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RAV, THE JERUSALEM SHUL - BAKA, JERUSALEM

Checking in with Ourselves Three Times a Day

The Book of Leviticus introduces us to the various sacrifices that were offered in the Temple. Although the rite has lapsed on account of the Temple's destruction, in a sense the sacrifices live on. The Rambam clarified that prayer is a biblical commandment, but the obligation to pray three times a day is a rabbinic institution based on the daily sacrifices.¹

But why did the Sages decide to divide the day according to the timing of these sacrifices? Furthermore, why does the Talmud say to take extra care with Minchah, and then add “even with Maariv” and “even with Shacharit”—why not formulate a general rule that we should be deliberate in prayer?²

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook taught that the prayers are strategically placed throughout the day to address the challenges its different periods bring. Eliyahu, determined to convince the nation to fortify their faith in God and to reject the evil worship of Baal, was answered by God on Mount Carmel during the time for Minchah. By and throughout the afternoon, we are exposed at the workplace or in managing our daily affairs to views and behavior that are antithetical to the Torah and morality. Rav Kook

called Minchah an act of hashavat aveidah, returning a lost object, because it brings us back to ourselves, spiritually recentering us.

Night is a time when we are tempted by passion and sin, our thoughts run wild. Our spiritual adversaries in the dark arise internally and of their own accord, without an immediate external stimulus. The Jew seeking to live dignifiedly must protect himself from them, and Maariv helps us to strengthen our resolve.

The morning does not immediately beset us with challenges from without and within. But spiritual battles are in the offing, and Shacharit serves as a reveille that rouses the troops. The best way to fend off what the day will throw at us is by preparing ourselves “to think sublime thoughts with rectitude and integrity, love and fear of God.”³

The prayers are timed as they are because prayer elicits within us a heightened spiritual awareness of dangers and possibilities that belong to different parts of the day. When we pray, we are reminded that if we put in the effort, God helps us persevere whatever comes our way.

Prayer requires us to peer inward. Rav Kook wrote beautifully:

Prayer is a great self-examination.⁴

3. *Ein Ayah, Berachot*, 1:60.

4. *Musar Avicha, Me'ein Hakdamah*, sec. 3.

1. *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseh* §10, and see *Berachot* 26b.

2. See *Berachot* 6b.

וְהִנֵּה הַתְּפִילָּה הַיּוֹמִית גְּדוּל לְאָדָם
Prayer calls the soul to its purpose.⁵
הַתְּפִילָּה מְבַקֶּשֶׁת מִהַנְּשָׂמָה אֶת תַּפְקִידָהּ

Daily prayer forces us to take a hard look at ourselves a few times a day, to recommit to our ideals and principles, and to overcome obstacles that impede our growth. One of the outstanding Talmudists of this past century, Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, confirmed that his friend Rav Kook lived his own teachings. “If only I could pray Neilah on Yom Kippur,” he wished, “with the holy trepidation and emotion that the Rav prays Mincha every day.”⁶

Centuries ago, the author of the classic work of exposition of the 613 commandments, *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, argued that certain mitzvot were established expressly to help safeguard a person from negative influences and pressures. He listed tefillin, regular Torah study, tzitzit, and the mezuzah.⁷ Rav Kook later argued that daily prayer belongs on this list.

Rav Kook was intimately familiar with our mystical tradition, which conceives of prayer as having a potent spiritual effect on the upper worlds of the divine emanations, the sefirot, yet he chose to focus on how prayer affects the one saying it. His approach is similar to that of other great thinkers, such as Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who noted that the Hebrew word for praying is the reflexive *lehitpalel*, signaling that prayer acts on ourselves. The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks argued that “prayer changes the world because it changes us.”⁸

5. *Siddur Olat Re'iyah*, 1:11.
6. *Raz, Angel Among Men*, 312.
7. *Sefer ha-Chinuch*, §421.

8. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “The Power of Jewish Prayer,” *Jewish Action*, Fall 2009 (5770), https://jewishaction.com/religion/inspiration/the_power_of_jewish_prayer/ (accessed March 17, 2021).

Rebbe Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, the second Gerrer Rebbe, once told his Chassidim that when we say the words “please, God” (אֲנֵנּוּ ה') in Hallel, “it is an auspicious time for all of one’s prayers to be answered.”⁹ Since we divide Psalms 118:25 in two, and each phrase begins with “please, God” (אֲנֵנּוּ ה'), the Chassidim themselves were divided about which phrase the rebbe meant. Did he intend “please, God, save” (אֲנֵנּוּ ה' הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא) or “please, God, grant success” (אֲנֵנּוּ ה' הַצְּלִיחָה נָא)? The rebbe’s son, the Imrei Emet (Rebbe Avraham Mordechai), realized that both camps were wrong. His father had in mind an entirely different verse altogether. Earlier in Hallel, we beseech, “Please, God, for I am your servant” (אֲנֵנּוּ ה' כִּי אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ) (Psalms 116:16). When we gaze inward and truly feel that we are dedicated to God and His Torah, God helps us be the better servants that we pray and yearn to be.¹⁰

Rav Kook emphasized that the heights of prayer are achieved when we come away inspired. Daily prayer strengthens our resolve to be truer to our ideals and principles and can help us overcome obstacles that impede our growth. Prayer rouses us to live life with a greater sense of faith in ourselves and to gain a glimpse of God’s endless faith in us. ■

9. Weiss, *Rav Asher Weiss on the Parashah*, 1:252.
10. *Ibid*.

Rabbi Goldscheider is the author of the newly published book ‘Torah United’ (OU Press), featuring divrei Torah on the weekly parasha from Rav Kook, Rabbi Solovetichik, and the Chassidic Masters.

