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Counting Our Blessings

Birkas HaShachar

The Morning Blessings

*Gaining insight into ourselves through the
wisdom and the profundity of the Morning
Blessings*

by

Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

THE MORNING BLESSINGS – OUR STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

The format of our Daily Prayers is very exact. Most of our formal prayers were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, many of whom had been blessed with Divine Inspiration. Subsequently, the prayers that they wrote were imbued with holiness and an uncanny insight into the human psyche. Among their beautiful compositions are fifteen blessings that are recited each day as a prelude to the prayers that are recited every morning.

Why fifteen? Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a corresponding numerical value. The number ten corresponds to the letter 'yud' and the number five to the letter 'heh'. When the letters 'yud' and 'heh' are combined they spell out one of the central Names of G-d. In Jewish thought, whenever the number fifteen appears it is always associated with the intensely spiritual dimension of G-d's Name – 'yud' and 'heh'. Therefore, the Rabbis teach that there are fifteen levels of spirituality that we are supposed to scale in our pursuit of spiritual meaning.

That is also why the number fifteen was found in the Holy Temple. For example, there were fifteen steps that led from the Women's Courtyard to the Israelites' Courtyard; and there are fifteen chapters of Psalms that are called the Songs of Ascent because they were sung on the fifteen steps.

To our great sorrow the Holy Temple has been destroyed and we are left waiting for the Third and Final Temple to be built. In the meantime the Sages granted us the ability to connect to G-d through prayer in place of the Temple Service. And in the place of the fifteen steps leading to the Temple our Sages composed the fifteen Morning Blessings.

In effect, each blessing serves as an integral stair to the next blessing. Each blessing is essential both for our climb upwards towards the spiritual realms and for our understanding of the blessing that follows it. And that means that, when they are said with the correct intent and with concentration, they bring us to the very gateway of connection to G-d. It is a truly inspirational idea – when we reach the fifteenth blessing we look back and see that we have ascended a stairway that has brought us to the Heavens!

We will explore the fifteen Morning Blessings together – to try to reveal and understand the deeper meanings that lie behind them. And by doing so, we will be able to enhance our connection to G-d which, after all, is the most fundamental reason for prayer to begin with!

(There is more than one opinion as to which order the fifteen blessings should be recited in. In this column the standard Ashkenazic opinion will be followed. That does not mean, however, that what we will learn together is only applicable to the those who follow the Ashkenazic order but, rather, the depth and the beauty of the blessings are apparent according to each opinion.)

BLESSING ONE: AS CLEAR AS DAY AND NIGHT

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who gave the heart understanding to distinguish between day and night.

The very first blessing seems to be somewhat oblique. Even though all of the contemporary translations that I found read “Who gave the heart understanding”, the word used for “heart” is not so clear. According to some of the commentaries the word is related to an Aramaic word that actually means “rooster”. If so, the blessing now reads “Who gave the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night.”

What is so special about a rooster that we recite a blessing over it? G-d granted a special ability for roosters to differentiate between the nighttime and the day. They are able to recognize when the dawn is breaking and they announce it to mankind.

Historically humans have lived their lives around the daytime. Daylight is a time of clarity. Light represents a time of action and creation. The rooster is announcing to the world that a new day has arrived. It is time to start getting up and to begin utilizing the precious time allotted to us. Time that will allow us to be productive. Studies are now being published that prove that our constant preoccupation with being “connected” twenty-four hours a day is actually counterproductive. Paradoxically, businesses that expect their staff to be available at all hours learned – to their surprise – that their employees were generally *less* productive than other workers who clocked in and out of their jobs at fixed times and were not expected to be “on call” at all hours.

We are expected to rest and sleep at night so that we can start each new day with enthusiasm and verve. That is why the main part of the Temple Service was done during the day because daylight is given to us so that we can achieve.

But that is so when translating the word as “rooster”. What about the standard, accepted translation of “heart” – “Who gave the heart understanding”. What exactly is this great event that is taking place each morning – that our hearts are able to discern the difference between day and night? Something that is so momentous that we recite a blessing over it?

The Rabbis explain that the words “day” and “night” are words that are analogous to good and evil. Good is day. Good is clear. Good is obvious. Night, on the other hand, parallels evil. Darkness is the absence of light. Night removes the clarity from the world and leaves us groping in the opacity for meaning and connection to G-d.

