

## ADDRESSING THE *KAVANAH* CHALLENGE DURING *SHMONEI ESREI*

### PART 2: STANDING “*LIFNEI HASHEM*”

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Based on an understanding of the brain phenomenon of mind wandering and of mindfulness as its antidote, the previous article proposed the use of an individualized, long term, Kavanah plan to achieve sustained attention during Shmonei Esrei. The first phase of a prototype Kavanah plan was described which included a mindfulness training period. The next phase, described below, introduces the Kavanah-Anchor Method to achieve the uplifting and transformative experience resulting from being “Lifnei Hashem.”

#### STANDING “*LIFNEI HASHEM*”

The notion of standing “lifnei Hashem” is not limited to prayer but has deep roots in the Torah since it is found in several instances referring to closeness with Hashem:

- “And the entire assembly approached and they stood before Hashem” (Lev 9:5).
- “Moses brought out all the staffs from before Hashem to all the Children of Israel” (Num 17:24).
- “You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your God” (Deut 29:9).

In addition, it is useful to recall that the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, also expresses the idea of coming closer to Hashem (the sacrifice dimension of Shmonei Esrei is discussed below. In the realm of prayer, the concept of standing “lifnei Hashem” is so fundamental that Maimonides includes it in the definition of the word “Kavanah” (Hil Tefillah 4:16): “What is meant by Kavanah? One should clear his mind from all thoughts and envision himself as standing before the Divine Presence.” The same requirement is found in the Shulchan Aruch OC Section 98: “When a person prays, he must ...be conscious that the Shechinah is opposite him.” In his famous essay “The Lonely Man of Faith,” Rabbi Soloveichik gave paramount significance to the notion of standing “lifnei Hashem”: “Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding

himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God” ..... “it remains unalterably true that the very essence of prayer is the covenantal experience of being together with and talking to God...”. Similarly, Rabbi Scherman<sup>1</sup> highlighted the significance of achieving intimacy with Hashem as follows: “The primary goal of prayer is to achieve the highest possible degree of intimacy with G-d. Arizal writes that when a Jew “pours out his heart like water”, he achieves closeness and unification between Israel and our Father in Heaven.”

### **KAVANAH-ANCHOR METHOD**

This method proposes three approaches to transform the recitation of the Shmonei Esrei in order to increase our ability to connect to Hashem:

- (i) learning a few relevant halachot;
- (ii) taking “ownership” of the Shmonei Esrei text;
- (iii) selecting specific words to serve as “kavanah-anchors. As explained below, these words have a dual role during the recitation of the Shmonei Esrei: they serve as reminders to remain focused and as “feeling generators.”

### **Learning Relevant Halachot**

As a first step, the Kavanah-Anchor method calls for studying in depth the following six halachot that specify the feelings and attitudes required when we are “standing before the Divine Presence and talking to God:”

- *One should approach praying solely with a feeling of dread and submission (Section 93.2).*
- *When a person prays, he must apply his mind to the meaning of the words which he pronounces with his lips and be conscious that the Shechinah is opposite him (Section 98.1).*
- *One must reflect on matters that subdue the heart and direct it towards one’s Father in Heaven (Section 98.1).*

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, “An Overview Tefillah/Prayer –Molding Yourself” The Expanded Art Scroll Siddur Wasserman Edition 2010, xxvii.

- One should pray in a supplicatory manner, like a poor man begging at the entrance and tranquilly (Section 98.3).

- “When one prays the Shmonei Esrei, one is required to say all the blessings with Kavanah. If one is unable to say all the blessings with Kavanah, he should at least say the first blessing called Avot with Kavanah” (Section 101.1).

- “One should not confine his prayer to his heart, but must pronounce the phrases with his lips and say them quietly” (Section 101.2).

