



For crying out loud

Putting things IN CONTEXT

Connecting the dots between the things
we say and where they come from

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

EVERY TIME WE DAVEN THE *SHEMONAH ESREI* (aka the *Amidah*, or “standing prayer”), we preface it by saying a verse from *Tehillim* (Psalms)¹: “Hashem, open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praises.”

But, have you ever considered why we say that particular verse each time? Have you ever looked it up to see it in context and why Dovid HaMelech (King David), the author of that chapter of *Tehillim* and, in fact, most chapters of *Tehillim*, made such a request of Hashem?

The introduction of that chapter of *Tehillim* immediately makes clear the background to King David’s request, “On the coming of Nossan HaNavi (the prophet) to him [ie. King David], when he came to Batsheva.”² In other words, King David wrote this chapter of *Tehillim* after Nossan HaNavi came to him on behalf of Hashem in order to rebuke him for his behaviour in the famous, but terribly misunderstood, episode with Batsheva.³ So misunderstood is this incident, in fact, that our Sages teach, “Anyone who says that [King] David sinned [with Batsheva], that person errs!”⁴

Contrary to popular misconceptions, King David was guilty neither of the murder of Batsheva’s husband, Uriah, because he, in fact, deserved the death penalty for treason, nor of adultery with Batsheva because she wasn’t married at the time she and King David were together. In fact, Jewish law prohibits a woman from marrying a man with whom she committed adultery⁵,

and King David and Batsheva not only married, but one of their children, Shlomo⁶ (Solomon), ascended to the throne after David and even went on to build⁷ the first *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple)!

What precisely King David did do wrong is a complicated discussion beyond the scope of this column, but his response to Nossan HaNavi does give some indication, “*Chatasi Lashem* – I have sinned against Hashem.”⁸ In other words, whatever King David did wrong was something that he’d done against Hashem, not against another person. From the fact that King David says, “Because You [Hashem] do not desire an offering, or I would give it; an olah (a burnt offering) you do not want,” our Sages derive that, whatever King David actually did do wrong, he unfortunately did it intentionally.⁹

And, herein lays the connection to why we preface *Shemoneh Esrei* with these words from King David.

The *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos* famously teaches, “[Shimon HaTzaddik] used to say, ‘The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on the *Avodah* (the service), and on *Gemilus Chasadim* (kind deeds).’” Our Sages teach that the “*avodah*” mentioned here by Shimon



HaTzaddik refers specifically to the *korbanos* (offerings) that were brought every day in the *Beis HaMikdash*. The entire world – all of it – was created for the sake of the *avodah*. Sadly, because of our many sins, however, the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed and the *avodah* was stopped.

So, how does the world continue to exist in the absence of the *avodah*? Avraham Avinu (Abraham our forefather) asked¹⁰ Hashem this very question, wanting to know what would be with the state of the world when the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed and, as a result, bringing *korbanos* was no longer possible anymore. Hashem answered Avraham that by merely reciting the order of the *korbanos* (ie. reading the service detailing what would take place when a *korban* was brought), He would consider it as

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though we had actually brought those *korbanos* that we read aloud and He would even forgive us for our iniquities. And, this idea is echoed by Hosea HaNavi¹¹: “Take with you words [ie. Hashem doesn’t ask from you to give Him silver or gold or even *korbanos* – just mere words of confession¹²] and return to Hashem; say to Him, ‘Forgive all iniquity, and accept [the] good [words that we say before You¹³], and let our lips make restitution for bulls [ie. *korbanos*].”

Davening was instituted by our Sages to replace the daily offerings that were brought in the *Beis HaMikdash*.¹⁴ As we’ve discussed previously, the number of times we daven daily actually corresponds to offerings that were brought in the *Beis HaMikdash* during those same time periods of the day, with additional prayers for those days which had additional offerings.

But, as King David alludes to in his pleas to Hashem, we can only bring *korbanos* for sins that were done unintentionally – for honest mistakes. We can’t bring *korbanos* for sins that we’ve done intentionally. In essence, King David is saying to Hashem, where I’m able to bring an offering to atone for a sin – where I’ve done something unintentionally, purely by mistake, Hashem is happy to receive such an offering. But, where I am unable to do so – where I’ve done something intentionally wrong – Hashem won’t accept such an offering. In such a case, King David asks that Hashem open his lips so that he may declare Hashem’s praises, that He accept his prayer in the place of an offering, and that He atone for his transgressions.

“THE MISHNAH IN PIRKEI AVOS FAMOUSLY TEACHES: ‘THE WORLD STANDS ON THREE THINGS: ON THE TORAH, ON THE AVODAH, AND ON GEMILUS CHASADIM.’”

So too, it’s the same with us, because we no longer have a *Beis HaMikdash*, we can’t bring offerings to atone for our transgressions, even the unintentional

ones. Just as King David did before us, we too ask Hashem to open our lips and accept our prayers in place of the offerings that we would bring were we able to do so – and then, immediately following this one-line supplication, we begin the prayer that our Sages drafted as a substitute for one of the daily offerings in the *Beis HaMikdash*, the *Shemoneh Esrei*. **II**

¹¹Tehillim 51:17

¹²Tehillim 51:2

¹³See Shmuel Beis, chapter 12

¹⁴Shabbos 56a

¹⁵See eg. Sotah 26b; Kesuvos 9a-b

¹⁶See Shmuel Beis 12:24

¹⁷See Melachim Aleph 6:1

¹⁸Shmuel Beis 12:13

¹⁹See Rabeinu Yonah on Pirkei Avos 1:2

²⁰See Taanis 27b

²¹Hosea 14:3

²²See the Radak

²³See Ibn Ezra and Radak

²⁴See Brochos 26b

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