YESHIVAT hAR eTZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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the laws of prayer

**Shiur #26: The Laws of the *Shemoneh Esrei* (1)**

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**Introduction:**

In previous *shiurim*, we explored the nature and obligation of *Tefilla*, the preparations for *Tefilla*, the proper time to pray, and the possibility of a compensatory *Tefilla*, as well as voluntary *Tefilla*.

This week, we will begin our study of the laws of the *Shemoneh Esrei* itself, including the details of how one should stand, and towards what direction one should face.

**Approaching Prayer:**

The Rokeach (Eleazar ben Yehudah ben Kalonymus of Worms, 1176-1238), cited by the Rema (95:1) writes that before beginning the *Shemoneh Esrei*, one should take three steps forwards, "the way of coming close and approaching." He notes that in three places the *Tanakh* employs the phrase "*va-yigash* – and he approached" before prayer. While the Eliya Rabba writes that one need not take three steps backwards, both the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (95:3) and Mishna Berura (95:3) note that the custom IS (when possible) to take three steps backwards, as "all actions of holiness require preparation." Furthermore, the Maharil records that he would stand up when he reached "*tehilot le-kel elyon*…."

**Angelic or Priestly Prayers:**

The rabbis of the Talmud described the way in which the *Shemoneh Esrei* should be recited.

For example, the Gemara (*Berakhot* 10b) instructs us say the *Shemoneh Esrei* while our feet are together, just as the angels are describe by Yechezkel as appearing to have one leg.

"R. Yose son of R. Chanina also said in the name of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov: When one prays, he should place his feet together as it says (*Yechezkel* 1:7), 'And their feet were a singular straight foot…'"

Interestingly, the *Yerushalmi* cites a debate.

"One who stands in prayer should even out their feet (le-*hashvot* *raglav*). Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Simon debate this issue. One says like the **angels**, as it says, 'And their feet were like a singular strait foot…' and one said like **kohanim**, as it says, 'You should not go up the steps…'- this teaches that the *kohanim* would walk heel to toe as if their feet were equal to each other…"

The Beit Yosef notes that while Rabbeinu Yona assumes that our Talmud rules in accordance with the view that one should pray like the angels, the Tur cites both opinions, implying that one may follow either view. In fact, elsewhere (98) the Tur himself equates a person praying to a kohen performing his service.

The Acharonim offer a number of reasons for this halakha. Some stress the impact this position may have on one's *Tefilla*. For example, the Kaf Ha-Chayyim explains that whose feet are "tied together" cannot walk, and has time to recite his prayers with the proper intentions. Similarly the Beit Yosef explains that one who is about to speak with the *Shekhina* should remove any physical thoughts from one's heart and emulate the angels. In addition, he cites the Mahari Abuhav that one behave as if one has only one leg, unable or without reason to flee, rather to achieve closeness with God. Others focus on the symbolism of one's feet being together. The Maharsha, for example, explains that one should stand before God "like a slave with his feet tied…."

The Shulchan Arukh cites the popular custom to pray while emulating angelic beings. However, a person who has difficulty standing in this position, i.e. an elderly person or a sick person, should certainly pray in a position which is most comfortable to them. One who is unable to recite the *Shemoneh Esrei* with their legs together should still, preferably, stand, rather than pray while sittings. Alternatively, one who must pray while sitting should still preferably keep their feet together.

**Praying while Traveling:**

At times, one may find it difficult, or impossible, to pray while standing. Clearly one who us unable to stand (i.e. an elderly of sick person) should pray while reclining or lying.

What about someone who is traveling? The Gemara (*Berakhot* 30a) teaches:

"If he is riding on a donkey he dismounts and prays. If he is unable to dismount he should turn his face [towards Jerusalem]; and if he cannot turn his face he should concentrate his thoughts on the holy of holies…

If one was riding on a donkey … our rabbis taught: if one was riding on donkey and the time arrived for saying *Tefilla*, if he has someone to hold his donkey, he dismounts and prays, if not, he sits where he is and prays. Rebbe says: In either case he may sit where he is and pray, because [otherwise] he will be worrying. Rav, or, as some say, R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: the halakha follows Rebbe…"

Most Rishonim (Tosafot *s.v. halakha*, Mordekhai 97, Rosh 4:19, and Rashba) explain that even when there is no present danger, one may still pray while on the donkey, even while it is moving, if that is where he will achieve the greatest *kavvana.*

Furthermore, the Orchot Chayyim (45) cites Rashi as saying that one who is surrounded by non-Jews and fears that they may interrupt his prayer, or one who fears that he may lose a business transaction, may pray while sitting in his place, as otherwise he would be unable to properly concentrate during his *Tefilla*.

