Focusing on Tefilla
Perspectives and insights on connecting and relating to our prayers during the Yamim Noraim and the rest of the year.

Understanding Teshuva
What is the Torah’s perspective on our avoda for this time of the year?
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Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future  
500 West 185th Street, Suite 419, New York, NY 10033  
office@yutorah.org  
212.960.0074

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by Carole, Gila and Avi Daman

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Sponsored l’ilui nishmot

Moshe Buksbaum, משה בן נתן מרדכי ע”ה and Sarah Buksbaum, שרה גיטל בת יוחנן ע”ה by their children and grandchildren
In the month of Elul, the conclusion of our prayers have a different atmosphere. Throughout the year, the sounds of the end of weekday prayers can be characterized as a mixture of people davening at various volumes and the clanking of tefillin boxes as people rush off to work. In Elul, the conclusion of our prayers is pierced by the regal tones of the shofar, jolting us into a mode of existential contemplation. Embedded within our Shachris tefilah, the shofar initiates each day of Elul with a sense of mission and purpose for our personal and religious growth. Galvanizing our spiritual momentum, the daily blasts carry us to Rosh HaShana, which is depicted in the Torah as the Yom Teruah — the day of shofar blasts — and then ultimately the climactic moments of Neilah on Yom Kippur. As we stand in silent contemplation and listen to the shofar, there are a number of halachos that define the scope of this experience.

The mishnah in Rosh Hashana writes:

 Begins the blow the barrel or cellar or the barrel, if the sound of the shofar he heard, he has fulfilled the mitzvah. If the sound of the echo he heard, he has not fulfilled the mitzvah.

Rosh HaShana 27b

The Gemarah proceeds to distinguish between those standing outside the pit, who potentially hear the echo coming out of the pit, and those standing within the pit itself, who are hearing the direct sound of the shofar.

The Meiri, commenting on this Gemarah, reveals that this case refers to a situation that would occasionally unfold in particular eras of Jewish history:

This mishna was taught during a time of persecution when they had to hide their observance of mitzvos. The Gemarah explains that those who are standing in the pit with the blower hear the sound of the shofar because the sound does not get distorted until it reaches the airspace above the pit ... It is for those who are standing outside the pit that we have to distinguish between those who heard the voice of the shofar and those who heard the echo.
Why should it matter? If the mitzvah is to hear the voice of the shofar, why should we care whether we heard it directly or indirectly? The cries and wails that the shofar represents are not diminished by the echoes of the pit. Indeed, the echo is, in some ways, an enhanced, reverberating manifestation of the shofar’s sound. Why is it so critical to hear the original sound?

The answer to this question is rooted in a deeper understanding of our Rosh HaShana experience. On Rosh HaShana we read the story of Chana. Chana was a woman with an exceptional dream to bring a child into this world. She was determined that this child would be devoted to G-d and serve the Jewish people. She appeals to her husband, as well as to the leader of the generation, Eli. However, as the pesukim describe, the ultimate turning point is not through appeals to her husband and the prophet Eli. Ultimately, it is not until she turns inward and confronts the deep recesses of her own “self” that her tefilos are answered:

וְהִיא מָרַת נָפֶשׁ וַתִּתְפַלֵל עַל ה' וּבָכֹה תִבְכֶה
וַתִּדֹר נֶדֶר וַתֹּאמַר ה' צְבָ-אוֹת אִם רָאֹה תִרְאֶה
בָעֲנִי אֲמָתֶךָ וּזְכַרתַנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַח אֶת אֲמָתֶךָ
וְנָתַתָה לַאֲמָתְךָ זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וּנְתַתיו לַה' כָּל יְמֵי
חַיָיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא יַעֲלֶה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ.

In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: “O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.”

Shmuel I 1:9-10

In contemporary life, there are many voices that surround us. Societal and communal expectations condition us to patterns of personal and religious behavior that is reflective of the world around us. Our ambitions and our actions become an echo of who we are, but do not truly manifest our personal and authentic sense of self.

Rav Soloveitchik explains that the shofar is an expression of our inner soul (see Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified pp. 18-29). In the creation of man, the Torah describes the life force that is infused into man:

יִצֶרُ ה’ אֱלֹקִים אֵלָיו יִצֶר ה’ אֱלֹקִים אֵלָיו יִצֶר
וַיִּפַח בְּאַפָיו נִשְׁמַת חַיִים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָה.

The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

Bereishis 2:7

It is that very primal breath that is exhaled and blown into the shofar to produce the sound that defines Yom Teruah. That voice emanates from the authentic depths of our personality and soul. It represents our true yearning to reach our potential in every facet of our lives. Rosh HaShana is a moment to step back from the myriad of echoes that constantly surround us and listen to ourselves. It is a day to hear — not the replication of our personal shofar, but the shofar itself. It is a day to step away from the cynicism that is sometimes associated with spiritual growth and embrace our true selves, which yearn to draw close to G-d and his people.

Tefilah is the primary way to reach this goal during Elul and the Yamim Noraim. Prayer is often experienced as a ritual echo. Sitting in shul, hearing the same words, observing the same actions, we feel like we are plugging into a program of prescribed observances. This issue of The Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go® focuses on the many dimensions of tefilah that can build our sense of connection to G-d through prayer. Indeed, one of the foundations of this most central experience to Jewish life is rooted in our capacity to connect to ourselves. We can shape the environment that allows us to hear that original sound of the shofar, becoming inspired to move forward in our quest for religious and spiritual growth in our connection with Hashem.

Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Yaakov Glasser at http://www.yutorah.org/Rabbi-Yaakov-Glasser
Miriam Peretz is, by now, a household name. Her son Uriel (1976-1998) fell in battle in the North with Hezbollah, and her son Eliraz (1978-2010) fell in the Gaza Strip in battle with Hamas. Repeatedly bereaved, Miriam is a modern-day symbol of courage, faith, and hope, despite her staggering losses.

Miriam writes:

When they told me that Uriel had been killed, the first thought that went through my head was, “Too bad I wasn’t there.” In my imagination, I saw myself going out on the ambush mission, standing in the line of soldiers. I’m a mother, I have good instincts. I would have shouted to Uriel, “Be careful of that rock! There are explosives there!” I also imagined Uriel turning around and asking, “Ima, what are you doing here?” and me answering, “Listen, Uriel, I don’t know anything about the army, but I do know how to be a mother.

... When I was told about Eliraz, I reacted differently. I wanted to know whether in that moment he had thought of his children, if he had held their image in his mind. I wanted to know the last thought that went through his head when he saw the flash, when his last breath left his body.

I’ll never have the answers to those questions, but I have a feeling that Eliraz’s last thought was of the Jewish people, that even in the last moment of his life, he was occupied with the great mission that stood before him, not with private thoughts. That’s my feeling, but in his pants pocket we found drawings that his children made for him. He had taken them with him on the mission. In another pocket was a book of Tehillim.

PUTTING OUR HEARTS BACK INTO OUR PRAYERS

Mrs. Michal Horowitz offers weekly classes and shiurim at many venues in her home community of the Five Towns, NY and the greater New York area. Additionally she is a speaker at Yeshiva University’s Midreshet Yom Rishon and has been a featured speaker for the last three years at the RIETS Shavuos Yarchei Kallah Program.
When they brought me Eliraz’s tallit, I sniffed it. It smelled of the army, of the grease they use on rifles. I pictured Eliraz at the height of his holiness. That grease symbolized the struggle for our spirit and faith; the tallit that belonged to a combat soldier enfolded a book of Tehillim and a rifle.²

בראש השנה יכתבון וביום צום כפור יחתמון מי יחיה ומי ימות מי בקצו ומי לא בקצו מי באש ומי במים ו—who before his time, who by his time and who before his time, who by water and who by fire... and repentance, prayer and charity erase the evil decree.

And on Rosh HaShana it will be written and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed, who will live and who will die, who in his time and who before his time, who by water and who by fire... and repentance, prayer and charity erase the evil decree.

More than any other time of the year, the Yomim Noraim remind us of the frailty of man and his seemingly absurd place in the cosmos. As we spend much of the month of Tishrei standing before the Creator and King, beseeching and pleading for our wants, needs and desires, we come face to face with the human condition. What is man if not a finite, limited, fragile being, flung into the chaos of this world, compelled by fate to navigate the turbulent waters of life?

My grandfather, Yitzchak Kaftan a’h, wrote in his Holocaust memoirs:

Yom Kippur, when we came from a hard day’s work [in the Budzyn labor camp], we quickly went into the barracks so that Neila could still be davened with a minyan, yet for us was heaven closed. However, all of us together vigorously pleaded for help.³

Often forlorn, sometimes confused, facing fears and doubts, what anchors us to G-d in our daily, personal and national lives? In a word: tefillah, prayer. The movement of the lips and the yearnings of the soul. The tenet of our faith, upon which our avodas Hashem rests.

Which behooves us to wonder: What gives finite man permission to plead with Infinite G-d? Man, who is here today and gone tomorrow, stands before the One Who embodies past-present-future,⁴ and pours out his innermost thoughts and desires, joys and fears.

That grease symbolized the struggle for our spirit and faith; the tallit that belonged to a combat soldier enfolded a book of Tehillim and a rifle.²

R’ Soloveitchik explains that:

Prayer is a vital necessity for the religious individual. He cannot conceal his thoughts and his feelings, his vacillations and his struggles, his yearnings and his wishes, his despair and his bitterness — in a word, the great wealth stored away in his religious consciousness — in the depths of his soul… Prayer is a necessity. Vital, vibrant religiosity cannot sustain itself without prayer. In sum, prayer is justified because it is impossible to exist without it.⁵

While it may seem preposterous for finite man to beseech, request and plead with Infinity, without prayer, the Rav teaches, man simply cannot exist. It is impossible for the stirrings of the soul, the passions of the heart, and the ideals of the mind to formulate and exist without prayer.

Tefillah, prayer, and the more colloquial verb “davening,” however, are ambiguous terms. To what, exactly, do we refer when we say, “I have to daven,” “I need to pray” or “It’s time for tefillah”?

The reality is that tefillah is comprised of two distinct elements, which are interdependent, but not interchangeable, and neither component is dispensable. There is the law of prayer and the heart of prayer.

The order, zman, and structure of tefillah are time-bound, word-specific, and governed by the rules and regulations of Jewish law.

The heart, passion, and emotive experience of prayer are unique to each of us, changing from person to person and time to time.

R’ Lord Jonathan Sacks writes:

There is tefillah and there is seder ha’tefillah: the act of prayer and the order of prayer, and they are two very different things. We can all relate to prayer in its most primal sense. We turn to G-d in high emotion — fear, joy, guilt, regret, hope, anxiety, or thanksgiving. Something deep within us feels moved to speak to that which is beyond us, to the Soul of the universe, the everlasting arms that hold us in their embrace.

Such were the prayers of our ancestors in faith: Yaakov fearing his encounter with Esav, the Israelites as they crossed the divided Sea, Moshe begging G-d to forgive the people, Chanah pleading for a child. Maimonides sees this kind of spontaneous expression — specifically the prayers of the Patriarchs — as the historic and halakhic basis of prayer as such. It has no set times and no set text. It can be long. Moshe once prayed for forty days and forty nights. It can be short: Moshe’s prayers for his sister to be cured of tzara’at was a mere five words, “Please G-d, heal her now.”
Prayer in this sense is a signal of transcendence, an instinct that tells us that we are not alone… There is Someone there to Whom we can speak the single most important word in the entire lexicon of prayer: Atah, You. The poet laureate of this kind of prayer was King David, and to this day, Sefer Tehillim, the Book of Psalms, is its most powerful expression. Prayer is the redemption of solitude. 6

With proper guidance and incorporating the order of prayer into our daily routines, generally with training from a very young age, it becomes habitual — and not all that difficult — to fulfill the requirements of the law of prayer.

Our day follows some variation of the same basic pattern: Wake up. Wash up. Get dressed. Pack up for the day at school/work/home. Go to shul and/or daven at home. Get on with the day. Stop sometime before sunset for mincha. Eat dinner. Daven maariv. Hopefully, at some point during the day, we have made time for limud Torah as well.

Our three daily prayers are based on those established by our forefathers, as the Sages teach (Brachos 26b):

Avraham instituted prayer in the morning, Mincha in the afternoon, and Maariv at night. As practicing, believing, observant Jews, the law and order of prayer fits nicely into our daily routine.

What, however, of the other aspect of tefillah, the heart of prayer?

If we are intellectually honest with ourselves (not always a comfortable, or comforting, experience) perhaps we would acknowledge that while many excel in fulfilling the law of prayer, far fewer among us excel in fulfilling the heart of prayer.

What are we davening for, if we utter the words by rote; if we make the minyan because we have to, and not necessarily because we acutely feel the need to. Can we discharge the obligation of prayer if we fulfill the law of prayer without the emotion of prayer?

Of her son, Moshe, who was critically injured while serving in the Israeli Air Force, Barbara Blum writes:

"After physiotherapy, Alex (Moshe’s father), with unending patience and love, would put Moshe’s tefillin on him and recite the morning prayers. Moshe took his prayers very seriously. Since his vision was affected by his injury, he could not read the prayers from the siddur. Alex would recite the prayers aloud and Moshe would repeat them with his lips. If Moshe thought that Alex was praying too fast, he’d make kissing sounds and Alex would slow down. If he suspected that Alex had made a mistake or missed a word, he’d become very upset and would want to start the prayers from the beginning. Sometimes this would happen after half an hour of praying. We tried to convince Moshe that Hashem knows that we are mere humans who make mistakes and He forgives us. But most of the time this didn’t satisfy him, and he would insist on praying from the beginning."

For “To love Hashem your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart” (Devarim 11:3). Which service of G-d is performed in the heart? You must say this is prayer.

