

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXIV: Vayikra (Lev. 1:1–5:26)

Essay 5. Atonement and the power of the *Shaliach Tzibur*

ראש השנה פרק ב' ירושלמי רב כהנא אמר "אם-יתפפר עון בית-עלי בנבח ובמנחה עד-עולם", בנבח ומנחה אינו מתפפר אכל מתפפר הוא בתפלה. הקשה בעשרה מאמרות פיו דבנבח ומנחה דוקא דאינו מתפפר, אם כן בכל מצנה אחריתי יתפפר. ומאי שנא תפלה דקאמר רב כהנא מפי משאר מצות ועוד הקשה על מה שאמרו, אכל מתפפר הוא בתפלה, דהא בכלל נבח ומנחה איתא נמי לתפלה שעקר הקרבן הוא הידוי והתפילה שעמו, דבלאו הכי הקרבן אינו לרצון, ומפיו נאפילו בנבח ומנחה אינו מתפפר כל שכן בתפלה לחודה עכ"ל ועיי"ש.

Hophni and his brother, Phinehas, were two of the sons of Eli, the High Priest. They were renowned for their corruption, stealing the best portions of sacrifices and engaged in sexual immorality with women serving at the tabernacle. This led G-d to curse the Eli's descendants.

Regarding this, **Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashanah, Chapter 2** (halacha 5), taught: **“Rav Kahana said:** [Regarding the verse,] ‘And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, **that the iniquity of the house of Eli shall not be expiated with sacrifice [zevach] [נבח] nor meal-offering [mincha] [מנחה] forever**’¹ —**by sacrifice and meal-offering it is not atoned, but it is atoned by prayer.**”

Question 1: ***Asarah Ma'amarot* raises a difficulty: since it is specifically by sacrifice and meal-offering that it is not atoned, if so, how can it be atoned by any other commandment? What is distinctive about prayer, that Rav Kahana singled it out over other commandments?**

Question 2: **He further raised a difficulty regarding what was said — “but it is atoned by prayer”—for prayer is already included within sacrifice and meal-offering, since the essential element of the offering is the confession and the prayer that accompanies it. For without these elements, the offering is not accepted, and since even with sacrifice and meal-offering atonement is not achieved, how much more so is atonement achieved with prayer alone? See there for his discussion.**²

* English translation: Copyright © 2026 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are available at <https://zstorah.com>

¹ I Sam. 3:14.

² Rabbi Menachem Azaria da Fano (“Rema M’Pano”) (1548–1620), Italian Kabbalist and commentator on the Talmud. *Asara Ma’amarot* (“Ten Utterances”) (Venice 1597), Ma’amar Chakor Din, chapters 22–23.

וְהָיָה בְּתִירוּץ קוֹשְׁיֵיטוֹ הַשְּׁנִיית יֵשׁ לוֹמֵר דָּאִין הֵכִי נָמִי שְׁעָרָה הַקָּרְבָּן הוּא הַיְדוּדִי וְהַתְּפִלָּה שְׁעָמוּ, וְזֶה הַיְדוּדִי וְהַתְּפִלָּה הֵנָּה בְּעֵת הַסְּמִיכָה. וּפְסֻק הַרְמַב"ם בְּפָרָק ג' מֵהַלְכוֹת מַעֲשֵׂה הַקָּרְבָּנוֹת, אִם לֹא סָמַךְ כֹּפֶר שְׁהַסְּמִיכָה אֵינָה מְעַכֶּבֶת אֶלְאָ שְׁמַעְלָה עָלָיו כְּאִילוּ לֹא כִפֵּר. וְהִיא בְּרִייתָא פָּרַק קָמָא דְזִבְחִים (דָּף ו' ע"א) דְכָתִיב "וְסָמַךְ . . . וְנִרְצָה לוֹ לְכַפֵּר" וְכֹו' וְאֵף עַל פִּי כֹן כִּפֵּר, כְּמוֹ שְׁפָרַשׁ רַש"י וְעֵי"ש, דְשָׁמַע מִיָּדָה שְׁהַקָּרְבָּן מְכַפֵּר כְּשֶׁמִּתְחַרֵּט בְּלִבּוֹ אֵף בְּלֹא הַיְדוּדִי וְהַתְּפִלָּה דְהֵינּוּ מַעֲשֵׂה הַסְּמִיכָה.

Now, regarding the resolution of his second difficulty, one may say that indeed the essential element of the offering is the confession and prayer that accompanies it, and this confession and prayer took place at the time of the *semicha*, the laying of hands on the sacrifice.³ The Rambam rules in Chapter 3 of the Laws of Sacrificial Procedure (halacha 12) that if one did not perform the laying of hands, atonement is still achieved, for the laying of hands is not indispensable, except that it is counted against him as though he had not achieved atonement.

This is a *Baraita* in the first chapter of *Zevachim* (page 6a), as it is written (Leviticus 1:4): “And he shall place his hand upon the head of the burnt-offering; and it shall be accepted for him to atone for him.”⁴

And does placing hands atone [for one’s sins]? But isn’t atonement [achieved] only by [the sprinkling of] the blood, as it is stated: “For it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.”⁵ Rather, why does the verse state: “And he shall place . . . and it shall be accepted for him to atone”? [This teaches] that if one deemed the placing of hands to be a non-essential mitzva [and thus failed to perform it], the verse ascribes to him [blame] as though it did not atone [for his sins]; but it [nevertheless] did atone [for his sins].

- Zevachim 6a

However, atonement is achieved even without it, as Rashi explained there⁶ — from which we learn that the offering atones when one repents in his heart, even without the verbal confession and prayer, that is, without the act of laying of hands.