The Shulchan Arukh (94:4-7) rules in accordance with the above Gemara and Rishonim, that one who is traveling may recite the *Shemoneh Esrei* while sitting, if stopping to pray will harm his concentration, even if he merely fears that he may arrive late. However, he should to stand for those sections which require bowing, and ideally even for the first *berakha*, *Avot*.

Practically, if one is riding in a bus or train, and is unable to stand, either physically, or because standing will inhibit his ability to concentrate, he may pray while sitting, with his feet together, and should preferably try to stand for the first *berakha*, and the "bows." In addition, he should try to take three steps forwards upon beginning the *Shemoneh Esrei*, and backwards upon concluding, even while sitting.

Similarly, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (90:20) writes that one who is on a train, and fears that if he leaves his seat in order to pray while standing someone may steal his belongings, he may pray while sitting.

If one if is in the middle of the *Shemoneh Esrei* and he arrives at his destination, he may stop his prayer in order to leave the bus (*Tefilla Ke-Hilkhata* 27:22).

One might question whether it is preferable for one traveling by plane to pray while standing uncomfortably in an isle (and at times preventing others from passing!) or in one's seat. As the Shulchan Arukh writes (94:4), "It is dependant upon the way, and the place, and upon one's ability to concentrate…."

**Body Position During Prayer:**

The Talmud (*Yevamot* 105b) teaches that one should direct one's eyes properly during *Tefilla*.

"…R. Chiyya and R. Shimon bar Rabbi once sat together, when one of them began as follows: A man who offers up his prayers must direct his eyes towards [the Temple] **below**, for it is said, 'And My eyes and My heart shall be there perpetually'… And the other said: The eyes of him who offers up prayers shall be directed towards [the heavens] **above**, for it is said, 'Let us lift up our heart with our hand.' In the meanwhile they were joined by R. Yishmael son of R. Yose. 'On what subject are you engaged?' he asked them. 'On the subject of prayer,' they replied. 'My father,' he said to them, 'ruled thus: A man who offers up his prayers must direct his **eyes** to the [Sanctuary] **below** and his **heart** towards [the heavens] **above** so that these two Scriptural texts may be complied with.'"

The Shulchan Arukh (95:2), in fact, writes:

"… One should lower one's head slightly so that his eyes are facing downwards and he should imagine as if he is standing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and his heart should be directed above to the heavens…"

The Rishonim offer a number of suggestions regarding one's posture during *Tefilla*. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 5:4), for example, suggests that one should place one's hands on one's heart as if they are tied up, like a slave who pleads for mercy from his master. Others suggest that one should pray with one's hands behind one's back.

The Beit Yosef cites the Mahari Abuhav who suggests that one should follow one's local custom, as there are many different customs, and pray as if one were approaching the local king or political leader.

**Direction of Prayer:**

The Gemara (*Berakhot* 30a) teaches:

"Our Rabbis taught: A blind man or one who cannot tell the cardinal points should direct his heart towards his Father in Heaven, as it says, 'And they pray unto the Lord.'

If one is standing outside of Israel, he should turn mentally (*yechaven libo*) towards *Eretz Yisrael*, as it says, 'And pray unto Thee towards their land' (I *Melakhim* 8:48). If he stands in *Eretz Yisrael* he should turn mentally towards Yerushalayim, as it says, 'And they pray unto the Lord toward the city which Thou hast chosen' (ibid. 44). If he is standing in Yerushalayim he should turn mentally towards the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, as it says, 'If they pray toward this house' (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 6:26). If he is standing in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, he should turn mentally towards the Holy of Holies, as it says, 'If they pray toward this place' (I *Melakhim* 8:35). If he was standing in the Holy of Holies he should turn mentally towards the *Beit Ha-Kaporet*. If he was standing behind the *Beit Ha-Kaporet* he should imagine himself to be in front of the *Kaporet*. Consequently, if he is in the east he should turn his face to the west; if in the west he should turn his face to the east; if in the south he should turn his face to the north; if in the north he should turn his face to the south. In this way all Israel will be turning their hearts towards one place…"

This Gemara implies that according to all opinions one should pray towards the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

However, the Gemara (*Bava Batra* 25b) elsewhere brings a debate regarding this issue.