These halachot are found in Sections 93, 98, and 101 of the Orach Chaim. After the initial study phase, reviewing them regularly (once a week) is helpful to learn how to stir oneself to generate feelings of dread, submission, and imploring, based on the principle that “words lead to thoughts which lead to feelings which lead to behavior.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Taking ownership of the Shmonei Esrei text**

It is common knowledge that the Shmonei Esrei text is sacred because it was composed by *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* (347 BCE) who included prophets. As pointed out by Rabbi M. Penner,<sup>3</sup> this text represents an “ideal crafted by our Sages,” which challenges us, uplifts us, and, if recited properly, allows us to undergo “a process that refines us as it reorients us.” But, to achieve those goals, we must prevail over the natural sense that when we recite a text that is not “our own”, our mind subconsciously builds a distance between us and its words and finds it easier to turn to other thoughts. Taking ownership of the Shmonei Esrei text simply means that we switch our outlook: because it is a sacred text that we could not have composed, we consider it a personal “gift” from *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*. We accept the gift by taking custody of the text and initiating a “deep dive” process into all its words, one at a time, for a period of many months. We try to understand each blessing and identify with it. This learning-acquisition period ends when we feel that the text has become “ours,” almost as if we had

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<sup>2</sup> This principle has many applications such as Dialectical Behavioral Therapy where people develop coping skills to deal with the sequence of events, thoughts, feelings and behaviors and thus prevent undesirable actions.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Menachem Penner “*Sim Shalom: The Perfect Prayer*” The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series. Rosh Hashana 5779 p.19-25.

authored it. At that point, we are equipped to “stand before the Divine Presence” and “talk to our Father in Heaven” using words with which we fully identify.

Taking ownership of the Shmonei Esrei text has other practical advantages. For one, we become able to decide the pace of our recitation. Also, we no longer visually “scan” parts of the text but actually enunciate each word such that the Shmonei Esrei stops being an exercise in telepathy where Hashem is supposed to know what words I am currently scanning.

### **Selecting Kavanah-anchors**

This third step of the method requires that each one of us selects words with which we can develop a strong relationship and that can help us generate feelings and attitudes as required by the above six halachot (sections 93, 98 and 101). These feeling-generating words are kavanah-anchors. They allow us to implement the two components of “service of the heart” as defined by Rabbi Soloveichik, a plea for “Mercy” and an element of “Sacrifice.”<sup>4</sup> The kavanah-anchor words also constitute individual cues to keep us focused and avoid distractions as we proceed through the Shmonei Esrei.<sup>5</sup> An illustration of the Kavanah-Anchor Method is shown below in selected parts of the three sections of the Shmonei Esrei.

### **First Blessing: AVOT**

As I am about to start the Shmonei Esrei, I stand in front of Hashem silent because I am awe-struck by the presence of the Shechinah (Section 98.1 suggests considering “the loftiness of God and the lowness of man”). I am unable to speak because my ability to speak<sup>6</sup> is a gift from Hashem and I don’t know whether I have used it well enough in the past to address Hashem directly at this time. To help with that hesitation, our Sages introduced “six mysterious words”<sup>7</sup> from Psalm 51: “*My Lord, open my lips, so that my mouth may declare Your praise.*” This insertion has been called “a pre-tefillah tefillah,” a preliminary prayer to help set our frame of

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<sup>4</sup> In the Rav’s terminology, prayer is a sacrifice where the worshipper makes a sacrifice of the heart. In the 17<sup>th</sup> blessing of *Retzei*, we ask Hashem to accept our being as a sacrifice; Hashem receives it and restores it to the one who offered it.

<sup>5</sup> Initially, I found it useful to highlight the kavanah anchor words in my siddur as additional visual cues.

<sup>6</sup> See Rabbi AC Feuer

<sup>7</sup> This expression is from Rabbi Avi Baumol *The Poetry of Prayer* (Jerusalem, Gefen Publishing, 2009), 104

mind when approaching G-d at the onset of Shmonei Esrei. The six words of this plea constitute my kavanah-anchors because they allow me to elicit feelings of dread and submission and be conscious that the Shechinah is before me.

### **Blessings of Praise**

The first section of the Shmonei Esrei contains three blessings of praise. Here is the first blessing where my anchor-words are in bold:

***“Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, G-d of Avraham, G-d of Isaac, and G-d of Jacob, the great, mighty, and awesome G-d, the supreme G-d, Who bestows beneficial kindnesses and creates everything, Who recalls the kindnesses of the Patriarchs and brings a Redeemer to their children’s children, for His Name’s sake, with love.***

*O King, Helper, Savior, and Shield. Blessed are You, Hashem, Shield of Abraham”*

My kavanah-anchors are the first eighteen words. Because they were originally uttered by Hashem, Moses and Malchizedek, they are strong feeling generators:

- The expression *“our G-d and the G-d of our fathers, G-d of Avraham, G-d of Isaac, and G-d of Jacob”* evokes a powerful recollection because Hashem used it first to introduce Himself to Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3;6) and He repeated it in that dialogue (Exod. 3:15).
- The next expression *“the great, mighty, and awesome G-d,* “also awakens a strong feeling because it was used by Moses (Deut. 10:17) to describe Hashem, after Hashem reconciled Himself with Bnei Israel and gave Moses the Second set of Tablets.
- The next attribute *“the supreme G-d”* is from Genesis (14:19,20) where Malchizedek (king of Shalem, the future site of the Temple) bestowed a blessing on Abraham.

