**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha in the Age of Social Media**

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**Shiur #36:**

**Prayer for the Sick:**

**Connected Only by a Facebook Post**

**Introduction: The Importance of Really Caring in Prayer**

Social media allows us to contact countless people in an instant. At its best, it allows us to share valuable information, encourage others to engage in positive activities, generate compassion for worthy causes, and generally involve larger circles of people in constructive efforts.

One expression of this which perhaps strikes us as obvious is the (all-too-often) urgent request to pray on behalf of a sick or injured person whom we have never met and are in no way directly connected to. Undoubtedly, the impulse to get large numbers of people to care about strangers and entreat God to help them is praiseworthy. However, there is a danger: people may pray without caring. While this may seem like a small cost, the importance of praying out of true identification, sympathy, and perhaps even empathy is often overlooked. To frame the issue, let us begin with a quote from Rav Shelomo Zalman Auerbach.[[1]](#footnote-1) I think it is critical for how we think about this issue, especially if we intend to undertake to pray for strangers.

In *Halikhot Shelomo* (*Hilkhot Tefilla,* Chapter 8, n. 60)*,* Rav Auerbach’s students record the following:

Our master customarily said that one should not pray for an ill person during the *amida* unless one has some connection to him, and one feels his pain, for one should not come to the King — the King of Kings, God — without a reason and justification for pushing to ask for someone else.

He would tell of the Maharil Diskin, that once someone asked him to pray for an ill person, and he agreed [after instructing him, as was his practice, to contribute a particular sum to the orphanage], and after some time the Maharil met him and asked after the ill person’s welfare, and he replied that the person had already become healthy, with God’s help. The Maharil thundered at him for not telling him of this, and burdening him with praying for that person all this time, saying, “Is it light in your eyes, making such a request in prayer? One must seek and find a reason to pray each time!” (And our master also thundered regarding this, and once he rebuked a student who delayed telling him about his salvation through God’s generosity. He said: Three times each day I pain myself and feel your suffering, and why did you only now decide to tell me?)[[2]](#footnote-2)

What is clear from this passage is that the Maharil Diskin and Rav Auerbach feel that to pray is to express genuine care and concern. When we agree to mention strangers in our prayers, this consideration should give us pause and remind us what such an endeavor entails. But what is the source for this attitude?

**The History of Personal Requests**

Let us begin with the Abudraham’s summary of how we have arrived at the text of the *Amida* that we currently recite thrice daily:

There is a positive biblical commandment to serve God through prayer… And the Torah has no [required] number of prayers. Rather, everyone may pray with full intent whenever he wants. Whether a little or a lot, it will go up with grace and be accepted.

This was how things were from the time of Moshe Rabbeinu until the time of the destruction of our holy and glorious Temple, when the Jews were exiled among the nations because of their sins and actions and were mixed among the nations… And children were born in these lands, and those children who arose after them had confused and mixed-up language, [comprised of] foreign languages, Moabite, Ammonite, Zidonite and Hittite, as it says (*Nechemya* 13:24): “And a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean.” And they could not pray or speak as was necessary in Hebrew, but only with confusion and a mix of foreign languages, and the true language was destroyed, cut down and extinct from the land.

When the Men of the Great Assembly saw this evil sickness, they said, “Let us go in the light of our God, ‘and let our lips replace the bulls [of sacrifices]’ (*Hoshea* 14:3), us and all of our congregation, and institute prayer which is called ‘service,’ which is heavy on the tongue, in a clear language and with brevity — pure, clear and straight, purified from the illness of the foreign language, so that it will be easy and fluent in people’s mouths, under which we all pray, with one language and with one tongue.”

And they all gathered, and instituted to pray the *Amida* before the Eternal One, every day, three times. (*Abudraham, Tikun Ha-tefillot* 2)

The original biblical value of prayer[[3]](#footnote-3) was for each person to express his or her own personal needs in eloquent Hebrew; the current formalized prayers emerged when people were unable to do that. However, what is clear is that the goal of standardized prayer is to help facilitate true *kavana* (intention) — not, as is all-too-often the case, get in the way.

The first three and last three *berakhot* of the *Amida,* those of praise and thanks, are mostly formalized and can rarely be changed (see *Berakhot* 34a and *Beit Yosef, OC* 119 for exceptions). However, to maintain the centrality of personal *kavana* in prayer, *Chazal* allow, encourage and perhaps mandate adding personal requests to the middle blessings, those of petition:

With regard to the halakhic ruling, **Rav Yehuda says** that **Shmuel says:** The ***halakha*** is that **a person requests his own needs** during the *Amida* prayer **in** the blessing ending: **Who listens to prayer. Rav Yehuda, son of Rav Shmuel bar Sheilat, says in the name of Rav: Although** the Sages **said** that **a person requests his own needs in** the blessing ending: **Who listens to prayer,** that is not the only option. **Rather, if he wishes to recite at the conclusion of each and every blessing** personal requests that **reflect the nature of each and every blessing, he may recite** them.