The very first blessing is revealing to us a fundamental of Jewish belief. That G-d has instilled in human beings the ability to differentiate between good and evil. To be innately aware that certain

things are obviously good and others are just as obviously evil. The blessing is not referring to subtleties – to actions that are not so easily defined one way or the other. The blessing is referring to those actions that are immediately recognizable and definable as good or evil. What can be described as logical morality. For example, murder. A person can try to convince himself that he had no idea that murder was evil, but the very first blessing – a blessing that is applicable to all mankind – teaches that such a perspective is not true. That, when it comes to the basics, we are all accountable for our actions.

BLESSING TWO: THE THRILL OF BEING JEWISH

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not
having made me a non-Jew.**

The next three blessings are unique. With the exception of the Morning Blessings, there is no other time when we recite what can only be described as negative blessings. In Judaism, a blessing is recited over what we have, not over what we do not have. For example, a person who is about to eat an apple does not thank G-d for not having given him a potato. And yet we now have three blessings, one after the other, that all begin with the words, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me...” More than that, two of the blessings seem to be phrased in a derogatory fashion. “Blessed are You... for not having made me a non-Jew,” and “Blessed are You... for not having made me a woman.” How are we to understand why the Sages deemed it correct to compose the blessings in the negative? And why did the Sages feel that it was appropriate to speak in such a language about non-Jews and women?

Many, many years ago I posed these questions to Rabbi Uziel Milevsky. Rabbi Milevsky was a senior lecturer at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem and was one of the most erudite, insightful and humble people that I have merited knowing. He began by explaining that the most sublime activities in this world are doing the Will of G-d. And, specifically, keeping G-d’s commandments and learning His Torah. G-d granted the obligation and the responsibility to do so to the Jewish People. That is the reason why the Jews are called the Chosen Nation. The ability to live a life that reflects the teachings of the Torah is truly an indescribable gift. But, it is not always such an easy thing to do. The daily obligations of a Jew are myriad and complex. The Code of Jewish Law is a primer that stretches from pre-birth to post-death. There is not supposed to be even a moment in our day that does not reflect the depth of our relationship with G-d. Rabbi Milevsky emphasized that it is the potential for such infinite profundity that can make our constant striving to connect to the Divine either inestimably exhilarating or just as equally discouraging. The numerous

commandments are tools that have been given to us to help us try to overcome the seductive attractions of this physical world. And, when we are successful, we are connecting ourselves to G-d in the most absolute way possible. But, for someone who finds that immeasurably difficult to do, the commandments can also be regarded as hurdles and barriers to living “the good life” in this world. It is hard to remain focused all the time on what G-d wants. And it is definitely hard to ignore the many corporeal delights that the Torah forbids us to enjoy.

How does this connect to the blessing of thanking G-d for not having made us a non-Jew? In spiritual terms, perhaps the most basic definition of who I am is that I am a Jew. I belong to G-d. And my task in this world is to live my life accordingly. Therefore, when I recite the Morning Blessings, which are – in part – a description of who I am, one of my first obligations is to thank G-d for having given me the most wonderful gift of all: To proclaim that I am a Jew.

However, being Jewish is not a non-conditional state of being, that G-d made me a Jew and I can behave however I want. Being Jewish is obligatory. It carries with it an enormous responsibility. If I were to declare that I am Jewish by saying, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, *for having made me a Jew,*” it would mean that I would be testifying to the fact that I live my life as a Jew, without deviating from any of my responsibilities. The problem is, I do not always live exactly as G-d wants me to. I am not always so careful about the things that I do or the things that I say.

When I make a blessing, I am bearing witness that what I am saying is absolutely true. By proudly making a blessing proclaiming that I am Jew, it would be as if I were telling G-d, “Look at me! Look how wonderful I am!” And, perhaps, that is exactly what G-d would do. It is conceivable that my blessing would be the direct cause of an extremely exacting Divine “investigation” into the way that I live my life. In effect, G-d would do exactly as I asked – plus more. He would not just *look* at me. He would *scrutinize* all of my actions as well, to see if they really match up to my overconfident declaration that I am a Jew.

In the spiritual realms, being Jewish is not just being born Jewish. Being Jewish is *living* Jewish.

