

Rabbi Yosef Blau

## *What Is Special in the Amidah for Shacharit on the Festivals?*

The structure of the *Amidah* on the festivals is similar to that on Shabbat. The middle portion of the daily *Shmoneh Esrei*, which consists of requests, is not said and is replaced by a single blessing on the *Kedushat Ha-Yom* (sanctity of the day). When a holiday falls out on Shabbat a single blessing integrating the themes of both is said. A noticeable difference between the *Amidah* on Shabbat and the festivals is that on a festival there is a single formulation of this blessing for *Ma'ariv* and *Minchah* as well as *Shacharit*, while on Shabbat there are variations on the theme.

The three holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are treated as a unit. While each is mentioned separately, the concluding paragraph for the three is identical. This reflects that the three share a common sanctity and in some senses complete each other. In communities where *piyutim* are still recited, the individual nature not only of the different holidays but of each day (excluding the intermediate days) is the motif. Each Yom Tov has its own prayers included in the repetition of the *Amidah*.

This middle blessing begins with the theme of God's choosing of Israel, showing His affection by giving the Jewish people commandments including the holidays. At this point the appropriate holiday is mentioned with a short description of its unique quality. Passover is the time of freedom. Shavuot is the time when the Torah was given on Sinai. Sukkot is the festival associated with joy. The eighth day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, has a partial separate identity. It has its own name but it shares with Sukkot the association with joy. It is important to notice that in the *Amidah* there is no mention of Simchat Torah, as it is seen as the second day of Shemini Atzeret celebrated outside of Israel.

The recital of *Ya'aleh VeYavo* which follows is included on the intermediate days, where a weekday *Shmoneh Esrei* is said, and in the *Birkat Ha-Mazon* recited after eating a meal. It fulfils the obligation to make mention of special days in our prayers. Remembering is its recurrent theme with God asked to remember His people, its origins, land, and the promise of its redemption as well as this particular special day. The use of the term "*pikdoneinu*" as well as the more familiar term "*zikhronenu*" for remembering us, refers to the use of that term in the redemption from Egypt and alludes to future redemption.

The concluding paragraph focuses on the blessing of having been given the holidays as a time of joy and sanctity. The blessing itself describes God as sanctifying the Jewish people and the special times. Even on the High Holy Days sanctifying the Jewish people is mentioned, though it is not included on Shabbat. This is explained as reflecting that Shabbat is the seventh day of the week and is independent of the Jewish calendar, while all the festivals are determined by the calendar which has been given over to the Jewish people to establish. For the three festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, which commemorate critical moments in the foundation of the Jewish people, the connection is particularly apt. The shared commandment to go to the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* three times a year is a component of their sanctity as a unit.

The fundamental distinction between the daily *Shmoneh Esrei* with its thirteen supplications and the holiday *Amidah* which omits them and singularly focuses on the sanctity of the day requires analysis. Turning to God in time of need is the essence of prayer. Nahmanides sees the obligation to pray as normally of rabbinic origin except for a time of need when it becomes biblical. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (the Rav) explained that the view of Maimonides that daily prayer is a biblical obligation is based on man's existential needs. Then how should we understand the *Amidah*, which is the essence of prayer, on the festivals? (The same question can be asked on the *Amidah* of Shabbat.)

One explanation is that the Jew's relationship with God on the holidays is on a higher level. He turns to God to respond to his spiritual need to truly experience the sanctity of the day. In a different context the Rav explained that the essence of the joy of the holidays is in the closeness of the Jew to God on these days of redemption and revelation. This relationship raises the Jew from his mundane concerns to focusing on his need to maintain his bond to God.

Alternatively one can see this holiday prayer as celebratory. Chosen for a unique relationship with God, the Jew expresses appreciation for being part of this people who are given the holidays to commemorate this closeness. On these special occasions we trust that God will meet our needs and endow us with holiness.