

Lesson 1-Modeh Ani

Welcome to this session of Take 5 for Tefila, a program sponsored by the Orthodox Union, as part of their Tefila Education Initiative. My name is Abe Katz. I will be your lecturer for the first series of lectures. My background in Tefila education comes from my work as the Executive Director of the Beurei Hatefila Institute, an organization that was established to promote the study of Tefila and in particular the Jewish Prayer Book, the Siddur.

I would like to begin this series of talks by pointing out that Jewish prayer services have a structure. Their organization was not haphazard but was carefully planned out. We will begin our review by examining the structure of Tefilas Shacharis, the morning prayer. So that we are all looking at the same prayers at the same time, I will use the standard Artscroll Siddur as our text.

Tefilas Shacharis does not begin in the synagogue. It begins at home. In truth it begins while we are still lying in bed when our eyes first open. The Talmud in Tractate Brachos page 4 side 2 tells us: upon awaking, one is required to recite the Bracha of:

אֱ-לֹהֵי, נְשָׁמָה שְׁנִיתָתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

G-d, the soul you have given me is pure. That Bracha can be found on page 18 of your Artscroll Siddur. The theme of the Bracha is our acknowledging and thanking the Ribbono Shel Olam for allowing us to awake; for returning our souls to us. It is as if G-d stands over us as we sleep and asks himself the question: shall I allow this man or woman to awake. That G-d allows us to awake is an act of kindness for which we must thank G-d. That is the theme of the Bracha and that is the meaning of the end of the Bracha, when we say:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', הַמְחַיֵּי נְשָׁמוֹת לְפָגְרִים מֵתִים

Who restores souls to the dead.

Something should be troubling you about this excerpt from the Talmud. Something appears to be missing. How can we recite a Bracha before we wash our hands? The answer is that this Gemara is a lesson on the difference in Jewish life today and Jewish life nearly 2000 years ago both in Israel and in Babylonia. At that time, Jews were so scrupulous about matters involving cleanliness and uncleanness, purity and impurity, that even subconsciously, while asleep, a person's hands would not touch any part of his body that would render him unclean. Therefore, when he awoke, he was still in a state of purity that allowed him to recite a Bracha without having to first wash his hands.

Unfortunately, today we cannot rely on our subconscious protecting us from becoming unclean while asleep. We need to first wash our hands before saying G-d's name; before reciting a Bracha. That created a problem for our Sages. How are we to be in compliance

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with the Talmud's rule that we recite an acknowledgement to G-d, thanking Him for returning our souls, while we are still lying in bed? Our Sages came up with a creative solution. They composed the prayer of Modeh Ani. Turn to page 2 of your Artscroll Siddur. You can find the prayer on page 2 of your Artscroll Siddur:

מוֹדֵה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁהַחַיָּוִת בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֶמְוִנְתָּךְ.

I gratefully thank you, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion-abundant is Your faithfulness.

With this statement we fulfill the requirement set forth in the Talmud that we must acknowledge G-d's kindness in allowing us to awake and to do so immediately upon rising. Yet we are not reciting G-d's name before washing our hands. We should also marvel at another aspect of the Modeh Ani prayer. Our Sages chose language that allows us to mention G-d without actually saying G-d's name. Look again at their description of G-d as **מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם**, living and eternal King. Our Sages composed a description of G-d to serve as a substitute for G-d's name. Although we are not permitted to recite G-d's name without washing our hands, we are allowed to describe G-d while in that state. This clever use of language by our Sages is one of the reasons that it is so important to pay close attention to the language of Tefila.