"R. Yishmael also held that the *Shekhina* is in all places… R. Sheshet also held that the *Shekhina* is in all places, because [when desiring to pray] he used to say to his attendant: Set me facing any way except the east. And this was not because the *Shekhina* is not there, but because the Minim prescribe turning to the east. R. Abbahu, however, said that the *Shekhina* is in the west… R. Yitzchak said: He who desires to become wise should turn to the south [when praying], and he who desires to become rich should turn to the north. The symbol [by which to remember this] is that the table [in the Tabernacle] was to the north of the altar and the candlestick to the south. R. Yehoshua ben Levi, however, said that he should always turn to the south, because through obtaining wisdom he will obtain wealth, as it says, 'Length of days are in her [wisdom's] right hand, in her left hand are riches and honor.' But was it not R. Yehoshua ben Levi who said that the *Shekhina* is in the west? — [He means that] one should turn partly. R. Chanina said to R. Ashi: Those like you who live to the north of *Eretz Yisrael* should turn to the south…"

This Gemara presents four opinions. According to R. Yishmael and R. Sheshet, one may pray in any direction (although preferably not east), as the *Shekhina* is found in all directions. R. Yitzchak, on the other hand, believes that one may pray towards the north or south, depending on one's desire for wealth or wisdom. According to R. Abbahu, one should face west, as the *Shekhina* is in the west, and R. Yehoshua ben Levi adds that one may turn partly towards the south. Finally, R. Chanina maintains that one who lives to the north of Israel should turn south while praying.

Tosafot (*Berakhot* 30a and *Bava* *Batra* 25a) and the Rosh (*Berakhot* 4:19) assume that the Amoraim in *Bava Batra* (except for R. Chanina) DISAGREE with the sugya in *Massekhet Berakhot*, and they rule in accordance with the Gemara in *Berakhot*, i.e. that one should face Yerushalayim.

The Beit Yosef (94), however, cites the Semag, as well as the Mahari Abuhav, who rule that one MAY pray facing north or south, as long as one turns one face toward the east. In other words, the two *sugyot* do NOT contradict each other, and while ideally one should face Yerushalayim, one may pray in a different direction and turn one's face towards Jerusalem.

Surprisingly, the Shulchan Arukh (94:1-2) rules in accordance with their view, and one who wishes to fulfill the Talmudic maxim, "He who desires to become wise should turn to the south [when praying], and he who desires to become rich should turn to the north" may do so, although the Rema acknowledges that the custom was to pray towards the east (*mizrach*), in the direction of *Eretz Yisrael*, as long as he turns his face towards the east.

To what extent should one be precise in facing Yerushalayim during prayer? A number of sources seem to indicate the one's exact direct is not crucial.

For example, the Gemara (*Berakhot* 30a) teaches that one standing in '*Chutz La-aretz'* should direct their prayer towards *Eretz Yisrael*. The Gemara does not seem to require a more precise direction. Similarly, R. Chanina (*Bava Batra* 25a) instructs R. Ashi, "Those like you who live to the north of *Eretz Yisrael* should turn to the south…" Even though Bavel is north-east of Israel, he merely told them to face south. Furthermore, our version of that Gemara (*Berakhot* 30a) says that one should "direct one's heart (*yechaven libo*) towards Yerushalayim…" implying that one's intentions are critical, and not necessarily the physical direction.

