



For crying out loud

What's worth risking **YOUR LIFE FOR?**

Just how important are the prayers we say

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



EVERYONE HAS HEARD OF THE STORY OF DANIEL and the Lion's Den, probably one of the most famous episodes in the Bible. But, have you ever read the story to see what transgression actually caused Daniel to be thrown there in the first place?

Daryavesh (Darius) the Mede rose to power following the reign of Balshatzar. He appointed three ministers, one of whom was Daniel, who surpassed them all and aroused their jealousy. When the King considered placing Daniel in charge of his entire kingdom, the other ministers tried to find fault with him, but they could not find any. So, these men came up with a fool-proof plan to trip Daniel up and get him in trouble. They convinced the King to enact a law stating that, for the next thirty days, no man would be allowed to petition anyone – god or man – with the exception of the King himself, upon penalty of being thrown into a den of lions! Daryavesh did just as they said and enacted the law. How did they know they'd trip Daniel up?

Although the arrangement of the *Siddur* as we know it dates back to just over a thousand years ago (to the time of the

Gaonim), many of the *brachos* and prayers that make up the *Siddur* date back even further, over a thousand years before that, to the time of the Second Temple period – to the time of Daniel.

Our Sages carefully and methodically assembled the blessings and prayers that make up the *Siddur*, most of which were compiled and composed by the *Anshei Keneses HaGedolah* (the Men of the Great Assembly), a group of 120 men, which included among its prestigious membership great Sages such as those found in Tanach (the Hebrew Bible); among them Daniel, Ezra the Scribe, and Mordechai (well known to us from *Megillas Esther*), as well as the prophets Haggai, Zecharia, and Malachai. It was these men who, with *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration from Hashem), established the order of the prayers, including the creation of the central part of the prayer service, the *Shemoneh Esrei* (aka the Amidah, or “standing” prayer).

There is nothing arbitrary in the arrangement of our prayers – not a single phrase, not a single word. It is a detailed recipe for our well-being individually, the

well-being of the Jewish people collectively, and our world. We would have to be great prophets or, at the very least, privy to *ruach hakodesh* like the Men of the Great Assembly were, to accomplish such a thing on our own. And, as with any recipe, leaving out some of the ingredients (or, in this case, words) results in a very different end-product being created. So too, the same recipe in the hands of a professional chef, steeped in years of knowledge and skill, will come out differently from that of a novice cook who lacks the same training and expertise. When we consider that the letters that comprise these words are those that Hashem used to bring the entire universe into being, and that each of these words and their arrangement was inspired by Hashem Himself, we can begin to appreciate that it is not for us to change so much as the tiny protrusion that flares out from the bottom of the letter *yud*. We can also begin to see why our Sages teach the importance of praying in Hebrew even if we don't understand what we're saying.

Originally, our Sages explain, each person prayed according to his own ability, without any fixed text, with some being more articulate and some being less so. Likewise, some would pray once a day and others would pray many times a day. When we were sent into exile following the destruction of *Bayis Rishon* (the First Temple) during the reign of Nevuchadnezer, we became interspersed among many nations and, as a result, our language became jumbled. Because of this, people were unable to express themselves in Hebrew without mixing in other languages along with it (likely akin to something like Yiddish, which is a combination of Hebrew words and words from the local language).

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When Ezra the Scribe saw this, he and the other Men of the Great Assembly established the *tefilla* of *Shemoneh Esrei* [literally: the Eighteen¹ (Blessings)]. There are three primary components to *tefilla* (prayer) that are incorporated into the *Shemoneh Esrei*; *shevach* (praises) to Hashem; *bakasha* (requests); and *hoda'a* (thanksgiving). Accordingly, the first three blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* serve as praises to Hashem and the last three serve as thanksgiving. These blessings at the beginning and conclusion are always the same regardless of the day. During weekdays, when we are permitted to make requests for things, the middle blessings serve as requests for all of the general categories of things that individuals desire and that communities need. (On other days, such as *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*, the middle blessings, instead of being requests, relate to that particular day, and for days such as *Rosh Chodesh*, *Chanukah*, and *Purim*, we add insertions within particular blessings.)

This was done so that all of these prayers could be learned and carefully arranged in the mouth of each person and so that the prayers of those who were inarticulate would be as complete and fitting as those who were. It was for this very reason that the Men of the Great Assembly arranged all of the *brachos* (blessings) and *tefillas* so that they could be orderly and equal in the mouths of every Jew regardless of a person's ability to express himself. They also decreed the number of times each day that we must pray – for weekdays, for *Shabbos*, and for *Yom Tov* – with *Shacharis* (the morning prayers) and *Mincha* (the afternoon prayers) corresponding to the offerings that were done at those times of day [whereas *Ma'ariv* (the evening prayers) was not initially an obligatory prayer, it was accepted by the Jewish people as such], with extra prayers on *Shabbos*, *Rosh Chodesh*, and *Yom Tov* that correspond to the additional offerings (aka

Mussaf), among other prayers that they instituted.

Despite the law against prayer that Daryavesh enacted, Daniel, who was one of the Men of the Great Assembly, as previously noted, continued to pray three times per day and to petition only the King of Kings, Hashem, thereby placing his life in tremendous danger. The other ministers knew that they would trip Daniel up, caught him red-handed, and immediately reported his behaviour to the King, who was reluctant to enforce the law against his trusted advisor. In the end, however, the King had no choice but to throw Daniel into the lion's den – and, as we all know, Hashem heard Daniel's prayers and prevented the lions from harming him. **IL**

Based on the Rambam and Aruch HaShulchan (Hilchos Tefilla) and Sefer Daniel

¹Rabban Gamliel later added a nineteenth blessing, asking Hashem to destroy all heretics



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