וּמִשּׁוּם הֵכִי שְׁפִיר קִמְשָׁמַע לֹן קָרָא שְׁעוֹן בֵּית עָלֵי לֹא יִתְפָּרַר בְּזִבְחָה וּמִנְחָה לְחֹוֹד כְּלָל וּכְלָל, אֲבָל אִין הֵכִי נָמִי שְׁיִתְפָּרַר בְּתְפִלָּה דְהֵינּוּ מַעֲשֵׂה הַסְּמִיכָה.

Therefore, the verse properly teaches us that the iniquity of the House of Eli would not be atoned by sacrifice and meal-offering alone at all, but indeed it would be atoned by prayer, meaning the act of laying of hands.

³ In this essay, the *Zera Shimshon* uses “prayer” (*tefillah*) and “laying hands” (*semicha*) interchangeably, because the Rambam (Laws of Sacrificial Procedure 3:13–15) explains that the essential content of the *semicha* was the verbal confession (*vidui*) and supplication accompanying it, the inner spiritual act of the worshiper turning to G-d. When Rav Kahana therefore says the sin of the House of Eli “is atoned by prayer,” *Zera Shimshon* understands this to mean by the confessional prayer, as distinct from the physical offering itself.

⁴ Lev. 1:4.

⁵ Lev. 17:11.

⁶ Rashi on *Zevachim* 6a interpreted that the verse ascribes blame as if it didn’t atone, to show that the laying of hands is important, but in practice it did atone.

ועוד יש לומר דמעיקרא קושיא ליתא, מדנקט קרא זבח ומנחה דנקא שיהי סמיכת שאר הקרבנות אין הכי נמי שהם וידוי ותפלה, אבל הסמיכה שהיו עושים על השלמים לא היו אלא דברי שובה ותודה, לא וידוי ותפלה, כמו שכתב הרמב"ם סוף פירק ג' הנ"ל דזבח משמע שלמים דנקא, ובמנחה אין סמיכה כלל, ואף התנופה שגם היא כמו תפלה לעצור רוחות וכו' אינה נוהגת בסתם מנחה כדתנן בפרק ה' דמנחות, ומשום הכי שפיר קאמר בזבח ומנחה אינו מתפטר אבל מתפטר הוא בתפלה.

One may further say that the difficulty does not arise in the first place, since the verse specifies sacrifice and meal-offering in particular. That is, while the laying of hands on other offerings does indeed constitute confession and prayer, the laying of hands performed on peace-offerings (*shelamim*) consisted only of words of praise and thanksgiving, not confession and prayer. This is as the Rambam wrote at the end of the aforementioned Chapter 3 (halacha 15): sacrifice (*zevach*) refers specifically to peace-offerings (*shelamim*).^{7,8}

Furthermore, in the case of a meal-offering there is no laying of hands at all. Even the waving, which is likewise a form of prayer — moving forward and back to restrain evil winds, etc. — is not practiced with an ordinary meal-offering, as we learned in Chapter 5 of *Menachot* (60a). Therefore, it is properly stated that by sacrifice and meal-offering, atonement is not achieved, but it is achieved by prayer.

Thus, we come to the *Zera Shimshon's* resolution of Question 2. While prayer may be included as a requirement in some sacrifices, it is not included in all sacrifices. This proves that prayer is distinct from sacrifice. With this understanding, “the iniquity of the house of Eli shall not be expiated with sacrifice nor meal-offering forever” is not saying “even sacrifice with prayer doesn't atone.” Rather, it is saying “sacrifice *without* the confessional-prayer component (*shelamim* and *minchah*) doesn't atone, but prayer — meaning the *semicha*-confession present in other offerings — does.”

ועל הקושיא הראשונה יש לומר דאמרינן בפרק ה' דברכות אמר ר' אלעזר גדולה תפלה יותר ממעשים טובים, שאין לה גדול ממעשים טובים יותר ממשה רבינו ע"ה ואף על פי כן לא נענה אלא בתפלה, ועוד אמר ר' אלעזר גדולה תפלה יותר מן הקרבנות שצאמר למה לי רוב זבחיכם וכו'. ואם כן שפיר קאמר בזבח ומנחה אינו מתפטר אבל מתפטר הוא בתפלה שיהי התפלה גדולה יותר מן הקרבנות.

Having resolved Question 2, why prayer is distinct from sacrifice, we now turn to Question 1, what makes prayer *greater* than all other commandments?

Regarding the first difficulty, one may say that we are told in Chapter 5 of *Berachot* (32b) that Rabbi Elazar said: prayer is greater than good deeds, for there is none greater in

⁷ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Sacrificial Procedure 3:15: “[For a burnt offering] how does he confess? He says: “I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity, and I did this-and-this, and I have repented before You and this is my atonement.” If he is bringing a peace-offering, he should perform laying of hands with all of his strength anywhere he desires within the Temple Courtyard, where [the animal] will be slaughtered. It appears to me that one does not confess on a peace-offering [which is not offered to atone for a sin]. Instead, he says words of praise.”

⁸ The *Asarah Ma'amarot* must have known that the Rambam ruled that *zevach* refers to *shelamim*, and that prayer is not an element of *shelamim*. So why did he write that “prayer is included in *zevach*”? Perhaps he was interpreting *zevach* as a more general reference to Temple offerings, many of which do incorporate prayer as a requirement.

good deeds than Moses our Teacher, peace be upon him, and yet he was answered only through prayer [when G-d permitted him to climb the mountain and look out over the Land of Israel].”

