴ describes the rule that a minyan is required for all *devarim she'bekedushah*, such as Kaddish, Kedushah, *keriat haTorah* and *Birchat Kohanim*. Furthermore, the text of tefillah, which is written in the plural, reminds us of its communal nature. For example, when asking Hashem to heal us in the berachah of Refaenu, we use the plural form of *refaenu*, not the singular form of *refaeni*. In the next berachah in Shemoneh Esrei, we ask Hashem for help in pursuit of financial success, again using the plural form of *Barech Aleinu*. The *Sefer Chasidim*¹⁵ articulates this approach, "One who does not consider the needs of others will not have his tefillah answered. Therefore, the text of tefillah was written in the plural form."

Relationship with Parents

A second external factor in the development of adolescent connection to tefillah is the strength of connection with parents, as well as the perceived connection parents have to tefillah. Teenagers who perceive their parents as having a

strong, positive religious connection and who feel a strong and positive connection to their parents are more likely to develop their own connection to tefillah.¹⁶ These findings highlight and emphasize the critical role parents play in the religious development of their children, specifically within tefillah. Rav Moshe Wolfson puts these findings in the context of a fascinating halacha regarding the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash. The Torah commands us,¹⁷ "The seven candles of the Menorah are to face the middle candle." Rav Wolfson suggests¹⁸ that the middle candle symbolically represents the parent, the anchor and backbone of the family; Hashem is telling us that the candles, representing the children, should be near and facing their parent when davening. In his language, "We should educate our children by having them stand next to us while davening." The connection between tefillah and our relationship with our parents is also magnified by the sense of tradition that permeates our tefillah practices. As Rabbi Jay Goldmintz writes:¹⁹

When I pray, I connect myself to the Jewish people of the past. I use the same words they did, I refer to the experience they had, I recall the beliefs that we all share, in the same language that has been used for thousands of years. In prayer, I become a part of the chain of tradition.

The chain of tradition links us most directly right back to our parents. The more positively we feel connected to this chain, the more likely we are to appreciate tradition as the bedrock of tefillah. Furthermore, the text of tefillah refers to Hashem as a parent.²⁰ It then follows that the strength of our relationship with our parents will impact the manner in which we connect with Hashem as our Father.

Relationship with Extra-Familial Role Models

Teenagers who express a strong sense of connection to extra-familial role models are also more likely to connect to more meaningful tefillah.²¹ Adolescents who admire and develop relationships with older role models, whether camp counselors, teachers, or older students in yeshiva, tend to develop a greater commitment to and appreciation of tefillah. This notion is also brought up by Rav Moshe Wolfson,²² in a creative approach to the story of Yehuda and Yosef. When Yehuda approaches Yosef at the beginning of Parshas Vayigash, Chazal explain that Yehuda approached Yosef through the mode of prayer. Why did Yehuda specifically wait until this point to engage in tefillah? Rav Wolfson explains that Yehuda had also engaged in tefillah before this moment, but now, as he drew close to Yosef, the influence of such a great tzaddik influenced him to daven again. Being connected to a positive role model can enhance our tefillah. This idea is echoed by the Chasam Sofer,²³ who explains that it is a special merit for the acceptance of our tefillah when we stand near a righteous individual. This again highlights the importance of extra-familial role models.

Schools have a special opportunity to capitalize on all three of these aspects of tefillah education: social development, extra-familial role models and parental relationships. Davening in school provides students with role models they can connect to and admire, ranging from rebbeim and teachers to older students. The social environment created in a

school community also enhances the tefillah education. Over the last 20 years, schools have demonstrated a more active commitment to family and parent education, recognizing the importance of the parent-child relationship as valuable in the educational development of their students.

The immense power of tefillah comes from blending our acknowledging Hashem's presence in our life and the development of our relationship with Him. Like all gifts, we must learn how to use them properly and maximize them. May Hashem give us the strength and wisdom to continue to learn about, discuss, and enhance our tefillah and the tefillah of our children.

Endnotes

1. *Berachos* 8a, and Rashi ad loc.
2. Numerous studies have shown the positive benefits of positive religious development among adolescents. See Salmoirago – Blotcher et al. 2011, Reinart, Edwards, & Hendrix, 2009.
3. See *Berachos* 32a.
4. See Jean Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development.
5. See Rabbi Jay Goldmintz, "Helping Students Find Their Own Voice in Tefillah: A Conceptual Framework for Teachers," printed in *Rav Chessed* in which he discusses the convergence of tefillah and emunah for adolescents.
6. *Mishnah Berurah* 1:4 discusses the minhag to have this phrase appear on klaf in each person's siddur.
7. Chazal's description that a person should appeal to Hashem as a servant speaking to his master is a humbling experience.
8. See Rashi, Parshas Vaeschanan, who explains that although Moshe had merits to use in making his request to enter Eretz Yisrael, instead, he asked Hashem for a *matnas chinam*, a gift to enter Eretz Yisrael even as an undeserving prayer.
9. The Torah is sensitive to this challenge for all people, in our warning to not focus on "kochi v'otzem yadi — my own power and hard word." However it is more pronounced in adolescents.
10. Tehillim 102:1.
11. In the *Koren Ani Tefilla Siddur*, Rabbi Goldmintz shares a story of two angels who were sent to this world to collect tefillos. At the end of the day, one angel returned with a full bag while the other returned with a bag barely half full. What accounted for the difference? The angel who returned with the full bag was searching for tefillos of request, while the other angel was looking for tefillos expressing appreciation. The story illustrates the more natural tendency to use tefillah to make requests.
12. Meltzer, Dogra, Vostanis, & Ford, 2011; Good & Willoughby, 2006; Good, Willoughby, and Frijters, 2009; Gunnoe and Beversluis, 2009.
13. Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011.
14. *Megillah* 4:3.
15. Siman 1063.
16. Vermeer, 2014; Bengston, Putney, & Harris, 2013.
17. Bamidbar 8:2.
18. See *Sefer Va'Ani Tefillah* page 97.
19. The *Koren Ani Tefillah Siddur* p. 812.
20. Examples include Selach Lanu Avinu and Avinu Malkeinu.
21. Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011.
22. See *Sefer Va'Ani Tefillah* page 97.
23. See *Derashos Chasam Sofer* vol. 2 page 357.