And that leaves us with a most challenging dilemma. On the one hand, my being Jewish is possibly the most fundamental definition of myself, a definition that cannot be ignored. My being Jewish absolutely requires recognition within the Morning Blessings, to proclaim with joy and unbridled passion that I am a Jew. To acknowledge the One who made me Jewish. And to recognize what an enormous privilege it is. I am not looking down at anyone else. Perish the thought. Rather, I am “counting my blessings” and offering up thanks. But, on the other hand, to do so directly might be the cause of an unwanted Divine accounting. Therefore, our Sages, in their infinite wisdom, composed a blessing that is an indisputable fact: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me a non-Jew.” Obviously, the only conceivable meaning of the blessing is that I am a Jew. But our Sages understood that when it is said in the negative form it becomes a statement of fact, rather than a brash, defiant announcement that could spark an unwelcome Divine reaction.

Finally, let me conclude with a very important point made by Rabbi David HaLevi Segal, who was known as the Turei Zahav (or the Taz for short) after his seminal work on the Code of Jewish Law and one of the most eminent authorities in sixteenth century Poland. He writes that this blessing

should not be taken to mean that non-Jews are considered to be of a lower status than Jews. This would be a serious and unfortunate mistake. Every category of being has a powerful purpose in this world, and each one is an absolutely necessary creation. But I bless G-d for not creating me as one of the other necessary categories, but, rather, as a Jew – because of the unique role the Jew has in serving the Creator.

BLESSING THREE: CELEBRATING FREEDOM – THE JEWISH WAY

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not
having made me a slave.**

The philosophy behind the “negativity” of the previous blessing is going to serve as the key to help us understand the third blessing and the depth of the message that it conveys.

No one wants to be a slave. The dictionary definition of slavery does not make for very pleasant reading: Slavery is any system in which principles of property law are applied to people, allowing individuals to own, buy and sell other individuals, as a de jure form of property. A slave is unable to withdraw unilaterally from such an arrangement and the slave works without remuneration.

It is clear why no one *wants* to be a slave. It would seem that the aversion to being enslaved is such a basic and straightforward concept that there is no need to recite a blessing over our being free. And yet the third blessing that we recite each morning is, “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me a slave.” Not only that, but it is the second of the three blessings that are recited in the negative. As with the previous blessing, the meaning behind the blessing is clear – we are thanking G-d for having made us free. And yet, for the second time, our Sages use a language that is distinctive in its composition and that requires clarification.

Why did the Sages not simply write, “Blessed are You...for having made me free”? Worded like that the blessing would clearly convey the message that we are here in this world in order to reach beyond ourselves. To stretch upwards towards our potential and to use our freedom to build up the world. In effect, to be attached to G-d. But, as before, our Sages chose to couch the blessing in negative terms. Why?

It transpires that there might be an intrinsic difference of opinion between the Torah and secular society as to how to define “free”. Our Sages in their thought-provoking moral and ethical treatise *Ethics of the Fathers* (6:2), teach in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that a truly free person is someone who studies G-d’s Torah [and lives his life accordingly]. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch

writes, in his customary eloquent style, that the Torah is not a crushing and constricting yoke. Rather, the Torah is a source of freedom that allows man to be loyal to himself and his G-dly soul. To be free to live according to the internal harmony of his personality. Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uceda, in his classic commentary on Ethics of the Fathers, writes that unless man lives as G-d created him to, he is a slave to his own passions, the standards of society, or the authoritarianism of dominant or fashionable cultures.

Accordingly, Jewish freedom is not to be defined as “an absence of servitude”. Jewish freedom does not mean that I can do whatever I want; whenever I want; to whomever I want. Jewish freedom means each person utilizing their life in order to make the world a better place by learning G-d’s Torah and keeping His commandments.

That is definitely an electrifying idea! But how does it fit into the Morning Blessings? Because, a blessing is a definitive statement. And freedom does not just mean that I am not enslaved. Jewish freedom means that I am doing the Will of G-d. Just as with the previous blessing, if I boldly claim that I am free – “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for having made me free” – *but I am not living up to what G-d wants from me*, then I am not using my freedom in the way that G-d wants me to. I am not connecting to G-d to become both better and bigger spiritually than I was up until now. And that may be the cause of G-d’s carefully examining how I use my freedom. It will be a thorough Divine checkup delineating exactly how I live my life. Am I using my precious freedom to draw closer to G-d or am I ignoring it and drifting further away from G-d?