Rabbi Elazar further said there: “Prayer is greater than offerings, as it is said, ‘To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me, says the L-rd. I am full of the burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not desire the blood of bulls and sheep and goats.’”⁹ If so, it is properly stated that by sacrifice and meal-offering, atonement is not achieved, but it is achieved by prayer, for prayer is greater than offerings.

אֵלָא דְבִהֵיא דְר' אֶלְעָזָר גּוּפָא יֵשׁ לְדַקְדָּק אַמַּאי פְּלִגְיָנָהּ לְתַרְי בְּבִי, הִנֵּה לּוֹמֵר גְּדוּלָה תְּפִלָּה יוֹתֵר מִמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים וּמִן הַקְּרָבָנוֹת, וְעוֹד דְּבִכְלָל מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים יֵשׁ גַּם הַקְּרָבָנוֹת. וְעוֹד קָשָׁה אִם אֵיתָא שֶׁהַתְּפִלָּה גְּדוּלָה מִן הַקְּרָבָנוֹת הַיָּאֵר אָנוּ אוֹמְרִים בְּדַאָּגָה וּבְשִׂמְמוֹת "וּנְשַׁלְמָה פְּרִים שְׁפִתֵינוּ", שֶׁתְּהֵא תְּפִלְתָּנוּ תְּשׁוּבָה לְפָנֵי הַקָּב"ה כְּמוֹ הַקְּרָבָנוֹת, וְהֵרִי הַתְּפִלָּה יוֹתֵר תְּשׁוּבָה מִן הַקְּרָבָנוֹת וְכִינּוּ שֶׁהַתְּפִלָּה אֵין צוּרָה כְּלָל לְקָרְבָן.

However, regarding that very statement of Rabbi Elazar, one may inquire why he divided it into two clauses; he should have said: prayer is greater than good deeds and than offerings. Moreover, offerings are already included within good deeds. A further difficulty: if prayer is indeed greater than offerings, why do we say with anxiety and desolation: “Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips.”¹⁰ That means that our prayer should be considered before the Holy One, Blessed be He, as the offerings. In other words, when prayer is in fact more valued than offerings, once we have prayed, what need is there for an offering at all?

וְאִם מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאָמְרוּ בְּפִרְקָהּ ה' דְּבִרְכוֹת מִיּוֹם שֶׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעָלוּ שְׁעָרֵי תְּפִלָּה, הִנֵּה לָנוּ לּוֹמֵר בְּנוֹסָח אַחֵר וְלֹא בְּנוֹסָח זֶה, דְּמִשְׁמַע דְּדַאָּגְתָּנוּ הִיא מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַתְּפִלָּה אֵינָה תְּשׁוּבָה כְּמוֹ הַקְּרָבָן. וְעוֹד הִיא גּוּפָא קָא מִבְּעֵינָא לָן אִם שְׁעָרֵי תְּפִלָּה נִנְעָלוּ לְמָה אָנוּ מְתַפְּלִים בְּחִנּוּם וּמִבְּלִי תוֹעֵלָת וּמְבָרְכִים כַּמָּה בְּרְכוֹת. וְלָמָּה דוֹקָא בְּחִרְבּוֹן הַבַּיִת נִנְעָלוּ שְׁעָרֵי תְּפִלָּה, וְמָה עָנְנוּ זֶה לְזֶה.

If it is because of what was said in Chapter 5 of Berachot (32b), “From the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked,” we ought to have used a different formulation and not this one, which implies that our anxiety is because prayer is not as valued as the offering.

Furthermore, this itself raises a question: if the gates of prayer are locked, why do we pray in vain and without benefit, and recite so many blessings?

Also, why were the gates of prayer locked specifically upon the destruction of the Temple, what is the connection between one thing and the other?

⁹ Isaiah 1:11.

¹⁰ Hosea 14:3.

והגם שְהֵעִיּוֹן יַעֲקֹב בְּמִסְכַּת בָּבָא מְצִיעָא פִּירֵשׁ דְּאִי לֹאוּ הָכִי לֹא הָיִינוּ דוֹאֲגִים כְּלָל עַל הַחֲרָבָן, הַלְשׁוֹן אֵינּוּ מוֹכִיחַ כּוֹ, דְקָאָמַר, מִיּוֹם שְחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעָלוּ שַׁעְרֵי תְּפִלָּה, מִשְׁמַע שְחָרַבָן גְּרַם לָזָה וְלֹא מִשׁוּם קִנְס וְחִשְׁשׁ, וְהִיָּה לּוֹ לּוֹמַר, עֲקִשְׂוֹ שְחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ נִנְעָלוּ וְכוּ', אוֹ לְפִי שְחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, אוֹ בְּלִשׁוֹן אַחֵר כְּדִי שְׂיִהְיֶה לָנוּ אַתְּמָה רְמָזוּ. וְעוֹד מֵהֵם אֵלוּ הַשְּׁעָרִים שֶׁל הַתְּפִלָּה, הִיָּה לּוֹמַר, אֵין תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ עוֹד מְקוּבָּלָת.

Although the *Iyun Yaakov* on tractate Bava Metzia (59b) explained that without this we would not grieve at all over the destruction, the language does not support this. For it says: “From the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked,” implying that the destruction caused this, and not as a penalty or precaution. It should have said: “Now that the Temple has been destroyed, the gates are locked,” or “because the Temple was destroyed,” or in some other formulation that would give us a hint. Furthermore, what are these gates of prayer? It should have simply said: “Our prayer is no longer accepted.”