R’ Soloveitchik movingly and powerfully teaches that:

The very essence of tefillah expresses itself in a romance rather than in disciplined action, in a great passionate yearning rather than a limited cold achievement, in a movement of the soul rather than performance of the lips, in an awareness rather than in action, in an inner longing rather than in tangible performance, in silence rather than in loud speech… Certainly one who does not correlate the experience with an objective symbol, in this case the recital of words, is remiss in his duty. However, the external act is clearly but a side, a formal side, of the full state of mind. The latter turns away from the externals and from physical
efforts; the individual is captivated by the great vision of the supremely impressive and wondrous. The inner activity, free from reaching out for external accomplishment; the inward look which does not call out for outward deeds; the attention that does not call out for outer show; in brief — the avodah she’ba’lev which ceremonial and decorum seem to hinder — this is the essence of prayer.

Imagine — and in our day and age of technology, smartphones, tablets, social media, and the ever constant bombardment of virtual communication, sadly, it is not too hard to imagine — that we are attempting to hold an important and fundamental discussion with a child, a loved one, a student, a confidant, a world leader, while checking the news apps on our phones, a Facebook post, or the latest Twitter feed. Such a discussion is no discussion at all, for while we may physically be present and going through the motions, undeniably, our hearts and minds are elsewhere.

In regard to the action of prayer without proper intent, the Rambam writes (Hilchos Tefilla 4:15):

Concentration of the heart — how (is this fulfilled)? Any prayer (recited) without concentration is not prayer. And if he prayed without concentration, it must be recited again with concentration. If a person finds that his thoughts are confused and his mind is distracted, he may not pray until he has recovered composure of the mind. Hence, on returning from a journey, and he is weary or distressed, it is forbidden to pray until his mind is composed.

We are taught from the youngest of ages that tefillah is an integral part of our daily lives, and this is good and well, for it helps establish prayer as the foundation of our faith and Divine service. And yet, it comes along with a caveat: Tefillah tends to become so routine that it is often practiced by unthinking rote.

Hence, it is not for naught that the Sages warn us:

Rabbi Shimon says: Be careful in the reciting of Shema (and praying). When you pray, do not make your prayer fixed, rather prayers for mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent, blessed be He, as it says, “For He is gracious and merciful, long-suffering and full of kindness, and reconsiders regarding the evil.”

Avos 2:13

Do we daven because we are obligated to do so, because it’s another activity to check off on the daily “To Do” list, because I have been davening since kindergarten, and everyone does it… Are my prayers kevah — fixed and by rote?

R’ Ovadia m’Bartenura (15th C. Italy) explains the Mishna as follows:

Fixed: Like a person who has something fixed that he is obligated in and says, “When will I unload this obligation

Tefillah Insights: Simcha l’artzecha v’sason l’irecha — Happiness for Your land and Joy for Your City

Artzecha refers to the Land of Israel and irecha refers to Jerusalem. Why is Israel associated with simcha and Jerusalem with sason? R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein, Baruch She’Amor, Tefillot pg 248, suggests that the difference between simcha and sason is seen in the phrase from Kel Adon, which we recite on Shabbat morning: semeichim b’tzeitam v’asim b’vo’am — they are happy when they depart and joyous when they arrive. Simcha seems to refer to the beginning of the process and sason refers to its completion. On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we ask God to bring simcha to the Land of Israel by gathering everyone from the exile. That is the beginning of the process of redemption, which culminates with the rebuilding of the Beit HaMikdash and which brings sason to Jerusalem.

Torah To Go Editors
his way and live! Until the day of his deserving death, but that he repent from for You do not wish the death of one hard to anger and easy to appease, For Your Name signifies Your praise:

As we enter into a new year, there is no better time than the present — for if not now, when? — to make a kabalah al ha’asid — a resolution to change for the better — in regard to our relationship with G-d through the vehicle of tefillah.

There are a plethora of halachos, seforim, and booklets to help us navigate the letter of the law in regard to tefillah. Let us tap into those resources so that the order and structure of our prayers are acceptable al pi halacha. We must recite the proper words, at the correct times, in the set order, so that we discharge our obligation of the law of prayer.

As for the heart of prayer and the emotive journey that goes along with seder ha’tefillah, let us turn inward, to the feelings, joys and trepidations found within our very own hearts, so that we may fulfill, not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law of tefillah as well.

When we resolve to make small changes with lasting impact, we will find that our relationship with our Father, our King, will be boundlessly, infinitely and greatly enhanced, as we elevate and ennoble ourselves through the mode, medium, structure, order and passion of prayer.

R’ Soloveitchik teaches that:

Prayer begins as an obligatory, even compelled act, with rigid requirements of time, location and behavior. We are particularly aware of this during the winter or in inclement weather when we must venture out into the cold for minyan early in the morning and at night. However, as we progress in our relationship to prayer, we feel the rewards of intimate communion with G-d.

For Your Name signifies Your praise: hard to anger and easy to appease, for You do not wish the death of one deserving death, but that he repent from his way and live! Until the day of his death You await him; if he repents, You will accept him immediately... A man's origin is from the dust and his destiny is back to dust... he is likened to a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust and a fleeting dream.11

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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." 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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. This dependence is epitomized through the requests we make of Hashem during tefillah. As a result, the “muscle” needed to make requests requires “exercise.” 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 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, “Tefillah l’ani ki ya’atof, v’ilnei Hashem yishpoch siculo — 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...
relayed 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 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. 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, 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, 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.
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 Vaechanan, 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.
11. In the Koren Ani Tefillah 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.
15. Siman 1063.
20. Examples include Selach Lanu Avinu and Avinu Malkeinu.
23. See Derashos Chasam Sofer vol. 2 page 357.
While tefillah is intrinsic to the daily life of a Jew, it is highlighted even more so now, during the High Holiday season. With the daily recitation of Slichot in the period leading up to Rosh Hashana, with extra tefillot during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva, and with the additional time spent in prayer both on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, prayer is clearly central to these Days of Awe. The recent articles about prayer in the Jewish Action magazine (Fall 2017) and the addition of special classes and yimei iyun in yeshivot and day schools on the topic of making prayer more meaningful are commendable. Rav Tzvi Hersh Weinreb’s “The Best Books on Prayer” provides many options to reflect on our prayers and gain a deeper understanding of them. However, despite the resources available, a meaningful prayer experience is elusive for many.

To properly appreciate prayer, we need to arrive to shul early, or at least on time. If you arrive to shul on time, you are already late. To properly begin praying at the official start time, we need to arrive beforehand and prepare. We are obligated to ensure that our surroundings and our bodies are appropriately clean, that the setting has few distractions, and that our minds are in the proper frame for communicating with our Creator. In addition to preparing ourselves before beginning prayer and even more specifically before beginning the Amida, with the recitation of “G-d, open my lips (so that) my mouth can tell your praises,” there are several elements during prayer that help to refocus our experience and to remind us that we literally are standing before the Almighty. The countless references to Hashem in second person, as in “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d…” is an almost continuous reminder that we are communicating directly with the Ribbono Shel Olam. Additionally,
the various movements designed by Chazal and by our traditions heighten our awareness of being in Hashem’s presence.

Psychological researchers have codified different modalities with which people experience the world. These are commonly broken down into visual, auditory and kinesthetic (movement). Some people grasp information better when material is presented visually, while others process information more readily when they hear it. A third group learn material best when they are fully drawn into it with movement. Interestingly, the way our tefillot are arranged requires that we use all three modalities while praying, to help us maximize the experience. People tend to be more familiar with the visual and auditory aspects of prayer, while the kinesthetic elements are less obvious and thus warrant more extensive elaboration.

The visual modality is activated by reading the words in the siddur, whether in Hebrew or in translation, and for some people, by closing their eyes and creating a visual image of connecting with Hashem. Using a translated siddur helps us understand the words we are saying, and studying any of the excellent English commentaries on prayer helps us understand the deeper meaning of our tefillot. This undoubtedly helps us focus our attention and have a more meaningful prayer experience. The image of a beautiful shul, a tastefully decorated Aron Kodesh, and being surrounded by others intently absorbed in prayer further heighten our visual sense as we daven.

We are supposed to audibly recite the Shema (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 62:3), thereby stimulating our auditory system. Additionally, our prayers are replete with responsive sections. We listen to the shaliach tizbur repeat the Amida and we frequently respond in Chzarat Hashatz, Kedusha, and Kaddish with various exclamations of baruch Hu uvaruch Shmo and amein. We hear the call of Borchu Et Hashem Hamivorch, and we respond in turn. Responsive prayers are even more numerous during Slichot and during the Asreret Ymei Teshuva, including the especially moving prayers of Kol Nidrei, Avinu Malkeinu, the Sh’losh Esrei Middot, and the Yom Kippur Musaf. Meaningful prayer certainly requires much listening, in addition to audibly articulating the prayers.

When we reflect on our own prayer, we typically consider the words we are saying and their meaning, and we think about the experience of what we see and hear during services; however, we usually do not consider the kinesthetic aspects of tefilla to have as deep significance. A newcomer to an Orthodox synagogue once remarked to me how surprised he was by all the movement taking place. He said it seemed loosely choreographed, like an ensemble in a play — sit, stand, turn around, bow, step forward and step backward. The truth is that observant Jews seem to be in almost constant motion while praying.

It seems clear that movement during prayer is meant to heighten the prayer experience and to evoke different emotions at different parts of prayer. Unfortunately, in the same manner that people often recite prayers by rote to merely satisfy the requirement or because they are on autopilot, our movements in prayer are executed in the same way. Movements in prayer are often mindlessly followed as prescribed in the siddur — strike your chest, bow here and turn around here, with regrettably little thought to their meaning. By increasing our awareness of the many movements we perform in our prayer, we can more appropriately benefit from their execution.

There are three primary functions for the various movements in prayer, which all have the goal of enhancing our prayer. Some of the movements serve to heighten our awareness of the awesome experience of approaching the King of all kings in supplication. At other times, we act out motions related to the specific words we are saying to help us become more keenly aware of these words. And at times, movements are intended to help us feel part of the tzibbur, with all participants following similarly choreographed ritual movements. The list of movements during tefilla is long, so we will highlight only some of them from each category.

**Movements that Highlight our Experience**

Many aspects of tefilla serve to experientially transport us to another realm. The Rema (95:1) states that we take three steps forward at the start of the Amida as a way of “approaching” Hashem. The Aruch Hashulchan (95:3) likens this to other aspects of holiness that warrant preparation beforehand. We also take three steps backward upon completing the Amida as a way of submitting to Hashem and taking leave of Him. We start the steps back with the left (weaker) foot to show our reluctance to depart from our closeness to Hashem.

The most common reason why we specifically take three steps is because of the three times in Tanach where it is recorded that someone “stepped
Forward” in prayer (Aruch Hashulchan 95:3). Rav Shimon Schwab (On Prayer, pages 401-405) describes how the Amida relates to the Kodesh Hakadashim (Holy of Holies), and that through teiffa we bring our neshama from the mundane world into the Holy of Holies. Just as the Kohain Gadol on Yom Kippur walked from the Azarah, through the Ulam, into the Heichal and into the Kodesh Hakadashim, we take three steps forward as we begin the Amida to demonstrate that we are symbolically leaving this world and entering the world of the Kodesh Hakadashim. And just as a korban is bound, so too, we bind our feet together as if to say to Hashem, “I am completely bound up and offer myself as a korban to you.” This evokes the verse “uneshalma parim sefateinu” — we will offer the words of our lips instead of bulls (Hosea 14:3) — which indicates a link between our teiffa and sacrifices. Rav Schwab describes (page 538) that following the Amida: …we take leave from the Kodesh Hakadashim by taking three steps backwards, which symbolically brings us back, first into the Heichal, then to the Ulam, and then to the Azarah, from where we came. The three steps backwards are to be taken while bowing, as one would reverentially do when taking leave of his master (Yoma 538).

An additional reason for three steps is that Moshe Rabeinu moved through three distinct levels to ascend to Hashem’s presence on Har Sinai, as indicated in the pasuk describing “darkness, a cloud and opaque darkness” (Deuteronomy 4:11) on Har Sinai.

Rabbi Menachem Penner quoted Rav Uri Weisblum’s sefer Ha’arat Hatfilla, which likened the three steps forward before the Amida to an airplane taking off from a runway. The world around us is dark and as we fly through the clouds, all is grey. But then the plane bursts through the clouds and the sun is shining. Flying above the clouds, we realize that the sun was there the whole time, we just couldn’t see it. The three steps forward could be experienced as our bursting through the clouds to be in the sun, or in the case of teiffa, in G-d’s presence. The steps backward following the Amida are our return to our earthly existence, albeit bringing G-d’s grace back with us, so that as we face whatever challenges we are experiencing, we can know that Hashem is with us.

We start and conclude the Amida with two bows at the beginning, in the brachah of Avot, and two toward the end, in the brachah of Hoda’ah (Modim), showing our deference to G-d and our experience of being in His presence. In addition to bowing in the Amida, we also bow when we say Barchu, both in the morning and evening prayers, and at other times, showing our humility and subservience to G-d. The source for this is in Divrei Hayamim I (29:20), which recounts how: ‘וַיֵאמָר דָוִד לְכָל הַקָהָל בָרְכוּ נָא אֶת ה’ אֱלֹקֵיכֶם וַיְבָרֲכוּ כָל הַקָהָל לַה’ אֱלֹקֵי אֲבֹתֵיהֶם. וַיֹאמֶר דָוִד לְכָל הַקָהָל בָרְכוּ נָא אֶת ה’ אֱלֹקֵיכֶם וַיְבָרֲכוּ כָל הַקָהָל לַה’ אֱלֹקֵי אֲבֹתֵיהֶם ’ Dovid said to the people “Bless Hashem your G-d” and the entire congregation blessed Hashem, the G-d of their fathers, and bowed down and prostrated themselves before Hashem.

