

- 1. Redemption through communal prayer.** According to the gemara, communal prayer is more likely to be received than individual prayer. In fact, Reish Lakish says that one who has a synagogue in his town and does not go there to pray with his community is called a bad neighbor. By not going to shul, you cause exile for you and your descendants. Conversely, going to shul can save the world. The gemara quotes a beraisa in the name of Rabbi Natan: "Anyone who engages in Torah study and in acts of kindness and prays with the congregation, I give him credit as if he redeemed Me and My children from exile." It's easy to understand why Torah and acts of kindness bring redemption to the world, but why communal prayers? Because communal prayer represents the linkage between Heaven and Earth. Service of G-d can hold a society together, but religious conflicts can tear a society apart. Rabbi Akiva and Hillel both taught that the mitzvah of loving one another is paramount to Judaism. When our spiritual service is communal, getting us out of our individual corners and bringing us all together as a group, it heals the world just like Torah and acts of kindness. I remember Rabbi Avraham Brandwein of blessed memory, one of my great teachers, teaching the following: We, the descendents of Avraham and Sarah, are blessed to be like the sand of the sea and like the stars of the night. Stars only shine when it's dark outside. Right now, in our exile, we have the ability to shine like stars as individuals. But though stars are bright, the night is dark. While we shine individually as brightly as stars, we never forget that we are in exile. And that's where the other blessing comes in - we are like the sand by the sea. Sand is sticky. When you pick up a handful of sand you don't get individual grains; all the grains stick together and you pick up a clump. We, too, must be "sticky." Because when we all act only as individuals, something is missing. When we pray as individuals, we are bad for the neighborhood. But when we come together and pray as a community, it is the beginning of the redemption.
- 2. Long life if you live in Israel or go to shul often.** Rabbi Yochanan was told there were old people in Bavel, and he was confused. Doesn't the passuk in Shema say "in order that you and your descendents should live a long life on the Land"? It seems from here that the blessing of long life is connected to the land of Israel. So how can someone living outside of Israel be blessed with long life? In response, Rabbi Yochanan was told that people in Bavel would get up early and stay out late in their synagogues, and that was why they were blessed with long life. What is the connection between the blessing of long life, living in Israel, and going to shul? The connection is *kedusha*, sanctity. Sanctity is what gives a person purpose beyond just their physical life. The Holy Land has a type of sanctity. But even outside the Holy Land, we can have a *mikdash me'at*, a "mini Temple" - a synagogue. And these synagogues also have sanctity. The sanctity of these places give us spiritual energy that can actually give us a longer life.
- 3. Since the destruction of the Temple, G-d only lives within the law.** Rav Chisda says, "What is the meaning of what is written, 'G-d loves the gates of Zion from all the dwelling places of Jacob'? It means G-d loves the gates that are perfecting the study of halacha, more than synagogues and regular study halls." Ever since the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed G-d has had only one home: the four cubits of law. The Beis Hamikdash manifested an intense holiness. Part of that came from the Avodah that was done within its walls, but even without the Avodah the place itself was holy. Today we no longer have that, but G-d has given us a way to relate to Him from wherever we are. He has given us halacha. Within the dimensions of halacha are embedded the dimensions of the Temple and its service. These usually secret principles link our observance of halacha to sanctifying our space and allowing for the Shechinah to be present. Within halacha His presence can be found, and so the places where halacha is studied are also intensely holy. That also means that these are the best places to pray. Torah and tefillah are two sides of the same coin. Studying Torah is learning G-d's will, and tefillah is sharing with G-d our needs and our desire to get closer to Him. Both are forms of clarifying our intentions and our

devotion to the highest purpose of our existence. The world exists for a reason, and each one of us was put here for a reason. Torah helps us understand that, and prayer helps us delve into our own feelings and figure out what we truly need. Tractate Brachos is all about bringing Torah and tefillah together - showing us the source of prayer in the Rabbinic and Biblical traditions; bracketing Biblical prayer with Rabbinic blessings and intentions; and giving us the Torah, the understanding, of what prayer is, why we pray, and how to do it.

