Why Pray?

There are many people who claim that they never pray. I don't believe them. Many years ago, I was an irresponsible teenager who decided to become an Orthodox Jew with many wonderful friends who thought that I was crazy. Part of their critique of my new lifestyle was the fact that, to their thinking, I was davening 'all the time'. They all insisted vigorously that they never, ever prayed. However, one December morning while driving on an icy road (US Route 3, Plymouth, NH) we got into a skid. With the car slowly sliding into a gas station, two of my 'I never pray' buddies were chanting with great devotion, 'O, God, I don't want to die. Please, God, don't let me die!'

Okay, most of us don't spend much time in slow motion car accidents, but still a lot of people pray. Why? Generally, I believe most people pray, because they believe it works. There are many studies which show that people who pray regularly live longer and have happier lives. I'm skeptical. It may just mean that the people who pray are the type who live longer and are happier. So, I don't really know why most people pray. As an Orthodox Jew, I pray because it's obligatory, but does the story end there?

According to the Midrash, there are ten terms for prayer: (1) prayer, (2) beseeching, (3) call, (4) cry, (5) outcry, (6) chant, (7) encounter, (8) falling, (9) sing, and (10) stand. Actually, there are more, like 'converse', 'ask' or 'recite'. The point is that our Sages recognized that there are many reasons why people pray, and each term for prayer can represent another motivation for TEFILA.

However, the two greatest Jewish religious thinkers of the twentieth century, Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik both wrote that there are really only two reasons to pray, even though they express it differently. Rav Kook wrote that we can divide the reasons for our modern praying into the mystical and rational. In the rational realm, we find Torah obligations based on historical, objective obligations to interact with God, because we have intellectually concluded that there is a Supreme Being, to Whom we owe obeisance.

This commitment began as KORBANOT (offerings) in the Temple. We continue those obligations through our public recitations of the SHMONEH ESREI (the AMIDA) prayer.
This reality is most noticeable on Shabbat, Chag and Rosh Chodesh in the MUSAF service, when we actually recite the verses about the offerings. But our weekday morning and afternoon SHMONEH ESREI prayers are in place of the daily offerings (TAMID offerings).

The less objective or spiritual approach to prayer is expressed in our silent SHMONEH ESREH, when we are allowed or even encouraged to interject personal requests and thoughts. This is our time with God. Our Patriarchs did this when they invented the morning (Avraham), afternoon (Yitzchak) and evening services (Ya'akov). Even though now there's a script, we must do everything in our power to make this a conversation. Those blessings which our Sages composed are guidance for these visits.

The Rav said that the material our Sages wrote for us means that we don't have to primarily 'need to say what we feel; we are required to feel what we say'. We should work hard to understand what our Sages composed, because they are guiding us in this encounter with our Maker. We should pour our souls into this endeavor.

This is hard. We feel the obligation to say the prayers but often don't feel that the process is working. Rav Soloveitchik once observed that many of us 'don't want to daven; we want to have davened'. It's a conundrum. I feel this often. There are days when I have trouble remembering my morning davening experience, and that's not a sign of significant involvement in the process. It's something to work on, for me and for everyone.

Rav Steinzaltz z"l was once approached by a young observant man who taught Torah. This individual divulged that he had 'become distant or disconnected from the prayer service'. Rav Steinzaltz suggested that the young man 'wrestle' with one sentence of one prayer: Grapple with that one sentence, and say it with intention (KAVANAH). That will change the whole day that lies before you.

That's the point of why I'm starting this new series of articles on T'FILA. To daven better, it's important to try to understand our prayers. Then we can follow Rav Steinzaltz's advice. Together, let's find that one sentence which will make our prayers more meaningful, then our day, then our life.
The Evolution of Prayer

Shmoneh Esrei - part 1

Our people have been praying since Avraham Avinu. The Avot are credited with 'inventing' SHACHARIT when the sun rises, MINCHA as it sets, and ARVIT during the distressing darkness. But what did they say? Except for a few snippets scattered throughout Tanach, we don't know what they shared with God during these encounters. Rambam explained 'that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer' (Laws of Prayer 1:2). He goes on to explain that this process should include praises, requests and thanksgiving. But through tribulations and exile people lost the focus or clarity to accomplish this task on their own without guidance. So, during the time of Ezra, the Men of the Great Assembly composed the Shmoneh Esrei prayer. My first articles on Jewish prayer will focus on this master work of liturgical composition.

The most remarkable aspect of this prayer's design is its flexibility. The introductory material of praises for God and the concluding section of thanksgiving vary only very slightly throughout the year. However, the middle part is always dedicated to the purpose of this particular prayerful encounter with God. Generally, the goal of the prayer is supplication to God for the needs of both the individual and the community. This petitionary text of thirteen blessings is exchanged on Shabbat and Chag for a single blessing which expresses the sanctity or special nature of the day.

On those days upon which the Torah (Bamidbar chapters 28 & 29) decreed a MUSAF (additional offering) in the Beit HaMikdash, we have a Musaf prayer. This iteration of our basic prayer format has one blessing in the middle which is based upon that day's special additional offering. It's these prayers which remind us of the dual nature of our davening. These prayers continue the obligation of daily prayer begun by the Patriarchs, but also are formatted to remind us of our presently abandoned offerings in the Beit HaMikdash.

Before we begin our analysis of the text of the Shmoneh Esrei, I think that it's important to note three innovations that our Sages thought important enough to impose upon those reciting their master prayer. The first is to stand with our feet
together. This obligation to be on our feet gives our prayer its most popular name, the AMIDA - the Standing Prayer. Our Sages based this custom on the angels who are described as 'standing upon a single leg' (Yechezkel 1:7), in the famous passage about God's Divine Throne, the MERKAVA.

Rav Kook uses this custom to explain that we have two great services to God. One is Torah study, and is described by the term HALACHA - movement. Torah study and its resulting legal observances are a work of persistent progress. We are expected to always move forward both individually and communally. Communally, we must always allow HALACHA to evolve and remain relevant no matter what innovations appear in contemporary society. Individually, every one of us is required to study and develop so that we are always reinventing ourselves as we mature and age. HALACHA is always a work in progress.

Prayer, on the hand, is a statement of where we are at the given moment that any prayer is recited. Prayer is sort of in a stasis. Today I stand before God and try to describe my situation and needs, at that moment in my spiritual journey. Sharing that information is a major part of what I communicate in my attempt to contact the Infinite.

The second rabbinic innovation is to face Yerushalayim, or if one is privileged to be in the Holy City, then to turn towards the Temple Mount. This wrinkle in our daily devotion adds two dimensions to our attempt to communicate with God. First, it gives the individual supplicant a sense of national unity. All the world's Jews are focusing on the same point. This adds a new dimension to our communication with our Maker. We are not alone. I'm a small part of a much greater effort.

Turning towards the place of the once and future Beit HaMikdash, also reminds us that our prayers are, in part, a replacement for the Temple offerings. It also calls attention to the fact that we believe that Yerushalayim is the interface between this world and the heavenly realm. All of our prayers travel to the Divine Throne via the Temple Mount. Zionism unites us politically, nationally and spiritually.

The third addition instituted by our Sages to help us daven better is to begin our Shmoneh Esrei with the verse: O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise (T'hilim 51:17). This plea reminds of an extremely important reality: Daven-
ing is very difficult! It's so hard to communicate with God that Divine support is required. It's almost a chutzpa to address our Creator. We seek permission for this possible impertinence.

Rebbe Nachman points out the numerical value (GEMATRIA) of HEICHAL, God's divine palace, 65, is also the value of the first word in our verse ADONAI. One requires the permission of the BA'AL HaBAYIT to receive the honor of visiting God's Sanctum. As God's servants we need the Master's indulgence to enter the Divine presence. This verse reminds us of the WOW factor involved when entering God's presence. Humility is required for this enterprise.

So, now we're ready to open our mouths in prayer, praise, supplication. In the following articles, I'll try to make our Sages' wonderful Shmoneh Esrei prayer come to life. I hope that I'm equal to the task.
Permission to Pray

Our Shmoneh Esrei prayer, the AMIDA, is a marvel of liturgical engineering. The Men of the Great Assembly (established c. 516 BCE), under the guidance of Ezra HaSofer, designed a remarkable service, which can be easily adjusted to fit any day of our ritual calendar. This Silent Devotion is full of requests and petitions on regular weekdays, but its list of pleas can be removed from its center and replaced with a description of the special nature of the occasion on Shabbat and Chag. Over the next weeks, we will explore the intricacies of this amazing prayer, and, hopefully, this endeavor will contribute to a more meaningful davening experience. I know that I can use a supplication overhaul.

