

Ladder Ascending to Heaven

Tefillah — A Ladder that Ascends to Heaven

Tefillah (davening — prayer), in essence, is to ascend to the Heavens. It is something we do here on this Earth, but it reaches Heaven, like we find by the ladder of Yaakov's dream: "A ladder placed on the ground, and its head reached the Heavens."

We also see this from the statement of the Sages, that *tefillah* is "a matter that stands at the height of the world."¹ *Tefillah* is to ascend to the Heavens.

This doesn't mean, though that *tefillah* is only in Heaven! What it really means is that if one ascends to the Heavens, he will find *tefillah* there; in other words, just because *tefillah* is such a lofty matter doesn't mean that we can't reach it. We reach *tefillah* by ascending the "ladder" found even on our physical world, which we will see.

The Difference Between Torah and Tefillah

We have two major vehicles that bring us close to Hashem — Torah and *tefillah*. What is the difference between them? The sefer *Nefesh HaChaim* writes that learning Torah is called "*achdus hamochin*" (unity of the minds). This means that Torah is all-inclusive, because it is a power that comes and unifies things. Torah is all-inclusive in that it unifies the Heavens with the earth. *Tefillah* is also all-inclusive — but from a different aspect: it unifies **Earth** to the **Heavens**. *Tefillah* is in essence a ladder that ascends to the Heavens, but it is footed on Earth. Torah was in Heaven, but Hashem brought it down to this world. *Tefillah*, however, is found on this world — but it ascends to Heaven.

Tefillah is like Yaakov *Avinu's* ladder: we begin from its foot here on Earth, and we ascend up it, step-by-step — until Heaven.

Chazal say that *tefillah* "stands" at the height of the world — and standing is *Amidah*, which is another term for the silent *Shemoneh Esrei*. This doesn't mean that *tefillah* stands in Heaven while the person praying remains here in This World. The opposite is true: *tefillah* is the ladder that a person ascends on — until the person himself reaches Heaven. Through *tefillah*, a person climbs a ladder toward Heaven, and he is actually standing in Heaven and praying there!

This has to be. Only in Heaven can a person be standing "in front of the King." When a person *davens*, he is actually standing in Heaven — "in front of the King."

How do we get from Earth to Heaven?! If we are to climb the ladder toward Heaven, through *tefillah*, then our *tefillah* cannot just be a lip service we do. There must be a specific path to take through *tefillah* in order to get to Heaven, and it must be a step-by-step plan.

How do we ascend this ladder toward Heaven? Before we get to the top of the ladder — which is the *Amidah*, the silent *Shemoneh Esrei* — we have to climb the beginning steps of the ladder. These beginning rungs of the ladder are the first three sections of *davening*, before we get to *Shemoneh Esrei*.

¹ *Berachos 6b*.

Our davening (before *Shemoneh Esrei*) is split into three sections: 1) The morning blessings and recitation of *korbonos* (sacrifices), 2) *Pesukei Dezimrah*, 3) *Shema* and its blessings.

The “Actions” in Tefillah

There are three parts that make up a person — actions, feelings, and thoughts. The actions are things done with your physical parts, like your hands. The feelings are in your heart. The thoughts are in your mind.

The three sections of the davening, as well, are made up of these human forces! The beginning of *davening* is action. One gets up, washes his hands, puts on *tzitzis* and *tefillin* — these are all actions. Then he sacrifices *korbonos* (which he recites). This is action manifest in our *tefillah*. The better one’s actions are, the higher level his *tefillah* will be. It is written, “All my bones shall speak of You.” But if a person sins, the sins are entrenched in his bones, and his bones cannot speak of Hashem....

Pesukei Dezimrah, as well, consists of actions — the action of purifying oneself more and more. The purer one’s actions are, the more worthy his *tefillah* will be — and it can be said of him that his “mouth and heart are equal.”

The Arizal writes that one should do *teshuvah* before he *davens*. Why is this? The depth of this is so that when one *davens*, it can truly be said of him that “All of my bones speak of You,” because he has purified himself through doing *teshuvah* beforehand.