וְיֵשׁ לּוֹמַר דְּלִגְבֵי הַחֲכָמִים וְהַצְדִּיקִים הוֹצֵרָה ר' אֶלְעָזָר לּוֹמַר, גְּדוּלָה תְּפִלָּה מִמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים, וְלִגְבֵי הַרְשָׁעִים שְׁשָׁבוּ בְּתִשׁוּבָה הוֹצֵרָה לּוֹמַר, גְּדוּלָה תְּפִלָּה מִן הַקְּרָבָנוֹת, וּמִשׁוּם הָכִי פְּלִיגְיָהּוּ לְתַרֵּי בְּבִי. שְׂאָף עַל פִּי שְׂיֵשׁ לּוֹ לְאַדָּם הַרְבֵּה מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים וְהוּא צְדִיק גָּמוּר, אֵל יִמְלֵאנוּ לְבוֹ לּוֹמַר הַקַּב"ה יִמְלֵא מִשְׂאֵלוֹתַי בְּלֹא שְׂאֲבָקֶשׁ מִמְּנוּ בְּתְּפִלָּה, כִּי זֹו אֵינֶה מְדָה טוֹבָה, חֲדָא שְׂזָה נִקְרָא עוֹבֵד עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, וְעוֹד שְׂכַר מְצוֹת בְּהֵאֵי עֲלָמָא לִיכָא.

One may say that with respect to the wise and the righteous, Rabbi Elazar needed to say “prayer is greater than good deeds,” and with respect to the wicked who have repented, he needed to say “prayer is greater than offerings,” and this is why he divided it into two clauses. For even if a person has many good deeds and is entirely righteous, his heart should not lead him to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, will fulfill his requests without his asking through prayer. This is not a good quality, firstly because this is called serving in order to receive reward, and furthermore because the reward of commandments is not given in this world.

וְעוֹד דְּאֵיתָא בְּשַׁלְחַן עָרוּף אֹרַח חַיִּים (סִימָן קכ"ח סְעִיף כ"ו) בְּשַׁעֲרֵי שְׂמִיכָרִים הַפְּתוּגִים אֵין לּוֹמַר שׁוּם פְּסוּק אֶלָּא יִשְׁתַּקּוּ וּיְכוּוֹנוּ לְבָרְכָה, וְהַטַּעַם אֵיתָא בְּמִסְכַּת סוֹטָה פְּלוּם יֵשׁ עֲבָד שְׂמִיכָרִים אוֹתוֹ וְאֵינוּ מְכוּוֹן לְבָרְכָה שְׂמִיכָרִין אוֹתוֹ. וְנֹאף כָּאֵן מִי שְׂצָרִיף לְדַבֵּר אֶחָד וְאֵינוּ רוֹצֵה לְהַתְּפַלֵּל לֹא שְׂפִיר עֲבִיד, וְנֹאף עַל פִּי שְׂיַעֲשֶׂה הַרְבֵּה מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים אֵינֶם עֲנִין לָזָה, שְׂהָרִי כְּתִיב "וּבְרָכָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה", וְאֵם כּוֹ צָרִיף שְׂהֶאֱדָם יִקְרָא לְהַקַּב"ה וְאֵז הַקַּב"ה יַעֲנֶה. וְעוֹד שְׂהָרִי כְּתִב הַטּוֹר (סִימָן ק"ב), אָסוּר לִישֵׁב בְּתוֹךְ אַרְבַּע אַמּוֹת שֶׁל תְּפִלָּה, וְדוֹקָא כְּשִׂיּוּשׁ בְּטַל אֶבֶל אֵם עוֹסֵק בְּתְּפִלָּה שְׂפִיר דְּמִי, וְאֵם עוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה אָסוּר, דְּבָהָא תְּפִלָּה עֲדִיפָא שְׂהַטַּעַם שְׂאָסוּר מִפְּנֵי שְׂנִרְאָה שְׂחֲבִירוֹ מְקַבֵּל עֲלִיו עוֹל מְלָכוֹת שְׂמִים וְהוּא אֵינוּ מְקַבֵּל וְכִשְׂעוֹסֵק בְּקִרְיַת שְׂמַע וּבְתְּפִלָּה אֵזֵל לִיהֵא טַעְמָא, אֶבֶל אֵם הוּא עוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה אַפְתִּי אֵיתָא לְהֵאֵי טַעְמָא עכ"ל. וּמִשׁוּם הָכִי שְׂפִיר קָאָמַר גְּדוּלָה תְּפִלָּה מִמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים. וְעֵינִין לְעֵיל בְּרֵאשׁ הַפְּרָשָׁה עַל הֵיא דְּנִבְיָלָה טוֹבָה מִמְּנוּ וְכוּ'.

Moreover, it is stated in the Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayyim (siman 128, se'if 26) that while the priests are pronouncing the blessing, one should not recite any verse but should remain silent and focus on the blessing. The reason is given in tractate Sotah (40a): Is there such a servant who is being blessed and does not attend to the blessing being bestowed upon

him? Here too, one who needs something and does not wish to pray does not act properly, and even though he performs many good deeds, those are not relevant to this. For it is written, “And the L-d your G-d will bless you in all that you do,”¹¹ meaning that a person must call out to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and then the Holy One, Blessed be He, will answer. Furthermore, the Tur (Orach Chayim, siman 102) wrote:

It is forbidden to sit within four cubits of one who is praying, specifically when sitting idle, but if one is engaged in prayer that is permitted, and if one is engaged in Torah study it is forbidden, for in this matter prayer takes precedence. The reason it is forbidden is because it appears that one’s companion is accepting upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven while he is not. But when one is engaged in the recitation of Shema or in prayer, this reason is removed; but if one is engaged in Torah study, this reason still applies.