This endeavor at communication with God is called Shmoneh Esrei because there were originally 18 blessings in this prayer. The first three and last three remain pretty stable all the time, and this present article will deal with the opening blessing. This first paragraph is called AVOT (Patriarchs), because it focuses on the reality that our relationship with our Maker is based upon God's love affair with our Founding Fathers, Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. Our Sages credit them with inventing the concept of regular prayer, every morning (Avraham), afternoon (Yitzchak) and night (Ya'akov).

Invariably, our litany of blessings follows the set format, 'Blessed are You, O Lord, King of the universe.' But not here at the outset of our Amida. Here, instead, we begin, 'Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, and the God of our ancestors.' Why? Rav Soloveitchik responds: The words 'King of the universe' are omitted here, for how can temporal, flesh and blood humans purport to approach the eternal and infinite King of the Universe for fulfillment of one's personal needs? Invoking the Universal King in the beginning of our Amida would negate our very ability to approach God in prayer. Instead, we invoke 'God of our forefathers'. If we are able to engage in prayer at all, it is only through the precedent of our forefathers who instituted the very institution of prayer.

So, our first blessing is a preamble to the Amida in which we state: We're here because our ALTE ZEIDIE paved the way. This introductory blessing continues by specifying that our God was the God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov. Why is it necessary to
list them individually and to attach the word God to each? Because each of them related to God differently, one through CHESED (kindness), one through GEVURA (spiritual stamina), and one through TEFERET (splendor, perhaps a synthesis of the first two approaches, but maybe through Torah study in his tent). We, too, are all different in our personalities and, as a result, connect to God from different perspectives and needs. Our master prayer must be flexible and versatile to meet the needs of all.

Now we begin to describe our perspective on how we view God and how we relate to our Creator. Not surprisingly, these descriptions appear in sets of three, corresponding to the AVOT. We start with by describing God as 1. GADOL (great), 2. GIBOR (mighty), 3. NORA (awesome). Then we move on to categorize God 1. is the most-high God (E-L ELYON), 2. bestows acts of loving kindness (GOMEL CHASADIM), and 3. creates and, therefore, owns everything (KONEI HAKOL). Next, we relate God's actions on our behalf; 1. God remembers the kindness of the AVOT, 2. brings a redeemer to their descendants, and 3. this is all accomplished through the Divine name in love. Finally, we declare that God is the King who will 1. help, 2. save, and 3. shield us.

It's important to point out that we love three-part concepts. At the beginning of Pirkei Avot, these same authors of the Amida, the Men of the Great Assembly, teach us three ideas: 1. Be careful (cautious, patient) in the administration of justice, 2. raise many disciples and 3. make a fence round the Torah. Then Shimon HaZadik, one of the last members of this august council informs us that this world stands on three pillars, 1. Torah, 2. Divine worship (AVODA), and 3. acts of loving kindness (GEMILAT CHESED).

Please, be aware that this love of triple ideas is a bedrock of this world of ours. Our earthly realm is three dimensional and can only find stability in groups of three, as in a three-legged stool. Therefore prayers, hopes and wishes for this earth will often be expressed in triplets. This is in stark contrast to God and the Celestial Realm where there is perfect unity. Never forget: God is absolutely ONE!

We end this first blessing of the Amida with a bit of a surprise: Blessed are You, O Lord, Who is the Shield of Avraham. Really! After all that effort to keep our observations about God in threes, out of respect for the three Avot, we end by just mentioning Avraham, and God's
promise to him when he felt vulnerable: Fear not, Avram, I am your shield, your reward is truly immense (B'reishit 15:1).

Our religion is the result of contributions of all three Avot, but our right to address God will always stem from the SACHAR (reward, merit, wages) of Avraham. He not only started our people; he began the Divine bank account which we will always draw upon. He will always be our permission to pray. The ticket into God's Presence is the membership card in Avraham's family, either by birth or by choice.

There is a curious HALACHA, law and custom, about this blessing. Even though one should have KAVANA (intention and sense of purpose) for the entire enterprise of davening, it's only this BRACHA which absolutely requires it. Without KAVANA for this blessing, one has not fulfilled the traditional requirement of prayer. Why? Because this blessing describes, not only how Jewish worship developed from the efforts of the Avot. These ancestors, and primarily Avraham, began the eternal relationship with the Eternal One. Without acknowledging that reality, we have no right to think that we have offered a Jewish prayer.
Walk thru Davening
with Rabbi David Walk

Unlimited Power

The first blessing of our Amida or Shmoneh Esrei prayer is all about love, kindness and relationship. That changes fast. The second of the trio of blessings described as SHEVACH or 'praise' is about power, and is called GEVURA. But we shouldn't let ourselves be intimidated, because the Sages who composed this script for our conversation with God remind us that God's unlimited capability is utilized for good and the benefit of humanity. This is a complex text, and we'll navigate it carefully.

We begin with 'You are GIBOR!' What do we mean when we discuss God's GEVURA or unlimited strength? Well, like so much else in Jewish tradition it's an argument. Many aver that we are discussing those activities which can only be accomplished by God. The Vilna Gaon disagrees, and explains that the powers listed here are about activities which can't be predicted or regulated. Things like rain or fertility which can't be predicted easily. These issues contain uncertainties, and are by no means inevitable.

The only certainty is that God is GIBOR, and that this Divine power leads to RAV L'HOSHIYA, immense salvation. This power will always be utilized for good and spiritual advancement, the betterment of humanity. We call this Y'SHUA, deliverance or redemption.

At this point, we encounter the dominant example of God's GEVURA, namely MECHAYEI HaMEITIM, giving life to the dead, or lifeless. This exact phrase appears three times in our blessing, and twice more in slightly different wording, MEMIT U'MECHAYEI and L'HACHAYOT MEITIM. So, the famous question is: Why do we emphasize this particular aspect of God's GEVURA?

This question sparks an interesting dichotomy between the two most popular English translations of our traditional Siddur. Art Scroll goes for the more traditional answer, that we repeat this phrase because there are so many examples of God giving life to the lifeless, unborn, or dead. These include our daily awakening from 'deathlike slumber', the bringing of rain which has life sustaining qualities, and, of course, the literal revival of the dead. I would add to that list the initiation of life during the Creation week and God's continued involvement in fertility as
described in the beginning of tractate Ta'anit.

On the other hand, The Koren Siddur, with commentary by Rav Sacks z"l, offers a historical approach. Rav Sacks wrote: The fivefold reference to the resurrection of the dead reflects the controversy between the Sadducees and the Pharisees in the late Second Temple era. The Sadducees rejected belief in resurrection; the Pharisees, whose heirs we are, affirmed it (p. 110). It is true that the Shmoneh Esrei prayer did contain material meant to bolster rabbinic positions, but I'm not sure that this was the intent of our particular blessing.

We wholeheartedly accept the veracity of the idea that there is some form of life after death, without going into the myriad debates about its format. There are enough references to its existence in the Prophets and rabbinic literature to attest to its normative position in our tradition. The Mishna at the end of Sanhedrin is very clear: And these are the people who have no share in the World-to-Come: One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead from the Torah (10:1).

Back to our second blessing, after the declaration about resurrection, we have the praise of God for bringing the rain in its proper season. This declaration is seasonal based upon the needs of Eretz Yisrael, rain in the winter and dew in the summer. This is not a request for rain, that would come in either the blessing about livelihood or the general requesting blessing, SHMA KOLEINU. Remember the first three blessings are about praising God, not asking for things.

The next section has a list of specific powerful activities carried out by God: sustains all life with kindness (CHESED), revives the dead with great compassion (RACHAMIM), supports the fallen, heals the ill, and frees the captive. This list inspired Rav Soloveitchik to remind us of the rule of Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 1:54), 'we are permitted to describe God's attributes or actions only if they impose upon man an ethical obligation. We have the imperative to emulate the ways of God... It would have been prohibited for us to praise Him in any way if that praise did not obligate us to follow in His ways (Worship of the Heart p. 159).

When God performs all of these mighty deeds of CHESED, our Maker is not only fulfilling the Divine will, there is also a continued implementation of the Covenant with our Patriarchs. This eternal deal is
referred to in the phrase: Who maintains His faithfulness to those asleep in the dust. This statement is based on a verse: Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). But I have always connected this to God's eternal relationship and commitment to our Patriarchs. This line contributes to davening in Ma'arat HaMachpela, above their eternal abode, so very intense and satisfying.

As the blessing moves toward denouement, we paraphrase the well-known and oft quoted exclamation of the Jews at the sight of the Splitting of the Sea: Who is like unto You amongst the mighty? Who is like unto You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, doing wonders? (Sh'mot 15:11). In our blessing, our Sages rendered this idea: Who is like unto You, Master of might, and to whom can You be compared.

It could be said that this is the main idea of our blessing. Personally, I believe that it is secondary to the idea of God the Provider of life to the dead, but it is a powerful statement of the Omnipotence of God. Compared to God there are no competitors.