Similarly, **Rav Ḥiyya bar Ashi says** that **Rav says: Although** the Sages **said** that **a person requests his own needs in** the blessing ending: **Who listens to prayer, if he has a sick person in his house he recites** a special prayer for him **during the blessing of the sick. And if he is in need of sustenance, he recites** a request **during the blessing of the years.**

**Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: Although** the Sages **said** that **a person requests his own needs in** the blessing ending: **Who listens to prayer; but if one wishes to recite** prayers and supplications **after** finishing **his** *Amida* **prayer, even** if his personal requests **are as** long as **the order** of the confession of **Yom Kippur, he may recite** them. (BT, *Avoda Zara* 8a, Koren translation)

The Gemara offers several places where personal requests can be made — during the relevant blessings (such as praying for the sick during the blessing of “*Refa’einu,”* “Heal us”), the blessing of “*Shema Koleinu”* (“Listen to our voice… Who listens to prayer,” the generic blessing), and at the end of the *Amida*. What is the distinction among these?

Rabbeinu Yona (*Berakhot* 22b) suggests the following based on a careful reading of the above passage:

1. In *Shema Koleinu,* one may add any request.
2. At the end of each topic blessing, one may make a relevant request, but only in communal language.
3. One may use personal language **in the middle of the topical blessings** if he or she has a specific personal need, such as someone sick in his or her home.
4. At the end of the *Amida,* before or after “*Yehi ratzon,”* one may make whatever requests, personal or communal, one desires.

The *Beit Yosef (OC* 119) understands that the Rosh disagrees, and allows making both communal and personal requests, both in the middle and at the end of the topic blessings. However, in *Shema Koleinu,* one may make any request, as it is a catch-all blessing. He assumes that the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 6:2-3) similarly rejects Rabbeinu Yona’s distinctions.

Tosafot (*Avoda Zara* 8a, s.v. *Im ba*) argues that the only distinction is length; in the topical blessings, as well as *Shema Koleinu,* one may make short requests. At the end of the *Amida,* one may add as much as he or she wants, even as long as “the confession of Yom Kippur.” The Meiri (*Avoda Zara* 8a, s.v. *Kevar yadata*) argues that in the middle blessings one may only add requests for that which one **needs,** while in *Shema Koleinu* one may make requests for what one **wants.** The Arizal (cited in *Beit Yosef*) argues that in the topic blessings one should think about one’s requests, but only verbalize them in *Shema Koleinu.*

The Ran, on the other hand, understands that this is not about allowances, but about requirements; if one has a sick person at home to pray for, one **must pray for the ill in *Refa’einu.*** If one does not, then one may do so in *Shema Koleinu.*

This position emphasizes the extent to which prayer is not meant to be a set text, but a true expression of our needs. However, even according to the other positions, it is clear that *Chazal* want our prayers to continue to express the original values of *tefilla*: to express our desires and requests to God. This explains all the various places within *tefilla* in which we may, in different ways, add our requests. This point is made by the *Piskei Teshuvot (OC* 119) in his introduction to the above laws:

Extra importance is evidenced in those requests that a person adds in his prayer, for prayer is a biblical commandment that requires intention of the heart. In our great iniquity, since a person is habituated to it, his mouth speaks and his heart is not with him. The personal requests that a person adds based on his requests that arise anew daily, for health, sustenance and success in Torah — that it should not desert his mouth or those of his children and descendants — and so too all his other needs, flow in general from the walls of the heart.

**Where to Pray for the Sick**

The simple reading of the Gemara in *Avoda Zara* indicates that one only prays for the ill in *Refa’einu* if the sick person is in one’s own household, a relative or close friend. Rav Ben-Tziyon Abba-Shaul (*Responsa Or Le-Tziyon* 2:7:33) assumes that this is indeed specific. He rules in accordance with the position that communal prayers may only be said in *Shema Koleinu* and argues that praying for anyone who is not a member of one’s household is like praying for the community and thus must be relegated to *Shema Koleinu.*

The *Mishna Berura (OC* 116*:3, Shaar Ha-Tziyun* 5) disagrees, following the position of the *Eliyahu Rabbah, Magen Gibborim* and *Birkei Yosef*. Rav Auerbach concurs (*Halikhot Shelomo* 8:16). It is in this context that his students add the note that we began with.

Rav Abba-Shaul adds that one should request that a certain sick person be cured in, at most, two out of three prayer services a day, to avoid this petition’s becoming a rote request.

**The Conceptual Underpinning**

These halakhic disputes seem to capture the sentiment we began with. Prayer is serious business, to put it simply. Rav Abba-Shaul thinks that the topical blessings are only for personal requests, and he cannot conceive that praying for someone not part of one’s family (perhaps close friends?) could be personal. Thus, he relegates such a request to *Shema Koleinu,* the standards of which are looser. While the majority of authorities disagree, as Rav Auerbach illustrates, they do not disagree with the principle that what justifies (or obligates) prayer is true identification with the need. As the anecdote from the Maharil indicates, he believes that one could come to care about a stranger to the extent that the wellbeing of the other becomes one’s own concern. This is the standard.