But, on the hand, I am beholden to acknowledge the dazzling gift of freedom that G-d has granted me. Yes, it is true that I may not be utilizing it to its fullest, but I still recognize it for what it truly is – the most effective and vivid method of connecting to G-d. Therefore, our Sages introduced another blessing written in the negative, “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me a slave.” A blessing that is undeniable in practical terms, but will not be the cause of Divine scrutiny in the way that the blessing, if said in the positive, might be. And a blessing that reveals my inner yearning to be close to G-d – even if I am not totally succeeding right now.

BLESSING FOUR (i): BE A MAN!

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me a woman.

Now that the method that our Sages use when composing “negative blessings” has been established, it needs to be applied one last time to the final blessing in the series of three blessings that follow one after the other within the Morning Blessings. This blessing is possibly the most challenging to explain. Not because of the concept that underlies the blessing itself, but because of the emotive issues that it raises.

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me a woman. Why do our Sages use such a seemingly insensitive vernacular? Why did our Sages not compose a blessing that states simply and clearly that I am thankful for having been created as a man? And, how does this blessing fit into the triumvirate of negative blessings?

What has become apparent in the two preceding blessings is that making a blessing that reflects directly on my spiritual standing can become a two-edged sword if I am not extremely careful in the way that I act and behave. And that same concept will apply here as well.

Our Sages teach that the spiritual spheres and the physical spheres mirror each other. Each one needs the other in order for us to be able to live balanced lives that reflect both the Divine side of us and the corporeal side. More than that, every single creation has its task in this world and is created specifically to be able to perform its spiritual assignment. Therefore, the undeniable biological differences that exist between men and women are a physical manifestation of the spiritual differences that exist between them. Consequently, just as there are certain things that only men can do, so too, there are things that only women can do. And this is applicable in both the physical realms and the spiritual realms.

Our focus in this article will be to explain the blessing made by men, “for not having made me a woman”. In the next article we will address in greater depth how those differences manifest themselves spiritually with regards to women.

Both women and men are created in the “image of G-d” and both are placed here in this world to enhance G-d’s Majesty in the physical realms – each one according to their Divine specifications. In spiritual terms how are these differences expressed? The most obvious way is through the number of commandments that men have to keep as compared to women. Women are exempt from most time-bound positive commandments. That translates into men having considerably more spiritual obligations than women. Why is that? Because men are less innately spiritual than women (this will be expanded upon in the next article) and they require more external

commitments to ensure a healthy and continual connection to G-d. Those external commitments are the commandments.

And that leads us into exactly the same problem that was raised with the previous two blessings. Every Jewish man is obligated to thank G-d for the unparalleled opportunity to keep His commandments. And the more commandments I am obligated to keep, the greater is my responsibility to thank Him – and the greater my joy should be at the possibility to do so. If so, it would seem that the most apt blessing to make should be, “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for having made me a man.” And yet, as twice before, our Sages chose to use the negative syntax to convey our gratitude and appreciation for being able to live a life that revolves around G-d’s commandments.

The reason for this anomaly is that, once again, there is a dilemma of how to express our gratitude without its being the direct cause of some kind of a Divine audit. Just as with the two previous blessings, by thanking G-d for having made me a man, the inference is that I am doing *everything* that G-d demands of me. And as a man there are many more obligations which, if I am not doing them exactly as G-d commands, my blessing might end up having exactly the opposite effect. Instead of its having its intended impact, my blessing could be the very medium that will trigger a spiritual appraisal. Therefore, the Sages introduced one last negative blessing to allow me the opportunity to give thanks to G-d for the increased opportunities that I have as a man to perform the commandments – without its impinging negatively on me.

Paradoxically, despite its complex composition, the fourth blessing is not a negative reflection on women at all. Quite the opposite. It is the potential for men’s spiritual inadequacies that are the cause of the blessing.

BLESSING FOUR (ii): BE YOURSELF!

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for having
made me according to His Will.**

The blessing that many women recite in place of “...for not having made me a woman” is fascinating for two reasons. Firstly, its origins are not clear. The majority of the Morning Blessings can be found in the Talmud but this blessing is a much later composition. It is first mentioned within Jewish Law in the 14th century by Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher in his magnum opus, the Tur, and by Rabbi David Abudraham in his scholarly work entitled Sefer Abudraham. But there is no real indication as to who composed it and when exactly it was written. The second fascinating element is the language it uses. We could have expected the blessing to mirror the

men's blessing, "...for not having made me a man" and yet it reads, "Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, for having made me according to His will."