Our second blessing of the Eighteen, ends by echoing the primary idea: Blessed are You, Reviver of the dead. We have moved from declaring that we have inherited an intimate relationship with God from ancestors in the first blessing to this resounding statement of the incomparable might of our Creator. From here we will move to the third great SHEVACH (praise) of our Maker: God is transcendent. That's to be our next discussion.
Walk thru Davening
with Rabbi David Walk

I'VE GOT A SECRET

Shmoneh Esrei 4

Everyone loves a secret! Growing up I loved the game show of that name; my family were big Gary Moore fans. But we Jews have secrets, too. The Kedusha service recited whenever we have a repetition of the Amida contains a profound and ancient secret. Actually, we refer to the secret in the text itself. In my Ashkenazic rite we only mention the existence of this obscure idea in Musaf on Shabbat and Chag, but Eidot HaMizrach and Nusach Sefard shuls mention it every Shacharit. Here's the quote: NA'ARITZ'CHA V'NAKDISH'CHA K'SOD SARFEI KODESH, We revere and sanctify You, just like the SECRET recited by the holy Serafim. But what is this, ironically, well-known secret? Well, that will take a little time to reveal.

The Hebrew word SOD (which reminds modern Israelis of cleaning products) really refers to a deep mystery. This isn't like a Miss Marple or Sherlock Holmes mystery, which a clever mind can unravel. This is a mystical truth which can only become known when revealed by heavenly forces. This isn't a puzzle; it's an unknown.

The SOD is embedded in the declaration of the Serafim, which we know only because of the prophecy of Yeshayahu: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole world is filled with His Glory (6:4). Before we get to the SOD, we must deal with a P'SHAT (literal meaning) problem: What are the three holies?

It has been famously said that the SERAFIM were informing Yeshayahu, and us, that there are three forms of holiness available to us. In ascending order, there is the holiness of time, like Shabbat and Chag; there is the holiness of place and objects, like Yerushalayim or a Sefer Torah; there is the holiness of human beings.

However, there are two explanations to this repetition problem in the davening. We recite this formula of Kedusha three times in the morning services. The first time it surrounds the recitation of SH'MA, the second is the Kedusha service (if there's a minyan), and then in K'DUSHA D'SIDRA (which we call UVA L'TZIYON) towards the end of Shacharit. In that third recitation, we present an explanation of the triple sanctity. It is from the Aramaic translation of the verse: Holy in the highest heaven, holy on earth... holy
forever and all time.

I think that we give another explanation in the very text of the BRACHA itself: 1. You are holy, 2. Your name is holy, and 3. holy ones praise You daily, SELAH!

So, now back to the secret. The declaration is that God is KADOSH, which we have been translating as 'holy', but the true implication of the term is transcendent or unreachable. Then the Serafim inform us that God's presence fills the entirety of our world. How can God be unavailable, yet, at the same time, all around us? It's a paradox! The Rav often said that Jews must learn to live with paradoxes.

Now we've encountered the SOD. God is the ultimate beyond. God inhabits a spiritual plane unreachable for us mere mortals. When God created our realm (through a Kabbalistic process called TZIM-TZUM, 'contraction'), some Divinity was left behind. This holy remnant makes God accessible to those who seek it. That's the SOD! Through spiritual efforts we can make the SH'CHINA accessible and imminent. The Serafim trusted us with the great secret: The Unreachable is attainable to those who seek it with sincerity, purity and love.

The next curiosity in the KEDUSHA service is the fact that we, sort of, say the same thing again, when we quote from Yechezkel (3:12) in the very next line: Blessed is the Presence of the Lord from His Place. In other words, we can bless, praise, contact God, even though the Divine presence is elsewhere, in God's abode in another dimension. Why must we reiterate this idea?

Rav Soloveitchik explained that Yeshayahu was reporting about his vision 'enveloped in an environment suffused with holiness'. The daily morning offering was being offered on the Altar, and the smoke of the incense rose... The entire Temple was filled with the spirit of God in holiness, purity, and majesty... Moreover, Israel was economically prosperous and resided in its land... There was no doubt or uncertainty; all had knowledge of God and affirmed their belief (Before Hashem, p. 5).

The Rav went on to describe the situation facing Yechezkel: The historical conditions in which Yechezkel witnessed his revelation were entirely different... He experienced his vision not in Jerusalem, not in the Temple, not in the palace of God, but as a refugee and exile. Jerusalem and the myriad
of holy communities of Israel were in ruin... His people were sold into slavery, beaten and subjected to hard labor... But despite the fact that it was a time of HESTER PANIM (God seemingly in hiding) ... Yechezkel demonstrated, God is still accessible despite His distance... Yechezkel's answer speaks specifically to us, who are in exile, we who must find God, Who is hidden, distant, and abiding in His 'place' seemingly removed from man (Before Hashem, p. 5-7).

That leaves one more declaration in Kedusha to be explained; God shall reign forever, your God, O Tziyon, from generation to generation, HALLELUYAH! (T'hilim 146:10). We are affirming our faith that our relationship with God is everlasting. But, like always, there's an issue. I mentioned before that we recite the Kedusha formula three times every morning, but in the other two recitations, just before Shmoneh Esrei and in UVA L'TZIYON, we end with a verse from the Song of the Sea, GOD will rule forever (Sh'mot 15:11). Why the change?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted that the first and third recitations describe the song of the Serafim; the second is a reenactment of the scene. This holier endeavor requires a minyan. A minyan adds another dimension.

Rebbe Nachman pointed out that everyone of us has different and unique attributes. We have to observe and learn from each other. Actually, the Rebbe learns this idea from the Aramaic translation of the introduction to the angelic declaration in Yeshayahu: They accepted (M'KABLIN) from each other. We must emulate that and learn from each other.

Our verse from T'hilim is saying a very similar idea. When we daven in a minyan, we each add something unique we learned from our parents and teachers. Plus, minyanim, ideally, have different generations present, each historic layer informing the other. Experience encounters youthful exuberance. We are sharing the SOD from different vantage points.

I love reciting Kedusha. It is a very moving declaration of the most important concept of T'FILA: we can encounter God. As Rabbi Sacks once commented: In Kedusha, we move beyond the priestly prayer-as-sacrifice, and the prophetic prayer-as-dialogue, to prayer as a mystic experience. And we share a secret.
TO ERR IS HUMAN

Shmoneh Esrei 6

This is the fifth in a series of articles exploring the daily Shmoneh Esrei prayer, also called the Amida or standing prayer. We've just explained that the fourth blessing is about recognizing that all intelligence derives from God. It is this intelligence which separates us from the rest of Creation, so we begin our Amida shopping list by requesting more grey matter. In blessings five and six, our Sages have advised us to ask God for repentance and forgiveness, because we know that we generally have fallen short of the Divine expectations for humanity. It's ironic that once we've attained a certain level of understanding, the first thing we realize is that we're wrong.

These two blessings present us immediately with a dilemma: Aren't T'SHUVA (repentance) and S'LICHA (forgiveness) basically the same thing? I mean don't we seem to combine these concepts during the Ten Days of Repentance? BTW we're going to have a similar issue of apparent duplication when we get to the blessings about rebuilding Yerushalayim and restoring the Davidic monarchy, but we must wait a few weeks to resolve that quandary.

Actually, the more basic problem is that most of us assume that T'SHUVA is always connected to sin. That's just not true. Look at the wording which begins blessing number 5: Bring us back, our Father, to Your Torah. We're not discussing specific sins or transgressions. We're discussing that life has brought impediments to our continued progress in Torah, Mitzvot and MIDOT (character development). Every morning we remind ourselves that we received a 'pure soul' (ELOKAI, N'SHAMA SHE'NATATA LI T'HORA HI) from our Maker, and now we're asking God to return it to the factory settings.

This, I believe, is what the Rambam is teaching us in his majestic Chapter 7 of Hilchot T'shuva: Do not say that no repentance is needed except for sins to which action is attached, for example: promiscuity, robbery, or theft. For even as it is necessary for each one to repent from such, so it is necessary for everyone to search one's bad tendencies, to turn in repentance from anger, from hatred, from jealousy, from deceit, from pursuing wealth, honor, feasting and
the such; in fact, from all of these it is necessary for one to turn in repentance. Indeed these failings are more grievous and more difficult for one to separate from than those which require action, for on such spiritual issues the prophet Yishayahu (55:7) said: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the man of iniquity his thoughts" (Halacha 3).

The difference between the normal view of T'SHUVA from sins and the issue in this B'RACHA is, I believe, described by our Sages as T'SHUVA MIYIR'A (repentance out of fear of sin and punishment) and T'SHUVA MEI-AHAVA (repentance from love of God and Torah). In our scenario, the individual hasn't done anything specifically prohibited, but has a feeling that the gap between this Jew and the Infinite is, paradoxically, growing. It's time to commit to the path God would want for us.

