

“Va-Ani Tefillah”: Tefillah as a Way of Life, Not Just Something We Do Three Times a Day

In *Sefer Tehillim*, David Ha-Melekh chooses a description for himself that is so profoundly simple that it begs for an explanation: “*Va-ani tefillah*” – “I am prayer” (109:4). David’s life was full of accomplishment: he was the king of the Jewish people, he fought and won many battles on behalf of Israel, he brought the *Aron Kodesh* (ark) to *Yerushalayim*, wrote *Sefer Tehillim*, and more. Yet he chooses such a seemingly limited description for himself – what exactly did he mean by this phrase?

***Deveikut Im Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* (Clinging to God)**

In the first chapter of *Mesillat Yesharim*, the Ramchal (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) lays out for us what should be our sole focus in this world: “*deveikut im Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*” – “clinging to God.” As David wrote (*Tehillim* 73:28): “*va-ani kirvat Elokim li tov*” – “For me, being close to God is what is good.” The ultimate good in this world is coming close to our Creator. All other endeavors are merely a means of reaching this goal. How does one accomplish this?

Connecting to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* Through *Mitzvot*

When we perform a *mitzvah*, a commandment from God, there are in reality two levels of accomplishment. The first, basic level is that we are discharging our obligation to perform that specific commandment. We are all commanded to put on *tefillin* or to make *kiddush* on *Shabbat*, and we do so to fulfill that obligation. But merely fulfilling an obligation is only half of the job. In reality, the *mitzvot* are not 613 individual actions, disconnected from one another. Rather, each *mitzvah* is part of an overall goal of being able to cling to God. They are not 613 commandments, they are 613 methods of connection, each one with its own unique and powerful *kedushah* (holiness). How much one connects to God through the *mitzvah* that he or she is performing is dependent on how much the person has the intention to do so. One who shakes a *lulav* or gives *tzedakah* (charity) simply to be *yotzei* (to fulfill the obligation), is just that – *yotzei*. He or she has fulfilled the obligation, but has missed out on an opportunity to accomplish the real goal. On the other hand, if one understands that this *mitzvah* is more than just an isolated activity, but rather a pathway to connect to God, he or she has now brought him- or herself closer to God and has actualized the full potential of the *mitzvah*.

What about those times that one is not obligated to do any *mitzvot*? How does one strengthen his or her connection to God when not performing the commandments?

Connecting to *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* Through *Emunah* (Faith)

Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu created the world in such a way that His presence is hidden. He is the *Kel Mistater*, the hidden God. We can easily go through an entire day of activities and not once see or feel that God is there. But of course we understand that nothing can really take place in this world without *Hashem*’s allowance. It is just up to us to be able to see it and feel it.

For example, a person goes out to run an errand. Although there is nothing inherently holy about the particular task at hand, there is still a tremendous potential to connect to *Hashem* through that activity. How much do we feel that God’s presence is there with us? To what extent do we believe that He is in full control of the situation, leaving only the choice of right and wrong in our hands? It is to the degree that we grasp and internalize this that we are able to change an ordinary chore into a connection to God.

How much more so when it comes to the big decisions of our lives, or times of *simchah* (joy) or tragedy. By understanding that God is not only involved, but is the One who is in total control, we are able to connect to Him in a powerful way. There is no greater method of connection than realizing and internalizing how truly close God is already to us – it is simply our responsibility to realize it. He is the *Kel Mistater*, not just in the world and nature, but more importantly within ourselves.

When it comes to *tefillah* though, there are numerous *halakhot* that are unique to our prayers that hint to the fact that there is a deeper aspect than simply performing another *mitzvah*. For example, when one is davening *Shemoneh Esrei*, it is forbidden for another person to walk within four cubits of that individual. No such restrictions exist when it comes to putting up a *mezuzah* or getting married. Additionally, there is a more strict dress code for *tefillah* than any other *mitzvah*; whereas one can sit in the *sukkah* wearing pajamas and be fulfilling the *mitzvah* to its fullest extent, one can only daven while wearing respectable clothing. What is the reason for these distinct, additional requirements?

Tefillah* – Unique Among the *Mitzvot

R. Dov Ber from Mezerich, also known as the Maggid of Mezerich, was once approached by a childhood friend who was perplexed by the length of time the *rebbe* spent davening *Shemoneh Esrei*. The Maggid's friend elaborated on his question by suggesting that it couldn't be because the *rebbe* was able to inculcate the *kavanot* (mystical intentions) of the *Ari Ha-Kadosh*. If that was the case, the friend said, he himself is able to contemplate those *kavanot* too, and yet his *tefillah* is still much shorter than the Maggid's. What then, he wondered, is the Maggid's source of strength to be able to focus on his prayer for such a long period of time? The Maggid explained that the difference between them was that even though his friend has the proper *kavanot*, he does so while simply standing where he is. The Maggid on the other hand, actually goes to the place of those *kavanot*.

In contrast to the other *mitzvot*, where the goal is to strengthen our connection to God, *tefillah* allows us to accomplish the ultimate goal – it is our opportunity to actualize our connection by being able to literally stand before *Hashem*. When a person davens he is not merely saying words while standing in a room. In reality, he has now placed himself directly in front of the King of all kings. As opposed to other *mitzvot* that a person does in isolation, trying to build a connection, when someone is davening, he is now directly in front of the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence).

This is a reason that no one should not walk within four cubits of a person who is davening. To do so would be disrespectful to God, in whose presence the person who is praying is standing. Similarly, *tefillah* requires a specific dress code, as befitting those standing in front of the King of all kings.

But how can we feel this connection? While standing in our local shul, can we really feel that we are now that close to God, almost as if to say that we have been transported to *shamayim* (the heavens) and are standing in front of the heavenly throne?

***Tefillah* as a Product of Our Lives**

R. Shlomo Volbe wrote that the result of our development as *ovdei Hashem* (servants of God) can be seen in our *tefillot*. An individual who lives his life trying to forge a deep bond with God, performing *mitzvot* not only to fulfill obligations, but also to strengthen that connection, and trying to see God's hand in every aspect of his life, will be able to stand in *tefillah* and experience the place in which he is standing. -*Tefillah* is our opportunity to place ourselves directly in front of God and be closer to Him than at any other time. But we can only feel that closeness if we have worked to strengthen the connection we have to Him throughout our daily lives.

A *mashal* (parable) is given of a father and son who live far away from each other and only come together once every few years. If over the course of those few years, there is no correspondence between the two, any reunion that may take place will most likely be emotionless and distant. However, if regardless of the distance between them, the two have attempted to connect at all times with letters, messages, and gifts, the reunion will be rich with an intense feeling of closeness that is the manifestation of all of their previous efforts. Similarly, *tefillah* is a manifestation of all of our efforts – to the extent that we fortify our connection to God in all of our actions, we will be able to feel that closeness when we stand silently praying to Him.

***"Va-Ani Tefillah"* – The Highest of Praises**

This is what *David Ha-Melekh* meant when he referred to himself simply as "*tefillah*" – namely, that his life and essence was simply to stand before *Hashem*. With every other part of his existence – as a king, as a warrior, as a poet – he craved to be close to God. He used those aspects of his life to build on that connection so that his entire life would have the feeling of *tefillah*, of truly being *karov* (close) to *Hashem*. Describing himself as "*tefillah*" was not David's way of pointing out one particular strength, but rather it was a way of illustrating what the ultimate goal of his life was: *kirvat Elokim* (closeness to God).

May we all merit using every part of our lives to intensify the bond we have with *Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu*, and therefore be enabled to feel how true it is that we are able to stand in front of Him during every one of our *tefillot*.