- Tur (Torat Chayyim) (section 102)

Therefore, it is properly stated that prayer is greater than good deeds. See above at the beginning of the parashah (Essay 2) regarding the statement that from Leviticus Rabbah that for a Torah scholar who does not use his mind to think and understand, *neveila*—an animal that has died of natural means, rather than having been ritually slaughtered—is better than him.

ואחר כך בגדולה תפלה מן הקרבנות רצה להורות לנו שמי שחטא ושב בתשובה שתקנתו היא להביא קרבן ולהתכפר, ובנדאי שעם הקרבן תהיה הסמיכה. דהיינו הוידיוי והתפלה, והתפלה היא יותר חשובה מהקרבן, אלא שהקרבן גורם התפלה וגדול קרבן שהוא מביא לידי תפלה, כהיא דאמרינו גדול תלמוד שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה. דבפרק קמא דכלים אמרינו עזרת הפהנים מקודשת מאין ישראלים נכנסים לשם אלא בשעת צרכיהם לסמיכה לשחיטה ולתנופה, ופירש הרב עובדיה מברטנורא, ואף על פי שאפשר בכהנים ואפשר נמי לזר לשחוט בעזרת ישראל, אפילו הכי לא אסרו לישראל ליכנס לעזרת פהנים לשחוט הקרבן עכ"ל. ויש לדקדק מה צורך להיתר זה. אלא נדאי צריך לומר לפי שכל מקום שהוא מקודש מחבירו הוא יותר מוכן לקבלת תפלה, שהמקום גורם, כמו שכתבו המפרשים במלכים א' ח' על פסוק "ושמעת אל-תחנת עבדך" וכו' "ואתה תשמע אל-מקום שבתך" וכו' ועיי"ש, ומשום הכי הואיל שעזרת פהנים היתה יותר מקודשת מעזרת ישראל לא רצו לאסור לבני ישראל להכנס לעזרת הפהנים לעשות הסמיכה דהיינו הוידיוי והתפלה והשחיטה, משום דבעינו תכף לסמיכה שחיטה, וגם התנופה לפי שגם היא היתה תפלה שמוליה ומביא כדי לעצור רוחות רעות וכו' מעלה ומוריד כדי לעצור טללים רעים.

Afterward, with “prayer is greater than offerings,” he wished to teach us that one who has sinned and repented — whose rectification is to bring an offering and achieve atonement, and certainly the laying of hands will accompany the offering, that is, the confession and prayer — prayer is more valued than the offering. But the offering brings about the prayer, and great is the offering in that it leads to prayer, as we say: “Great is study, for study leads to action.”¹²

¹¹ Deut. 15:18.

¹² Kiddushin 40b.

For in Chapter 1 of Kelim (Mishnah 8) we are taught: the Court of the Priests is more sacred than it, in that Israelites do not enter there except when they require it — for laying of hands, for slaughter, and for waving. Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura explained: Even though it is possible through priests, and it is also possible for a non-priest to slaughter in the Court of Israel, even so they did not forbid Israelites from entering the Court of the Priests to slaughter the offering.

One may ask: what need was there for this dispensation? Rather, one must certainly say that every place that is more sacred than another is more prepared for the reception of prayer, for the place is a determining factor. This is as the commentators wrote in I Kings, chapter 8, on the verse, “And when You hear the supplications that Your servant and Your people Israel offer toward this place, give heed in Your heavenly abode—give heed and pardon.”¹³ For example, the *Metzudat David* wrote: “Not that You should sit here to listen, but that the prayer made here will be heard by Heaven, accepted with mercy, and the sin of the prayerful will be forgiven.”¹⁴

Therefore, since the Court of the Priests was more sacred than the Court of Israel, they did not wish to forbid the Israelites from entering the Court of the Priests to perform the laying of hands, that is, the confession, prayer, and slaughter. This was since we require that slaughter follow immediately upon the laying of hands; and likewise the waving, since it too was a form of prayer: moving forward and back to restrain evil winds, etc., raising and lowering to restrain harmful dews.¹⁵

ואם כן מצינו שהתפלה גדולה מן הקרבן, שהרי הקרבן אינו מרויח כלום להיות נשחט בעזרת פהגים יותר מעזרת ישראל, אבל התפלה יותר מקובלת בעזרת פהגים, וזה המקום נקרא שער השמים כמו שאמר הכתוב "וזה שער השמים", ופרש רש"י, מקום תפלה להעלות תפלתם לשמים. ובזה נחא שמיום שחרב בית המקדש ננעלו שערי תפלה כלומר אותם המקומות הקדושים היותר מוכנים לקבול תפלה הנקראים שערים, אבל אין הכי נמי ששאר מקומות וסלונות לקבול תפלה אבל אינם גדולים כמו השערים, והשערים ננעלו לפי שחרב הבית, והינו דכתיב "משגים מן החלונות מציץ מן החרכים", כשאנו בגלות שאין עוד שערים פתוחים, ורישיה דקרא מוכיח, דומה דודי לצבי וכו', ועיין בתרגום על פסוק "ברח דודי ודמה-לה לצבי" דמירי בענגן הגלות והתפלה, וזהו "הנה-זה עומד אחר פתלנו", ומשום הכי אנו אומרים בדאגה, ונשלמה פרים שפתינו, לפי שאין לנו עוד הקרבן שהנה מביא עצמנו לידי תפלה במקום קדוש.

Thus we find that prayer is greater than the offering, for the offering gains nothing by being slaughtered in the Court of the Priests rather than the Court of Israel, whereas prayer is more readily accepted in the Court of the Priests. This place is called the Gate of Heaven, as Scripture says, “and this is the Gate of Heaven,”¹⁶ and Rashi explained: a place of prayer, to carry their prayer up to heaven. By this, it is well understood that from the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked, meaning those sacred places most prepared for the reception of prayer, which are called gates. But indeed, places and windows

¹³ I Kings 8:30.

