Hashkiveinu: A Prayer in the Time of Covid-19

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

*Lay us down, LORD God, in peace, and raise us up again, our King, to new life.
Spread over us Your canopy of peace,
Direct us with Your good counsel.
Save us for Your name’s sake.
Shield us from every enemy, plague, sword, famine, and sorrow.
Remove the adversary from before and behind us.
Shelter us in the shadow of Your wings,
Guard our going out and our coming in, and grant us life and peace, now and always.*

How many times have we *davened* *Mincha* or *Maariv* with our thoughts focused on the day ahead or the day behind more present in our minds than on the prayer before us; how often have the sweet words of the *Hashkiveinu* slipped through our lips without a thought to the truth that it is God alone who is the author of our peace and our lives?

Reb Nachman of Breslav taught that, “The world is a narrow bridge…” But we forget. We become caught up in the urgencies of our egos, our families, our wants, and our comforts. We forget. We plan weddings, vacations, and business strategies believing we have thought of “everything” … but we forget.

We forget that it is only in God’s hands that everything rests.

I estimate that I have recited *tefilat Hashkiveinu* nearly 25,000 times over the course of my life and yet the times I have fully felt its power and grace still stand out to me. The words of other *tefilot* can sometimes seem lofty or removed from daily life and experience but not *Hashkiveinu*. Its words are personal and sweet, safe and comforting...

The day is done. Night is about to descend and with it, darkness and uncertainty. Night is frightening in ways the day could never be. Our Sages too felt our vulnerability and, so they allowed a “pause”, a “breath” for the *Shmone Esrei* after the conclusion of Shema and the concluding *bracha* of *Ga’al Yisrael*; they did not insist that the *Amidah* be recited immediately after the prayer for “Who redeemed Israel” despite the halachic principle of Semichas Geula l’Tefila as it does in *Shacharit*.

Focusing on the Psalmist’s words, “…to speak of Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness at night” (92:3), Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that with daylight we celebrate God’s kindness and love with confidence in His promised redemption (*geula*) but at night we must muster up our faith to sustain us against the surrounding darkness. We pause. In the morning, with confidence of our past *geula* we move directly to the *Shemone Esrei*. We barrel forward, confident in life and redemption.

But at night… our confidence wanes. Our faith in the bridge connecting “…the glorious redemption of time past and the promise of a future one…” weakens. Chazal were all too aware of our uncertainty. At night, we confront the unknown, the unseen and unseeable. There is no flashlight, no LED bulb, no flood light that can illuminate that dark place. Only faith in God. And so, we say, “Lay us down in peace, Lord our God, and raise us up, our King, to life…”  Only God is our shelter; only God our guide. “Spread over us the canopy of Your peace – sukat she’lomecha.”   There is nothing lofty in our request. Ours is the cry of a child to a parent, seeking comfort as the night comes on. Please don’t go away! Please don’t leave me!

Powerful, meaningful, awesome words. And yet, too often we take for granted their meaning and power even as we say them. We rush headlong into the end of our day just as we presume we will in the morning, when we rush through our morning prayers to hurry forward to the days demands.

But not anymore. Now, in our blustering, our self-importance, our arrogance, we have been introduced to a threat that seeps into every crevice and corner of our lives; a threat to our communities, our relationships, our health and our lives; a threat lurking in the handshake of a dear friend or neighbor…

Now there can be no comforting *minyan*. No “safety in numbers.” There can be no communal prayer – the very thing that has sustained us for so long!

Now, in prayer and in life, it is just me and Him. Quiet. Still.

Shabbos afternoon. Just my wife and me. At home. Alone. It is time to *daven Maariv*. So, I pray. Slowly. Thoughtfully. And why not? There is no rush. I have no place else to be, no place else to go.

We conclude Shema and then Boruch Atah ... Ga’al Yisrael. Before *Shmone Esrei*, *Hashkiveinu.* Please God, “…lay us down in peace; raise us up...” Please God, “…save us, shield us.” The prayer is often described as a sweet, soothing and reassuring “Jewish Lullaby” but *Hashkiveinu* is anything but that now; not just *Motzaei* Shabbat but *Motzaei* Shabbat Corona.

In the stillness of the room, with me *davening* in one corner and Clary *davening* in another, when I come to *Hashkiveinu*, this prayer I’ve prayed thousands of times, the words come suddenly alive, they scream to me, “Ve’hagen ba’adenu, ve’haser mealeinu, oyev, dever ve’cherev ve’raav ve’yagon” – Protect us, O God, from enemies, epidemics, violence, hunger and sorrow. Enemies! What enemies? Hear the *very next word*! **Dever**! Epidemics! More than seventy years of *davening* this prayer and it is only now that the deep truth of it burst before my eyes.

I want to scream out, “Shield us, O God, from this Covid-19 enemy! Save us!” But I remain quiet. I just stare at the words. *Oyev. Dever. Ve’cherev.* Enemies striking with invisible swords.

And I think, when was *Hashkiveinu* just a lullaby?

We must all pray to God now, all pray for redemption from this epidemic. Even women who do not generally *daven Maariv*, who have always been the source of the sweetest lullabies, the safest comfort, should pray for the shelter of peace and deliverance.

Please God, we beg You. Remove this Corona *dever*.  Let us once again know the security of your sheltering peace. Let us once more be able to embrace friends and neighbors. Let us once more pray as together as one.