Seemingly these sources support the common practice of those in the Western Diaspora to pray towards the east, regardless of their precise location. In fact, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (94:4) notes that while Tosafot, as well as the Rosh, faced east during their prayers, the Rema, as well as the Arukh Ha-Shulchan himself, lived north-west of *Eretz Yisrael*. Therefore, it would seem that the correct custom would be to build a *Beit Kenesset* facing southeast! Or, at least those facing east should turn slightly towards the south, which is clearly against the common custom! (The Mishna Berura writes that those who are west of Jerusalem, like "in our country," should face east!)

The Arukh Ha-Shulchan then questions the ruling of the Tosafot and Rosh, and asks, how is it possible that all of the Amoraim cited in *Bava Batra* reject Shlomo Ha-Melekh's call (I *Melakhim* 8:44), "And they pray unto the LORD toward the city which Thou hast chosen, and toward the house which I have built for Thy name…." Alternatively, how is it possible that we rule in accordance with the single opinion cited in *Berakhot*, against all of the Amoraim cited in *Bava Batra*!

He concludes that the Amoraim really do not disagree, and that while one may face other direction for various reasons, one should always be inclined towards Yerushalayim. Therefore, one can understand the custom of Eastern European Jewry to build their synagogues towards the east, as it is sufficient to face in the general direction of *Eretz Yisrael*, and to direct one's "heart" towards Jerusalem.

Others, however, seem to insist that one actually physically, and some even insist precisely, face Yerushalayim. Firstly, Tosafot insist that the Gemara in *Berakhot* should not read "turn one's heart," as one is required to actually turn one's face towards Yerushalayim. Secondly, the Ma'adanei Yom Tov (Rosh, *Berakhot* 4:6), who questions why R. Chanina told R. Ashi to face south while praying, and not southwest, explains that R. Chanina was instructing them not ONLY to face west, as they would have assumed, but also slightly south, towards Yerushalayim. In fact, the sixteenth century Rav Mordechi Yaffe, author of the *Levush* (and well educated in math, philosophy and engineering), insists that in Eastern Europe one should face east during prayer (see *Mishna Berura* 94:11). (Incidentally, calculating the precise direction to Jerusalem is quite complicated, depending on whether one uses the "great circle" or "rhumb line" [a loxodromic curve].)

The Acharonim cite a number of practical differences between these opinions. For example, should one who started the *Shemoneh Esrei* in a different direction move one's legs in order to turn towards Jerusalem? Similarly, if an entire congregation if facing away from Jerusalem, in one permitted to turn in a different direction, in order to face the proper direction? The Mishna Berura (95:10), for example, rules that if one mistakenly started to pray facing the incorrect direction, one should continue, and "turn one's face" towards Jerusalem.

Often, one may find one's self in a synagogue in which the *aron kodesh* faces away from Jerusalem. The Mishna Berura (10), as well as the Arukh Ha-Shulchan and others, rules that one should NOT turn one's back to the *aron*, even at the expense of praying away from Jerusalem. In fact, the Arukh Ha-Shulchan (94:5) writes that even those to the south of the *aron kodesh* facing east shouldn't face somewhat south, as by doing so they would be turning their backs, even slightly, away from the *aron*. The Peri Megadim, however, in his *Mishbetzot Zahav*, disagrees, claiming that only those standing directly next to the *aron* itself should avoid turning their backs to the *aron*.

Incidentally, the Yeshivat Har Etzion *Beit Midrash*, which faces due north, is 38.5 degrees north of Jerusalem. In other words, one who wishes to face Jerusalem precisely must turn slightly to the right while praying. Rav Amital ruled in accordance with the Arukh Ha-Shulchan, that the *tzibbur* should face the *aron ha-kodesh* (see <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/yom-yerushalayim/praying-towards-jerusalem> for a fuller discussion).

This problem also arises at the *Kotel Ha-maaravi*, which is located slightly south of the *Makom ha-Mikdash*. One who wishes to face the *Mikdash* precisely should turn slightly left, towards the central part of the Temple Mount.

Finally, one who is traveling on a plane should, seemingly, also try to face Jerusalem. Therefore, when flying TOWARDS Israel, one should face the front of the plane, while when flying FROM Israel, one should face the rear. One who is unable to determine which direction to face, or who unable to pray in his direction of choice, should direct one's heart towards his Father in heaven.

Next week we will continue our study of the laws of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, focusing on the proper intention and concentration during prayer.