In addition, I find this first blessing majestic and awe-inspiring because it covers the full panorama of Jewish history, thus creating a historical framework to situate the “covenantal experience” aspect of the Shmonei Esrei that Rabbi Soloveichik considers the “essence of prayer”.

### **4<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Blessing: Petitions for Needs**

This second section of the Shmonei Esrei includes 13 petitions for all our needs, as individuals and as a nation. To travel from one blessing to the next without interruption, I utilize the

structure described by Rabbi J Sacks<sup>8</sup> that divides these blessings into groups of 3 requests followed by the 17<sup>th</sup> blessing, a prayer that all our prayers be heard. The 6 individual requests (4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> blessing) begin with 3 spiritual needs (understanding, repentance, and forgiveness) followed by 3 material needs (deliverance from affliction, healing, and prosperity), while the 6 collective requests (10<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> blessing) begin with 3 material/political needs (ingathering of exiles, restoration of judges, and end of internal strife) followed by 3 spiritual needs (the Righteous, Jerusalem, and restoration of Davidic monarchy). Considering this structure as a unit makes it easier to navigate between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> blessing with more sustained attention.

- My first kavanah-anchor is the word most repeated in the Shmonei Esrei “*Atta*,” which refers to Hashem as “*You*.” I found this word powerful to keep the awareness that I am standing “*lifnei Hashem*” and creates continuous intimacy with Hashem since it is found at the end of each blessing (as well within several blessings). Also, since each blessing is formulated in the present tense, the word *Atta* fortifies my faith (*emunah*) and trust (*bitachon*) in Hashem’s ongoing supervision of our people which gives it its eternity. Finally, focusing on this kavanah-anchor made it easier to comply with the Mishna Berurah rule that one should train oneself to say (at least) the closure of each blessing with concentration.

- My second Kavanah-anchor is the word “*Rachamim*” which means *Mercy or Compassion* which is found in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> [twice] blessings (also in the 18<sup>th</sup> [twice] and 19<sup>th</sup> [twice] blessings). The significance of the word “*Rachamim*” is found in Rabbi Soloveichik’s article on “*Communal Prayer and the Structure of the Synagogue*.”<sup>9</sup> There, the Rav indicated that prayer entails two essential qualities contained within the term “service of the heart” (i) a plea for “Mercy” and (ii) an element of sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> The worshipper makes a plea for mercy because of “man’s experience of exhaustion and weariness, his sense that he is a poor, downtrodden creature, powerless to save himself, to solve his problems or satisfy his needs, be they spiritual or physical, ...with complete reliance on the Holy One Blessed be He.” The awareness of our needs serves to connect us to Hashem and to remember that everything is

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<sup>8</sup> Lobel Edition of the Koren Siddur (page xxvi)

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik “*Blessings and Thanksgiving Reflections on the Siddur and Synagogue*” (Ed by S Carmy and JB Wolowelsky; Maggid Books, OU Press, 2019), 152.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 3.

from Him.<sup>11</sup> This twelve-fold plea for mercy may shed some light on reasons why the service of the heart has become a challenge for some Orthodox Jews living in Western countries, especially our teenagers. Since technological successes have put us in charge of so many aspects of our lives, some have the illusion that we became mostly invulnerable and consider vulnerability a weakness. Rabbi N Scherman<sup>12</sup> asks and responds: “Does modern man have less need to pray because he has gained so much control over his environment? No, just the opposite. Because man has become so powerful, he can—and does—fail to realize that he is strong only because G-d has made him so, and that he is no less dependent on the One Above than were his humblest ancestors, scratching at rocky soil with a wooden plow.”