Although the countless references in Tanach to the Avot and Neviim bowing to Hashem were full prostrations, our custom is to bend our knees and then our upper body (Brachot 28b). We fully prostrate ourselves in prayer only during Musaf on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Other movements in prayer are meant to heighten our awareness of specific words and themes. We elevate our heels in kedusha as we say “Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh,” (Yeshayau 6:2-3) comparable to the angels who are elevated when they praise G-d with these words. This evokes a feeling of lifting ourselves toward G-d, similar to those who raise their eyes heavenward. We bow specifically when we say Modim, demonstrating our appreciation that all aspects of our very being are entirely dependent on Hashem. We strike our chest over our heart with our fist as we say “we have sinned,” as if to say “I am sorry.” This is based on the verse “Ve’chachai yiten el libo” — and the living will lay it on his heart (Kohelet 7:2), and that our misbehavior is due to inclinations of the heart. And we hide our faces as we say Tachanun out of contrition and embarrassment over our sins.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 61:5) explains that we cover our eyes as we recite the first verse of Shema to enhance our concentration and reduce distraction, focusing on accepting the yoke of Heaven and declaring G-d’s oneness. The Talmud (Berachot 13b) traces this practice to the great Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, who would interrupt his Torah lectures to recite Shema and would pass his hand over his eyes as he said the verse. Similarly, many people close their eyes while praying or bury their face in a siddur to increase their concentration and reduce distractions. The Magen Avraham (132:2) cites that the custom to bow during Aleinu while saying “va’anachnu korim u’mishtachavim u’modim” is so that we should not
appear hypocritical as we say, “they bow to vanity and emptiness... but we bend our knees, bow and acknowledge our thanks before the King over kings of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu.”

**Movements that Help Connect us to the Tzibur**

Another aspect of movement during prayer is a way of joining the *kahal* (congregation) during particular parts of davening. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 65:2) describes a situation in which the tzibur is saying Shema, but the individual is saying a prayer that he cannot interrupt to say Shema. At that point he should pray loudly, in the tune the congregation uses for Shema, while continuing to pray the part he is actually saying. The *Kaf Hachaim* (65:7) writes that he should cover his eyes as well, to demonstrate that he is an active member of the tzibur, accepting the yoke of Heaven as described in Shema. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 109:1) similarly writes that if the shaliach tzibur, during Chazarat Hashatz, reaches the brachah of Modim while you are still reciting the silent Shemoneh Esrei, you should bow with the tzibur, in order not to appear as if you deny the message of Modim. A parallel to this in contemporary culture is the American practice of standing and placing our right hand over our heart during the singing of the national anthem. Just as “taking a knee” during the Star-Spangled Banner is seen as offensive to some, not participating in the important prayer rituals which everyone else is doing, can be seen, *l’havdil*, as being a *poresh min hatzibur*, literally one who separates himself from the community and denies the specific declarations being made.

**Swaying**

Although one of the most obvious movements in Orthodox prayer is the almost constant swaying (also known as *shukeling*), which is the unofficial custom of most Orthodox Jews, swaying is certainly not a halachic requirement. The *Shulchan Aruch* (95:3) states that during Shemoneh Esrei, we should “stand like a slave before his master with fear, awe, and dread,” which some interpret to mean standing still and not swaying. The Rema (48:intro), however, states that those who are careful (*midadkim*) sway while praying to fulfill the verse “kol atzmotai tomarnah Hashem mi kamocha” — All my bones shall say, Hashem, who is like You?” (Tehillim 35:10). While the primary reason for swaying is so that we pray with “all of my bones” i.e. literally, my whole body, other reasons are given as well. The *Magen Avraham* (48:4) says swaying shows a humbleness before G-d. The *Zohar* (2:79-80) writes that it was sway while praying to fulfill the verse: “When a Jew utters a word of Torah, the light [in his soul] is kindled... and he sways back and forth, like the flame of a candle” (Zohar to Numbers, 218b-219a). The Kuzari (2:79-80) writes that it was a practical custom because several people studied out of a single large book and moved up and down to make room for the many others who wanted to use that book.

Although the *Mishna Brurah* (95:7) speaks of swaying during the Amida, the *Mishna Brurah* (48:5) also cites other opinions about swaying (*Magen Avraham* and *Eliyahu Zuta*) that we should only sway during Pesukei D’zimra and Birchat Kriot Shma, but not during the Amida. The *Mishna Brurah* (48:5) further quotes the *Magen Avraham* who says that it all depends on the individual — people who concentrate better while swaying should sway and those who focus more intently while standing in place should just stand and not sway. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (48:3) similarly says that swaying is very person-specific and we should each find our own pattern of movement when praying. Although our prayers are expressed verbally, tefilla is meant to be more than a mere recitation of words. Chazal created a structure that mandates us to speak our prayers, and to also utilize sight, hearing, and movement as we pray. Prayer is meant to be a full-body experience and a complete immersion into the encounter. When Rabbi Akiva prayed alone, he moved from one corner of the room to another, due to his many bows and prostrations (*Berachot* 31a). Other stories recount how rabbis were so engrossed in prayer they were not aware of things going on around them. Let us recognize the gift we have in being able to approach the Almighty in prayer. Let us focus on the words we are saying, the sights and sounds of prayer, and the movements in which we engage to come closer to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Let us ask Hashem to open our mouths in prayer, but also to allow our bodies and souls to come close to Him, especially at this time of the year.

**Endnotes**

1. Available at: https://jewishaction.com/religion/shabbat-holidays/rosh-hashanah/best-books-prayer/
2. “Avraham Stepped forward” (Bereishit 18:23), “And Yehudah stepped toward him” (Bereishit 44:18) and “Eliyahu stepped forward” (Melachim I 18:36).
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 -สะל המברך והמתפלל על мираו בשם:่าว בשלום - בשלום בשלום - "פיוור סוכת שולם". הברך כニー - בשלום בשלום - "שאמר "שלום על שולם". ונל הברך - בשלום בשלום - "שאמר" על שולם בשלום.

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:

שִים שָׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וָחֶֽסֶד וְרַחֲמִים בָרְכֵֽנוּ, אָבִֽינוּ, כֻלָֽנוּ עָלֵֽינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְרָאֵל עַמֶֽךָ׃

כִי בְּאוֹר פָנֶֽיךָ נָתַֽתָ לָֽנוּ ה' כְאֶחָד בְּאוֹר פָנֶֽיךָ אֱלֹקינוּ תוֹרַת חֲיִים וְאַֽהֲבַת חֶֽסֶד וּצְדָקָה וּבְרָכָה וְרַחֲמִים וְחַיִים וְשָׁלוֹם׃

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:
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.  

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! 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!

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):  

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 (Hilkhot Temidim uMussafin 6:4), this “Birkat Kohanim” refers to the berakhah of Sim Shalom. The Gemara (Megillah 18a) already makes a connection between Birkat Kohanim and Sim Shalom:

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

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

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 (I’m’ancha 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.

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

Sim Shalom and Birkat Kohanim are inherently linked and form a single unit. The Gaon of Vilna spells out the thematic connections between the two:
“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.” ...; “U’veracha” 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 berakah 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 Ray, 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 hifsek in the Amidah? Why not wait for one more berakah — Sim Shalom — to finish before introducing Birkat Kohanim?

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

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 berakah of Sim Shalom to the Amidah is less problematic than insertions made earlier in the Shemoneh Esreh:

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,
Considerably more for peace. It, however, asks for issues to this point. Let me summarize our questions and of the Amidah? What is this prayer recited after the conclusion of Sim Shalom? What is the mystery of Sim Shalom? What is it to be understood as a request? And if the answer is “none of them,” how can we bother us before? And if the answer is “none of them,” how can we ask these questions? How many of these questions have been completed, since Shemoneh Esrei has been completed, and it thus resembles tashanunim [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, z”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 berakhah 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 (Hilkhot Tefillah 15:6-7), it is G-d Himself:

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 *mitpallei* 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 Avodraham, Seder Tefillot shel Chol*), points out the word *l’hitpallei* 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 *Tekat 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...*

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*: **"..."**
“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, our Father, all of us as one with the light of Your face; For by the light of Your face You have given 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, our Father, all of us as one with the light of Your face.”

We are praying above all for peace. Of course we want peace. 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.”

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:

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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, pale in comparison to the blessings that I received and pray to continue receiving from my Creator in the form of peace, goodness, blessing, grace, loving-kindness 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 berakhah 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 Asaret Yemey 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 Berakhah 34a, s.v Al. See as well Sefer Or Hachamah by Rav Zandel Krozer to Berakhah 34b who suggests several approaches to this issue.

2. The Rambam’s source seems to be Bavi Berakhah 34a. The Talmud, however, does not mention giving thanks. Instead, the last three berakhah 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 Berakhah.

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 berakhah 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 berakhah are “Avodah” (Retzei) and “Birkat Kohanim.” Interestingly, this Mishnah seems to indicate that Modim was completely omitted in the Temple.

5. Tosafot to Bavli Berakhah 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 Hilchet Rosh Chodesh (siman 428).


9. See the many explanations of these berakhah 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 uracha 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.
A. The First Principle of Prayer: Hashem Is Involved in Our Personal Lives and World History

The first Rashi in Chumash notes that the stories of Bereishis and the rest of the Torah are as important as the mitzvos haTorah. Hashem commanded us through His mitzvos to do various actions and to abstain from others. These commandments are the mainstay of the Torah. If the Torah is about laws, why are so many stories included in the Torah? We read the stories about Adam, Noach, Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Yosef, Moshe, and more. There are many stories in the Torah, sometimes containing more detail than certain mitzvos. Why is this? Rashi explains that the stories teach us that Hashem our God is involved in human events. He is more than just the Creator and Lawgiver; He is actively involved in human life. Hashem is part of our everyday life, on the individual level and on the national level.

I remember davening as a child in New York in a Chassidishe shteeble filled with Hungarian and Polish refugees and wondering, “Who is Hashem?” “He is also a member of the shul,” I told myself. “He is absolutely here in the lives of these people in shul.” Over the centuries, the Jewish people have been able to both absorb and live this reality.

When we read the stories in the Torah, we see Hashem as a real character, indeed as the prime character, of the stories. He has conversations with Adam, Noach, the Avos, Moshe, and Aharon. He plays a major role. The Torah wants us to make this a living part of ourselves. God is not something abstract. He is not just a lawgiver who gave us a book of do’s and don’ts and a Shulchan Aruch. There is a far more important concept of Hashem: as a real, living being, involved in our lives and in the history of the world. He is as
important as presidents and kings, and we have to feel that. Hashem is an important actor in the human story. This concept is the basis of Sefer Bereishis, as Rashi illustrates with his famous first comment.

For what reason does [the Torah] open with Bereishis (when the first mitzvah is given to the Jewish people comes only much later)? ... For if the nations of the world will tell Israel “You are thieves, for you captured the land of the seven nations [who previously lived there],” they will reply, “All land belongs to God. He created it and gave it to whoever He saw fit. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it from them and gave it to us.”

Rashi, Bereishis 1:1

At different times Hashem plays the roles of coach, judge, reward giver, and punisher. He is involved in whatever we do. This is why the Jewish people get the Land of Israel. Hashem gave it to us through His involvement in human history. He is a participant in the human story.

Prayer is our way of accessing Hashem and influencing His role in our lives and in history. It is a great gift which He has given to us.

B. The Second Principle of Prayer: A Precious Gift

Tefillah, prayer, is Hashem’s gift connected with the spiritual level of the soul, the tzolim Elokim. The Shem Mishmuel (Noach 5674) defines the word “tefillah” based on the passuk in Bereishis 30:8, “Naftulei Elokim niftali.” Rashi there says that naftulei means connection, like the word pesil, which is a wick comprised of several strands twisted together. Tefillah therefore means connecting to Hashem, directing our own Godliness toward Him. This is the gift Hashem gave to us in order to express the Godly, spiritual side of ourselves.

This process of connecting to God through prayer is also a unifying process within ourselves. Our biological souls may want to eat, drink and be merry, but our emotional, spiritual selves often say no. Sometimes our emotions want to get angry, but our intellect says no. We experience many internal conflicts.

How can we settle the contradictions within ourselves? The tzolim Elokim, our inherent Godliness, unifies all the elements of our personality into one. Tefillah addresses these issues by making us aware of our own Godliness and connection to Him, thus enabling our spiritual side to be the arbiter of our inner conflicts.

We live at a time of conflict — between people, and between nations. Individuals experience conflict within themselves. A person has many goals, which often conflict. The goal of financial success, for example, drives a person to spend a lot of time working. But we also want to spend time at home. People want power, but power produces enemies. Then enter alienation and anxiety. How can we synthesize our conflicting drives? Prayer connects us with Hashem, and helps us put our competing values in perspective.

When we connect to Hashem, He stretches out a hand, caresses us, consoles us, and tells us to put things into perspective. He shares a bit of His Divine perspective with us through the power of prayer. Our bodies shake back and forth, our souls sing in emotional rapture, our minds contemplate the greatness of the Almighty and how He can help us. All levels of our personality are involved in one act of connection with Hashem together with our own unified, single soul.

Let us always be strong in tefillah. This is the solution for concerns of health, wealth, peace, and security. Prayer connects us to Hashem and He helps us with our needs. It places tzolim Elokim as the prime mover of all the levels within ourselves, instead of conflicting levels of guf, nefesh and seichel (body, soul and mind).

Especially on the Yamim Nora’im, prayer becomes the main focus, enabling us to achieve internal unity as well as unity between all of the Jewish people. Indeed, prayer on Yamim Nora’im enables us to achieve unity with the whole world and of course with Hashem.

C. The Third Principle of Prayer: Using Emotion and Intellect to Serve Hashem

In Parshas Vayigash, the Torah describes the confrontation between Yehuda and Yosef. These two great tzaddikim, founders of the Jewish people, are not just models for their respective shevatim, but for each and every Jew. In Chassidus, Yehuda represents the heart of the Jew and Yosef represents the mind of the Jew. Every person must possess and develop a combination of a logical, intellectual mind with a warm heart filled with feeling.