So, this B'RACHA continues to discuss that one must reconnect to Torah and to Divine service. We, therefore, ask God to bring us back SHLEIMA, completely and totally, to the spiritual highway. Then we conclude that it's right to ask for this help because, 'Blessed are You, HaShem, who truly desires this T'SHUVA route.

Then we turn in B'RACHA 6 to the regular garden variety of T'SHUVA, namely sin. This blessing is famous because when we mention the two examples of sin we hit our hearts. This signifies that it was our heart-based emotions which have caused us to transgress God's law, not our minds. If we had thought things through, we wouldn't have sinned, maybe.

Now a public service announcement: Don't bang your chest! This isn't a Tarzan moment. We're embarrassed by our faux pas, so, please, a gentle tap. The rest of us don't want to hear your enthusiasm.

We have two terms for sin, and two terms for forgiveness, and they directly correlate to each other. We begin with S'LACH or 'forgive' for our CHEIT, one of many words for sin. But what kind of sin? I first encountered the original meaning of CHEIT at the rifle range in the IDF. It means to miss the mark or target. Not that I ever missed. Here, too, it refers to missing the expectations God has for us. It generally refers to sins of error, called SHOGEG. I didn't realize that act was prohibited. Famous example: I thought the piece of animal fat was SHUMAN (permitted fat), when in reality it was CHELEV (prohibited fat).

The word for forgiveness for this
type of mistake is S'LACH or forgive the misstep. That's why we begin our blessing by referring to God as AVINU, our Parent. This is the kind of mistake a loving parent will make allowances for.

Next we encounter PESHA, a much more severe variety of sin. This transgression was done on purpose. The individual knew it was prohibited and, at least, for that moment didn't care. Hence, we refer to God as MALKEINU, our King, in this circumstance. We should have the proper awe and fear of the Master of the World when we behaved so poorly.

This transgression can't just be excised and forgotten so easily, therefore we ask for M'CHILA, pardon from severe penalty. It's akin to commutation of a sentence. The sin doesn't disappear, but we mitigate its impact.

Missing from our blessing is the highest level of clemency, KAPARA, atonement, erasure of the sin. There are commentaries who explain that KAPARA is assumed in the next blessing, GE'ULA, redemption. I believe that we don't ask for KAPARA on a daily basis. This level of amnesty is reserved for Yom Kippur. It's important to maintain our fear and trepidation of sin throughout the year. We reserve our begging for this special gift of God, for the anniversary of the revelation of the 13 Attributes of Compassion while forgiving the sin of the Golden Calf.

These two blessings are a daily reminder of the spiritual dangers lurking in our world. We must commit on a regular basis to tread carefully on the path of life. We recognize that we need God's help in this project.
About half of all Americans claim to pray daily. That's a lot. The things they claim to pray for are varied indeed. Along with the expected items like forgiveness and health, many people pray for the success of their sports team or to find a parking space. Maybe it's just me, but I can't remember praying for my sports team since 1967, when my prayers for the Red Sox were thwarted by the curse of Babe Ruth. In my experience as a rabbi answering questions about prayer, I think that safety, health and prosperity are the most common goals people desire Divine help for. These are the three issues in blessings 7, 8 and 9 of our Sh'moneh Esrei prayer.

Blessing 7 is called GE'ULA or Redemption. But it's not about redemption like from Egypt or the future Messianic Era. It's about being saved from suffering and oppression in our day to day lives. Throughout history (at least the last 2000 years of it) Jews have been an oppressed minority. This blessing is mostly about begging God to save us from being trapped by forces beyond our control. Often Jews have been victims of cruel regimes, and this blessing is about being saved from the long list of brutal overlords who have victimized us.

Until this blessing, the issues discussed have been spiritual in nature, this and the next two blessings are about requesting help from God concerning our physical existence. But there is a spiritual aspect of note. We ask to God to help against these forces which we can't control, and then say it's 'for Your name's sake'. Why? It's similar to what Moshe Rabbeinu said to God while pleading for the Jews after the sin of the Golden Calf: Let not Your anger blaze forth against Your people... Let not the Egyptians say that it was with an evil intent God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains (Sh'mot 32:11-12).

We are God's nation and representatives in this earthly realm. It does cause a CHILUL HASHEM, desecration of God's holy name, when we wallow in shame and disgrace. We should never cause embarrassment to God, and Moshe begged God to not be the cause of such a debacle.

The Sages ended this blessing with the words GO'EIL YISRA'EL, Who redeems Yisrael. This statement is in the present tense. We see the GA'AL
YISRAEL, in the past tense very often. When we praise and thank God, we refer to the past. When we entreat God to save us, we speak in the present tense.

Blessing number 8 contains the issue that I was asked about the most during my rabbinic career. More people asked me about praying for an ill relative or friend than any other topic, and by a wide margin. I don't think a week ever went by without someone either asking me to pray for someone or seeking advice about Psalms or prayers to recite for an ill person. It's no accident that we recite the MI SHEBEIRACH for the ill, with great solemnity during our services.

This request has an odd feature about it. We say 'heal us and we will be healed, save us and we will be saved'. That seems odd. Of course, if we're healed then we're healed. Well, maybe not. Doctors are great, but they don't always succeed. With God, when healing is on the agenda, it succeeds.

The line before the closing B'RACHA is: For you God, are a faithful and compassionate Healer. Why must we emphasize compassion in the healing process? Sadly, there are many situations when the healing process is extremely uncomfortable and painful. We believe that God takes the least painful route towards the healing process.

As we close this blessing we recite: ROFEI CHOLEI AMO YISRAEL (Who heals the ill of His nation Yisrael). This is in contrast to the blessing for bodily functions, when we say: Healer of all flesh. Why is our blessing focused of Jews, while the other B'RACHA is universal? I think that we definitely concern ourselves with the whole world, but Sh'moneh Esrei is the prayer for the home team, for the heirs of the Covenant of the Patriarchs, which we reference in the opening blessing.

Our final blessing for today is blessing number 9, for livelihood. We call this BIRKAT HaSHANIM, the blessings of the years. Historically, our ancestors were agrarian. Prosperity was an annual concern, based upon harvests. The ability to survive and thrive was calibrated by annual rainfall figures. Therefore, this B'RACHA emphasizes rain. Even though this blessing appears in the part of the Sh'moneh Esrei concerned with personal needs, nevertheless the Talmud informs us that this request is based upon the needs of Eretz Yisrael. If another part of the world requires rain, we ask for it in the general request B'RACHA, SH'MA KOLEINU.
Then we request SAB'EINU MITUVECHA, satisfy us through Your goodness. This is a more general request for our needs to be taken care of. At this point we should have in mind anyone we know who may require Divine support for their livelihood.

We then ask that this year should be blessed 'like the best of years'. This, again, makes most sense in an agricultural context. In a business framework, it may make sense to ask for the greatest productivity or profit ever, like sales records. However, in agriculture there are only so many acres available for cultivation, so it made sense to ask for one of the really good years.

The closing blessing praises God as the Blesser of Years. This makes senses, of course, in the agricultural context. I must add, though, that traditionally, we viewed our blessings as an annual issue. Our Sages believed that our fate for the year was established on Rosh HaShana. We always viewed God’s bounty in that yearly format.

The Vilna Gaon pointed out that we should ask for TAL or dew in the summer time, because it's important to recognize the little items which contribute to our well-being, as well as the large cloudbursts of support. We sometimes ignore those small things which can make a big difference.

To a certain extent, these three blessings are the heart of the norms of prayers to God. We next turn to the specific requests which are required for the maintenance of well-run society.
Beginning with blessing number 10, we turn our attention to communal needs. This is important. The Jewish nation survives or fails based on our concern for one another. We believe that KOL YISRAEL AREIVIN ZEH BAZEH, every Jew is responsible for every other Jew. I saw this first-hand last Thursday at Ben Gurion. I went to pick up my wife Rivka from visiting the US. Outside entrance 3 were young women (B'NOT SHEIRUT) handing out flags and backpacks to Jewish refugees from war-torn Ukraine. The singing (HAVEINU SHALOM ALEICHEM) and the tears told the whole story: Jews care about Jews!

This fits right in with the topic of Blessing 10: Blast the great Shofar for our freedom, and raise high the banner to gather our exiles. This thrilling start to our blessing paraphrases two famous verses from the book of Yeshayahu:

(1) On that day a great ram's horn will be blown, and those lost in the land of Assyria will come, as well as those dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they will worship the Lord at Jerusalem on the holy mountain (27:13),

(2) And he shall lift up a banner (NES) to the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth (11:12).