### **18<sup>th</sup> Blessing: Thanksgiving [*Modim*]**

The third section of the Shmonei Esrei is dedicated to Thanksgiving. Taking ownership of the text of this section that expresses gratitude feels natural since we all know how much we benefit from Hashem’s goodness continuously.

My kavanah anchor in this blessing pertains to its four layers of expressions of gratitude that show increasing specificity. In the first layer, we appreciate that Hashem is our G-d, in charge of our lives, and of our deliverance. In the second, we thank Hashem for our lives, our souls, and His daily miracles on our behalf. In the third, we thank Hashem for His wonders and acts of goodness that we experience within any given day, evening, morning, and afternoon. In the fourth, we thank Hashem for his never-ending Goodness using words that reveal a fundamental formula whereby Hashem’s Goodness (*Hatov*) expresses itself in the form of His Mercy (*Rachamim*) which is materialized in His acts of Kindness (*Chesed*). This formula relating *Rachamim* and *Chesed* is found throughout our liturgy, with its primary source in the revelation of Hashem’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (*Ex 34:5-7*).

Rabbi Arush explains why gratitude is an essential “connector” to Hashem:<sup>13</sup> “Feeling grateful to Hashem is indeed our most important task. We build a steadfast connection by way of our

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<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Menachem Penner “*Sim Shalom: The Perfect Prayer*” The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series. Rosh Hashana 5779 p.23.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, “*An Overview/Prayer, A Timeless Need*” The Complete Art Scroll Siddur July 1984, xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Shalom Arush “The Garden of Gratitude” (Jerusalem, *Chut Shel Chesed* Institutions, 2011), 135.

gratitude to Him. Therefore, as long as our gratitude to Hashem is deficient, our connection to Hashem remains weak and incomplete.” For these reasons, we must be careful to avoid any distraction during the recitation of this third section of the Shmonei Esrei. Indeed, the Mishna Berura (Section 101.1) cites authorities who consider that the blessing of *Modim* has the same Kavanah requirement as the first blessing of *Avot*.

### **19<sup>th</sup> Blessing: *Sim Shalom***

This blessing is a kavanah anchor by itself because it has unique features. Its text reveals that it is a request for peace, goodness, blessing, grace, kindness and mercy. But that interpretation raises an important question since this third section of the Shmonei Esrei is dedicated to Thanksgiving. Rabbi M Penner<sup>14</sup> addresses this issue by suggesting that (i) the Shmonei Esrei ends with the Modim section (ii) the Priestly Blessing which follows represents in fact “the divine response to our prayers” (iii) we then express our gratitude for Hashem’s (Priestly) blessing by reciting the 19<sup>th</sup> blessing of Sim Shalom, whose “sublime requests” mirror the themes of the Priestly Blessing and focus on peace, since peace “encompasses all other blessings”. According to this approach, the requests of the 19<sup>th</sup> blessing are “sublime” because they constitute “a second chance at tefillah” that made on “Hashem’s terms.” All that is possible because of the transformative impact of standing “lifnei Hashem!”

### **Summary**

The Kavanah-anchor method described above was designed to enhance our three daily opportunities to connect with Hashem by standing before Him and conversing with Him using a Shmonei Esrei text that we identify with as if it were our own. Awareness of standing “lifnei Hashem” is significant because it makes us focus less on our needs and more on the awesome experience of the moment. In each recitation of the thirteen middle blessings that include the needs of the Jewish people, we affirm the two purposes of prayer described by Rabbi N

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<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Menachem Penner “*Sim Shalom: The Perfect Prayer*” The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series. Rosh Hashana 5779 p.19-25.



Scherman,<sup>15</sup> (i) to make us recognize that there is no force in the world to whom we can pray other than Hashem, the complete Master of the universe; and (ii) to demonstrate that we are powerless to obtain our needs without Him, that we put ourselves entirely at His disposal, and that it is for Him, and for Him alone, to decide what He will grant us.”

### **LONG-TERM IMPACT OF STANDING “LIFNEI HASHEM”: SIMCHA AND TSHUVAH**

Standing “Lifnei Hashem” for 3 to 5 minutes three times a day has a long-term, cumulative, and transformative impact with profound ramifications on several aspects of Jewish life.