¹⁴ Rabbi David Altschuler (1687-1769), *Metzudat David* (Altona 1736) on I Kings 8:30.

¹⁵ Sukkah 37b.

¹⁶ Gen. 28:17.

for the reception of prayer remain, though they are not as great as the gates, and the gates were locked because the Temple was destroyed. This is the intent of what is written: “gazing through the windows, peering through the lattices”—when we are in exile and there are no longer open gates.¹⁷ The beginning of that verse bears this out: “My beloved is like a gazelle, or like a young stag; there he stands behind our wall.” See the Targum on the verse “Flee, my beloved, and be like a gazelle,”¹⁸ which deals with the subject of the exile and prayer.

The Targum writes:

“In that hour the elders of the Assembly of Israel will say, ‘Flee, my Beloved, Lord of the world, from this polluted earth, and let your Presence dwell in heaven above. But in times of trouble, when we pray to you, be like a gazelle which sleeps with one eye closed and one eye open, or like an antelope fawn which looks behind as it runs away. Just so, look on us and regard our pain and affliction from heaven above, until the time when you will be pleased with us and redeem us and bring us up to the mountains of Jerusalem and there the priests will burn before you the incense of spices.’”

- Targum to Song of Songs 2:9

This is the meaning of “behold, he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, etc.”

Therefore, we say with anxiety: “Instead of bulls we will pay [the offering of] our lips,” because we no longer have the offering that would bring us to prayer in a sacred place.

וּבְעֵינָיו הִתְפַּלֵּה אֵימָא בְּפֶרֶק קַמָּא דְּבִרְכוּת תַּנְיָא ר' נָתָן אוֹמַר מִנֵּין שְׂאִין הַקַּב"ה מוֹאֵס תְּפִלְתָּן שֶׁל רַבִּים שְׁנֵאמַר "הֵן-אֵל כְּבִיר וְלֹא יִמָּאֵס" וְכַתִּיב "פָּדָה בְּשָׁלוֹם נַפְשִׁי" וְכוּ', אָמַר הַקַּב"ה כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה וּבְגִמְלוֹת חֻסְדִּים וּמִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הַצָּבוּר מֵעֵלָה אֲנִי עָלָיו כְּאִילוּ פְדָאֲנִי לִי וְלִבְנֵי מִבֵּין אוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם ע"כ.

Regarding prayer, it is stated in a *Baraita* in Chapter 1 of Berachot:

Rabbi Natan says: From where do we know that the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not despise the prayer of the masses? As it is stated: “Behold, God is mighty but despises no one,”¹⁹ and it is written: “He has redeemed my soul in peace from the battle against me; it is as though there were many on my side.”²⁰ The Holy One, Blessed be He, says: Anyone who engages in Torah and in acts of kindness, and prays with the congregation, I ascribe to him [credit] as if he redeemed Me and My children from among the nations of the world.

- Berachot 8a

¹⁷ Song of Songs 2:9.

¹⁸ Song of Songs 8:14.

¹⁹ Job 36:5.

²⁰ Ps. 55:19.

וכולי עֲלָמָא מְקַשִּׁים שְׁהַפְסוּק אִיגוּ נִוְתָן הַטַּעַם אֶלָּא מִפְּנֵי, "כִּי רַבִּים הָיוּ" וְכוּ', וְעוֹד דַּר' נָתַן גּוֹפִיָּה לָא נְחִית אֶלָּא לֹאמַר שְׂאִין הַקַּב"ה מוֹאֵס תְּפִלְתָּן שְׁל רַבִּים, וּמִנֵּין לְגוּ דְבַעֲי נְמִי תוֹרָה וּגְמִילוּת חֻסְדִּים.

Everyone asks: the verse gives the reason only as “it is as though there were many on my side.” Furthermore, Rabbi Natan himself came only to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not despise the prayer of the many — from where do we know that Torah and acts of lovingkindness are also required?

וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמַר דְּאָמְרִין בְּפִרְקָא קַמָּא דְּתַעֲנִית "אִם-יִשָּׁף הַנֶּחֱשׁ בְּלוֹא-לְחֹשׁ" אִם רְאִיתָ דּוֹר שְׁהִשְׁמִים מִשְׁתַּכְּיָן עָלָיו כְּנַחוּשָׁת מְלַהוּרִיד טַל וּמִטָּר בְּשִׁבִיל לִוְחָשִׁי לְחִישוֹת שְׂאִין בְּאוֹתוֹ הַדּוֹר, מֵאִי תִקְנָתָן לְכּוּ אֶצְל מִי שְׂיִוְדַע לְלַחֹשׁ וְלַחֹשׁ. וּבְפִרְקָא ח' דְּבַתְרָא מִי שְׂיֵשׁ לוֹ צַעַר בְּתוֹךְ בֵּיתוֹ יִלְךְ אֶצְל חֻכָּם וַיִּבְקֹשׁ עָלָיו רַחֲמִים. וְכֵן בְּמִדְרַשׁ עַל פְּסוּק רְצוֹן-וְרָאִיו יַעֲשֶׂה.

One may say that we are told in Chapter 1 of Ta’anit:

“If the serpent [*nachash*] bites [*yishokh*] before it is charmed [*lachash*], then the charmer has no advantage.”²¹ If you see a generation [for whom] the heavens corrode [*meshatkhin*] like copper [*nechoshet*], [preventing them] from bringing down dew and rain, because there are none in the generation who pray the silent prayer [Amidah].