The first verse has a prominent place in the Rosh Hashanah davening.

The reference to a 'great ram's horn' prompts the Midrash to note that the ram which Avraham slaughtered in place of Yitzchak had two horns. The smaller was blown during Revelation at Sinai. The larger being reserved to be blasted at the outset of the final redemption. Clearly, the final redemption will dwarf the former.

This is clearly just the first stage of the redemptive process, because we don't discuss the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy until later blessings. Nevertheless, the reunification of the scattered nation is a significant step. The idea that there is tremendous power in the unity of all the Jews is seen in the mitzva of HAKHEL, when the whole the nation gathers every seven years to hear the king read from Sefer D'varim. In Kabbalistic thought KNESSET YISRAEL is actually a manifestation
of SH'CHINA, Divine Presence, in our world.

The sad historic reality of the dispersion of our people has been a weakness of our nation for 2700 years. When Haman wanted to describe the decrepit nature of our people, he told Achashveirosh, 'There is one nation which is scattered and dispersed (M'FUZAR UMFORAD) among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm (Esther 3:8). The Malbim describes this double whammy: M'FUZAR, they have no land for themselves; M'FORAD, even in the lands in which they do dwell, they have no cities or specific territory for themselves. This dispersal has made us extremely vulnerable.

We conclude, 'Blessed are You, God, Who gathers the dispersed of His people, Yisrael.' This term for 'dispersed', NIDACH, implies more than just separated. Again, the Malbim explains that NIDACH means truly isolated and alone. It's a pitiable image.

When, at long last, the Jewish people finally begin to reassemble, what is our first need? Well, that's blessing number 11. We need good leadership. The term SHOFEIT means so much more than only a 'judge'. As in the book of that name, these are leaders who have judicial, political, and military power. These leaders require expert advice, and that's where YO'ATZEINU, 'our advisors' come in. These are people with technical and logistical knowledge, who can provide sage advice for the SHOFTIM. Never denigrate the contributions of competent technocrats and bureaucrats.

This reference to judges and advisors is a paraphrase of a verse in Yeshayahu at the end of chapter one, which makes up the Haftara for the Shabbat before Tish'a b'Av. Destruction has come to the Jews as a result of corrupt leadership. Yerushalayim will never return to its former glory as a City of Righteousness, Faithful Citadel unless the leadership is caring and compassionate.

Now comes one of my favorite lines in the whole Sh'moneh Esrei: and remove from us YAGON (suffering, sorrow, discomfort) and ANACHA (sighing, groaning). Under Anti-Semitic regimes our people have suffered beyond belief. Now, we can finally reverse that trend of governmental oppression. This line is an exhortation to Jewish leaders, including rabbis: Rule with a light touch! Don't burden the people unnecessarily!

Understanding full-well that we will
never find such perfect leaders, we turn to God, and beseech, 'May You alone, O Lord, reign over us.' The rabbinic authors of the prayer then use four terms to describe this desired kind of leadership: CHESED (kindness), RACHAMIM (compassion), TZADKEINU (vindicate us, find us innocent), BAMISHPAT (in justice).

Jews have been unjustly accused of horrible crimes throughout history. Blood Libels and claims of terrible depredations have been the common fare of Antisemitic screeds for many centuries. This last phrase is a specific demand that we be exonerated from all those lies hurled upon us by our unscrupulous enemies from time immemorial.

We close this blessing by describing God as the 'King, Who loves righteousness and justice' (from Psalms (33:5), 'Who loves TZADAKA U'MISHPAT'). This is remarkable. It's the only blessing in the requests section where the words 'King' and 'love' appear. Rav Yeshayahu HaLevi Horowitz (Shnei Luchot HaBrit) explains that when you love something there is no need to explain your attachment. God loves TZADAKA U'MISHPAT. That's all there is to say.

When we refer to God as MELECH, king, we are describing our Creator as being in total control over our lives. Historically, a king had unlimited power over his subjects. Even though, in our modern world we've become accustomed to constitutional monarchies which limit the rulers, the authors of our prayers were thinking of kings as a force of unbridled power.

Our vision of society demands TZ'DAKA U'MISHPAT. There must be an enforced system of justice and fair play. That's definitely worth praying for.
BAD GUYS
Sh’moneh Esrei 9

We definitely have enemies. If we Jews are paranoid, there's a good reason for it. I could fill this whole column with a just list of all the Hamans and Hitlers we've endured over the past 4000 years. However, the blessing in our Shmoneh Esrei which I'm going to discuss isn't about those villains at all. Actually, we've already begged God to deliver us from oppressive bad guys in the request to save us from 'our afflictions' in the blessing about GEULA or physical redemption. Oh no, here we're talking about the worst possible threat to our continued existence: enemies from within.

This B'RACHA is an enormous anomaly. The most striking thing about this blessing is that it's negative. All the other requests are 'Please, give us this,' or 'Please, provide us that.' Not, so here. We implore God to: uproot, crush, smash, cast down, obliterate. Pretty tough stuff. Like the screen-overs from a Batman fight.

What's going on? Clearly, the Jews at the time of its writing were suffering horribly because of the machinations of these trouble makers. Let's set the scene: It's approximately 100 CE. The great Jewish court, Sanhedrin, has fled the destruction of Yerushalayim and is situated in Yavne, near the coast, not far from Ashdod. Rabban Gamliel II, head of the Court, sees Jewish malcontents stirring up the Roman Empire against the downtrodden Jews of Judea. These persistent attacks threaten the fragile existence of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael. What to do?

Rabban Gamliel asks who can compose a prayer against those fellow Jews who threaten our very ability to survive. The meekest of the Court, Shmuel HaKatan stepped forward to compose the original version of this B'RACHA. Rav Kook explained that he was uniquely able to do this because he lived his whole existence based upon the principle: Never rejoice over the downfall of your enemy (Pirkei Avot 4:19).

We're not sure what the original version of this prayer looked like. To this day, there are more variations on this B'RACHA than any other in our Shmoneh Esrei prayer. There is still a debate about which term should headline our plea. Is it against the
MINIM, sectarians or heretics, or MALSHINIM, slanderers or informers?

Let's go with MINIM first. These are Jews tearing apart the fabric of our nation by claiming that they have the only, true concept of what Judaism stands for, and all others are not only wrong, but will never inherit the ultimate reward which God has in mind for the Chosen People. There were many such sects in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The most famous, of course, was the various guises of Christianity. Until they broke off, and went a separate way. But there were also Essenes, Boethesians, Sadducees and others.

What about MALSHINIM? These are members of the Jewish community who collaborate with our enemies, and, thereby, endanger every other Jew. Quislings, if you will. These informers may really have believed that siding with the enemy will be for the ultimate good of us all. On the other hand, they may just be selfish and want to flourish personally at a time when the Jews are being oppressed and persecuted. In any case, they are very bad news, indeed.

Which threat is worse? I don't know. But at various times and places in our history one threat would look more perilous, and the rabbis of that era would emphasize one over the other. The core idea, though, is that the greatest danger to the Jewish people are these internal factions. Judaism's success depends on cooperation between Jews, the ability to accept every Jew, almost without exception.

The actual language of the blessing is very sharp and violent. We can feel the strong emotions of the authors. For these perpetrators of Jewish self-loathing 'let there be no hope'. Then we ask that RISHA'A, evil itself must immediately perish. We still hope these people can survive if only the evil motivations are destroyed.

All of the enemies of our people must be cut off. This imprecation, Y'KAREITU, means to have no future. This threat must be eradicated, and never seen again.

Now, we introduce a new term to describe these bad guys: ZEIDIM. This term implies a willful intent to perform evil. This person is described as knowing that their actions are wrong, but are willing to do them anyways.

Then there appears a list of terms which might come from an ad for a wrecking company: T'AKEIR, uproot; T'SHABEIR, break or crush; T'MAGEIR, cast down; and TACHNI'A, bring low or humble. Wow, that's a
powerful list! It's meant to intimidate any members of these groups who might still be present to participate in or spy on our religious services. Actually, this B'RAcha acted as a litmus test, if someone had trouble enunciating these imprecations, we assumed the worst about them.

These requests are demanded to be fulfilled K'REGA, 'this minute' or M'HEIRA (2x), 'speedily'. These internal threats were so dangerous that they must be eliminated as swiftly as possible. We can't live very long with these efforts to destroy us.

This difficult blessing ends with a fascinating twist. We ask that 'enemies be broken', but ZEIDIM, those members of the Tribe who act brazenly to derail Jewish destiny, should be MACHNI'AH. This term means 'brought low' or 'caused to submit'. We would prefer them to end their destructive ways and rejoin our community. Bring them home.