There are two great expressions of serving Hashem and keeping His Torah. These two expressions are
Torah study and prayer. “Talmud Torah keneged kulam” — Torah study is the most important of all mitzvos a human being can ever do (Pei’ah 1:1)." This is primarily an intellectual endeavor. The second method of expressing fealty to God is by praying to Hashem. This is accomplished through arousal and experience of feelings. “...Le’ahava es Hashem elokeichem ule’ovdo bechol levavchem uve’chol nafshechem. ...To love the Lord, your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul (Devarim 11:13).” The Gemara (Taanis 2a) asks, how does one serve God with his heart? The Gemara gives a short and profound answer — with emotional prayers. Prayer is not meant to be primarily an intellectual exercise. It should emotionally move us! Just saying the words of prayer is not enough. We must feel the words. We must emotionally beg Hashem for the things that we desire, and thank and praise Him with all of our heartfelt emotions.

We need to see more emotional prayer among us. Too often prayer has become an intellectual exercise, as if going through a checklist, to say this chapter and recite this prayer. Prayer must include emotion! Before you pray, think of yourself as talking to Hashem. Then pray and speak emotionally of your needs and ask for help. “I am your child. I need your help. I am suffering. My family needs your help. My people need your help. Come help us Abba!”

Torah, however, is in the mind — the cool, collected intellect, logically analyzing, unswayed by emotion. When learning Torah, we must be sharp and to the point. Prejudices and preconceptions have no place in Torah study. We should not take the Torah where we want it to go. We must follow the Torah's logic to where it tells us to go. This is the only real way to learn Torah, Torah lishmah, la’amita shel Torah, no matter where it takes us. In talmud Torah, the heart cannot be our guide; the mind must be the master.

Yehuda was an emotional person, and he was the antagonist of Yosef. He originally had hatred and jealousy for Yosef. He was almost ready to kill him. Yehuda then instigated the sale of Yosef. This was the downside of his emotional nature. Later, in the story of Yehuda and Tamar, Yehuda repents. Even though Yehuda was the leader of the brothers, he courageously admitted his guilt. Tamar, a young woman, was able to show how terribly he had acted. Yehuda was about to commit the worst of crimes, murder, but he didn’t. “She is right,” announced Yehuda, “and I am wrong.” He succeeded in directing his emotions the other way.

Emotions can be very damaging. Bad emotions can really hurt others and even the person who experiences them. Emotions, though, can be wonderful, especially in terms of changing a person for the good. Positive emotions include the emotions of love and yearning for something better, the emotions of shame and regret, of a desire to do good, the emotions of excitement to do the right thing. These are great emotions and are at the core of repentance.

The Yamim Nora’im are days of repentance. We must be able to say that we have made a mistake. The mind sees things one way. If a person analyzed a situation and concluded that a certain behavior was fitting, the mind will normally maintain that conclusion. The heart, though, can cry and see the pain that one has caused others. The heart has the ability to change.

Change is so important for us! We must be brave enough to admit that we have made mistakes and that
we can learn from them. From our experience of life we learn that we can and do make mistakes. We can even be happy to grow through our mistakes, and do teshuvah, repentance. These emotions encourage a person to experience the catharsis of change. This is the lev of a Jew. This is Yehuda.

Yosef is the mind. The mind is very important. When it discovers the truth, the mind knows what it is and will not budge from that truth. If you know that 2 + 2 = 4, the whole world could oppose you but you would still know that it is the truth. You would surely insist that it is so. We know as truth that Hashem gave us the Torah. No one can budge us from this truth. No matter how much our enemies try to distort history, they cannot succeed, because our minds will not be swayed.

Similarly, no amount of misrepresentation and deceit can ever change the truth that we are the founders of the holy city of Jerusalem and that we had two temples there. No matter how many bulldozers come to the Temple Mount to destroy remnants of our Holy Temple that stood there, they cannot change our awareness of the reality of our history. No one can change the truth for us.

The mind of the Jew knows the truth and will not leave the truth — Moshe ve'soraso emes — Moshe and his Torah are true (Sanhedrin 110a). This is logical and historical fact.

No amount of pressure has ever been able to change us as a nation. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were burned at the stake in the Middle Ages, but we did not abandon the truth of our faith. The Holocaust did not make us abandon our faith that we are the chosen people, the people of Israel and that the Land of Israel is ours. The terrorist attacks of today will not change our awareness of this truth. All of Israel is ours, and Jerusalem is ours. We know this truth, no matter how much they may attack us. We may become frightened by our enemy’s attempts to hurt us, but we will never relinquish our recognition of the truth. What our parents taught us is true, and what our teachers taught us is true. We are the chosen people of God, and he gave us the Torah that guides us to this day.

Yosef was the true Jew. Chazal say he was the same Yosef in his father’s house, in the house of Potifar, in jail, and then in the palace of Egypt. His steadfastness was rooted in the power of his mind to know the truth and to remain absolutely committed to his values in all circumstances, whether they were pleasant or horrible.

Yehuda was the first Jewish king. As such he represented the heart of Israel. The Rambam writes in Hilchos Melachim (3:6) that the king’s heart is the very heart of Israel. As the heart of his people, Yehuda was ready to sacrifice his own freedom, and even his very life for the benefit of Israel. This is why he offered himself as a slave in place of Binyamin. He wanted to preserve Yaakov’s life and the burgeoning family-nation of Israel. Self-sacrifice and absolute dedication to the nation of Israel is the very heart of our people.

Thus the reconciliation of Yosef and Yehuda ensured Jewish leadership forever, to have the optimal combination of thought and feelings, to use the thinking Jewish mind and the feeling Jewish heart for the benefit of all Jews. This is the model of King David, and of the King Mashiach who will ultimately lead our holy people at the time of the final redemption. This is the model that we should try to emulate during the Yamim Nora’im when we go through the process of teshuva — which involves our total intellect and heart.
Teshuva is a mitzvah that is incumbent upon us throughout the year, but which takes on unique significance during Aseres Yemei Teshuva. Similarly, achieving interpersonal reconciliation — via asking and granting mechila (forgiveness) — applies all year round, but assumes special relevance as Yom Kippur approaches. Before reviewing the halachic sources pertaining to mechila, it is worth acknowledging the complexity of this issue on a human level. The question of how to seek and extend forgiveness should not be reduced to abstract formulations; it must also take into account psychological realities endemic to the human condition. To ask forgiveness from someone who we have wronged is no easy gesture. [This is especially true when the overture is done sincerely, rather than in a perfunctory, manipulative or patronizing manner.] It requires humbling ourselves, swallowing personal pride, and assuming genuine responsibility for having caused harm to another person. Likewise, to genuinely forgive someone who has wronged us can be equally challenging. There are times where forgiving doesn’t sit right with us — whether because the hurt is too great or because the offender seems undeserving of our forgiveness (perhaps we are convinced that he lacks a genuine sense of remorse, or because we want to reserve the possibility of pursuing legal recourse to redress the crime). On the other hand, as difficult as it is to forgive, withholding forgiveness can take a heavy toll on our emotional and physical wellbeing. Studies have found that people who rehearse unforgiving responses experience elevated blood pressure, which can eventually compromise the immune system. It has been said: “Resentment is like a glass of poison that a man drinks while waiting for his enemy to die.”

This article will present not an unequivocal case for forgiving at all costs, but an appreciation of how the halacha engages the complex realities of human relationships. As will be seen, the picture is nuanced. Not every situation demands that we forgive. And yet, even as the halacha creates distinct parameters, it also leaves a measure of
latitude for going beyond the letter of the law when appropriate. It beckons us to aspire to ever greater levels of personal piety, offering us a glimpse of the tangible spiritual dividends that come along with such choices.

**Framing the Halachic Issues**

Let us begin with a series of five questions. First, what is the source for the obligation to ask mechila and to grant mechila? Second, are these respective gestures interdependent or are they independent of one another? In other words, does someone whose initial request for mechila is rebuffed still have an obligation to seek forgiveness? Conversely, if the offender shows no remorse and has made no overture toward the person he wronged, is it incumbent upon the victim to initiate the process of reconciliation? Is he obligated to extend forgiveness unilaterally? Third, what is the role of mechila within the process of teshuva and as a prerequisite for achieving forgiveness? Fourth, are there offenses for which forgiveness need not be granted and for which it should not be sought? Fifth, what is the relationship between the requirement to extend mechila and the Torah's prohibition against bearing a grudge — lo sitor es bnei amecha? Is refusing to forgive synonymous with bearing a grudge?

**Two Sources for Mechila**

There are two Mishnaic sources that establish the requirement to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged: one appears in Tractate Yoma in connection with Yom Kippur; the other in Tractate Bava Kama with regard to chovel bachavero — monetary obligations resulting from physically assaulting another Jew.

The mishna in Yoma (8:9) states a principle regarding the capacity of Yom Kippur to provide atonement:

עבירות שבין אדם למקום ומן הפורים ממלוכ עבירות שבין אדם לחרו — ואת הפורים ממלוכ רב שירת ברו — ואת דרכו compilers to רעוה: כל השכירים לפני סמורו ובעד השב יף חרבו בשיבו שלפיה בחרה ברו.

Yom Kippur atones for transgressions between a person and God, but for a transgression against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he appeases his neighbor. Thus R. Eleazar ben Azariah expounds the text, "From all your sins before Hashem you shall be cleansed": For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; for transgressions against one's neighbor, Yom Kippur cannot atone, until he appeases his neighbor.

In its discussion of this mishna, the Gemara cites various halachic rulings pertaining to the requirement of asking and granting mechila. These halachos are codified by Rambam, (Hilchos Teshuva Chapter 2) and Shulchan Aruch (OC 606) and include the following: At first you don't succeed (in achieving the other's forgiveness), try a second and third time, and in the presence of three other friends. If the aggrieved party remains obstinate, one is absolved from pursuing the matter further, unless that person happens to be one's rebbi, in which case it is necessary to make continuous overtures in hopes of gaining forgiveness. If the offended party passes away, one must visit his grave and declare in the presence of ten: "chatasi la'Shem elokei Yisrael ve'lepeloni ze she'chatasi lo" — I have sinned against Hashem the Lord of Israel and to this individual whom I have sinned against.

The mishna in Bava Kama (8:7), discussing monetary compensation for physical assaults, states the following:

אף על פי ששתאנהין נפשו ולא מניחו נפשו, עדיין יש שמה שמאר ה' (בראשית כ) השב נפשו, ומניחו של אהרן מצור (שם) ויחלארו ולא ענילו יירפו אלהים ולא איביכלו נפשו. Even when he gives him [the payment], he will not be forgiven until he seeks [pardon] from him, as it says, “Therefore, return the wife of the man [Abraham] for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you” (Genesis 20:7). And from where do we know the forgiver should not be cruel? As it says, “Abraham prayed to God and God healed Avimelech” (ibid 20:17).

Rashi explains that the mishna refers to a situation where a person has been shamed by another in a manner — such as a blow to the ear or the cheek — where beis din would impose a monetary fine. The mishna teaches that monetary compensation is insufficient because emotional scars remain, and therefore the offender must also ask the other's forgiveness. Once forgiveness is requested, the victim should respond compassionately and grant forgiveness. The mishna proves this from the episode involving Avimelech's abduction of Avraham's wife, Sarah, which resulted in the kingdom being beset by a strange illness whereby pregnant women could not give birth. G-d threateningly appeared to Avimelech in a nocturnal vision and instructed him to return Sara to Avraham who, as a prophet, would pray to alleviate the suffering. In other words, Hashem directed Avimelech not merely to return Sara but also to procure Avraham's heartfelt forgiveness to such a degree that he would be naturally inclined to pray for Avimelech.4 From here we derive
the obligation to seek forgiveness. By extension, Avraham’s willingness to pray is the source for requiring us to grant forgiveness when asked. Not to have prayed would have prolonged the suffering and would have been deemed callous.

What is the relationship between these two sources? Are the obligations derived in both instances identical? Or do these sources reflect separate and distinct obligations?

Two Tiers of Mechila

An indication that the two sources reflect different aspects relating to mechila emerges from a seeming contradiction between two rulings of the Rambam. In codifying the mishna in Bava Kama, the Rambam suggests a fundamental distinction between bodily injury and monetary damages, implying that for the latter, there is no requirement to ask forgiveness:

A man who inflicts physical injury upon another is unlike one who damages another’s property. If one damaged another’s property, as soon as he has paid what he is required to pay he obtains atonement. If, on the other hand, he wounded another person, even though he has paid compensation on five counts he does not obtain atonement, and even if he has offered up all the rams of Nebiaoth, he is not atoned, and his sin is not forgiven unless he asks forgiveness of the injured person who will pardon him.

Hilchos Chovel 5:9

On the other hand, when codifying the mishna in Yoma, the Rambam includes theft in the list of offenses for which mechila must be sought:

If monetary restitution suffices for one who caused monetary damage, the same should be true for theft. Why, then, does the Rambam rule that for the sin of gezel, we are required, in addition to returning the article or its value, to seek forgiveness from the victim?

The Lechem Mishneh (in Hilchos Chovel) suggests that in two respects the sin of theft is deemed more serious than damaging another’s property. First, because unlike the case of damages, the thief actually profits from the victim’s loss. Second, because the victim of a theft feels personally violated. For these reasons, the sin of theft is treated on par with physical assault, for which we are required to ask forgiveness. According to this approach, for all instances of monetary loss, with the exception of theft, the perpetrator need only offer monetary compensation and would not be required to seek forgiveness from the victim.