What is their remedy? [They should] go to one who knows how to pray the silent prayer, and he will pray.

- Ta’anit 8a

Also, we read in Chapter 8 of Bava Batra (116a): “One who has distress within his household should go to a sage and ask him to seek mercy on his behalf.”

Likewise, see in the Midrash on the verse “He grants the wishes of those who fear Him,”²² where we read:

The prophet said to Hezekiah, “Instruct your household, as you are dying. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall [and he prayed to the Lord].”²³ The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: “I have heard your prayer... I hereby add fifteen years to your days.”²⁴ As it is written: “He grants the wishes of those who fear Him, and He hears their cry and saves them.”

- Deut. Rabbah 8:1

²¹ Eccl. 10:11.

²² Ps. 145:19.

²³ Isaiah 38:2.

²⁴ Isaiah 38:5.

ואם כן התפלה תהיה רצויה כשיתפלל אותה איזה חכם או צדיק, ואמרינו בתענית מורידין לפני התיבה זקן ויש לו בנים כדי שיהיה מלא רחמים דהיינו גמילות חסדים. ועל זה אמר הכתוב כשיהיה ראוי להיות שליח ציבור דהיינו שידע תורה וגמילות חסדים, דתלמידים חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם ואף הגמילות חסדים מרבה השלום, אז כאילו פדאני וכו', ומדקאמר "פדה" לשון יחיד ואחר כך סיים "היו" בלשון רבים על כרחוק לומר דהיינו השליח ציבור, ואמר "נפשי" על דרך דאמרו בזוהר על פסוק "אשר לא-נשא לשוא נפשי" וכו'.

We now return to Question 1. The iniquity of the House of Eli could not be atoned by sacrifice or meal-offering, that is, by the external Temple rite stripped of its inner prayer. What *can* atone is precisely that prayer, offered sincerely and in a holy place, by one whose life embodies the qualities that make prayer acceptable before G-d. This is the role of the *shaliach tzibbur*, the communal prayer leader, who stands in place of the Temple service, bringing together Torah, lovingkindness, and sincere supplication in the way that the *semicha* once united gesture, confession, and holy place.

If so, prayer will be accepted when offered by some sage or righteous person. We are also told in Ta'anit (15a) that they bring before the ark as *shaliach tzibur* (prayer leader) an elder who has children, so that he should be full of compassion — that is, acts of lovingkindness. Regarding this, the text says: when one is fit to be a communal prayer leader — meaning one who knows Torah and acts of lovingkindness, for “Torah scholars increase peace in the world,”²⁵ and acts of lovingkindness likewise increase peace, then it is “as if he redeemed Me and My children from among the nations of the world.”

From the fact that [Ps. 55:19] says “redeemed” in the singular, i.e., “He has redeemed my soul in peace from the battle against me,” and then concludes “it as though there were many on my side” in the plural, one must necessarily say this refers to the communal prayer leader. It says “my soul” following the manner of what was said in the Zohar on the verse “who has not taken a false oath by My life,”²⁶ etc. That is, our text of the Torah, based on the Leningrad Codex, is written “who has not taken a false oath by My life [נפשי]. However, there are other versions in which “His life [נפשו]” is written, though even in those cases the Mesorah was to read *nafshi*. The Zohar states:

“Who shall ascend into the mountain of the L-rd? He that has clean hands, and a pure heart, who has not taken My name [*nafshi*, literally, ‘My soul’) in vain.” It is written *nafshi* [“My soul”], yet is read *nafsho* [“My Nefesh”]. Why [is it written] *nafshi* [but read] *nafsho*? It is all the same thing, as it is written, “The L-rd G-d has sworn by His soul [*nafsho*],”²⁷ “that shall do according to that which is in My heart and in My soul [*nafshi*].”²⁸ King David united with that heart and *nefesh*, Hence, it is written, “who has not taken *nafsho* in vain.”

- Zohar, III:45b, Tazria 16:69

²⁵ Berachot 64a; Yevamot 122b; Nazir 66b; Keritot 28b; Tamid 32b.

²⁶ Ps. 24:4.

²⁷ Amos 6:8.

²⁸ I Sam. 2:35.

That is, *nafshi* corresponds to the soul of David, the side of faith (i.e., the *Shechinah/Malchut*), while *nafsho* corresponds to the soul of the individual person. One who guards his own soul by not swearing falsely is also guarding and honoring the *Shechinah* (since the two are linked), and thereby “shall receive a blessing from the L-rd.”

The *Zera Shimshon* is using the Zohar as support for explaining why Psalm 55:19 uses the singular (“He redeemed *my* soul”) before switching to a plural context. The Zohar’s identification of *nafshi* with the soul of David, the *Shechinah*, and the “side of faith” suggests that the *shaliach tzibbur* (communal prayer leader) who prays faithfully is not merely acting for himself. Rather, his prayer is aligned with the soul of David, the side of faith, the *Shechinah* herself. This is why his prayer has special power to “redeem” G-d and Israel from among the nations.