**The Challenge**

As we noted at the beginning, it is undeniable that caring for others — family, friends, strangers — should be ethically and religiously meaningful. Prayer is a way of expressing this concern. However, prayer must be taken seriously. When we are flooded with requests to pray for strangers, it is a beautiful thing to take it upon ourselves to pray for them. With social media, mass emails and other forms of communication, those requests may come from people many steps removed from us.

As Rav Auerbach captures, to accept to pray is to accept to care. This may be uplifting, but it is not easy. Simply adding the name without taking the time to internalize the we are actually beseeching God to aid someone we have come to care for empties the prayer of its meaning.

Rav Abba-Shaul seems not to believe that it is possible to really care that personally about an outsider, and therefore he pushes such requests to the generic blessing of *Shema Koleinu.* He further instructs that we ensure that such personal requests not become rote by only saying them at some prayer services. This prevents the name of some stranger from becoming just more words that we mutter. Whatever exact halakhic position we accept, the challenge to pray only if we can muster deep emotional concern seems to underly all the positions we have seen. If that means not simply adding a list of sick people to every prayer, but rather alternating so that we remember that there are real people behind the names, then this is what we should do. If that means putting the petition in *Shema Koleinu,* as per Rav Abba-Shaul, to remind ourselves that this prayer is not as personal as petitions for ourselves and those close to us can be, then so be it. This analysis is not meant to discourage people from turning to the world to pray for their relatives and friends; it challenges us to internalize what we are obligated to do in order to take that responsibility seriously.

**Using the Name of the Sick Person**

The Gemara records that when Rabbi Elazar would visit the sick, he would pray for them in Aramaic. The Gemara asks how this is possible:

The Gemara asks: **How did he do this,** pray in Aramaic? **Didn’t Rav Yehuda say: A person should never request** that **his needs** be met **in the Aramaic language**? **And,** similarly, **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Anyone who requests** that **his needs** be met **in the Aramaic language**, **the ministering angels do not attend to him** to bring his prayer before God, **as the ministering angels are not familiar with the Aramaic language,** but only with the sacred tongue, Hebrew, exclusively. The Gemara responds: **A sick person is different.** He does not need the angels to bring his prayer before God because **the Divine Presence is with him.** (BT, *Shabbat* 12b, Koren translation)

The Ramban (*Torat Ha-adam,* p. 18) cited by the *Beit Yosef* (*Tur, YD* 335; *Shulchan Arukh, YD* 335:5), accepts this distinction. The *Taz* (ad loc. 4), however, notes that according to many Rishonim, one may pray in any language aside from Aramaic, which is uniquely inscrutable to the angels. Based on the limitations of praying not in the presence of the sick person, the *Eliyahu Rabba (OC* 116), whose view is accepted by the *Mishna Berura* (ibid. 3), rules that when one prays in the presence of the sick person, one need not use the sick person’s name. However, when the sick person is not present, just as one must be more precise in the language used, one must use the name of the sick person. The *Chatam Sofer* (*Chiddushim, Nedarim* 40b, s.v. *Ve’ahavta*) further argues that, for this reason, it is better to pray for a sick person in his or her presence than from afar, as using the name of sick person causes God’s attributes of justice to be turned against the sick person. Thus, the prayer is less efficacious.

These concerns are true anytime that we pray for someone not in his or her presence. However, the more we are asked to pray for strangers, the more likely it may be that we forget the halakhic details, settling to pray for “the person that X requested we pray for on Facebook.” However, as this rule indicates, such a formulation is not sufficient. Ideally, part of taking prayer seriously is giving attention to the minutiae. This is also part of showing that we care and understand the gravity of approaching God with petitions.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this piece, I hope it is clear, is not to claim that there is a problem with our tendency to get as many people to pray for those in need as possible. It is rather a reminder that prayer requires genuine concern and attention to detail. These elements are often lost in the flood of requests to pray. However, we can all remember cases where such requests are met with real care. The number of people who remember the names of those captured soldiers whom we pray for in *shul* every week and care that they one day be returned to their families indicates that we are capable of mustering that level of empathy. The challenge is to actually achieve that concern for every person, no matter how far removed, when we agree to integrate them into our deepest requests of God.

1. My thinking on this subject has been influenced by Rav Mordechai Torczyner in his *shiur* here: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/915958/rabbi-mordechai-torczyner/davening-for-the-terminally-ill/>, and subsequent exchanges with him. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translation from the previously noted *shiur* by Rav Torczyner. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the Rambam (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot,* Positive #5; *Hilkhot Tefilla,* Chapter 1), the daily requirement of prayer is a biblical command. The Ramban (Mitzva #5) disagrees, arguing that prayer is a privilege, except perhaps in cases of dire need. For these purposes, I will elide the differences. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)