However, other commentators suggest that the two rulings of the Rambam are meant to reflect two tiers relating to the obligation of seeking forgiveness. When distinguishing between bodily assault and property damage, the Rambam refers to the requirement of seeking mechila as part of the process of making restitution, in accordance with the law stated in Tractate Bava Kama. Along with monetary compensation, the offender owes the victim an apology. Interestingly, the language of the Rambam implies further that not only must the offender seek forgiveness, he must also “attain” forgiveness. Without seeking — and possibly also attaining — mechila, the offender has yet to undo the effects of his actions. By contrast, when damaging another’s property, full restitution is achieved merely by restoring the victim financially. Nevertheless, one who causes property damage has a separate obligation to ask his victim’s forgiveness as a prerequisite for receiving atonement from G-d. This is based on the derivation of “From all your sins before Hashem shall you be cleansed.” Hence, the Rambam in Hilchos Teshuva includes theft in the list of sins for which we must ask for forgiveness as part of the teshuva process, and as a means of attaining forgiveness from G-d.

Based on this analysis, it is conceivable that for physical assaults one must continue to make efforts to attain forgiveness as part of making “emotional restitution,” even beyond asking three times, inasmuch as
restitution is not complete until one attains forgiveness. On the other hand, with regard to attaining atonement on Yom Kippur, what is key is the effort toward seeking the other’s pardon — which applies even to monetary wrongs. Under normal circumstances, it is enough to make an honest effort three times, after which there is no longer an obligation.

**Obligations of the Victim When the Offender Hasn’t Requested Mechila**

Are we obligated to forgive without being asked?

The midrash in *Bamidbar Rabbah* (19) states definitively that the obligation to forgive only applies when the offender expresses remorse and asks for forgiveness. The midrash derives this from a verse in the Book of Shmuel where Shmuel agreed to pray for the people after they expressed remorse for having demanded of him that he appoint a king.

When Rabbi Zera had a complaint against a person who insulted him, he would pace back and forth and present himself, so that the offender would come and appease him. Rashi explains that R. Zera would purposely make himself available to the person who wronged him — *ulai yevakesh mimenu mechila v’yimchol lo* — perhaps he we will ask forgiveness and forgiveness will be granted. The Gemara there records a similar story involving Rav.

These practices, while not rising to a formal obligation, nevertheless suggest that it is appropriate for the offended party to make himself physically available to the offender, thus affording him an opportunity to ask mechila. R. Yitzchak Blazer (*Kochvei Or*, no. 5) finds a precedent for this in the fact that Hashem draws close to us during the Aseres Yemei Teshuva, in order to give us the opportunity to do teshuva before Yom Kippur. If so, the merit of doing so might be specifically associated with the period before Yom Kippur. Indeed, the Gemara seems to associate the practices of these rabbis with the period just prior to Yom Kippur as a means of ensuring that the offender do what is necessary to attain divine forgiveness on Yom Kippur.

Upon further reflection, however, there may be a firmer halachic basis to require the victimized party to take initiative in the process of reconciliation — not only in connection with Yom Kippur but throughout the year. This would be predicated on the mitzvah of *hocheiach tochiach es amisecha*. (Vayikra 19:17) Although classically understood as a commandment to rebuke someone who is committing an aveira, many Rishonim assume that this mitzvah also refers to a case in which one perceives that he has been wronged by another in a manner that is likely to arouse feelings of hostility. In such a situation, the offended party is obligated to confront the offender and air his grievance rather than keep the resentment within.

The Rambam writes:

*כשיחטא איש לאיש לא ישטמנו וישתוק עלינו על מה ששתק... אלא מצוה עליו להודיעו ולומר לו למה עשית יכדר איש לאיש.*

... *Why did you do this to me and why did you sin against me on this matter?* as it states, “you shall surely rebuke your neighbor.”

**Hilchos Deos 6:6**

Ramban and several other commentators interpret this pasuk in a similar fashion.

The Rambam explains that part of the rationale for doing so is in order to facilitate reconciliation by affording the offender an opportunity to ask for mechila.10 Thus we see that that one who is wronged is mandated by the Torah to take action and initiate a process by which the offender will be more likely to seek forgiveness for his actions.

Finally, it should be noted that although we are not required to grant forgiveness to someone who has not specifically requested it, there exists a level of *midas*...
R. Yosa said: When was this said? When

Talmud Yerushalmi (ruling is the following comment of the exemption. The earliest source for this

Let us first explore the latter

The Rama has identified two

The Rama writes:

One should not be cruel and withhold forgiveness, unless it is for the benefit of the one seeking forgiveness. If one was a victim of slander, one need not forgive.

Rama, Orach Chaim no. 606

The Rama has identified two categories for which we need not forgive: when our intention is for the benefit of the offender, and when our reputation was slandered.

Let us first explore the latter exemption. The earliest source for this ruling is the following comment of the Talmud Yerushalmi (Bava Kama 8:7):

A ר" wordpress is not prima facie a prayer recited by many just before or after Kol Nidre.

Instances in Which We Need Not Forgive: Slander and the Good of the Offender

The Rama writes:

The most obvious rationale for not having to forgive a slanderer is that the damage is irreversible, since there will be people who heard the original slander and did not hear about the slanderer’s contrition. Additionally, the sin of slander affects not only the person spoken about but also his progeny in future generations. R. Yitzchak Hutner (Pachad Yitzchak, Yom Kippur, no. 38) suggests a more innovative explanation. He explains that the obligation to forgive others is modeled after Hashem’s forgiveness of us. Just as Hashem forgives us when we sin against Him, so must we emulate Hashem and forgive others when they sin against us. However, since Hashem does not forgive those who commit the sin of chilul Hashem — desecrating His name and reputation — so are we not obligated to forgive those who damage our reputation.

The first exception presented by the Rama — that we may be unforgiving if our intent is for the benefit of the offender — requires clarification. According to the Bach, the source for this exception is an incident recorded in Tractate Yoma 87b. The Gemara relates how on one occasion Rav offended Rav Chanina. Although Rav tried to appease Rav Chanina numerous times, Rav Chanina would not forgive him. The Gemara comments:

Rava say: Anyone who is forgiving will be forgiven for all his sins? Rather, Rav Chanina had a dream and saw Rav hanging on a palm tree, and there is a tradition that one who is hanging on a palm tree will become a leader. He [R. Chanina] said [to himself]: Apparently Rav is destined to be a leader; Let me not appease him so that he will go and teach Torah in Babylonia.

According to Rashi, Rav Chanina’s motivation was for his own self-preservation. Since he [Rav Chanina] was already a rosh yeshiva in Eretz Yisrael, he worried that Rav’s destiny as a leader, were it to unfold in Bavel, would come at the expense of his own position, thus hastening his own demise. R. Chanina’s inflexibility forced Rav to leave Eretz Yisrael and establish a new Yeshiva in Babylonia.

The Bach (OC 606) and the Bi’ur HaGera (ibid) note that according to Rashi’s explanation, there is nothing in this story to support the Rama’s ruling that we may refuse to forgive for the sake of the offender since, as noted, R. Chanina’s refusal was for his own sake. Rather, the Rama must have interpreted the Gemara differently. Rav Chanina’s dream suggested to him that Rav was destined to become a rabbinic leader, which might saddle him with communal responsibilities that would detract from his Torah studies. Therefore R. Chanina refused to forgive so that he would be enticed to relocate to Babylonia, which would allow him to remain focused on his studies. Hence, R. Chanina’s refusal to forgive Rav was intended for the benefit of Rav himself. The Bach wonders, however, why the Rama chose to interpret the Gemara differently than Rashi and to derive a novel ruling based on such an interpretation.

How could Rav Chanina do this? Didn’t he did not slander his name; but if he slandered his name he can never be forgiven.

Rav is destined to be a leader; Let me not appease him so that he will go and teach Torah in Babylonia.

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It should be noted that the Mishna Berura 606:9, suggests that the Rama’s example of not forgiving for the benefit of the offender refers to a case where the victim senses that the offender lacks a sufficient degree of contrition. Therefore, not granting forgiveness is meant to spur him to a fuller awareness of the gravity of his sin.\(^{14}\)

### Offenses for Which We Need Not Ask Mechila

Are there times when asking mechila is not required or inappropriate?

In a letter published by the son of the Chofetz Chaim,\(^{15}\) the story is told that after completing his work on the laws of forbidden speech, the Chofetz Chaim brought the manuscript to Rav Yisrael Salanter for an approbation. After reviewing it, Rav Yisrael demurred, citing what he felt was a problem with one of the rulings. In section I, 4:12, the Chofetz Chaim ruled that if someone spoke lashon hara about someone else, thus causing him harm, and the victim is unaware of the source of the harm, the offender must nonetheless ask for mechila. Rav Yisrael asserted that if the victim is unaware of the transgression, letting him know that the offense took place will cause him anguish. Therefore, it is best not to ask for mechila.\(^{16}\)

This issue is, in fact, the subject of great controversy among latter-day poskim. Many concur with Rav Yisrael Salanter.\(^{17}\) Others suggest that in such a situation, one should ask for mechila in general terms without referencing the specific incident.\(^{18}\)

### Mechila and the Prohibition against Grudge-Bearing

In Parshas Kedoshim (Vayikra 19:18), the Torah presents the prohibition against bearing a grudge toward a fellow Jew — \textit{lo sitor es bnei amecha}. Does this prohibition require us to automatically forgive others, even if they have not explicitly expressed remorse and asked for our forgiveness? If so, why does the midrash (cited above) assume that we are not obliged to forgive when the offender has not asked for forgiveness? Furthermore, why do we derive the imperative of mechila from Avraham Avinu and not from this mitzvah?

To understand the relationship between \textit{lo sitor} and \textit{mechila}, it is necessary to explore the paradigmatic example chosen by Chazal for the prohibition of \textit{netira}, as cited by Rashi (19:18) based on the \textit{Toras Kohanim} and Yoma 23a:

\begin{quote}
ואין א ‎ל שואלני קרדומך אמר א‎ל לא מחר אמר לו השאילני מגלך אמר לו

ו‎א‎י‎ז‎ו‎ה‎א‎ט‎א‎ב‎ו‎ת‎א‎ל‎ש‎א‎י‎ל‎הכ‎ל ש‎א‎ל‎ל‎ש‎מ‎י‎נ‎ל‏ם‏מ‎א‎ר‏ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ו‏נ‎א‎ל‏מ‎ע‎ת‎א‎ל‎ש‎א‏ל‎ו‏נ‎א‎ל‏ש‎א‏ל‎ל‏ו‏נ‎א‎ל‏ש‎א‏ל‎ל

א‎ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ר‎א‎י‏ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ר‎א‎י‏ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ר‎א‎י‏ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ר‎א‎י‏ל‏ל‏א‏ל‏ר‎א‎י‏ל‏ל


\end{quote}

What is bearing a grudge? If one says to another, “Lend me your hatches,” and he replies “No!” and on the next day he says to him “Lend me your sickle,” and he replies: “Here it is; I am not like you, because you would not lend me” — this is called “bearing a grudge” because he retains enmity in his heart, although he does not actually avenge himself.

In this instance, the individual bearing a grudge is presented with an opportunity to take revenge by refusing to lend the implement. However, at this very same moment, he uses the opportunity to express triumphantly how he chooses to act in a benevolent fashion in stark contrast to how his friend behaved toward him the previous day.

According to many Rishonim (e.g. Yere’im 197-198 and Semak no. 131), the prohibition of \textit{netira} is violated only if the grudge is verbalized in the form of “I am not like you” and in the context of the situation described. According to this view, the prohibition of \textit{lo sitor} does not directly relate to the requirement of granting \textit{mechila}. However, other Rishonim such as Sefer HaChinuch (no. 241), imply that no verbal declaration is required.\(^{19}\) We violate \textit{lo sitor} simply by harboring a grudge against another individual. This is also the simple inference from Rashi’s comments — “he retains the enmity in his heart.” If so, we must consider whether the prohibition of \textit{lo sitor} requires us to extend forgiveness in all circumstances even without being asked. There are two approaches to understand why this may not be so.

First, Rashi, in a responsa (no. 245), discusses the case of two individuals who were involved in a physical altercation, whereupon one of the parties took an oath never to forgive the other. Normally, we cannot take an oath to violate a mitzvah. The question posed was whether this oath constitutes an oath to violate \textit{lo sitor}, in which case it would not be binding. Rashi responded that the oath does, in fact, take effect (and would need to be halachically annulled), since the prohibition of \textit{lo sitor} would not obligate this individual to forgive someone who physically beat him. Rashi averts that \textit{lo sitor} applies only to situations such as lending utensils, where the aggrieved party can be reasonably expected not to bear a grudge against someone for simply denying his request to borrow a tool. However, an individual who suffered physical or emotional anguish at the hands of another would have a far more difficult time resisting such an impulse.
In such instances the prohibition of netira does not apply. Nevertheless, once the offender expresses remorse for his actions, we are encouraged to emulate the conduct of Avraham Avinu and grant mechila, although doing so is not within the purview of the mitzvah of lo sitor. It follows that according to this approach, whenever the prohibition of netira is operative (i.e. for monetary provocations), we would indeed be obliged to offer the offender unilateral forgiveness.

Alternatively, it may be argued that avoiding the transgression of lo sitor need not be accompanied by the granting of forgiveness. Perhaps the prohibition against netira merely requires that the victim of a slight forget about the episode and not keep the memory alive in his mind. By prohibiting the harboring of a grudge, the Torah wishes to ensure that the victim of a wrong not be held emotionally hostage to the grudging sentiments that the episode generates within his consciousness, thus allowing the victim of the hurt to “move past it,” irrespective of whether the other party has expressed remorse for his affront. Granting forgiveness, on the other hand, is a moral obligation that only applies if and when forgiveness is sought out by the party who acted wrongly. Forgiving unilaterally is, at best, a midas chasidus, as noted earlier.

Support for such a distinction can be found in the following comments of Ritva:

**Preventing for Yom Kippur: Strategies to Facilitate the Ability to Forgive**

As noted in the introductory comments, the topic of mechila should also be explored on a human level. The imperative to forgive, even when absolutely required, does not come easy. All the more so if we aspire toward a loftier moral standard. While there may be clear-cut instances where we need not forgive, it is tempting to hide behind lame excuses to withhold our mechila, even when we should be letting go of the grievance. Not only might we disregard the model of Avraham Avinu, we may even fall prey to the biblical prohibitions of nekima and netira — vengeance and grudge-bearing. Rather than giving others the benefit of the doubt, we might ascribe malicious intent without bothering to investigate the facts, and then hypocritically approach Hashem on Yom Kippur and beseech Him to see the best in us.