4. **What should a chassid pray for?** The gemara cites five opinions about what a pious person should be praying for: A woman; Torah; death; burial; and a bathroom. What's going on here? The first two opinions are easy to understand. Finding the right woman is hard, so it makes sense to pray for assistance. The search for Torah in a way is similar to the search for the right woman. There are so many things to study, but not every aspect of Torah will lift you up and fill your soul. A chassid should pray to find the right "match" in the Torah. The next two opinions are about legacy. It's important to think beyond the present moment, about what you're going to leave behind when you go. Are people going to be speaking lashon hara about you even before you're buried? A chassid wants to leave behind a good legacy that lasts past death, burial, and even beyond. As to the last opinion, everyone needs a bathroom. A chassid should pray for the things that he needs, and a bathroom is one of those things.
5. **One who benefits from his own hard labor is greater than one who fears G-d.** How is that possible? The Mei Hashiloach says that there are two concepts that are at odds with one another. There is Divine revelation, which means that G-d is everywhere and in control of everything, and there is G-d's concealment, which means that He is "hiding" and we don't always feel His presence. As powerful as it would be to have a world where everyone could recognize G-d's presence everywhere, in a way it is necessary for Him to remain concealed. The fact that we can't see Him is what gives us our drive to work to take care of the world and to sustain ourselves and our loved ones. If we could truly see G-d's hand everywhere we would not feel the need to do these things for ourselves. We would rely on miracles and never strive to make the world a better place. But we are supposed to strive, and so it is better to be someone who works and makes an honest living than someone who fears G-d.
6. **How to be *maavir sedra* (review the weekly Parsha).** Reb Ami says a person should study the torah portion by reading the verse two times and the Targum (usually assumed to be Targum Onkelos) one time. But how is this done? Do you read the whole Parsha on Friday afternoon or Shabbos morning? Do you start on Sunday and do one *aliya* each day? In fact, there are different customs. The Aruch Hashulchan says you should divide the Parsha not by *aliyot* but by chapters. That means you should read the chapter as a whole, then read it again, then read it through in the Targum. But some people prefer to do this passuk by passuk instead of a whole chapter at a time. Some do divide into the seven *aliyot* and do one a day, and others do the whole thing on Friday or Shabbat morning. Does it have to be specifically Targum Onkelos? Can you read a different commentary, or an English translation? Can you use Rashi, even though Rashi doesn't have something to say on every single passuk? There are varying opinions, including that Rashi is valid, but the bottom line is that even doing this the "wrong" way has a value. Perhaps it is best to be *maavir sedra* with Targum Onkelos, and reading the English isn't acceptable according to all opinions. But it's still a good thing to do, and it's certainly better than not reviewing the Parsha at all.
7. **Alzheimer's and the broken *Luchos* (Tablets).** Be careful about an older person who forgot his Torah learning, because the Aron Kodesh had both the Tablets and the broken Tablets. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains: the Tablets that were broken by Moses were still holy enough that they were kept inside the Ark, because breaking them did not take away what they were. Learning Torah imbues a person with sanctity. Forgetting the Torah that was learned does not take away

that sanctity. If the Tablets that were broken and replaced still had a spot inside the Ark, surely a Torah scholar who forgets his Torah should still be respected.

8. **Don't sit on the bed of an Aramean woman.** What does this mean? One opinion is that it is referring to the requirement to say the Shema. Not reciting the Shema is like living with an Aramean woman, because Shema protects you from sexual urges. If you don't make a regular practice of reading the Shema at night, you become susceptible to those things.
9. **Is dawn considered day or night?** Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that a person could read the Shema right before dawn and then again right after dawn and fulfill his obligation for both the night Shema and the morning Shema, even though both times are during the night. If dawn is technically still night, how can that fulfill your obligation for the morning Shema? It is good enough, because there are people who wake up that early. From this it sounds like halachically dawn is still night, but we can make an exception for the Shema. However, on daf 20 the gemara will bring two verses as proofs that dawn is actually day. If dawn really is halachically daytime, then why do so many things need to wait until later? Because even if dawn is technically day, it still looks like night. So we mostly avoid doing things that are supposed to be done during the day. It is only when there is a need, like if someone is about to begin their day and will not be able to say Shema later, that a daytime mitzvah can be performed at dawn.
10. **A time that could be either day or night.** The gemara goes on to say that a person might say Shema right before sunrise and then again right after sunrise and fulfill his obligation for both the night Shema and the morning Shema. But didn't we just say that dawn is already halachically daytime? How can you say the evening Shema when it's already daytime? Because the time for Shema is connected to the time people go to sleep and the time people wake up. At dawn, some people are still sleeping but others are awake. The time between dawn and sunrise can therefore be considered as either night or day, because it is an in-between time when some people are already awake and others are not. So it depends on you. If you're going to sleep at that time, you can consider it night and say the evening Shema. If you're already awake and starting your day, you can consider it daytime and say the morning Shema.