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**

**Shiur #16: *Tachanun***

After one completes the [*Shemoneh Esrei*], one falls on one's face and inclines a bit, he and all the congregation, and he should beseech (*yitchanen*) while fallen, and then he sits and lifts his head, he and all the congregation, and he beseeches a little out loud while seated. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefilla* 95)

The Rambam refers here to the prayer that we call *Tachanun*. In this *shiur*, we will attempt to understand its meaning within the framework of the daily prayers. Why, after completing the nineteen blessings of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, do we add another few minutes of requests for Divine assistance and grace?

The Rambam, as we mentioned last week, views *Tachanun* as an integral aspect of prayer and as an important addendum to the *Shemoneh Esrei*. He lists reciting *Tachanun* as one of the eight things that characterize prayer, even though they are not necessary requirements. However, the Rambam also presents *Tachanun* in a particular light by giving it a specific name – “*hishtachavaya*” – prostration. The emphasis here is not on what you **say*,*** but on the position you take when saying it. After praying – where, as we saw, there is an emphasis on standing erect – one falls to the ground (the literal name in the Talmud is “*nefilat apayim*,”"falling on one's face"). Accordingly, we could conclude that *Tachanun* is not really about an opportunity to speak some more, but is about our relationship with God. The royal audience we described last week is completed and complimented by expressing our complete self-negation in front of God.

Interestingly, the *Shulchan Arukh*, in the course of a lengthy list of laws pertaining to *Tachanun*, neglects to use the word *Tachanun* or to even mention that one recites *tachanunim* (supplications). Even though the *Shulchan Arukh* does not quote the Rambam, it completely absorbed the Rambam's attitude, using the term *nefilat apayim* exclusively.

What is the meaning of *hishtachavaya*? We often find the verb used in *Tanakh* to describe the reaction to hearing good news. Eliezer bows to God when he hears from Betuel's family that they agree to the match of Yitzchak and Rivka, and the Jews bow down to God when Moshe and Aharon tell them for the first time that they will be redeemed. In both cases, bowing expresses gratitude. Gratitude, I think, is expressed by acknowledging a debt (see the *shiur* on *Birkat Modim* in the series on the *Meaning of the* *Shemoneh Esrei* – <http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-23-modim-part-1>). Bowing to acknowledge a debt indicates that because I owe you, I am subservient to you (as the verse in *Mishlei* 22:7 states, "A borrower is a servant to a lender"). Viewed graphically, the one who bows indicates that he is lower than the other, and hence subservient to him. *Nefilat apayim*, prostration, is more extreme, for here the relation is not **relative** – I am lower than you – but absolute – I am nothing, dust (in your presence). It expresses absolute self-abnegation. This explains the difference between the bowing in *Shemoneh Esrei*, which the Rambam calls *"keri'a*,” and the prostration after the *Shemoneh Esrei* in *Tachanun*, which the Rambam calls *hishtachavaya.* In the *Shemoneh Esrei*, I am the servant of God called for an audience, a personal meeting with my King. As we explained last week, this requires that I appear in dignity, with formal dress and proper preparation, standing erect, and formally bowing at certain times, to express my position as a member of the King's court as one of His servants. The meeting with God dignifies man and elevates him. *Nefilat apayim* is the opposite, essentially nullifying the position taken in prayer. Man's position disappears and he falls to the ground in his realization that he is nothing but dust and ashes. The honor of having been called to appear before the King fades away, leaving only the helpless, terrified feeling of being unworthy of any stature at all.

Just as bowing is the response to hearing good news, prostration is the response to hearing terrible news and the realization that one is helpless before the situation. Thus, we find Moshe and Aharon falling on their faces when confronting the sin of the spies and again when Moshe hears the challenge of Korach, and Yehoshua prostrates himself after the disaster at Ai. A particularly instructive example is Esther before the king – "and she fell and pleaded," which follows the statement that "we have been sold, I and my people, for death and destruction."

The relationship to *tefilla* is clear. In the *shemoneh Esrei*, we make a measured request for what we need, presenting our arguments in a formal setting. When we finish, we prostrate ourselves and plead and beg, abandoning the formal setting. R. Yehuda b. Yakar, the medieval commentator on the *siddur*, adds in his description of *Tachanun*: "And one weeps, for the main thing is the weeping, for the gates of tears are not closed." When all else has failed and there is no rational basis for God's favor, we throw ourselves on the ground and weep, for all we have is our helplessness.

In the accepted text of *Tachanun*, the prayer concludes with a section beginning "We do know what we can do." The *Shela* explains that after praying standing, sitting, and prostrating, we conclude by saying that we are at our wit's end; there is nothing more we can think of. The Tur quotes a version of *Tachanun* found in the *siddur* of R. Amram Gaon in which this sentiment is promoted to the main theme of *Tachanun* itself:

Each one makes his request and says: Sovereign of the Worlds and Master of Masters, God great and mighty and awesome, have mercy on us, for we are your servants, creatures of flesh and blood, dust, worm, and maggot. What are we and what is our lives, what is our grace, what is our justification, what is our power, what can we say before You, our God and the God of our fathers, for all the great ones are like naught before You, and the famous and as though they never existed, and the wise are without knowledge, and the intelligent without intelligence, for all their deeds are nothingness, and the days of their lives are vanities before You… And we have no priest to perform our obligations and no high priest to atone for our sins, and no altar to offer a sacrifice on, and no Holy of Holies to pray there. Therefore, may it be Your will that our prayer which we pray before You should be accepted and considered by You like bulls and sheep, as though we had sacrificed them on the altar, and You will grant us grace. (Tur, *Orach Chaim* 141)

The text here emphasizes helplessness and hopelessness, with a touch of desperation. This merges seamlessly with the self-abnegation we identified in the posture of prostration placed at the center by the Rambam. We are helpless, worthless, and hopeless – except for You.

