YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

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**Shiur #17: *Ashrei* and *Uva-leTzion***

*Tachanun,* which we discussed in the previous *shiur*, concludes the framework of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. But the daily prayer is not yet over. Immediately after *Tachanun,* we encounter a section consisting of verses. First, there is the chapter of Psalms commonly referred to as "*Ashrei*," followed by a short psalm of salvation ("May God answer you on a day of trial”), followed by the collection of verses known as "*Uva Le-Tzion*." This section is the focus of our discussion in this *shiur*.

The first element in this section is *Ashrei*. Most commentators offer no explanation for its location here, preferring to rely on the statement in *Berakhot* (4b) that "one who recites *Tehila Le-David* **three** times every day is guaranteed a place in the World to Come."[[1]](#footnote-1) Since *Ashrei* is recited in the beginning of *Shacharit* and before *Mincha*, there is a need for a third recitation, and so it was added at the end of *Shacharit*. I have never seen a better explanation, so we will leave it at that.

Our focus will be on *Uva Le-Tzion*. This section basically consists of a series of verses, and it is difficult to explain its purpose or role. Unlike the *berakhot* that we have examined in the past, there is no framework with a well-defined structure that we can analyze. The one noticeable part with a familiar aspect is the presence of a *Kedusha* text at the beginning, but this provides more questions than answers. Why are we reciting *Kedusha* again, after including it in the *Shemoneh Esrei*? Why does this *Kedusha* come with a *targum*, a translation into Aramaic? And where is the context? In the *Kedusha* of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, we open with the call to sanctify God's name as it is sanctified in the heavens by the angels. In the *Kedusha* found before *Kriat Shema*, we describe how the angels sanctify God's name in praise and hymns, and then we cite the *Kedusha*. In our case, the verses of *Kedusha* are simply recited, with no more than a brief introduction stating the source. There is no call, introduction, or framework.

(I read once – in a source I no longer remember – a suggestion that one should recite *Kedusha* three times a day, since it is written "Holy, Holy, Holy." Hence, parallel to what I cited above about *Ashrei*, there is a need for a third one, and it is simply added here. This strikes me as being a very unsatisfying as an explanation in this case.)

Some answers to this question are based on the secrets of the Kabbala. I would like to present a non-mystical explanation based on a comment of Rashi.

The *mishna* in *Sota* (48a) states:

R. Yehoshua testified: Since the day that the Temple was destroyed, there is no day that is not cursed, and the dew has not descended with a blessing, and the flavor of fruits has been taken away.

The *gemara* (49a) expands this statement:

Rava said: Every day has a greater curse than the previous one, as is written, "In the morning you will say, ‘Who will bring the evening,’ and in the evening you will say, ‘Who will bring morning.’" Which morning? If you say, the next morning, how does he know what will be? Rather, it is the previous morning! But if so, on what does the world endure? **On the *Kedusha De-Sidra* and on the *yehei shmei rabba* of *aggadeta*.**

Rashi explains:

***Kedusha De-Sidra***: The order (*seder*) of the *Kedusha*, as it was only instituted so that all of Israel would be engaged in a little bit of Torah every day, when he recites its reading and the translation (*targum*), which is like being engaged in Torah. Since it applies to all of Israel, scholars and the common people (*talmidim* and *amei ha-aretz*), and there are two elements – the sanctification of the name of God and the study of Torah – it is dear (*chaviv*).

Rashi here defines for us the essential nature of *Uva Le-Tzion*, the *Kedusha De-Sidra*. It is an activity of learning Torah. But Rashi adds that what makes this learning of Torah special (*chaviv*) is that it is the learning of "all of Israel," the learned and the ignorant alike. This explains why the translation of the verses is part of the recitation. Any time Aramaic appears in the prayers, the explanation is that a special effort was made to include the less-learned, who, in Babylonia, spoke Aramaic but might not understand Hebrew. Rashi here is saying that this was not merely a nice afterthought; it is the main purpose of the recitation itself. This is a chance to have a common experience of learning Torah of all of Israel, even those who normally would be precluded by their lack of education. The *targum*, then, is essential to achieve the goal.

Rashi adds a second point: "There are two elements, the sanctification of the name and the study of Torah." If this were merely a cumulative addition, it would not be a cause to make the prayer special. Rashi clearly means that the two points somehow interrelate and combine to create something unique. What is the connection between the sanctification of the name of God and the study of Torah?