The urgency of the plea is in direct correlation to the magnitude of the threat to the well-being of the nation. These threats within our community constitute an immediate and dire threat to all other Jews. This B'RAcha is in direct proportion to the risk level posed by these traitors.

It's for this reason that our Sages added this petition to our Shmoneh Esrei. There is precedent for this emergency request. Besides our list of 12 requests for the well-being of our Jewish society, there are other examples of the number 12 representing the norms of a well-ordered community, like the 12 Tribes or the 12 months. And each of these twelves can be augmented, in an emergency, with a thirteenth member. Like after the sin of the Golden Calf, the tribe of Levi replaced the firstborns as spiritual leaders. From those precedents, we added this 13th B'RAcha, different from all the rest.

There is a certain melancholy aspect to begging God to eradicate these bad apples, but it was seen as a necessary step for the safety of all. May the need for this request soon disappear.
The last B'RACHA we analyzed is about the most dangerous enemies of Jewish society. Those Jews who turn on our faith by joining or supporting our foes. That uniquely negative blessing in our prayer expresses the fear and frustration caused by these turncoats. It's a prayer drenched in loathing. But now, our prayer turns back to its primary goal of communicating to or with God about our most important needs. The new need? After begging God to eradicate those most dangerous villains, we now describe the most valued members of our ideal society: The Good Guys.

So, who are the Good Guys, those people our Sages view as crucial for a well-run society? Here's the list: TZADIKIM, CHASIDIM, Z'KEINIM, SOFRIM, and GEIREI TZEDEK. Now, let's try to figure out what kind of individuals are described by these terms.

What is a TZADIK? Basically, the root of this word denotes just and right. This is a person who is always endeavoring to do the correct thing. Remember, no one gets it right every time, 'Indeed, there is no one upon earth so good (TZADIK), that this one never sins (or 'errs', Kohelet 7:20).'

However, the TZADIK is always trying to perform Mitzvot and avoid transgressions.

That's already a very high bar. So, what constitutes a CHASID? The Etz Yosef suggests BA'ALEI MA'ASEH, people whose every deed is good and kind, whether this performance is a mitzva per se, or not. Generally, we define CHASIDUT as going beyond the letter or demand of the HALACHA, Jewish law.

The Z'KEINIM, on the other hand, are known for their scholarship. A ZAKEN is one who has acquired knowledge. The first two categories strive to fulfill Jewish Law; this class of individuals is working hard to discover what the HALACHA truly is. This group is always struggling to apply HALACHA to the latest technological advances.

Who are the PLEITAT SO-F'REIHEM, the remnant of the transmitters of Torah? They are the elders among us who knew and experienced the greatness of previous generations of Torah giants. In my post Holocaust generation, this group was so vital for the continuity of our people and our MESORA, which the Nazis tried...
so hard to stamp out. The term SOFER, often rendered 'scribe', comes from the word to count, because they carefully counted every word and letter of texts to assure its accuracy.

Rav Soloveitchik waxed poetic about this group. For me, of course, he bore witness to the greatness of the of the Jewish world which existed before the deluge. He explained: Jewish scholarship must be linked to previous generations to be authentic, to be part of the MESORA. The MESORA isn't only abstract concepts; it's also feelings, reflecting an experiential continuity... This bridge to the past can tip the balance in favor of holiness over the profane.

Full disclosure: There is another explanation for the identity of PLEITAT SO-F'REIHEM. There are commentaries who believe that these are those patient and saintly individuals who dedicate their lives to teaching the youngest children. We never again experience the same simple honesty as we receive from these dedicated pedagogues.

The fifth, and last, category of this handful of components for a successful Jewish community is GEIREI TZEDEK, righteous proselytes who remind us of how inspiring Torah observance can be to a sincere, outside observer. The Torah warns us to never denigrate the convert. Rav Steinzaltz z"l points out that we include righteous penitents in this grouping. He notes the continuity of the verses, 'a nation that didn't know you, will come running back to you' (Yeshayahu 55:5) with 'let the wicked abandon his ways and evil thoughts, and turn back to God, Who will be compassionate and his Lord, Who is abundant in forgiveness' (verse 7).

We now beseech God to grant SACHAR TOV, 'a good reward', to these individuals, and to us. Are there bad rewards? Well, it could mean an appropriate reward, because people often ask for things which aren't really good for them. As Aesop warned: Be careful what you wish for! But I like the Ramban's definition for TOV, in the first chapter of B'reishit. The things which are TOV are long lasting.

The other request is V'LO NEIVOSH, 'let us not be ashamed'. Another curious request. But is it? Maybe, because I wasn't always observant, I remember going through a stage when public Mitzva performance concerned me. What would people think if I wear a KIPA or DAVEN in public? But when we have strong faith in God and in the Torah's demands, then we should be confi-
dent, and never concerned of embar-
rassment. Do what's right, and never fear the consequences.

Then we conclude this blessing: MISHAN U'MIVTACH LATZADIKIM (ArtScroll: Mainstay and Assurance of the righteous). MISHAN, for me, is an Ulpan word. It's the back of a chair, which gives us support. What's the difference between the support of MISHAN and the security of MIVTACH? I believe strongly that MISHAN is a physical support, as in the first time it appears in the Torah, 'If one strikes another with stone or fist... if he then gets up and walks outdoors upon his staff (MISHANTO, Sh'mot 21:18-19).

On the other hand, MIVTACH is spiritual or emotional support. In our prayers, we beg God for both. We exchange our faith and trust in God (BITACHON) for the hope and expectation that God will reciprocate by supporting us both physically and psychologically. We invest of our soul's power to do Mitzvot, and pray for God's protection.

Everyone wants and needs BITACHON, a sense of security and safety. The blessing puts that desire into inspiring words. 😍
FUTURE TENSE
Sh'moneh Esrei 11

In these articles discussing the Shomnesh Esrei prayer, we've noticed the fact that this name, which means 18, is an anachronism. Around the year 100 CE, our Sages added a nineteenth blessing of request. However, the number of these requests is even more complicated, because the Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Talmud) says that the two blessings which I will describe today were once together in the same blessing. At that point, apparently, there were 17 blessings, which is nice because that's the numeric value, GEMATRIA of TOV or good.

These two requests are for the rebuilding of Yerushalayim and the reestablishment of the Davidic Monarchy, you know Mashiach. Our Sages have separated them into two distinct requests, because the first is about God's presence on Earth, while the second is about our ultimate aspiration: a partnership with God in developing a just, moral and spiritual society on Earth.

Actually, the first request, a place for God on Earth, is a more remarkable plea than the second, an inspired ruler. We've always believed that God can imbue certain humans with revelation, but asking God to dwell in our midst seems to be asking a lot. Our blessing is aware of the audacity of the petition and, therefore, informs us that we have the right to ask for this only because God has previously informed us of this possibility. The blessing says KA'ASHER DIBARTA, 'As You have promised'.

In the Midbar, God told the Jews, 'Build for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell in your midst' (Sh'mot 25:8). This dwelling within Yerushalayim (V'TISHKON B'TOCHA) is, perhaps, our greatest desire. This Divine Presence, the SH'CHINA is the goal of every prayer. Ultimately, this request only makes sense, because God has previously guaranteed it. It's unlike any other request in our Shmoneh Esrei which we could generate on our own.

This reality, we believe, can only be achieved in Yerushalayim, because that term, like every Hebrew word which ends in AYIM, denotes a duality. Like YADAYIM, means two hands; Yerushalayim means two Jerusalem's, one here and one in heaven. Many authorities claim that's why our B'RACHA begins with a VAV.
for connection between the paired entities.

We beg that this rebuilt BEIT HaMIKDASH reveal itself B'KAROV, soon, because it's important to God as well as to us. The Talmud informs us that God has said, 'I will not enter the Yerushalayim of Heaven, until I have entered the Yerushalayim of down here (Ta'anit 5a). And we assume that this rebuilding will be eternal because God will make it happen. The body of this blessing closes by referring to the next blessing: And the throne of David should speedily be established within it.

Blessing number fifteen is about the reestablishment of the King descended from David in the Holy City. The Messianic wish appropriately is numbered 15, because that number has holy connotations. It's the GIMATRIYA of the shortest name of God (YUD HEI), and represents the 15 steps leading from the outer court of the Beit HaMikdash to the inner area, upon which the Leviyim sang the 15 Shir HaMa'alot.

We refer to this new scion of the House of David as TZEMACH. There are two reasons for this, both based on verses. In Zecharia, it says, 'Behold a man named TZEMACH will flourish (branch?) from this place (6:12). So, perhaps, his name will actually be Tzemach, even though there are sources which suggest Menachem. But it does describe the phenomenon of the development of the Messianic Era, as described in Yirmiyahu, 'In those days and at that time, I will raise up a true branch (TZEMACH) of David's line, and he shall do what is right and just in the land (33:15).'