If we are to be worthy of Hashem’s forgiveness, it behooves us to do our utmost to forgive others. As the Gemara (Rosh Hashana 17b) teaches: “hama’avir al midosav ma’avirin lo al kal pesh’a’av” — one who is less exacting and demanding toward others will merit that Hashem will also be less exacting toward him.

From the language of Chazal and the Rishonim, three strategies emerge that can empower us to forgo petty grievances and extend mechila to those who have wronged us.

One approach is to consciously trivialize the wrong. Frequently, we find it difficult to forgive because we perceive the offense as more egregious than it truly is. In elucidating the Torah’s prohibition against taking revenge, the Rambam (Hil. Deos 7:7) writes the following:

It is appropriate for a person to not be exacting with regard to worldly matters; for sophisticated people all of these matters are trivial and are not worth taking revenge over them.

Yom Kippur is a day that reframes the priorities of life, and helps us to see things for what they truly are. Having a broader vision about the fragility of life and purpose of creation can inject us with a healthy dose of humility, and enable us to overlook many wrongs that may seem very important at the time but matter far less when considered from a broader perspective.

A second strategy is to remind ourselves that everything we experience occurs by Divine decree. When we see ourselves as masters of our own realities, in control of the events of our lives, it is difficult to forgive others for their misdeeds. If we view our experiences and interactions as expressions of hashgacha pratis, we are less likely to lash out at those who are merely unwitting agents to communicate a Divine message. This approach is suggested by Sefer HaChinuch as the basis for overcoming the urge to take revenge and bear grudges.

Yom Kippur is a day when we naturally feel a visceral connection to the Ribono Shel Olam. Such an intense feeling of closeness allows us to view all that happens to us, including setbacks that seemingly emanate from other people’s conduct, as communications from Hashem. The more we deepen our sense of enuna in hashagacha pratis, the easier it is to extend genuine forgiveness.
There is a third strategy that can serve as a powerful motivation to shed grudges and graciously extend mechila toward others: It is the ability to connect with the humanity of the one who offended us, and to recognize that all Jews are, in a very real sense, part of one family. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Nedarim 9:4) offers the following parable to illustrate how we can avoid the impulse to take revenge. As someone is cutting meat with a knife in one hand, he accidentally cuts his other hand. It would be ludicrous to imagine the wounded hand taking revenge against the “cutting” hand since they are both part of the same organism.

Such should also be our perspective on our fellow Jews — we are part of one family.

Yom Kippur: A Day That Epitomizes Jewish Unity

The notion that klal Yisrael are a single family is symbolized by the notion of shevatim — each with a distinct path, but all as part of a larger collective. Indeed, in the Yom Kippur liturgy we refer repeatedly to Hashem as “machalan le’shivtei Yeshurun” — a forgiver of the tribes of Yeshurun. Why is Hashem referred to by this designation? And why is it preceded by the appellation “salchan le’Yisrael” — forgiver of Israel?

The Meshech Chocha (Vayikra 16:30) explains that “salchan le’Yisrael” alludes to aveiros between man and G-d — all of which are rooted in the chet ha’eigel. The second expression — “machalan le’shivtei Yeshurun” — refers to interpersonal sins (bein adam lachaveiro). This is because every sin bein adam lachaveiro has its roots in the sin of mechiras Yosef, carried out by the Shithei Kah — the sons of Yaakov Avinu, who sold Yosef into slavery. The very symbol of unity — the notion of shevatim — was put to the test early in our history, leading to interpersonal strife and near bloodshed.

The Torah’s description of the happy reunion in Egypt of Yaakov’s family leaves us with the impression that the reconciliation was complete and that no hard feelings remained. However, Rabbeinu Bachyei (Bereishis 50:17) presents a chilling insight. He notes that despite the brothers’ expressing remorse to Yosef for having wronged him, and notwithstanding Yosef’s comforting response and reassurance, Yosef never explicitly forgave his brothers. Apparently, there was no full closure. Because their sin remained unforgiven, it came back to haunt their descendants centuries later through the harsh decrees of the asara harugei malchus — the ten martyred Sages of Israel, as alluded to in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

Yom Kippur is also a day meant to heal that rift. There is a passage in the Yom Kippur liturgy that enumerates the various halachic restrictions particular to the day.

The passage then continues with the following:

A day of establishing love and friendship; a day of forsaking jealousy and competition.

Apparently, Jewish unity is as defining an aspect of Yom Kippur as are the basic restrictions. On Yom Kippur, we emulate the angels not only in our ability to refrain from earthly pleasures, but also in our ability to epitomize peace — as it says “oseh shalom binromav” — He makes peace in the heights (Iyov 25). In explaining the basis for asking mechila before Yom Kippur, the Tur (OC 606) cites a midrash in Pirkei de’Rebbi Eliezer, which states the following:

Just like the ministering angels have peace among themselves, so too the Jewish people on Yom Kippur.

Rav Soloveitchik often noted that reconciling with our fellow Jew before Yom Kippur is not merely to remove the barrier to attaining individual atonement. Rather, it is based on the fact that Yom Kippur provides a collective kapara for the entire Jewish people. For this reason, we recite a verse at the outset Yom Kippur that emphasizes the communal atonement — “ve’nislahch lechal adas bnei Yisrael.” To be worthy of that special gift of Divine forgiveness, we must first join together as one people in a spirit of genuine unity and reconciliation.

As we beseech the Ribono Shel Olam for His forgiveness, may we mirror the spirit of forgiveness in our own lives — not just looking at the technical halachic requirements, but connecting to the essence of the attributes of Hashem who is described repeatedly in the Yom Kippur liturgy as melech mochel vesole’ach — a King who pardons and forgives. May we use these precious opportunities to shed old grudges, trivialize old slights, see all that happens around us as messages from Hashem, to reach out to others and love our neighbor as ourselves. In this merit, may we achieve reconciliation with Hashem, and may we be worthy of all His blessings in this year and the years ahead.
1. Chazal (Yevamos 49b) teach that the verse dirsha Hashem b’himatz o — seek out Hashem when He is present (Yeshayahu 55:6) — refers to the ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.


4. See the comments of Meiri cited by Shita Meikutzetes, ibid.

5. For another example equating praying for the offender with granting forgiveness, see Rashi to Bemidbar 21:7 (where Moshe prayed to remove the plaque of the fiery serpents after the people begged his forgiveness). See also Midrash Bemidbar Rabban (ibid) for additional examples. See also Tosefta Bava Kama 9:10, which implies that the imperative to pray applies even when the offender did not expressly request that prayers be offered (see Minchas Bikkurim).

6. Interestingly, R. Yona (Shaarei Teshuva 1:44) implies that with regard to theft, mechila is not required.

7. Maasei Roke’ach; Shtei Halechem (R. Moshe Chagiz) #15.

8. R. Moshe Chagiz tentatively suggests this possibility (“lulei demistapina ...”) based on the language of the Rambam. However, he subsequently backtracks stating that it is difficult to be that stringent.

9. See previous note.

10. For a lengthy analysis of this obligation as it relates to reconstructing the language of the pasuk, as well as to various hashkafic rationales and halachic implications, see this author’s Asher Chanan: Shiurim U’Ma’amim, pp. 21-44.

11. This reason is quoted by Magen Avraham (OC 606) in the name of Terumas Hadeshen. See also Levuah ibid.

12. See Bach OC 606 and Sema CM 422 6.

13. Mishna Brura (OC 606:11) cites the opinion of the Magen Avraham that there is a midas chasidus to forgive even in cases of slander. This position seems more tenable according to the earlier rationales but would not necessarily hold according to the explanation of R. Hutner. Additionally, the language of the Yerushalmi, “ein lo mechila alamis” (there is no forgiveness) implies that there is not even a midas chasidus to forgive in such an instance. Interestingly, the Ramban (Bereishis 20:7, interpreting the phrase “ve’es kol venochachas”) asserts that although Avraham willingly forgave Avimelech, Sarah continued to quarrel with him and refused to be appeased. Ramban concludes by stating that the Torah informs us of this fact as a credit to Sarah. R. Wolf Boskowitz (son of the Machtzis Hashkel) in his commentary Seder Mishne (Hilchos Deos 6:6) suggests that Avimelech’s sin toward Sarah entailed an element of slander (inasmuch as it created the false impression that Sarah engaged in provocative conduct that led Avimelech to take her), for which she would not be obliged to forgive. This would suggest that in a case of slander there is no obligation whatsoever to forgive, even on a level of midas chasidus. (For other innovative interpretations of “ve’es kol venochachas,” see the commentaries of Radak and R. Avraham ben HaRambam ibid.)

14. It is unclear what Talmudic source serves as a basis for this ruling.


16. In an interesting addendum to this story, R. Ahron Soloveitchik (Parach Mateh Aharon, Hil. Deos 7:5 p. 88; Hil. Teshuva 2:19, p.187) relates in the name of R. Yitzchak Hutner that the Chofetz Chaim then asked R. Yisrael Salanter if he would write an approbation that would include a sentence stating his disagreement with that particular halacha. R. Yisrael countered that doing so would be insufficient to erase the impression that he agreed with all the sefer’s contents, since many people would not bother to read his commentary and R. Yisrael’s words that the Chofetz Chaim then asked R. Yisrael Salanter if he would write an approbation

17. R. Ahron Soloveitchik (ibid); R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichos Shlomo 3:6).

18. Moadim U'zmanim 1:54 in the name of Rav Desser. See also, Az Nidberu 7:65.

19. For an elaboration on the range of views regarding the prohibition of netirah, see Asher Chanan pp. 45-64.

20. The basis for distinguishing between slighter provocations of a monetary nature and more severe provocations is based on a passage in Yoma 23a. For a fuller elaboration, see Asher Chanan p. 45 note #2.

21. See Chizkuni (Vayikra 19:18), whose language suggests that in monetary cases, one would indeed be required to extend unsolicited forgiveness based on the prohibition of lo sitor.

22. This distinction would seem to be incontrovertible according to the view of the Sefer HaChinuch (no. 241), that one violates lo sitor even without verbalization and even in the face of serious provocations.

23. R. Elyakim Krumbein (Techumin Vol. 6 pg. 297) suggests that this perspective aligns well with the rationale given by the Rambam, Hilchos Deos 7:8, that the prohibition of netirah is a safeguard against taking revenge. Once the grudging emotions recede, one is less likely to lash out in retaliation.

24. This notion is reminiscent of a psychological phenomenon discussed by Dr. Janis Spring in her book How Can I Forgive You, which she calls “acceptance” and describes as “a healing gift to yourself that asks nothing of the offender.”

25. The Ritva utilizes the aforementioned distinction to explain why the nightly practice of one of the Amoraim to offer unsolicited forgiveness to all who wronged him is deemed “midas chasidus,” and would not be mandated by the biblical prohibition of lo sitor. It should be noted that while it is clear from the Ritva’s words that lo sitor does not require us to forgive, it is not entirely clear whether the Ritva’s intention is to distinguish in the manner presented here (lo sitor = detaching emotionally from the episode) or in a slightly different fashion.

26. There is much discussion regarding Rabbeinu Bacheyel’s comments. Some suggest (see for example Ayeles Hashachar to Vayechi) that Yosef couldn’t bring himself emotionally to extend mechila because the hurt was so great. Others (see R. Simcha Zissel Broide, Sam Derech to Vayehi and Chayim Byad no. 57) suggest that Yosef fully forgave the brothers, but didn’t express it verbally. R. Asher Milunil (Sefer Haminagos pg. 21) suggests that Yosef did forgive his brothers, but didn’t pray for them as did Avraham for Avimelech.
**TESHUVA IS NOT DEPRESSING**

**A. The Teshuva/Elul Myth**

Tales are told of tzadikim who, upon simply hearing the word “Elul” during the Shabbos Mevorchim prayers at the end of Av, would begin to faint. These stories were probably passed down with the hope of giving us perspective on how powerful the days of Elul could and should be, and to depict the ideal attitude toward the Days of Awe. Unfortunately, the downside of sharing such stories is the creation of a misperception that the days of Elul are days of fear, not awe. Early texts describing teshuva by referencing “charata” (guilt) and “busha” (embarrassment) further reinforce the notion that teshuva is either anxiety-provoking, or simply depressing.

However, a closer look at some of the actual sources describing the teshuva process highlights that, in fact, the exact opposite is true: teshuva in its purest form should be neither anxiety-provoking nor depressing; rather, it is an exciting opportunity, and our mood in Elul and the High Holidays should reflect that mindset.

**B. Constructive vs. Destructive Guilt**

Perhaps the most famous work on teshuva is the Rambam’s ten chapters of *Hilchos Teshuva*. In the first chapter, he speaks at length about the *viduy* process and teshuva on Yom Kippur. In the second chapter, he addresses the general concept of teshuva and walks us through the process:

> "מה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו מחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגו’. גם יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי. ויעיד عليه ביום כיפור יתהלומיו שלא ישוב לו חטא לעולם שנאמר ולא נאמר עוד אלקינו ולא נאמר ولשם שנאמר" [Rambam, Hilchos Teshuva, chap. 1, sec. 12].