#### **Simcha “Lifnei Hashem”**

The relationship between “rejoicing (simcha)” and being “before Hashem” has been explained by Rabbi Hershel Schacter as follows, based on Rav Soloveitchik’s halachic definition of simcha: “whenever the Torah speaks of simcha, it connects this emotion with one’s appearing before G-d.”<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Schacter cites the following sources: “ And you shall rejoice before Hashem, your God, for a seven-day period” (Lev 23:40), and “Glory and majesty are before Him; might and delight are in His place,” leading to the conclusion “There is always happiness and rejoicing before G-d.” Similarly, in the context of the Second Tithe, we are commanded: “You shall eat it there before Hashem, your God, and rejoice you and your household,” (Deut 14:26). Also, in the context of Shavuot, “You shall rejoice before Hashem, your God, you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, the Levite who is in your cities, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow who are among you (Deut 16:11).

Similarly, since the performance of any mitzvah brings us closer to Hashem, it should always occur with “simcha.” This requirement is highlighted in the context of the calamities found in long Admonition in Deuteronomy 15-68: “They will be a sign and a wonder in you and in your offspring, forever, because you did not serve Hashem your God amid gladness (simcha) and goodness of heart, when everything was abundant” (Deut 28:47). Thus, our daily efforts in

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Nosson Scherman, “*An Overview Tefillah/Prayer –Molding Yourself*” The Expanded Art Scroll Siddur Wasserman Edition 2010, xxxi.

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Hershel Schacter, *HaMizrachi* volume 2, Issue 5, p.14; October 2019.

awareness of the presence of Hashem during Shmonei Esrei condition us to perform mitzvot with joy and protect our people from destruction and exile.

### **Tshuva “lifnei Hashem”**

As pointed out by many Sages, Maimonides begins the laws of teshuva by emphasizing that confession must be done “lifnei Hashem”: “Every commandment of the Torah, whether positive or negative, if one transgressed any of them, whether intentionally or accidentally, when (or if) he does Tshuva and returns (or repents) from his sin, he is obligated to confess before God” (Hil. Tshuva 1:1). Indeed, the confession states: ‘I beseech You, Hashem, I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed before You, and have done thus and thus,...’. One underlying principle is that a person sins precisely because that person loses awareness of being “lifnei Hashem.” This was illustrated by Joseph who refused to commit an immoral act saying: “How then can I perpetrate this great evil and have sinned against God!” Clearly, his awareness of the presence of Hashem protected him.

Regaining the awareness that we have sinned not only against Hashem but “before Hashem” creates the feeling of shame that brings us to tshuva: “Great is Teshuva for it brings man closer to the presence of God (Shechina) (Hil. Tshuva 7:6). Yom Kippur rectifies our lack of awareness of being “lifnei Hashem” since the verse states: “before the Lord, you shall be cleansed from all your sins.” This analysis illustrates the enormous potential of the daily Shmonei Esrei as a means to catalyze our self-transformation and protect us against mindless wrongdoing.

### **CONCLUSION**

This pair of articles is the result of an effort that began ten years ago to find practical tools to help my grandchildren overcome the challenge of achieving sustained Kavanah during Shmonei Esrei. Over time, various “tefillah techniques” that I proposed during Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies found receptive hearts outside of our family circle, and these articles fulfill the promise I made to several individuals to commit to writing the concept of a Kavanah plan. I

conclude with Rambam's prescription for Kavanah from the end of Moreh Nevuchim<sup>17</sup> that was brought to my attention by Rabbi Yehudah Rappaport:

"I will now commence to show you the way how to educate and train yourselves in order to attain that great perfection. The first thing you must do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read Shema' or during the Tefilláh, and do not content yourself with being devout when you read the first verse of Shema, or the first paragraph of the prayer. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try in reading the Law or listening to it, to have all your heart and all your thought occupied with understanding what you read or hear. After some time when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the prophets, or when you say any blessing; and to have your attention directed exclusively to the perception and the understanding of what you utter. When you have succeeded in properly performing these acts of divine service, and you have your thought, during their performance, entirely abstracted from worldly affairs, take then care that your thought be not disturbed by thinking of your wants or of superfluous things..... When you are alone by yourself, when you are awake on your couch, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God, viz., to approach Him and to minister before Him in the true manner which I have described to you--not in hollow emotions. This I consider as the highest perfection wise men can attain by the above training."

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<sup>17</sup> Moses Maimonides *The Guide for the Perplexed* (New York, Dover Publications, Inc, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) Part III, Chap 51, *How God is worshipped by a perfect man*; 386.