YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in memory of   
Lillian Grossman *z”l* – Devorah Leah bas Shlomo Halevi   
by Larry and Maureen Eisenberg

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Dedicated *le-zekher nishmot* Amelia Ray and Morris Ray   
on the occasion of their eighth *yahrtzeits*   
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray

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**Shiur #15: Before God**

In this course, we are not going to discuss the individual blessings of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, as a number of years ago I devoted an entire course to the text of the *Shemoneh Esrei* (available on the [VBM website](http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/understanding-shemoneh-esrei) and published in Hebrew as a book two years ago). However, within the framework of our discussion of the structure of prayer generally, there are two additional elements of the *Shemoneh Esrei* that I would like to address – *Kedusha* and *Birkat Kohanim* – which are found inthe *Shemoneh Esrei*but are not themselves elements of petitionary prayer.

In order to understand why these two elements are placed within the *Shemoneh Esrei*, we need to understand a basic aspect of the *Shemoneh Esrei* itself. In order to do so, I will briefly analyze an entire chapter in the laws of *tefilla* as formulated by the Rambam.

The Rambam, as is well known, did not merely list the laws of the Talmud; he did a marvelous job of organizing them. This is especially evident in *Hilkhot Tefilla*, where the Rambam took statements found all over *Masekhet* *Berakhot* and elsewhere and organized them into chapters with specific themes. Chapter 4 opens with the statement: "There are five things that invalidate prayer." In contrast, chapter 5 opens with the heading: "There are eight things that one who prays should be diligent to fulfill, but if it is difficult or he is unable or he has prayed and neglected them, it does not invalidate the prayer."

Specifically because these latter requirements are **not** absolute, they provide a window into understanding the nature of prayer and the *Shemoneh Esrei*. They are expressing not the definition of prayer, but the goal, the ideal state. The question is whether we can derive a general principle from the list.

The eight requirements are, in the language of the Rambam:

1. Standing
2. Facing the Temple
3. Preparing the body (proper posture)
4. Preparing one's clothing
5. Preparing the location
6. Moderating the volume
7. Bowing
8. Prostration

I believe that a common theme runs through all eight. In a few cases, this theme is explicit in the Rambam, and I would like to suggest that it can be exported to all of them. Since these requirements are unique to the *Shemoneh Esrei* and do not apply to other prayers and recitations, this will provide us with a definition of the unique status of the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

The Rambam offers no explanation or insight for the first requirement, standing. We will address "Facing the Temple" shortly. The third requirement provides a more explicit hint:

Preparing the body – how? When one stands in prayer, one must place one's feet next to each other and direct one's eyes downwards, as though he were looking at the ground, **and his heart should be directed upwards, as though he were standing in the sky**, and he should place his hands on his heart, the right clasped over the left,  **and he stands as a servant before his master with fear, awe, and trepidation**.

*Tefilla* is not mere communication. When you recite the *Shemoneh Esrei*, you are not sending a message to God; you are standing in His presence. To use a somewhat archaic expression, *tefilla* is an **audience** with the king. When I sit at my computer to compose an email to someone from whom I need a favor, even if he is a very important person and even if he is the king himself, I do not need to compose my posture in a particular manner. There would be nothing inappropriate in writing the email while lying in bed. Nor would I have to get dressed; the email is in no way denigrated by my writing it in my pajamas. Yet:

Preparing one’s clothing – how? He should prepare his clothing in advance and make himself special (*metzayein atzmo*) and be elegant (*mehader*), as is written, "Bow before God in the beauty of holiness (*hadrat kodesh*).

The accepted definition in the *poskim* for the standard of dressing for prayer is "as one dresses to appear before the king." This appears in the Rambam in the negative when he relates to being barefoot: "He should not stand in prayer… in bare feet if the custom of the people in that place is not **to stand before great people** without feet coverings."

This idea is directly reflected in several other items in the list. It is the obvious explanation for the practice of bowing – you can only bow before God if you are in His presence – but extends to details as well.