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from his thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it, even as it is said: “Let the wicked forsake his way” (Is. 55.7); so, too, shall he be remorseful on what was past, even as it is said: “Surely after that I was turned, I repented” (Jer. 31. 19). In addition, The Knower of all secrets will testify about him that forever he will not turn to repeat that sin again, according to what it is said: “Say unto Him … neither will we call any more

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**Understanding the Teshuva Process of the Yamim Noraim**

**Avi Muschel, PsyD and Martin Galla, PhD**

Dr. Avi Muschel is a staff psychologist at the Yeshiva University Counseling Center and Dr. Galla is the Counseling Center’s Associate Director.
the work of our hands our gods” (Hos. 14.3–4). It is, moreover, essential that his confession shall be by spoken words of his lips, and all that which he concluded in his heart shall be formed in speech. The Rambam identifies three indispensable steps to the teshuva process: regret (“yis’nachem al she’avar”), confession (“l’hisvados bi’sfasav”), and leaving the sin/committing to not doing it again (“she’ya’azov ha’choteh chet’o ... vi’yigmor b’libo she’lo ya’asehu ode”).

Several commentaries note that in contrast to others (such as Me’iri and Rabbeinu Yonah), the Rambam seems to emphasize that the key phase in teshuva is the last one chronologically, the abandoning of the sin and the commitment not to regress. This is evident from the way the Rambam structures this halacha, where he asks, “What is teshuva?” and responds with the requirement to abandon the sin, removing it from our thoughts, and committing to never recommit the sin. He then adds, almost as an addendum, “v’chen,” and the repentor should also regret his deeds. This framework reveals the Rambam’s belief that the crucial step in teshuva is the positive acceptance going forward, and that the component of regret is only required to ensure that he remains genuinely committed moving forward. This is further demonstrated from the verse the Rambam cites, “acharei shuvi, nichamti,” after I have completed teshuva, [then] I regret [my previous sins].

In other words, the Rambam believes that although there is a place for guilt in the teshuva process, he only subscribes to “constructive guilt,” which inspires better behavior going forward, and not “destructive guilt,” which ruins a person’s mood, and distances him further from his goal. The most important part of teshuva is to simply be better. A person should work toward changing his actions, and through that process, he has already performed the most significant aspect of teshuva. The feelings of guilt are beneficial only inasmuch as they help a person maintain his commitment for the future. Clearly there is no benefit, or even permission, in allowing feelings of guilt to become so overwhelming that they cause a person to continue doing the very deeds that he was upset about in the first place!

When beginning the teshuva process, we must completely forget the past, lest we give up hope when looking back. This dilemma can be illustrated with the following brief example. A person begins to work toward ceasing to speak loshon hara. If this person commits the sin again, he may struggle with normal disappointment and constructive guilt over his continued speaking of loshon hara. If, however, he also experiences destructive guilt — in the form of self-directed frustration for continued loshon hara-speaking — this can trigger maladaptive feelings of sadness and anger that may not have been present prior. Put simply, he will be worse off than he was before.

At Yeshiva University’s Counseling Center, we often discuss the idea of this Rambam with students who presents with overwhelming guilt over their misdeeds. In our role as clinicians, we cannot (and do not) tell students how to behave. However, when a student presents with overwhelming guilt over their misdeeds, we can and do explore with them the source of the guilt. If the guilt is caused by their desire to grow in their spiritual lives, then we help the students recognize that focusing on “constructive guilt,” which produces a stronger relationship with G-d, is useful; “destructive guilt,” on the other hand, often perpetuates their negative cycles of behavior.

C. No Place for Hopelessness

In a similar manner, Rav Moshe Shternbach analyzes another curious detail in the Rambam. Specifically, he notices that when defining teshuva, as quoted above, the Rambam lists commitment for the future before listing regretting the past. By contrast, when the Rambam describes in his first chapter of Hilchos Teshuva how to confess (viduy), he writes that a person must first acknowledge his regret over past misdeeds and then commit to never doing them again. Why, in the context of viduy, does the Rambam list the stages of teshuva in chronological order (regret then commit), when he clearly deviates from that order in defining the essence of teshuva (commit then regret)? Rav Shternbach explains that when beginning the teshuva process, we must completely forget the past, lest we give up hope when looking back. This is the Rambam’s intention in his framing of the general halacha about teshuva: forget the past and worry about the present. Only once a person has succeeded in correcting his ways, and there is no longer concern about his giving up hope, can he properly do viduy and reflect back on his past deeds.
in a healthy and productive way. Just as destructive guilt can turn a person away from achieving his goals, perhaps its most dangerous outgrowth is hopelessness. The true beauty of teshuva is that regardless of how many times we have failed, we always have hope, and although we may feel otherwise, we always have another opportunity.

D. The Real Me

In describing the process of the se’ir la’azazel, the goat thrown off the cliff, the Gemara makes it very clear that the two goats used in the lottery must be nearly identical in price as well as in every detail of their physical appearance.\(^5\) In explaining this need for total similarity, Rav Yechezkel Yakovson, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Sha’alvim, points to the history of psychology. Although a founding father of modern day psychology, Freud had a tragic view of man, defining him as constantly struggling against his innate desires for aggression and sexuality. Later psychologists, such as Abraham Maslow and Viktor Frankl, developed humanistic psychology, which asserts that man, at his essence, is in search of meaning and value in life, and animalistic impulses merely interfere with man’s innate desire to achieve spiritual and/or psychological growth.

Rav Yakovson concluded that the se’ir la’azazel demonstrates that we side with the humanists. The message that the Jewish people send to Hashem on Yom Kippur, as they send the goat off the cliff, is that at our core, we really are good people. We may often look like we are doing the wrong thing, but that is not us; it is our doppelganger.

Similar to our own distinction between “constructive guilt” and “destructive guilt,” psychologists have come to a similar conclusion in explaining the fundamental difference between “shame” and “guilt.” According to Helen Block Lewis:

The experience of shame is directly about the self, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the thing done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience.\(^6\)

Put more simply in recent years by Brené Brown, “Shame is, ‘I am bad.’ Guilt is, ‘I did something bad.’”\(^7\)

The difference between these two concepts is more than semantics; studies confirm that a person’s subsequent behavior is affected by whether we experienced shame or guilt. In the case of the former, we are more likely to retreat or withdraw, often leading to addiction and depression, among other potential mental health problems. Contrast this reaction to those who experience guilt, who may possess a more balanced and reasonable awareness of themselves and are therefore less likely to develop those same issues.

Perhaps a case example from our experience can help demonstrate the all-too-common path from destructive guilt to hopelessness to shame. Yaakov presents to us as frustrated and annoyed about a particular behavior that he continues to engage in, though

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Tefillah Insights: Avinu Malkeinu

In Avinu Malkeinu we refer to God as our father and as our king. These two references parallel what we recite in HaYom Harat Olam after the shofar is blown during Mussaf “im k’vanim im k’avadim” — whether we are like children or like servants. Indeed, many congregations use the same tune for Avinu Malkeinu and HaYom Harat Olam.

In HaYom Harat Olam we say that if we are like Your children, please have mercy on us like a father has mercy on his children, and if we like servants, we turn to You until You can be gracious to us. R. Yaakov Etlinger, Minchat Ani to Parashat Ha’azinu, asks: If a child got into trouble with his or her father and said, “My master, be gracious to me,” it would be inappropriate and cold. The father might ask, “Are you ignoring the loving relationship that we have?” If a servant of the king said to the king, “Please show me some loving kindness and have mercy,” it would be equally inappropriate. If we are unsure whether we are like children or servants, how can we ask for both mercy and graciousness? Wouldn’t we be reciting something inappropriate regardless of our status? R. Etlinger answers that when God presented His Thirteen Attributes to Moshe Rabbeinu, he said “ani a’vir kol tuvi al panecha” —AT I will make all My goodness pass before you (Shemot 33:19) — meaning that we can refer to all of the attributes of God simultaneously. Different people have different relationships with God, and He allows us to reference these multiple relationships simultaneously. That is what allows us to refer to him as Avinu and Malkeinu.

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his shame prevents him from even expressing his primary issue until we have met three or four times. He finally acknowledges that he is behaving in a way contrary to how he wants to live; he desperately wants to stop his behavior and move in another direction. He has attempted to change multiple times but has not yet been successful. Yaakov is aware that he is doing something that he wants to discontinue and although he is trying, he has not yet succeeded. The healthy awareness of knowing and working on what he wants to change, even if not yet successful, falls under the category of constructive guilt. As soon as Yaakov pivots and views himself as a “failure” for struggling to make those important changes in his life, Yaakov enters into the domain of destructive guilt. He attacks himself for being unable to succeed at overcoming his desires, and becomes frustrated and angry at himself, identifying with his failures. He becomes less focused on his original goals and behaviors and concentrates more on his inability and failure to change. He begins to feel hopeless about the future, his ability to move forward and behave consistently with what he believes is achievable opportunity for each and every one of us. Just as Yishmael’s teshuva was accepted by G-d “ba’asher hu sham,” as he was in the moment, without considering his progeny, so too G-d looks at each of us as we stand before Him on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and only considers our sincerity and effort in that moment. We all know from past experiences that we may relapse, but G-d wants to know as we stand before Him that our motives are for good.

The months of Elul and Tishrei can unfortunately prompt feelings of fear and anxiety. Throughout the year, but especially now, the concept of teshuva can sound scary and overwhelming. It is crucial that we look back at the words of our rabbis, both of recent generations and many years ago, to remind ourselves that teshuva is a gift from G-d and an inspiring and achievable opportunity for each and every one of us.

E. Living in the Moment

There is one final point in the Rambam worth highlighting. When describing the necessary extent of our commitment to avoid regressing, the Rambam writes, “vi’ya’id alav yode’a ta’alumos,” “The Knower of all secrets will testify about [the repenter]” whether he is indeed sincere in his commitment not to engage in a repeated offense. At first glance, we find yet another trigger for feelings of hopelessness: even as we try to swear off all of our sins, the Omnipresent G-d sits and testifies about our eventual return to our old habits, thereby negating our attempt at teshuva.

Several commentaries suggest an insight into the Rambam, which can elevate our teshuva and hopefully our entire lives.8 The Rambam describes G-d as the “Yode’a ta’alumos,” One who knows that which is hidden; however, he does not refer to G-d by an equally accurate title of “Yode’a asidos,” One who knows the future. The Rambam chose his words carefully to emphasize that Hashem does not actually look into the future to testify about our inevitable relapses. Rather, He seeks complete and sincere repentance in the moment that we reach out to Him. Additionally, this can also mean that He is well aware of, and takes into account, a person’s intent to improve. There is real spiritual and psychological value to wanting and trying to change, even if that change does not occur immediately and is not visibly obvious. Therefore, if a person can focus on constructive guilt when self-reflecting rather than sinking into a self-defeating destructive guilt approach (i.e. he as a whole is not bad, even good, but his behaviors could use some work), it is valuable to The Knower of all secrets regardless of actual results.

Endnotes

1. Translation courtesy of Sefaria.org.
2. See, for example, Rav Noach Isaac Oelbaum’s Minchas Chen and Rav Elya Baruch Finkel’s Poseach Sha’ar, #9.
3. The terms “constructive guilt” vs “destructive guilt” are our own; they are similar in ideology to distinctions that appear later in this article.
4. Mo’adim U’zmanim vol. 6 #19.
5. Yoma 62a.
8. See for example, Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz’s Sichos Mussar, #57, Rav Aharon Kotler’s Mishnas Rav Aharon vol. 2, p. 249, Rav Moshe Shternbach Mo’adim U’zmanim vol. 6 #19, and Rav Elya Baruch Finkel’s Poseach Sha’ar, #10.
Rosh Chodesh Elul ushers in the teshuvah process. During the Yamim Noraim, starting with Rosh Hashanah, repentance intensifies and peaks on Yom Kippur. It is a time to renew our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu through teshuvah. The Shabbat during Aseret Yemei Teshuvah is an opportunity to accelerate this journey and deepen our commitment to teshuvah, introspection and avodat Hashem.

There are a few explicit pesukim in the Torah (Devarim 30:1-10) and numerous passages in Navi that can serve as a guidebook for the teshuvah process. In this essay, we will focus on the haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah, from Trei Asar. This haftarah contains passages from Hoshea, (the minhag of Ashkenazim is to add additional pesukim from Yoel) and Mikhah.

The haftarah begins with Hoshea ben Be’eri’s prophecy. Hoshea is the inaugural navi of Trei Asar and the first to promote teshuvah. According to the midrash, Bereishit Rabbah no. 84, the prophet Hoshea hails from Shevet Reuven, even though there is no textual mention of Hoshea’s ancestry in the book of Hoshea. Hazal attribute the prophet Hoshea ben Be’eri to Be’erah the nasi of Reuven during the Assyrian exile in Divrei HaYamim I 5:6.

Why attribute his lineage to shevet Reuven? The midrash explains that because Reuven was the first of the shevatim to engage in teshuvah, his descendant Hoshea merited commencing Trei Asar. Reuven’s teshuvah for the events involving Bilhah is not explicit in the peshat in Breishit, yet Hazal assign his prominent position among the shevatim in future surveys to his embrace of teshuvah. He loses the position of leadership to Yehudah and double portion in Eretz Yisrael to Yosef but retains much of his stature among the shevatim. Although Reuven initiates teshuvah, it is Yehudah who is the prime example of complete...
teshuvah when he exclaims, “tzadka mimeni — she is more righteous than me” (Breishit 28:26) in his dealings with Tamar. It is no coincidence that Yehudah assumes the mantle of leadership among his brothers in the Yosef-Egypt episodes and beyond.

Why start Trei Asar with a prophet from Reuven who succeeded in his teshuvah, but not spectacularly? Perhaps this contains a message to all of us. There is always potential for spectacular teshuvah. Oftentimes, however, due to this very possibility, the expectations are so daunting. We set the bar so high and are reticent to even begin the repentance process. Hazal’s attribution of Hoshea to Reuven and the eventual choice of this haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah empowers us even on our imperfect quest to attain teshuvah.

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The haftarah begins with the following:

夫妻ימין — היא יותר צדקה מכם כלִין._radak

Why start Trei Asar with a prophet from Reuven who succeeded in his teshuvah, but not spectacularly? Perhaps this contains a message to all of us. There is always potential for spectacular teshuvah. Oftentimes, however, due to this very possibility, the expectations are so daunting. We set the bar so high and are reticent to even begin the repentance process. Hazal’s attribution of Hoshea to Reuven and the eventual choice of this haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah empowers us even on our imperfect quest to attain teshuvah.

