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 - כל הברכות והתפלה חותמין בשלום:
קרית שמע - חותמה בשלום - ”פוריס סוכת שלומך“. ברכת כהנים - חותמה בשלום - שנאמר ”וישם לך שלום“. וכל הברכות - חותמין בשלום - ”עושה שלום במרומיו."

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

Masekhet Derekh Eretz, Perek Shalom no. 19

There are, however, multiple reasons to question whether Sim Shalom is a mere request for peace. Indeed, the first half of the berakhah asks for more than peace:

וְשִים שָׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וְבְרָכָה חֵן וָחֶֽסֶד וְרַחֲמִים בָרְכֵֽנוּ, אָבִֽינוּ, כֻֽלָֽנוּ עָלֵֽינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְרָאֵל עַמֶֽךָ׃
כִי בְּאוֹר פָנֶֽיךָ נָתַֽתָ לָֽנוּ ה' כְאֶחָד בְּאוֹר פָנֶֽיךָ אֱלֹקינוּ תּוֹרַת חַיִים 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!

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:

SIM SHALOM: THE PERFECT PRAYER

19

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series • Rosh Hashana 5779
Most of the berakhot are listed as expected. Yet Sim Shalom is nowhere to be found!¹

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 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 berakah of Sim Shalom.³ 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... Sim Shalom:

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

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

Tefillah Insights: Zochreinu L’Chaim

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

Torah To Go Editors

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

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

This is emphasized in Nusach Ashkenaz, in which Sim Shalom is said only during Shacharit, when Birkat Kohanim is (at least theoretically) recited. At other times, we recite Shalom Rav, a shorter request for peace which does not correspond to the multi-faceted Birkat Kohanim. Due to the concern that a kohen might have consumed an alcoholic drink, Birkat Kohanim is not recited later in the day (Taanit 26a). The only exception is a fast day. On a fast day, 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 hofsek in the Amidah? Why not wait for one more berakhah — Sim Shalom — to finish before introducing Birkat Kohanim?

Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein (Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion) 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 Neillah] — except for Minchah.

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

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,
we do recite “Be-sefer chayim” in Sim Shalom since Shemonah Esrei has been completed, and it thus resembles tahanunim [additional prayers recited after the formal Shemonah 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 berakhah is requests. Rather, Sim Shalom is a response to G-d’s blessing. “Yes” we say, “May it be Your will to bestow these blessings upon us.” Thus, it is an expression of gratitude to G-d for bestowing His blessings upon us.
If Sim Shalom is a response to Birkat Kohanim, however, why is it said by the individual mitpallel in the silent Amidah — even before the blessings are bestowed? Perhaps we can argue that, for various reasons, the text of the silent Amidah should match that of the repetition. But then why recite Shalom Rav at Minchah and Maariv? If the Amidah has technically ended with the recitation of Modim, and there will be no mention of Birkat Kohanim — and thus no Sim Shalom — why not end the Amidah at that point?

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

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

Let’s take a step backward:

The recitation of the Shemoneh Esreih is more than an act of prayer to fulfill a religious obligation. It is a thrice-daily encounter with the Divine that is meant to serve as a transformative experience. The process of saying the Amidah, especially the weekday Amidah, with its long list of requests covering the gamut of personal and national life, is meant to reorient our priorities and our outlook on the world. Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch, following in the footsteps of Rav David Kimchi (quoted in Sefer Avudraham, Seder Tefillot shel Chol), points out the word l’hitpallel means “to judge oneself.” The text of the Amidah allows me to compare the mindset with which I enter the state of tefillah to an ideal crafted by our sages. By reading this sacred text, authored by the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah — among them prophets — I am challenged and uplifted on many levels.

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

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

Would I use more than half of my requests to pray for the unfolding of the national redemption of the Jewish people (from Tekah 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, Utkzin 3:12)

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

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

What are the true goals of those many blessings? One thing: Peace. Though many details are mentioned in the blessing, the berakhah’s conclusion, the chatimat ha-berakhah, is clear: “May it be pleasing in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel with peace. Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, who blesses the People of Israel with peace.”

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

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

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

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

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

I try to stop for a moment at several places in Shemoneh Esreh. One of them is at the end of Modim. I take stock for a moment and think about how distracted and unaware of G-d I had been for so long before my tefillah. I am glad that I brought Him back into my consciousness and hope that I will stay in that state of awareness for as long as possible after I leave the shul or Beit Midrash. Then I accept that all that I thought so important just moments before, pales in comparison to the blessings that I received and pray to continue receiving from my Creator in the form of peace, goodness, blessing, grace, 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 berakhot do, obviously, contain requests, they differ from the requests in the middle section of the Amidah. The requests made in Retzei and Sim Shalom are for communal needs, whereas earlier requests are for individual needs. [Thus we are able to add special communal requests during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva.] Furthermore, it praises the Master when He is needed by the masses. It is not completely clear, however, how the needs expressed in Retzei are more communal than many of the needs listed in the latter half of the middle section. Cf. Tosafot to Berakhot 34a, s.v. Al. See as well Sefer Or Hachamah by Rav Zandel Krozer to Berakhot 34b who suggests several approaches to this issue.

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

3. See Shu’t Ridbaz (8:15) who explains that the “ikkar hoda’ah” is Modim. Then, as with Kriyat Shema, Chazal were metakein appropriate berakhot before and after. We will suggest a different approach.

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

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

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


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

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