When he bows [at the end of the *Shemoneh Esrei*], he takes his leave (*noten shalom*) on his left, and afterwards on his right, and then he lifts his head from the bowing…

And why does he take leave on his left first? Because his left is the right of he who is facing him; in other words, when he stands before the king, he takes leave from the right of the king and afterwards the left of the king, and the Sages established that **taking leave from prayer is like taking leave from the presence of the king.**

I believe that this is the meaning behind all of the eight items in the Rambam’s list and that it is the principle that guided the Rambam in formulating the list.

Standing makes obvious sense – you are in the presence of the king. Facing the Temple is meant to orient you with the one with whom you are speaking, He whose presence rests in the Temple. This is made explicit by the directive regarding what to do if you do not know in which direction the Temple or Jerusalem is: "A blind man or one who is unable to determine directions or one who is on a ship should direct his heart towards the Divine Presence and pray." The Temple is a physical stand-in for the Divine presence in the world.

We already discussed the need to attend to proper posture and clothing. Regarding location, the Rambam writes: "He should stand in a low place and face the wall… He should not stand on a place that is three handbreadths high… or on a chair." This could – and should – be understood as contributing to proper intent when praying, but I suggest it is also part of the proper relationship in the royal audience, a meeting between two un-equals.

Regarding moderating the volume of one’s prayer, the Rambam writes: “One does not pray mentally, but also not in a loud voice.” The *gemara* gives two different reasons for refraining from praying out loud – in order not to interfere with others[[1]](#footnote-1) and because one who prays out loud is "of the small in faith." The obvious difference is that the first reason applies only in public. The Rambam differentiates between public and private prayer, but applies the rule even to private prayer, unless one is sick and unable to concentrate on his prayer without praying out loud.

The simple explanation of "small of faith" is that praying loudly implies that God is hard of hearing (compare with the ridicule of Eliyahu addressed to the priests of Baal when their prayers are unanswered). However, if we were indeed far away from God, praying out loud would not be so ridiculous. In fact, this stricture applies only to the *Shemoneh Esrei*. The very name of extraordinary petition in times of trouble – *ze'aka* – indicates that sometimes in order to get help from God, you need to call out. In this case, however, where you have been granted an audience with the king, it is quite out of place to be shouting. Do you think He is hard of hearing?! You are speaking up close, in an intimate meeting of two.

Bowing is obviously an integral feature of the royal audience. In listing prostration, the Rambam is referring to *nefilat apayim*, the prayer we call *Tachanun*, which comes immediately after the *Shemoneh Esrei*. We shall discuss this prayer in the future, but the action referenced by the Rambam, prostration, obviously fits into the same framework that we have been discussing.

I do not believe that this aspect of prayer, the immediacy of the meeting with God and standing in His presence, contributes to the **efficacy** of prayer. It is not that God can hear you better or is more inclined to grant your request. The important point here is the fact itself. Aside from communicating our requests to God, we are also granted a private and personal audience with Him in which to present our requests. That has importance in and of itself. It is a sign of God's favor that we are called to His presence (unlike Esther, who was "not called to come to the king for these last thirty days"). The experience of *tefilla* is one of standing in God's presence, and this is important for its own sake.

In light of this aspect of prayer, we can understand the two additions to the *Shemoneh Esrei*.

*Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessing, is recited daily. This blessing was recited by the priests in the Temple as part of the daily temple service. The *gemara* states that there is also a blessing *be-gevulin*, outside the Temple, and that is the basis for its recitation in our times as well.[[2]](#footnote-2) But why is it placed in the *Shemoneh Esrei*?

The simple answer is that *Birkat Kohanim* *be-gevulin* mirrors *Birkat Kohanim* in the Temple, where it was part of the *avoda*, the divine service. The *Shemoneh Esrei* is a kind of *avoda* (*avoda she-balev*, according to the Rambam, based on the Sifri), so *Birkat Kohanim* is placed within its framework to preserve the character of *avoda*.