We are now basically **after** the morning prayer. *Tefilla* ends with *Tachanun*. What we are doing now is an answer to the question: What do we do, how do we live, when we depart from *tefilla*, from the presence of God? This is a very difficult transition, from *kodesh* to *chol*, from the presence of God to the mundane world outside. The answer of the Sages in constructing the morning prayer is to "learn a little bit of Torah." After prayer, one must engage in learning. When you have finished praying, it is truly over. The experience of standing before God is finished. There is a clear demarcation between "inside" and "outside," between "sitting in the house of God all the days of my life" and living in the world of man, of trials and tribulations, of mundane values, successes and failures. Three steps backwards and you are outside. But Torah does not include the same wall of demarcation. There is no "*mechitza*" between the world of Torah and the secular world. When you finish learning, the Torah accompanies you because it is part of you. In other words, Torah, even though it is the words of the living God and an intimate encounter with Him, is also part of the world.

Prayer elevates you to the heavenly throne. Torah has already descended from on high, to Mt. Sinai, to the lower world in which we live. Torah is the bridge, and it is dear because **every** Jew is learning. If only the learned elite engages in Torah study, this is not "*chaviv*" – and perhaps more importantly, this will not support the existence of the world. The destruction of the Temple indicates that God has left, so to speak, the lower world. How, then, can the world persist? How can it exist if God is not present? The answer is through the common Torah of all Israel, because Torah is itself the presence of God in the world. If Israel is engaged in studying Torah, that is a recreation of the descent of Torah – and the presence of God – on Mt. Sinai. Only Israel as a national unit can be the seat of the presence of God in the world. The Torah of the elite, even if it is qualitatively and quantitatively immensely more than the "little bit" of the whole of Israel, is like the "house of God.” It is internal, sanctified, separated, an island within the world. But the Torah, even a little bit of Torah, of all of Israel, transforms the world itself.

This is what Rashi means when he says that there are two elements, Torah and the sanctification of the name of God. Sanctification of the name of God means the raising of the actual presence of God in the world. The Torah of *Uva Le-Tzion* is, despite its simple level, Torah that sanctifies the name of God in the world, precisely because it is the simple Torah of the common man, all together. This Torah serves as the basis of the Divine presence in the wide world, and not just in the *beit midrash*.

Hence, the Sages chose as the actual content of this "little bit of Torah" verses that are themselves *Kedusha*. It is not the content of these verses that produces the sanctification of the name of God. Leaning Torah does that. But it is appropriate to make that clear by choosing the verses that explicitly state the sanctification of God, the text of the *Kedusha*.

So this is not really a recitation of *Kedusha*. There is no need here for an introduction, calling on the congregation to sanctify God's name. There is no need here to explain that the angels recite *Kedusha* on high. In fact, this kind of sanctification of God's name is completely outside the experience of the angels. Any verse would really have been just as effective. There is *kedusha* here, but it is not in the content of the verse but in the experience of the study of Torah by all of Israel, as we leave the house of God and venture into the world. The experience is one of Torah, rather than of reciting *kedusha*, but the result is *kedusha.*

The prayer chosen after the *kedusha* verses make this very clear:

Blessed is our God, who has created us for His glory, and separated us from those who err,

And has given us the true Torah, and eternal life has imprinted within us.

May He open our hearts in His Torah

And place in our hearts His love and fear

And the desire to do his will and serve Him with perfect heart.

In the Geonic *siddur* of R. Amram Gaon, the prayer concludes at that point. (In the *siddur* of R. Saadya Gaon, only the *Kedusha* is found.) But today, in all *siddurim*, this is followed by a collection of verses about trust and faith in God: "Blessed is the man who trusts in God and God is his trust." This now makes sense. We are going out into the world, leaving the safety of the sanctuary. We are on the bridge, leaving behind the walls of the house of God, having completed prayer. To do so, we must arm ourselves with the attribute of faith and trust.

In the Sefardic rite, and actually in most Ashkenazi *siddurim* as well until the modern era, the very last verse is "Strengthen and fortify your hearts, all those who hope for God." Torah of all Israel is the strength of the heart, to go out into the world and sanctify the name of God, of all who hope for God.

חזקו ואמץ לבבכם, כל המיחלים לה'

1. There is an alternative version of the text that does not include the number three; see Rosh 1,6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)