There is another description of the new King. He is also called KEREN, a magnificent horn or antler. This seems to reference that the individual will be the pride or glory of the nation. Historically, many crowns or helmets had horns attached to them to be more impressive.

At this point, there is a line which does not appear in the Siddur of either Rambam or R' Sadya Gaon: For we await Your Salvation every (perhaps: all) day. This is a paraphrase of a line in the blessing given to Dan by Ya'akov Avinu (B'reishit 49:18). This powerful three-word verse is recited as an acrostic by many Jews every day at the end of TEFILA (ArtScroll p. 180).

But more importantly, it expresses the constant expectation of the future, great Salvation, which has sustained our nation all these millennia. In fact, the Talmud teaches
that when a Jewish soul ascends to heaven, God asks six questions. One of which is, 'Did you consistently anticipate My Salvation?' (Shabbat 31a).

Earlier in this essay, I tried to distinguish between asking for the rebuilt Yerushalayim and requesting Mashiach, but there's another distinction which must be made as well. In blessing number seven, we asked for GEULA. Here in blessing fifteen, we are asking for Mashiach and Y'SHUA. What's the difference between GEULA (usually translated as 'redemption') and Y'SHUA (often rendered 'salvation')?

Even though these two terms are often used interchangeably, they shouldn't be. GEULA implies being freed or released from incarceration or from being oppressed. Leaving Egypt was definitely an example of GEULA. Y'SHUA, Salvation, on the other hand, means spiritual liberation from the mundane and profane. GEULA describes a physical state; Y'SHUA characterizes a metaphysical circumstance. They require different requests, because they describe very different situations and needs.

In blessings fourteen and fifteen, we are expressing the deepest historic yearnings of the Jewish people. Our longing for Yerushalayim and Mashi-
With blessing number sixteen, we end the middle section of the daily Shmoneh Esrei prayer. This large block of material which appear in the weekday service is called BAKASHOT - requests, and we conclude it all with what seems to be a general catch-all for human needs and longings. And, indeed many authorities view our blessing that way. It is common to see printed in Siddurim requests for health or livelihood to be inserted before the KI ATA SHOMEI'A T'FILOT AM'CHA YISRAEL (For You hear the prayers of Your people Yisrael). But there is another approach, which I subscribe to: This B'RACHA presents its own request for a basic human need.

What is this new human urgency? The need to pray! The human soul wants to express itself to our Maker. We need to pray more than we need any other requests fulfilled. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l explains this, when the first sentence of our blessing (Hear our voice, HaShem our God, spare us and have compassion upon us) introduces the confessional part of the Selichot service:

This is the core of our faith on which the whole life of prayer is predicated... God is a personal God, that is to say, One who loves, cares, forgives, and relates to us as persons with our own fears and loves. God is more than an impersonal concept, entity or force, the God acknowledged by philosophers and scientists through the ages, Whom Yehuda HaLevi called 'the God of Aristotle'. For us, He is also the God of Avraham, who calls to us and listens when we call to Him... An impersonal force cannot hear a prayer. An 'It' cannot forgive. Only One to whom we can say 'You' can do these things' (Koren Yom Kippur Machzor, p. 161).

Our B'RACHA then begs: And receive in compassion and favor (RATZON, we will further elucidate this term next week, when we discuss the R'TZEI blessing) our prayers. Why do we add these conditions to receiving our prayers. Why not just beg God to give us what we want? Well, that would be a grave mistake. Often, we ask for things which aren't in our best interest (but I want to win the lottery!!). In 1932, Rav Soloveitchik fervently prayed for circumstances which would have allowed him to stay in Europe rather than emigrate to America. God's not fulfilling that request saved his life, and immeasur-
ably enriched American Jewry and my life.

The Rav went on to explain that we have the assurance that God indeed hears or pays attention to our prayers, but doesn't necessarily accede to our specific requests. It is our persistent hope that our requests be fulfilled, but it is not our 'primary motivation' for prayer. The Rav concluded, 'In praying, we do not seek a response to a particular request, as much as we desire a fellowship with God.'

At this point in the blessing, we have a practice of inserting specific BAKASHOT (requests) for any pressing need in our lives. After the asterisk, we confidently announce: For You pay attention to the prayer of Your people, Yisrael, with compassion. Then we conclude the blessing with this closing CHATIMA: Who pays attention to prayer.

This expression SHOMEI'A T'FILA (Who pays attention to prayer) apparently comes from this verse: O You, Who hears prayer, all flesh (BASAR) will come unto You (T'hilim 65:3). The previous verse gives us some context, which, in turns, explains our prayer habits: Praise befits You in TZYION, O God. So, before asking for our personal and national needs, it is appropriate to praise God. Plus, we must understand that the praises and prayers are addressed and focused towards Yerushalayim.

We understand that praise and prayer can get us into intimate contact with God. But there's a term in that verse 3 which requires some explanation. We say that all flesh and blood human beings will come to God, but how close? The word in the verse is ADECHA, variously translated as 'to You', 'unto You', 'approach You', or the old fashioned 'unto Thee'. But we're still not getting the full impact of this term. The Malbim explains that this expression means that the supplicant can reach all the way to the Divine Presence in the Heavenly Court, as opposed to mere flesh and blood kings, who often are unapproachable, and are persuaded by bribes to a lackey, without ever encountering the king.

But I am really moved by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's explanation for this phrase: Through the medium of prayer, we reach a level of delight (perhaps bliss, SHALVA) and exaltation (MITROMAMUT) which brings us to make the right decision, pertinent to our life, which we previously never even considered. It's this reality that God pays attention to our prayers, which brings assurance
to the human psyche that we can truly achieve connection to the Divine... At that moment, we can overcome all barriers to reaching all the way to (AD) God, achieving SHALVA and fulfillment for our soul.

So, we end this list of both personal and national human needs with the declaration that this effort has been worthwhile because our God is SHOMEI'A T'FILA, the Being who hears our yearning for connection. This is all the more remarkable because we readily acknowledge that we are mere 'flesh' (BASAR). Nevertheless, we are imbued with a soul which desires this connection to the Infinite, and God grants this great boon.

This ends the weekday shopping list of BAKASHOT. It culminated in the realization that our greatest needs are really spiritual, and all we really desired was connection. As Avraham Yehoshua Heschel explained: We pray to pray. There is no greater need.
Walk thru Davening
with Rabbi David Walk

Ya'aleh V'yavo -
The Elevator Prayer
Sh'moneh Esrei 13

Remember the old joke: What's the B'RACHA for going up in elevators? Of course, the corny answer was YA'ALE V'YAVO, which means 'may one rise and arrive'. That corny pun does remind us of the awe and thrill we should feel in our prayerful ascent towards God on special occasions. We add this extraordinary request on the days upon which MUSAFIM were brought when our ancestors would ascend to the Beit HaMikdash, even on days when work was permitted, namely Chol HaMoed and Rosh Chodesh. It's important that we feel the added sanctity of these occasions, in spite of performing regular creative activities.

The idea of a special prayer for these days is mentioned in the Talmud (Shabbat 24a), and is based on a verse (Bamidbar 10:10), which demands special trumpet blasts on days with MUSAF offerings. The name of this prayer isn't mentioned until Masechet Sofrim, written in the 8th century. So, there is speculation over the origin of this prayer. Although there is no consensus, many authorities believe that this prayer was originally a PIYUT, liturgical poem, recited during the section of ZICHRONOT (remembrances) in the MUSAF of Rosh HaShana.

In my last article in this series, I discussed the blessing R'TZEI. Note that this blessing contains a unique 'request': Please, God, consider this prayer which I'm directing to You as a Divine service, similar to the Temple offerings of old (and of the soon future, IYH). In other words, this isn't about any physical needs, just let me cleave to You. That would be sublime. This addition is also begging that our additional service be acceptable, favorable and delightful to You, our God.

After the normal beginning for PIYUTTIM (ELOKEINU VEILOKEI AVOTEINU, our God and the God of our ancestors), we have a list of eight verbs. There are a number of beautiful ideas about how to understand this list. The most famous is that these verbs correspond to the seven levels of Heaven:

YA'ALE is VILON,
YAVO is RAKIA,
YAGI'A (should reach) is SH'CHAKIM,
YEIRA'EH (be seen) is MA'ON,
YEIRATZEH (be accepted or favored) is Z'VUL,
YISHAMA (Be heard) is MACHON,
and the last two verbs, YIPAKEID (be considered) joins YIZACHEIR (be remembered) to arrive at the highest level, AREIVUT.