The text of R. Amram Gaon includes an additional note – not only that I have prayed and that my prayers did not succeed and were wanting, but that prayer itself is by definition wanting, for it is not actually the service as was practiced in the Temple, with the priests sacrificing on the altar. Not only was **my** prayer a failure, but prayer itself as an institution is a failing replacement for true service of God. In this sense, *Tachanun* is the request that seeks to bridge the gap between my paltry prayer and the true service of God in the Temple: “May it be Your will that our prayer which we pray before You should be accepted and considered by You like bulls and sheep, as though we had sacrificed them on the altar, and You will grant us grace."

A deepening of the meaning of *Tachanun* can be found in the commentary of R. Bachayei. R. Bachayei, in his commentary to *Parashat Korach*, presents three different elements of the inner meaning of *Tachanun*:

Know that *nefilat apayim* has three meanings: The first is "the awe of heaven." The second is "to show suffering and submission." The third is "to show the arresting of one's senses and the nullification of one's feelings."

The first is the awe of heaven, that one should assume on himself shame and modesty, for **covering one's face** is a practice of humility and shame. Since the intention of the one who prays is that the Divine Presence is before him, as is written, "I place *Hashem* before me always" (*Tehillim* 16:8), they instituted as one of the strategies of prayer to cover the face, and all of this is for the fear of God, as was said of Moshe, "Moshe hid his face, for he was fearful of looking at God."

R. Bachayei here identifies "falling on one's face" as a means of covering one's face, not looking directly forward at God, who is understood to be standing directly before the one who is praying. He calls this "shame and humility." I think this should be understood as a feeling of unworthiness. This is close to the feelings we identified above, but not exactly the same. It is not only helplessness, which could conceivably not be your fault, but unworthiness. Of course, the second is a basis for the first. This extends and deepens the idea we have developed.

The second is to show suffering and submission. This is because one who falls on his face suffers and submits, and submission is one of the essential elements of repentance. And then, his prayers are acceptable, and God considers his suffering and fulfills his request.

R. Bachayei continues and emphasizes that suffering is a reason that a prayer should be fulfilled. I think this idea should be read as a continuation of the previous one. Since we are worthless, there is no argument that can be offered why we should deserve to have God fulfill our request. Suffering "works" not because you are worthy, but because you are not: "And when he will cry out to me, I shall hear, for I am gracious." God "considers" the pain – we might even add that God feels and shares the pain, and this leads to His graciousness in fulfilling the request.

The third is to show the arresting of one's senses and the nullification of one's feelings. This is because one who falls on his face covers his eyes and seals his mouth, and he concludes in his mind that he does not think about his own injury or benefit… as though his feelings are nullified and arrested from fulfilling his own desires, and his eyes and lips are sealed – he cannot see or speak other than fulfilling the will of God.

The nations [Christians] show this idea by arranging their hands in supplication [a reference to clasping of the hands in Christian prayer], and they themselves do not know why they have become accustomed this way. But the reason is to show the nullification of owns power, as though your hands were restrained and you give them over to He to whom you are praying. Now, because in order to advance one's benefit and distance one's injury the movement of the feet is greater than the movement of the hands, therefore we arrange out feet rather than our hands.

This third point is, at least for me, a novel point. *Nefilat apayim* is a physical manifestation of "turning oneself off," of denying one's own autonomy, leading to complete submission to the will of God. This, of course, is a continuation of the second point – the idea of submission – taken to an extreme. You no longer have a will, feelings, or desires that could be different than the will of God. By falling down, you are denying your feet the ability to move, you are foregoing your autonomy to further your own purpose – thereby giving it completely to God.

The complex of feelings and attitudes in the different sources I have quoted are not contradictory, but rather together they provide a rich expression of a basic common core. *Tachanun* represents the opposite of the *Shemoneh Esrei* – not a formal conversation with God, but a desperate cry of utter helplessness. This includes self-abnegation, crying, hopelessness, helplessness, awe and shame, submission, and self-denial: "From the depths I call to You *Hashem*."

There is one more source I would like to share with you, more extreme than any of the others I cited. The Arizal said that *nefilat apayim* is death (self-abnegation taken to the extreme), which is then followed by recreation (*birya chadasha*). One has to forego everything in order to gain new life. (The *Tachanun* recited by the Ari, the 25th chapter of Psalms, begins, "To You, God, my soul I lift," which the Ari understands as "my soul I return.") I do not completely identify with this level of submission, but I think you can all see how it follows and continues the theme that we have examined.

Accordingly, *Tachanun* is an important complement to the *Shemoneh Esrei*, coming after it and expressing our realization that we are not really worthy of the audience God granted us previously. On festival days and on Shabbat, it may be inappropriate to cry out to God in this way, but on a regular day, especially one on which I am "advancing my own benefit" and requesting that God fulfill my requests, this is a necessary element in understanding the proper relationship with God.