In *tefillah*, we make requests of Hashem. Why do we request something? Because we want to change our situation. This is actually the soul’s desire to change situations — a form of action. This force in our souls comes from the aspect of action within us. This shows us that *tefillah* is not just saying words — it is in essence a desire for change.

The “Feelings” in Tefillah

The second section of davening is *Pesukei Dezimrah*. After we have hopefully changed our actions by purifying them, the soul now wants to change and purify its feelings. This is a desire for a “pure heart,” as it is written, “A pure heart Hashem created in me.” After purifying the actions, the next level is to break his “heart of stone” and to instead have a “pure” heart.

In *Pesukei Dezimrah*, we sing Hashem’s praises. In essence, this is the soul itself singing to Hashem. Why is the soul singing now? Because it now feels what it wants; we sing when we feel that we have attained what we wanted. *Pesukei Dezimrah* is not just saying over Hashem’s praises, saying one *Hallelukah* after another. It is the soul’s song to Hashem — an expression of purifying the feelings.

Pesukei Dezimrah also isn’t to reflect on Hashem’s praises. It is to reach a state that one’s feelings are dedicated to Hashem. When one overcomes bad *middos*, such as overcoming an evil desire or overcoming arrogance — the soul sings from this. The soul is singing because now Hashem can be found nearby, with the person who overcame the bad *middos* — the feelings have been purified.

To summarize: first, a person purifies his actions (by avoiding sin), which is in essence the soul’s desire to change. After this, a person sings a song of longing from his soul — *Pesukei Dezimrah*. Through this, a person sings the true song — a song of praise to Hashem.

The “Thoughts” in Tefillah

The third section of *tefillah* is *Shema* and its blessings. This is the aspect of the “mind” in *davening* — purifying the mind and thoughts. It represents the step that comes after one has purified his actions and feelings.

In this part of the *davening*, we ask Hashem to enlighten our eyes to the Torah, and we include the *Abavah Rabbah* prayer — which speaks of Hashem’s love to our people. All of these prayers are, in essence, sanctifying our thoughts. We are not just mentioning here that we want to always think thoughts of learning Torah (we wish that too!). It is rather a different request — we are asking Hashem to help us live in the world of thought, which is in essence the Torah. It is written, “And you shall be immersed in it day and night.” This means to actually live in a world of thought — which is Torah.

The blessings that precede the *Shema* help us reach the level of sanctifying our thought — and to pray from there onward. A person climbs this ladder of *tefillah* — first through actions, then through feelings, and then the person reaches the thoughts. These are thoughts that are in essence a desire, from our intellect, to long for Hashem.

Climbing the Ladder — Within

But one has to understand that he climbs the ladder within *himself*. Yaakov *Avinu*, who dreamed of a ladder, represents the ladder. This means that he himself was a ladder, climbing it within himself. Thus, if a person’s actions, feelings, and thoughts are not worthy, and they don’t match up to his prayers, it is like what is written of Haman: “And he came to the king in sackcloth.” A person can’t stand in the King’s court wearing dirty clothing. Sins are like coming to the King with dirty clothing. But if one’s conduct matches his prayers, it is then that he can enter the King’s court.

Shemoneh Esrei: Entering the King’s Court

If we accomplish these three steps, we can now proceed to the next part of our *avodah* here: *Shemoneh Esrei*.

Reb Chaim Soloveitchik² *zt”l* said there are two aspects of concentration in *tefillah*: 1) the actual meaning of the words, and 2) standing in front of the King. Let us explain more the meaning of his words.

Until now — the three sections preceding the *Shemoneh Esrei* — a person feels that he is here on this Earth, while Hashem is in Heaven. But in *Shemoneh Esrei*, there is *amidah* — standing in front of Hashem! This is where a person actually feels that he is in front of Him. It is to literally be “*nochach*” — opposite of Hashem — as real as can be. In *Shemoneh Esrei*, we are not on this world — we are with Hashem, in Heaven, as we stand in front of Him.

Translated from the original Hebrew shiur: תפילה 001 הקדמה