That is very moving and a wonderful way to describe the elevation of our offerings or prayers to Heaven, but I prefer another approach. These verbs are describing a pilgrim's ascent to Yerushalayim and Har HaBayit. In this scenario we are following the supplicant's climb up the stairs, entering the outer gate, reaching the courtyard, being acknowledged by God or the Kohein, then having the offering accepted, one's plea be heard, request be granted, and this merit being remembered and recorded for posterity.

The next part of this prayer or PIYUT continues to emphasize the last two verbs, POKEID and ZACHOR. We are remembered and, in some way, recognized or even given an assignment (TAFKID) by God. The term ZICHRON (remembrance appears five times. That seems to acknowledge the 5 times God informs us of Divine remembrance of the BRIT AVOT (Patriarchal Covenant with God, Shmot 6:4, Vayikra 26:42,45). The reference to PAKDEINU is assumed to come from Moshe Rabeinu's experience at the Burning Bush, POKEID POKADTI ETCHEM, and appears to be a code which the Jewish elders, Z'KEINIM, would recognize and believe that the redemption was at hand (Shmot 3:15, based on Breishit 50:25).

The specific entities to be remembered are the AVOT, MASHIACH, Yerushalayim, and God's nation Yisrael. This request to remain in God's attention is for the purpose of P'LEITA, deliverance or survival. That word is related to PALIT, refugee or one who escapes. That is, as Jews, who we are: history's survivors.

Just before we announce the special occasion that we are celebrating we list the six blessings for which we are requesting to be remembered for: TOV (goodness or well-being), CHEIN (grace), (CHESED (loving kindness), RACHAMIM (compassion), CHAYIM (life), and SHALOM! It's been pointed out that this same sextet appears in the last B'RACHA of the Amida, SIM SHALOM. There are those who aver that these six also correspond to BIRKAT KOHANIM, two corresponding to each of the three verses.

After identifying the specific special day that we are commemorating, we have three declarations. These statements are famous because, when
recited in a minyan aloud, the community responds AMEIN! We are supplicating to God for

1. Remember us for good (probably here means forever),

2. Recollect us or visit upon us blessing (increase),

3. Save us for life.

Remember at the beginning of this piece I suggested that this whole prayer was probably originally a PIYUT for Rosh HaShana? If that's true, then these three phrases can be connected to the holidays of Tishrei. Remember us on Rosh HaShana, recollect us on Yom Kippur, and save us on Sukkot, when we recite HOSHANOT.

We close the prayer with a supplication for God to fulfill the Divine promise (D'VAR) to always treat Yisrael with RACHAMIM, CHUS (mercy), and CHEIN. Because we have always looked to God to be our gracious Monarch.

Whenever rabbis discuss YA'ALEH V'YAVO, they always focus on what to do when you forget to insert this prayer. There's a plethora of web sites which address that sad issue. I say it's sad because we forget it because we're not concentrating when we recite our T'FILOT. Me. Too.

I'm more interested in why on weekdays we place this prayer in the blessing of R'TZEI, but on CHAGIM, we recite it as part of the main middle blessing, which describes the sanctity of the occasion.

I think it belongs in R'TZEI on weekdays, because the middle blessings are about more mundane requests for human needs. R'TZEI is a spiritual appeal for God to accept our service. But on CHAGIM, the middle blessing is about the special, religious nature of this celebration. YA'ALEH V'YAVO fits right in with that material. It gets skipped entirely in Musaf, because that entire AMIDA prayer is already about begging God to accept our special holiday offerings.

This little prayer is truly cool. It reminds us that the special holiday mood should be about the spiritual high we should be feeling, and not just the special holiday foods and comraderie. On Rosh Chodesh it helps us to recall that in Temple days Rosh Chodesh was a festive occasion. In any case, let this modest prayer help you to soar to amazing spiritual heights, just go up the elevator.❤️
Walk thru Davening
with Rabbi David Walk
Always say Thank You
Sh'moneh Esrei 14

We were all brought up with the idea that there are two 'Magic Words', namely 'please' and 'thank you'. Well, most of our Shmoneh Esrei is built on the concept of 'please', as we ask God for so many favors. So, it's about time, as we conclude this magnificent prayer, to say 'thank you'. But there are a few surprises in our thank you list. It doesn't reference the specific requests of the prayer itself, as one would have expected, 'Thank you, God, for hearing my pleas.' But that would be wrong. This list is very different, indeed.

First, a word about the introductory term MODIM, usually translated 'we are thankful'. However, this same term is used in Jewish courts of law to mean, 'I admit' or 'I confess'. Rav Yitzchak Hutner explained, 'We give thanks equals we admit. We find it hard to admit that we need others. This is an admission that we are not complete.' So, according to Rav Hutner, a sincere thank you requires a profound level of humility.

There is another famous approach to this term. We find in many Psalms and prayers the famous expression, 'HODU LASHEM', which is another form of the same root MODEH. This is almost always translated as 'Praise be to God'. So, another aspect of 'thanks' is praise for the other. So, we have 'thank you', 'I admit to you' and 'I praise you'. Might there be an explanation that encompasses all three ideas?

Rav Ezra Bick of Yeshivat Har Etziyon, I believe, has an idea which fits the bill. He explains that what we're expressing in this phrase is akin to what serfs owed to feudal lords in the Middle Ages. He suggests that the best explanation might be that the supplicant is expressing fealty, loyalty, allegiance and deference to God.

In any case, we have a major shift in the temper of the prayer. We have moved from active requests to an appreciation or, at least, acceptance of what life may present us with.

Our first expression of appreciation is for the very fact that we are known as God's nation. God lends the Divine name to our identity. You, God, are our God, and the God of our ancestors. We gladly acknowledge and accept this.

Then we acknowledge that we grow and develop on the TZUR CHAYEINU, Cornerstone (Foundation?) of our lives. Who is this TZUR? I would have
thought God (and I believe that's the literal meaning), but the Eitz Chayim commentary on prayer declares that it's our ancestors and parents. We thank God for being the Lord of our ancestors and providing these marvelous forebears who anchor our being. We are hewn from that hard stuff which embodies our progenitors.

Then we acknowledge God, our Shield. God You are our solid foundation, and also a protective bulwark against the vicissitudes of life. There was an old toothpaste commercial about providing an 'invisible shield' for our teeth (Colgate with Gardol). Then a tennis ball, coconut or baseball was launched at the announcer who remained perfectly safe behind a clear barrier. Please, forgive me, but that's the image I still have over 60 years later, as God our MAGEN, invisible shield, enabling us to continue our march through the ages.

Now we have the essence of thankfulness: I will acknowledge and relate Your praise. Every meaningful thank-you must have an explication of the specific deed for which we are grateful. To my horror, I learned this while writing the thank you notes after my Bar Mitzva. Courtesy required me to mention the specific gifts I resented receiving. BARUCH HASHEM, with God this is easy:

Thank You for our very lives entrusted into Your hand; our souls, placed into Your charge. For Your miracles which are with us daily; Your wonders and Goodnesses which appear at all times, evening, morning and afternoons.

What do we mean by 'souls placed into Your charge'? Some say this refers to placing our immortal souls into God's care while we sleep every night. But I prefer to think that we are thanking God for entrusting us with this little piece of Divinity, which resides deep in our psyche.

And what are these 'miracles, wonders and favors'? Well, the simplest to describe is 'wonders' NIFLA'OT, those are the rare amazing events like splitting the Sea. NISSIM are miracles that the recipient doesn't realize were really changes in the natural order of things. Rav Soloveitchik says this includes life itself, 'the greatest of all miracles'.

These are with us at every turn of the day, night, sunrise and the sun's march toward setting. These are, of course, the three time frames for our daily prayers, MA'ARIV, SHACHARIT, MINCHA. We must exalt God for these benefits at all times (TAMID,
constantly), and for all eternity (L'OLAM VA'ED), as well.

In the home stretch of this the longest blessing in our Shmoneh Esrei (by far, which emphasizes the importance of gratefulness), we declare that all living beings must acknowledge their debt and gratitude to God. The less sentient living things do this by just following the dictates of their DNA. We, who often fight our instincts, are required to make a cognizant effort to be thankful. This idea of the universality of thanks is punctuated by a SELAH, which means an emphatic punctuation of exclaim.

We, the Jewish nation, who receive God's salvation (YESHU'ATEINU) and help (EZRA'TEINU), must praise God's Holy Name. God gave us the ability to think and decide. We must use those powers to express our gratitude to the Good or Beneficent One (HA'TOV). And that deserves a SELAH!, too.

As we end the B'RACHA, by acknowledging how appropriate (NA'EH) this activity is, we are reminded that, even though it is sometimes difficult, when we give the proper gratitude, it ultimately feels good and right.

We could end here, but our Sages, in their wisdom, decided that there should be another version of this thanksgiving prayer, MODIM D'RABBANAN, and we'll explore that famous prayer next week. ❤️
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 is 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 HUKECHA, 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?