

Walk thru Davening

with Rabbi David Walk

Communal Gratitude

MODIM D'RABANAN

Sh'moneh Esrei 15

It's a curious conundrum that our silence during the repetition of the Amida is pierced by the congregation bowing and reciting Modim d'Rabanan. What's going on? The Rambam is clear: Everyone stands, listens, and recites AMEIN after each and every blessing (Laws of Prayer, 9:3). But not at blessing number 18. Here we join the CHAZAN and simultaneously recite MODIM ANACHNU LACH (We are grateful to You). Why does this happen? What is different about this blessing?

Apparently, the first authority to discuss this question was the Abudarham, writing in the 14th century. He claims that MODIM really means 'we admit and accept Divine authority'. His commentary on the Sidur makes the case that acceptance of OL MALCHUT SHAMAYIM, 'the yoke of Heavenly Kingship', requires personal commitment and can't be done by proxy. In other words, our SHALIACH TZIBUR, 'communal representative', can be our emissary for our requests to God,

but can't make God our Sovereign.

Rav Soloveitchik, on the other hand, believes that MODIM primarily means we give thanks. He agrees that the CHAZAN can't say MODIM on our behalf, but for a totally different reason. Showing gratitude must be done personally to be meaningful. Every person must thank God for themselves for the effort to succeed.

This brief paragraph is called MODIM D'RABANAN, the thanksgiving of the Rabbis. It acquired this name from the two sources of our text, one in the Babylonian Talmud (Sota 40a) and the other from Yerushalmi Talmud (B'rachot 1:4). In each text we have a list of Rabbis stating their version of this communal gratitude. Our accepted version is selected excerpts from these prayers. So, we have the MODIM of all these Rabbis.

With this in mind, we begin our statement of thanksgiving: We gratefully thank You, for it is You who are God (YUD-HEI-VAV-HEI) our Lord, and the Lord of our ancestors, the Lord of all flesh. Our Molder (TZUREINU) and the Molder of all Creation (B'REISHIT).

We are thanking God for total control of everything in existence, and we do this in concentric circles of realities. First, we mention the personal

connection to God as our Master. There is a direct connection to our God. Then we state that this connection is based upon the historical reality of God forging ties with our ancestors, through covenants and historical experiences. Next, we see the Jewish relationship with God as part of a greater Divine commitment to all living beings (KOL BASAR). Finally, there is an acknowledgement that the basis for this relationship is that God is the force behind the Big Bang (B'REISHIT) and all existence in the universe.

Now we declare a double acknowledgment (B'RACHOT and HODA'OT, 'blessings' and 'thanks') for a double bequest (SHE'HECHI'TANU and KIYAMTANU, that You have 'given us life' and 'sustained us'). Blessings are an expansion of existing situations, so I believe that B'RACHOT connects to KIYAMTANU. While 'thanks' are often for unexpected or new boons, and therefore I assume it relates to our birth and coming to life.

We now have the closest thing to a request in our short prayer: So, may You continue to give us life and sustain us; and gather our exiles to the courtyards of Your holy precincts, for the purpose of observing Your decrees, to do Your will, and to serve You wholeheartedly. This

'request', I believe, is really part of our declaration of appreciation of God's bounty on our behalf. We are committing ourselves to a purpose for existence. We truly cherish Your gifts, because they contribute to our better serving You. This is what we ultimately desire and value.

I like the sequence of descriptions of Mitzvot in this passage. They are first HUKCHA, Your CHUKIM or obscure decrees, beyond our ken. But we do them anyway. Then they are Your RATZON or Divine Will. We do them because we want to, in some ineffable way, please You. Then they become AVDECHA, Your Divine service which we do with a full heart. These initially enigmatic practices become our cherished behavior patterns, because of our love for You. We only understand Mitzvot by doing them.

As we near the end of our short prayer, we encounter a difficult phrase 'AL SHE'ANACHNU MODIM LACH. The Koren Siddur translates it: for it is for us to give You thanks. I think this means that we're doing what is right and proper to do by giving thanks to God. Okay. ArtScroll adds a couple of words in brackets to get: [We thank you] for inspiring us to us to thank You. Sounds a little sneaky on God's part. It's like God is

tricking us into giving these thanks.

My go-to psychologist has always been Rav Dr. Avraham Twerski zt"l, one of the finest human beings I have ever encountered. He explains that gratitude 'is indeed a uniquely human trait'. Sadly, often people react to favors with 'resentment instead of gratitude'. I remember hearing that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein once commented, when told that another Rav had publicly attacked him, 'Funny. I don't remember ever doing him a favor.' Rav Twerski teaches: One of the effects of our liturgy should be that we should become more familiar and comfortable with expressions of gratitude (Twerski On Spirituality, p. 140).

I think the compilers of our MODIM D'RABANAN paragraph built in a 'gratitude clause'. All this thanking is not only about thanking God, but teaching us how important thanking is. This led Rav Twerski to conclude: the first words we utter in the morning are MODEH ANI... the emphasis given to expressing gratitude indicates its overwhelming importance. The spiritual person is a grateful person (p. 143).

Our beautiful paragraph ends with a disagreement between the Bavli Talmud and Yerushalmi Talmud. Could it be any other way? Our

popular version ends like the Bavli: Blessed is the God of Thanksgiving. However, the Vilna Gaon concludes with the version of the Yerushalmi: BARUCH ATA HASHEM (Blessed are You, O Lord), God of Thanksgiving. Should there be a formal concluding blessing configuration?

I like the version of the Gaon, because it gives the whole piece a stronger format. And don't we want to make the gratitude agenda as powerful as possible? 