I think we can find a deeper connection. *Birkat Kohanim* appears twice in the Torah. In one place, in *Parashat* *Naso*, it appears as an independent *mitzva,* unrelated to any other. There is no mention there of the Temple, and no particular time or place are given for the blessing by the priests: "They shall place My name on the people of Israel, and I shall bless them." But there is another reference to *Birkat Kohanim.* In *Parashat Shemini*, when the *Mishkan* is dedicated and the people of Israel witness the descent of the Holy Presence of God on the *Mishkan*, we find the following sequence of events:

Aharon performs a long ritual of sacrifices, after preparing himself for seven days for this role (*Vayikra* 9:1-21).

Aharon raised his hands over the people and blessed them, and he descended from preparing the sin-offering and the burnt-offering, and the peace-offering. (22)

Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting and exited, and they blessed the people, and the glory of God was visible to all the people. (23)

And fire came out from before *Hashem*, and it consumed the burnt-offering and the fats on the altar, and the people saw it and they sang out, and they fell on their faces. (24)

Rashi, based on the Sifri, explains that this blessing was *Birkat Kohanim*. (This event, of course, takes place **before** the explicit text in *Sefer Bamidbar* mandating *Birkat Kohanim*). We see that *Birkat Kohanim* is a response to the encounter experience with the Divine Presence. It arises naturally from the meeting of the people with God, with God's presence in the *Mishkan*. On the eighth day, God's presence descended on the Mishkan and this was experienced by all the assembled people. In a natural and spontaneous manner – for no command is given by God – Aharon blesses the people with *birkat kohanim*. The reason is simple – the blessing of the priests is not a blessing of the priests but of God: "They shall place My name on Israel, and **I** shall bless them." The language of the priestly blessing makes this clear. There is no mention there of benefits that God will shower on the recipients of the blessings, but only of the presence and closeness of God Himself: "May God show you the light of His face and grant you grace. May God life up His face unto you, and grant you peace."

I believe that the blessing of Aharon on the "eighth day" is the source for the dual location of *Birkat Kohanim*, in the *Mikdash* and in the *Shemoneh Esrei*. It is not the fact that *Shemoneh Esrei* is a replacement for the daily sacrifice that makes it the location for *Birkat Kohanim*; indeed, even in the Temple, the blessing was not part of the offering of the *tamid* sacrifice. It is the **experience** of the *Shemoneh Esrei* as an encounter, an audience with God, that leads to *Birkat Kohanim*, just as it did when Aharon completed the ritual that resulted in the Presence of God appearing to the people on the eighth day. God blesses the congregation through the agency of the priests because He and they are meeting. Even more, I believe, God's blessing to the people is a direct and natural result of that meeting, for the blessing of God is, in its essence, the meeting itself, the experiencing of God in one's life – the "light of His face" and the "raising of His countenance" and His peace. Meeting God is itself receiving God's blessing, and the *Birkat Kohanim* is the expression of that.

The same point explains the introduction of *Kedusha* into the *Shemoneh Esrei.* I will not explain the meaning of the *Kedusha* here. (See the *shiur* in the series on the *Shemona Esrei* – http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-06-kedusha). But in short, *Kedusha* is our acceptance of the role of being the bearers of God's name in the world, of being the basis for the Divine Presence in the world: "Holy Holy Holy is the God of Hosts, **His glory fills the entire world**." Hence, it begins with the encounter which takes place within the framework of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. You meet God; you glorify Him and attempt to carry that Presence with you.

This point – that prayer is standing before God – is mentioned in one other place by the Rambam, and this time it is a necessary requirement of prayer, one whose absence invalidates the prayer: "What is the intention [necessary for prayer]? He should empty his heart of all thoughts and see himself as **standing before the Divine Presence"** (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:16).

1. The *gemara* in *Sota* (32b) gives an additional reason, also connected to having one’s prayer heard by others: "In order not to embarrass sinners [who confess in the prayer]." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Outside of *Eretz Yisrael*, Ashkenazim recite *Birkat Kohanim* only on holidays. The reason for this is somewhat unclear, but in any event, the *halakha* in principle mandates it daily, and that is the custom in most of *Eretz Yisrael*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)