

## Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 29:

- 1. The 19th blessing.** The tefillah is called Shemonah Esrei because it contains 18 blessings. But that's not actually true - the Shemonah Esrei that we say today has 19 blessings. The 19th, the "against heretics" prayer, was instituted later. This blessing is not a friendly one. It says "and for those who slander us, let there be no hope, and all the heretics (*minim*) shall be gone, and all the enemies of your people should be cut down." It was instituted because of challenges that arose in sectarian streams of Judaism, that in the eyes of the rabbis were breaking away with core beliefs. People were turning on their fellow Jews and turning them in to the Romans. Some say that these *minim* were early Christians, though of course when we say it today we are not referring to Christians. In those times, it may have been hard to distinguish between the existing faiths, and the *minim* that the prayer refers to were a threat to the continuation of Judaism. So Rabban Gamliel asked the sages, "Who amongst you could enact an additional blessing, the blessing against the heretics?" Shmuel Hakatan (the humble one) responded and wrote the prayer. But a year later, Shmuel Hakatan was leading services and he forgot the words he had written. It took him two or three hours to remember the prayer and continue the services. Rabbi Yehuda says in the name of Rav that if the chazzan makes a mistake in any of the other blessings, we don't replace him, but if he can't say the prayer against heretics we replace him, because we suspect he might be a heretic. So when Shmuel Hakatan forgot the prayer for a few hours, why wasn't he removed and replaced? Maybe Shmuel Hakatan was different because he was the one who wrote the blessing. One contemporary commentary suggests that he didn't actually forget the words, but he realized that it's a serious thing to single people out from the congregation and pray for bad things to happen to them, and he was taking a few hours to consider if it was really something that should be said. The seriousness of this singling out might be the reason we still call it Shemonah Esrei even though there are now 19 blessings. It's such a negative blessing; in a sense we want to pretend it's not really there. The gemara concludes that the reason Shmuel Hakatan was not removed was that he actually started the prayer and then forgot the rest of it. He didn't refuse to say it, he just got confused in the middle. Because of that, we can assume that he was not a heretic.
- 2. Could Shmuel Hakatan have become a heretic?** The gemara suggests that though Shmuel Hakatan was not able to say the heretics prayer for a few hours, he was not suspected of being a heretic because he was the one who wrote the prayer. But isn't it possible that he'd changed his mind since writing the prayer and joined the heretics in his heart? Abaye says no, because we have a tradition that a good person doesn't turn bad. But Rava argues, is that really so? We have a verse that says, "a righteous person can turn from their goodness and do crookedness." Yochanan the Kohen Gadol was a great sage and was faithful for 80 years, but at the end of his life he became a Tzeduki. Nobody can be trusted to be a tzaddik forever. However, according to Abaye there is a difference between someone who starts off as a rasha and becomes a tzaddik and someone who has been a tzaddik for his or her whole life. Yochanan the Kohen Gadol was a rasha before he was a tzaddik. A lifelong tzaddik will never fail and become evil. But how can that be? Don't we believe in free will? One of the greatest works of Chassidus is the Tanya of the Alter Rebbe of Chabad. The first book, *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, defines what makes a tzaddik, an in-between person (*beinoni*), and a rasha. A true tzaddik is someone who does not sin at all, someone who does not even have a desire to sin. Such a person is so righteous that he doesn't even have true free will; he is just good through and through and will only do good. There is a gemara in Yuma (38b) that discusses the necessity of tzaddikim. G-d saw that the world needed more tzaddikim, and so He gave tzaddikim to the world as a gift. This suggests that true tzaddikim are created rather than made. While most people have free will, these special people

are lifelong tzaddikim who will never fall into wickedness. The gemara in Yuma supports Abaye in our *machloket*, saying that a person who starts off as righteous will not go back on their righteousness, but in Yuma there are no disputing opinions offered. While this does not have halachic implications, it does give us insight into the Tanya's concept of the born tzaddik as someone who will never do evil. That concept appears to contradict what we know about free will, but the Talmud is willing to accept this contradiction because tzaddikim are vital to society. However, the debate between Abaye and Rava continues in some form even today.