The haftarah begins with the following:

כשעון אבותם שיחא עון ואמרו אלוהים כן שיחא עון

Hoshea beckons Israel to return all the way to Hashem, even though Israel is faltering and mired in sin. The beauty of the first words of the haftarah, shuva Yisrael — return Israel — is that they refer to Israel in the singular as one unit. Aseret Yemei Teshuvah culminate in Yom Kippur, a day that is set aside for all of Bnei Yisrael to do teshuvah and viduy as one community. This theme is articulated explicitly by the Rambam:

יהו-אמר להם זה קץ מחילה וסליחה לישראל, והרבים הוא קץ מחילה וסליחה לישראל, ביום הכפורים הוא זמן תשובה לכל ליחיד ואמרوا: כי כשלת בעונך כי אתה רואה יתברך כי אין מקימך ממכשולך אלא תשובתך

The Ramban understands these pesukim in a very uplifting way. Viduy and teshuvah are not in the heavens or beyond the sea. They are attainable with our mouths and hearts, any place and any time.

But “this commandment” refers to repentance … Because this thing is not too esoteric or distant for you, but rather is very close to you to do it in every time and in every place. And this is the meaning of “in your mouth and in your heart to do it”: That they should confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors with their mouths and return in their hearts to God.

Ramban, Devarim 30:11

So too in Navi, Hoshea declares: “k’hu imakhem devarim” When you recite your viduy, the words must be meaningful and transformative. Words create reality. Hashem created the world with words. Words should reflect the true inner self and inspire action.

Radak comments:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

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This theme is articulated explicitly by the Rambam:

The Ramban cites the pesukim in Devarim 30:11-14 as the source for teshuvah generally and verbal viduy:

כורי אליך שיתודו את עונם קוח תסמס קורבניהם ויהא

Yom Kippur is the time for repentance for each individual and for the community. It is the close of the period of forgiveness and absolution for the Jewish people. Therefore, everyone is obligated to repent and confess on Yom Kippur.

Hilkhot Teshuva 2:7

Every time individuals commit sins, they must repent throughout the year (Rambam, Hilkhot Teshuva 2:6). Requests for repentance and forgiveness are included in the Amidah prayer three times daily. However, Yom Kippur is a unique occurrence once a year, when all of Klal Yisrael as one are obligated to repent and do teshuvah. Hoshea formulates this process as follows:

Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: “Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; Instead of bulls we will pay [The offering of] our lips.”

Hoshea 14:3

How does one initiate the teshuvah process? It is achieved with words. This is the concept of viduy (imru elav). What words do we say? “Kol tisa avon,” Hashem, You should forgive us and our sins and the sins of our ancestors in your mouth and in your heart to do it”: That they should confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors with their mouths and return in their hearts to God.

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כורי אליך גאולה אשר ואני מ congזוי והוה אל מי כמהי עליך הקדשים, מאי כל pci תوبة, ואת עון אבותם שיחא עון ואמרו אלוהים כן שיחא עון

Yom Kippur is the time for repentance for each individual and for the...
On the following pasuk, the Radak comments:

The Radak identifies a main component of teshuvah. Hashem does not demand from us any material goods. Wealth does not buy access to Hashem and teshuvah. Hashem wants meaningful words that convey our heartfelt true intentions. These words cannot be hollow or mere lip service. Why is verbalizing the viduy so critical? Perhaps, formulating sincere and genuine feelings into coherent and articulate sentences concretizes the originally amorphous thoughts and catalyzes the process.

Uttering and expressing the words provide a framework for the actions that will follow. This is viduy. For the Rambam and Ramban, viduy is an indispensable component of teshuvah. This is why Hoshea begins the process with “k’hu imakhem devarim imru elav,” admitting your sin out loud, to yourself, to Hakadosh Baruch Hu identifies the barrier that obstructs our relationship with Hashem.

The Radak continues:

Instead of bulls we will pay [The offering of] our lips — instead of [offering] bulls before you, we will provide the confession of our lips because You prefer words of repentance, as offerings don’t work without confessing the sin, as we find the Torah states regarding sin offerings, “he shall confess for his sin.” Regarding the goat that was sent [on Yom Kippur], the only thing was a confessional because the goat was not sacrificed at all on the Altar, as it states, “He will confess on it all of the sins of the Jewish people.”

Articulation is crucial. When Bnei Yisrael proffered korbanot they were accompanied by viduy, a declaration. If you sacrificed the korban without a meaningful viduy, the korban was lacking. The same standards apply to tefillah: It must be integrated with kavanah, real understanding and intent. Otherwise it, too, is deficient.

The Radak subsequently makes a fascinating point. On Yom Kippur, there were two goats — se’irim. One goat was sacrificed on the mizbeah and one was its counterpart, the se’ir mishtalei’ah that was sent down the cliff l’Azazel. The only thing that was done with that se’ir was viduy. The Kohanim proclaimed the sins of Bnei Yisrael over the goat. That was effective because the power of viduy, especially on Yom Kippur, is so robust. The key to unlock the gates of teshuvah is verbalizing the words, comprehending the words, and internalizing their significance as a vehicle to altering actions.

Hoshea continues:

Assyria shall not save us. No more will we ride on horses; Nor ever again will we call Our handiwork our god, Since in

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You alone orphans find pity.

Hoshea 14:4

The haftarah begins with the voice and perspective of the navi. He is speaking the word of Hashem to Bnei Yisrael. He is calling on them to repent and provides them with the method of viduy as teshuvah. In this pasuk, Bnei Yisrael internalized the message and are articulating viduy and teshuvah.

Radak uses the phrase viduy:

We frequently seek a quick fix, a magic bullet to solve our problems without taking the classical path. Sometimes there are no shortcuts. Teshuvah is an example of this. Hashem beckons to us to return to Him and we must resolve to turn to Hashem, with a simple heartfelt pronouncement of viduy — of expressing our core failures and a clear acknowledgement of our reliance on Hashem. It is actually the simplest, most straightforward, elegant solution.

The next pasuk states:

I will heal their rebelliousness,
(meshuvatam), Generously will I take them back in love; For My anger has turned away (shav) from them.

Hoshea 14:5

Now Hashem responds to Bnei Yisrael’s viduy. He tells the navi and Bnei Yisrael: He heard their cry. He will lovingly take them back. He is no longer angry. The choice of meshuvatam and shav here are cleverly used by the navi as a play on words.

[Radak offers the following explanation:

Radak, Hoshea 14:4

Radak explains that Bnei Yisrael are admitting that they sinned by relying on Assyria, and prostrating before graven images that they themselves fashioned. These vehicles could not save them. However, just like the orphan relies solely on Hashem because he is disenfranchised, dispossessed, and has no support system, so too Bnei Yisrael came to realize they were in a needy state and turned to Hashem to save them from their iniquity.

Since in You alone orphans find pity — For we know that the orphan finds pity in you alone and for those who don’t have the strength, You give them strength and save them. You should do the same for us.

Radak, Hoshea 14:4

The message for us in our day is clear. We frequently seek a quick fix, a magic and charitably. If you turn back to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Hashem is going to embrace you lovingly, generously and open heartedly.

The last pasuk from Hoshea in this haftarah states:

מי חכם י보호 אתל stopwatch וידה יתןἵירב תמר
אדריש לא יושיענו - והתודו לפניו ואמרו אדריש
I will love Bnei Yisrael generously

Hoshea 14:10

The key to intelligently and wisely understanding these ideas is that Hashem’s ways are trustworthy and just.

He who is wise will consider these words, He who is prudent will take note of them. For the paths of the Lord are straight; The righteous can walk on them, While sinners stumble on them.

Hoshea states:

חכם ציוויה

Not like those who say “this can’t be the way of God” as it states in Yehezkel. Rather, if you repent properly, your original sins will be forgotten.
Hashem gives us a second chance. If we are alienated from Hashem and could never surmount it, we would be in a constant state of existential crisis. For this reason, teshuvah is such a foundational principle in Yahadut. There’s always an opportunity for teshuvah, to heal the relationship between us and Hashem.

After we read Hoshea in the haftarah, there are varying practices. Many Ashkenazi communities read pesukim from Yoel (2:11-27) and then from Mikhah (7:18-20). Sefardim read the pesukim from Mikhah, but not from Yoel. We will elaborate on a few pesukim from Yoel and then conclude with the pesukim from Mikhah.

The message of Yoel is that sincere teshuvah is effective at all times and all places — even in the face of upcoming disaster. It specifically focuses on teshuvah as a public communal event.

Hashem tells us:
"וְגַם עַתָה נְאֻם ה' שֻּבוּ עָדַי בְכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְצוֹם וּבִבְכִי וּבְמִסְפֵד. וְקִרְעוּ לְבַבְכֶם וְאַל בִגְדֵיכֶם וְשׁוּבוּ אֶל ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם כִּי חַנוּן וְרַחוּם הוּא אֶרֶךְ אַפַיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל הָרָעָה."

"Yet even now" — says the Lord — “Turn back to Me with all your hearts, and with fasting, weeping, and lamenting. Rend your hearts rather than your garments, and turn back to the Lord your God. For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and renouncing punishment.

Yoel 2:12-13

Radak explains:
"טִקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר בְצִיוֹן קַדְשׁוּ צוֹם קִרְאוּ עֲצָרָה Blow a horn in Zion, Solemnize a fast, Proclaim an assembly! Yoel 2:15

Gather the people, Bid the congregation purify themselves. Bring together the old, gather the babes and the sucklings at the breast; Let the bridegroom come out of his chamber, the bride from her canopied couch.

Yoel 2:16

Teshuvah that is performed together by a unified tzibbur has a unique potency. This is an additional reason why teshuvah on Yom Kippur has this collective component. The Rambam

Tefillah Insights: The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

Over the course of the High Holiday season we recite the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy many times. The source for doing so is a comment of the Gemara, Rosh HaShanah 17b:

" distint א"ר יוחנן לעג פָּרֹק א"ש ב"כ יֵשׁ בָּהּ אָדָם כְּבָדִי כְּבוֹד מִלְפָּה. מַלְפָּה מְנַשֵּׁשׁ חַכֹּלֶה לְכָל מַלְפָּה לָלֹא בְּשַׂרָה לָלֹא. מַלְפָּה מְנַשֵּׁשׁ חַכֹּלֶה לְכָל מַלְפָּה לָלֹא בְּשַׂרָה לָלֹא. מַלְפָּה מְנַשֵּׁשׁ חַכֹּלֶה לְכָל מַלְפָּה לָלֹא בְּשַׂרָה לָלֹא. מַלְפָּה מְנַשֵּׁשׁ חַכֹּלֶה לְכָל מַלְפָּה L. R. Vidas (16th century), Reishit Chochma, Sha’ar Ha’Anavah no. 1, asks: Why does the Gemara say “do this order” and not “say this order”? Furthermore, why do we find that so many people recite this order many times and it doesn’t seem to work? He answers that we don’t just recite these attributes for the sake of reciting them. We recite them so that we will come to emulate God in these attributes. If we become merciful, compassionate, etc. and “do this order” in our actions, then we will be forgiven.

Torah To Go Editors
Although it is always good to cry out and repent, but during the space of the ten days’ time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it is better, and is accepted immediately as it is said: “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found” (Is. 55.6). This is not only regarding an individual, but a community; every time they repent and cry out sincerely they are answered, even as it is said: “As the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for” (Deut. 6.7).

The passage in Yoel describes communal repentance in the face of looming national tragedy. It was chosen by the Ashkenazim as part of the haftarah for Shabbat Shuvah, because it highlights the importance of communal fasting and gathering on Yom Kippur.

Whereas the message of Hoshea is teshuvah for Am Yisrael, but especially the power of the individual to initiate and realize complete teshuvah; in Yoel the message is that Am Yisrael joining together and executing teshuvah in a ceremonial congregational fashion surely has an effect. Today we don’t have the Beit Hamikdash, we don’t have the se’ir l’azazel, but we do have the public communal aspect of Yom Kippur that echoes this powerful national dimension.

Finally, most communities conclude the haftarah with the three culminating pesukim of Mikhah:

Who is a God like You, Forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; Who has not maintained His wrath forever Against the remnant of His own people, Because He loves graciousness! He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins Into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, Loyalty to Abraham, As You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

Mikhah 7:18-20

The Mikhah verses are universally chosen as the conclusion of the haftarah and part of the Tashlikh ceremony, because the message of these last three pesukim is Hashem’s unwavering forgiveness, love and loyalty to Bnei Yisrael. These phrases represent our confidence in the covenantal relationship with Hashem that originated with the Avot and continues to this day. It focuses on Hashem’s forgiving, compassionate loyalty toward us. It does not even mention the teshuvah that Bnei Yisrael are obligated to undertake. After the elaborate discussions of Bnei Yisrael’s teshuvah process in Hoshea — and for Ashkenazim in Yoel — the haftarah concludes with our confidence in Hashem’s forgiveness that flows from His compassion for His people and His promise to our forefathers.

Our goal on Yom Kippur is to renew and transform our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. This renewal is achieved through teshuvah. The haftarah of Shabbat Shuvah in the midst of Aseret Yemei Teshuvah affords us this opportunity. The haftarah describes the public and private process of teshuvah and viduy, and concludes with an affirmation of Hashem’s compassion for Am Yisrael because of our longstanding covenantal relationship with Him. It also emphasizes Hashem’s interest in helping us come closer to Him. If we pursue teshuvah sincerely, Hashem will generously enable us to reach his Throne of Glory:

Repentance is so great that it reaches to the Throne of Glory as it states “until the Lord your God.”

Yoma 86a

May we all merit His compassion and be inscribed in the book of life, blessing, peace, good health and success.