ומכל מקום אף בתכמים עצמם יש הפרש, דיש מי ששנענה מיד יותר מחבירו, דאמרין בפרק ה' דברכות הוא דומה לעבד בפני המלך ואני דומה לשר לפני המלך. והנה המפרשים ז"ל טרחו עצמם הרבה בביאור לשון זה, ולענייני דעתי נראה שהנה שורת הדין היתה שרבי חנינא שהיה כל כך צדיק וחסיד והיה עשיר גדול ויתעבדו אף בעולם הזה כפי זכותו, ומעתה שאנו רואים שאינו נהנה כלום אלא כדי סיותו בצמצום, אם כן אינו ניזון לפי זכותו אלא מתורת הצדקה שהקב"ה עושה עם כל בריותיו, כדכתיב "פוחת את ידך ומשביע לכל חיי", ונהרי הוא דומה לעבד שניזון מן הצדקה, לפי מאי דקיימא לן יכול הרב לומר לעבד עשה עמי ואני נגד, ולכן בשהוא מתפלל על איזה חולה אף על פי שאותו חולה משורת הדין אין לו זכות להתרפאות, עם כל זה רבי חנינא היה יכול לטעון שיברפאהו הקב"ה בתורת צדקה וחסד ולא יעמיד רפואתו על קו הדין, כשם שגם הוא אינו נהנה מהעולם הזה לפי זכותו וכפי שורת הדין אלא בתורת צדקה, אבל רבי יוחנן בן זכאי שהיה נשיא, כמו שאמר, אני דומה לשר בפני המלך, והנה מהעולם הזה כפי זכותו וכפי שורת הדין, אין לו כח לטעון שהקב"ה ירפא אותו החולה אם לא יהיה לו זכות להתרפאות, הואיל דלגבי דיניה הפל הולך לפי שורת הדין.

Nevertheless, even among the wise themselves there is a difference, for there are those who find their prayers are answered more readily than others. As we are told in Chapter 5 of Berachot:

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa, who went to study Torah before Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Yochanan’s son fell ill. He said to him: Chanina, my son, pray for mercy on behalf of [my son] so that he will live. Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa placed his head between his knees and prayed for mercy upon his behalf, and [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s son] lived. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said [about himself]: Had ben Zakkai stuck his head between his knees throughout the entire day, they would have paid him no attention. His wife said to him: And is Chanina greater than you? He replied to her: No, but his prayer is better received than my own because] **he is like a servant before the King** [and can enter before the King and make requests at all times]. **I am like a minister before the King** [and can enter only when invited].”

- Berachot 34b

Now the commentators, may their memory be blessed, labored greatly to explain this expression. In my humble opinion it seems that the strict line of justice would have had Rabbi Chanina — who was so righteous and pious — be a great wealthy man, enjoying even this

world in accordance with his merit. Now that we observe he enjoyed nothing beyond his bare subsistence, he was evidently not sustained according to his merit but rather through an act of charity that the Holy One, Blessed be He, performs for all His creatures, as it is written: “You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing.”²⁹

He is thus like a servant, sustained through the principal of charity and lovingkindness, beyond what is strictly required, in accordance with our ruling that a master may say to a Canaanite servant: work for me, but I will not feed you.³⁰ Therefore, when he prays on behalf of some sick person, even if that sick person by strict justice has no merit to be healed, Rabbi Chanina could nevertheless argue that the Holy One, Blessed be He, should heal him through an act of charity and lovingkindness. [G-d] should not hold [the sick person’s] healing to the strict line of justice, just as [Rabbi Chanina] himself did not enjoy this world according to his merit and by the strict line of justice, but through an act of charity.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, however, who was a prince — as he said: “I am like a minister before the king” — and who enjoyed this world according to his merit and by the strict line of justice, has no power to argue that the Holy One, Blessed be He, should heal that sick person if that person has no merit to be healed, since for him everything proceeds by the strict line of justice.

אִי נִמְיָ בְּדַרְךְ אַחַר, גְּרָסִינָן בְּעִירוּבֵינוּ פְּרָק הַדָּר אָמַר ר' חֲזִיא בַר אֲשִׁי אָמַר רַב כּל שְׂאִין דְּעֵתוֹ מִיּוֹשְׁבַת עָלָיו אַל יִתְפַּלֵּל שְׁנַאֲמַר בְּצַר אֵל יוֹרְהָ. הֵבֵא בְּדַרְךְ אֵל יִתְפַּלֵּל שְׁלֵשָׁה יָמִים. וּמִי שֶׁהוּא שָׂר כְּמוֹ רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי שֶׁהֵיָה רֹאשׁ יְשִׁיבָה וְנִשְׂאִי הַדָּוָר, הֵיָה טְרוּד לְעוֹלָם בְּצַרְכֵי צְבוּר וּמְשׁוּם הָכִי לֹא הֵיָה דְּעֵתוֹ מִיּוֹשְׁבַת עָלָיו לְהִתְפַּלֵּל, כִּי "לֵב מְלָכִים אֵין חֶקֶר", אֲבָל רַבִּי חֲנִינְיָ בֶּן דּוֹסָא הוּא דּוֹמָה לְעֶבֶד שְׂאִין לוֹ טְרָדוֹת בְּמַחְשְׁבָתוֹ, וּמְשׁוּם הָכִי נֶאֱדָה לוֹ לְהִתְפַּלֵּל.

Alternatively, along a different line: we find in Eruvin (65a), the 6th chapter, entitled “One who resides,” that “Rabbi Chiyva bar Ashi said in the name of Rav: whoever’s mind is not settled should not pray, as it is said: ‘In distress, one should not issue decisions.’”³¹

“One who returns [home] from a journey should not pray for three days [while recovering from the hardship of being on the road].”

One who is a minister, like Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who was head of the academy and prince of his generation, was forever preoccupied with communal affairs, and therefore his mind was not settled for prayer — for “the heart of kings is unsearchable.”³² But Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa is like a servant who has no preoccupying concerns in his thoughts, and therefore it befits him to pray.

* * *

²⁹ Ps. 145:16.

³⁰ Ketubot 43a, 58b; Gittin 12a, 12b; Bava Kamma 87b, Bava Metzia 93a.

³¹ Rashi believed that the phrase came from Ben Sira, but it does not appear in extant copies of Ben Sira.

³² Prov. 25:3.