3. **Abbreviated Shemonah Esrei.** When someone does not have time to say the full Shemonah Esrei, he can say an abbreviated version known as "*me'ein* Shemonah Esrei." What is this abbreviated version? Rav says that we say the first and last three blessings in full and abbreviate each of the middle 13 blessings, shortening the body of each blessing but ending it with the regular "baruch atah Hashem" formula. Shmuel says we say the first three blessings in full, and then we say a paragraph that contains the essence of each of the remaining blessings. This paragraph is called Havineinu. "Grant us understanding to know Your ways; circumcise our hearts so that we'll fear You; return us in teshuva; forgive us that we should be redeemed; keep us far from pain and illness; satiate us with goodness in Your Land; gather us from the four corners; those who make mistakes should be judged; lift Your hands against the wicked; the righteous should rejoice in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, in the fixing of Your courtyard, in the reflowering of the Davidic dynasty and the arrangement of the candelabra of Ben Yishai Your anointed one; that before we even call out You answer us. Blessed are You, G-d, Who hears our prayer." Technically this abbreviated prayer can be said whenever someone doesn't have time to say the full Shemonah Esrei, but Abaye didn't like when people abused it. Today Havineinu is not used, but there are so many people who might benefit from it. Kids with ADD, adults who are too busy or unable to daven for other reasons. Should we bring back Havineinu? Is there a rabbi who'd allow it, and if so under what circumstances? These are difficult questions.
4. **Filling in extras in Havineinu.** Can you say Havineinu on a Saturday night? The gemara debates whether one can simply include an abbreviated havdalah at the beginning, in the same spot havdalah would be added in the full Shemonah Esrei. What about the blessing for rain or dew that we say, depending on the time of year? Should we add "*v'tain tal umatar*" in the section about the Land? No, because that would be too confusing. Havdalah isn't too confusing because it's at the beginning of Havineinu, but the blessing for rain comes later and that would be much harder for someone saying the paragraph by heart. Keep in mind that back then people did not have siddurim, so they had to memorize the prayer and therefore adding in even a few extra words in the middle would have been difficult. We can see that the rabbis were thinking practically of what people could be expected to remember and basing rulings on those considerations.
5. **Praying for rain/dew.** There are two sections in the Shemonah Esrei where we add a prayer for rain during part of the year. On Pesach, we make changes in both of these sections to pray for dew, or general blessings, rather than rain. On Shemini Atzeret, we switch to a prayer for rain only in the earlier blessing. We do not switch the later blessing until December. Perhaps this is because the earlier one is praise of G-d, and the later one is a direct request. The first three blessings are perhaps more primary than the middle section. If you leave something out in those first three blessings, it's like the whole thing doesn't count.
6. **If you forget.** According to the Talmud Yerushalmi, if you miss *mashiv haruach* in the second blessing it is enough to listen to the chazzan say it in his repetition. But according to the Bavli, listening to the chazzan is only good enough for the later mention of rain. If you miss the earlier one, you have to repeat the Shemonah Esrei. Why? The first three blessings are more essential. Forgetting something in this section is more serious than skipping a request from the list of

requests. Also, if you miss the second mention of rain, you can make up for it in the shema koleinu blessing when there is space to fill in extra personal requests. That doesn't work for the first mention of rain, which is praise rather than a request.

7. **Make your tefillot more meaningful.** We are told not to make our prayers *keva*. What does that mean? There are four interpretations. The first is "burdensome," which Rashi understands as "habit-forming." When prayer becomes just a habit, it loses its passion and becomes boring. Davening is like being in a relationship with G-d. In a relationship, you can't be lazy. When you're lazy, you let things become routine, and those things begin to lose their meaning. They become heavy, uninspired, and unmotivating. They become a burden. Don't turn your prayer into a habit and let it become a burden.
8. **Pray with *chein*.** Another way to understand *keva* is that prayer must use language of *tachanunim* (supplication). The root of the word "tachanunim" is "*chein*," which means grace or charm. We should have an intimate way of speaking with G-d. We must learn how to speak to G-d with *chein*, because words that come from the heart go into the heart. Again, prayer is being in a relationship with G-d. When you're in a relationship, you must speak lovingly to your partner. Otherwise every conversation is all business, and that's not a real relationship. When you speak to your children, it can't just always be, "did you do your homework?" You need to show them unconditional love. In our relationship with G-d, we want to have charm in His eyes. Without it, we can't expect to get much from Him. But the more *chein* we have, the more we can ask of G-d. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa had the ultimate amount of *chein*, and that meant he could pray in a special way and G-d would respond lovingly.
9. **Make your prayer new.** According to Rabba and Rav Yosef, we avoid making our prayers *keva* by making them new every time. You can renew the prayers by creating an element that's unique to you. Otherwise you're just reading stale words. How can we make the prayers new? By including extra requests in shema koleinu and finding ways to ask for the things we need. Learn the halachot of how to include personal prayers in the Shemoneh Esrei, and start doing it.
10. **Daven at the right time.** A fourth interpretation of *keva* has to do with set times. Daven as the sun is coming up in the morning and when it sets in the evening. These are intense, naturally beautiful times, and we can use them to inspire our prayers.