As we discussed in the previous article, keeping commandments is a privilege. The fact that men have more commandments to keep obliges them to make a special blessing acknowledging the gift that they have been granted. And that is also the reason why women cannot make a corresponding blessing "...for not having made me a man" – because to do so would mistakenly imply that it is good not to have been given so many commandments. On the other hand, as was also pointed out previously, women are inherently more spiritual than men, which means that they do not have the same need that men have to be constantly connected to the commandments to be able to sustain their relationship with G-d.

Where do we see that women have an innate sense of spirituality? The Maharal of Prague (Be'er Hagolah 4:16) writes that there is fundamental spiritual concept that G-d built in to the Creation called *ma'alim bekodesh* – to grow in holiness. *Ma'alim bekodesh* means that, in spiritual progression, something that follows another is on a higher spiritual level than that which immediately precedes it.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in explaining the creation of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:22), writes that the fact that Eve was created after Adam is proof that women have an innate spiritual potential that men do not possess. When Adam was created, G-d took earth and fashioned his body. But when it came to creating Eve, the material for her body was not taken from the earth – which represents inanimate, albeit pure, potential – but, rather, she was created from the sensitive living body of Man.

And that brings us to the question of the wording of the blessing. Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz of Frankfurt, in his brilliantly erudite work the *Hafla'ah*, writes that even though Eve was created from Adam's side, it was established for all the future generations that she be born complete. And then he continues, "It seems that they [the Rabbis] enacted for women to recite the blessing 'for having made me according to His will' over this. Meaning, over being created complete, as arose in G-d's will from the first."

My Rebbi, Rabbi Moshe Shapiro z"l, explained that G-d's will is to give – to bestow kindness – to mankind. So, too, a woman is created with the same will to give and to create. To nurture and to support. That is why the blessing women make is "...for having made me according to His will" – that the blessing is conveying that women were created *similar* to G-d's will.

A classic example of the way that the spiritual needs of men and women differ is the commandment for men to wear Tefillin. The Rabbis teach that Tefillin are a mystical and esoteric means of establishing a bond with G-d. But, explains Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, women have a far more meaningful way of creating their relationship with G-d - through the experience of carrying life within them. Intriguingly, in the Kabbalistic works, the inner chamber of the Tefillin is compared to the womb and the leather strap is a parallel to the umbilical cord.

But perhaps the most significant idea that can be gleaned from the differences between the blessing that men recite and the one that women recite is that every individual – regardless of gender – has the most incredible potential to be an upright and noble human being. A being who can reach unparalleled closeness to G-d. As Rabbi Mordechai Becher writes, “Men and women have different challenges. Commandments are described in the Zohar as *tikkunim* – solutions, fixes to these challenges.” Consequently, the commandments that men are obligated to keep are tailor-made to help men meet their challenges. So, too, the commandments that women have serve exactly the same function for women. And the different blessings for men and women reflect their different approaches to serving G-d.

In effect, the ultimate spiritual level of each individual is determined by how they respond to their challenges and whether they utilize the unique potential that has been granted to them by G-d.

Please Note: *There are various opinions within Jewish Law as to how – or even whether – women make this blessing. The accepted Ashkenazic and Chassidic approach is that the blessing is recited as it appears in the Prayer Book including the Names of G-d. However, there is at least one Chassidic sect whose custom is (mostly) not to recite it. Among the Sefardic communities there are two differing opinions. Some rule that women should go directly from the third blessing to the fifth blessing without reciting the fourth blessing at all. Others rule that the blessing should be recited without saying the Names of G-d. Rather, only to say: “Blessed are You for having made me according to His will.”*

Accordingly, each person should follow their own family or community custom. Anyone who is unsure as to what is the correct approach for them should consult with a local Orthodox Rabbi.

BLESSING FIVE: WHAT BIG EYES YOU HAVE...ALL THE BETTER TO SEE YOU WITH!

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who gives
sight to the blind.**

The fifth blessing thanks G-d for having given us sight. The origin of the words “gives sight to the blind” is chapter 146 from the Book of Psalms, verse eight. There is an obvious practical dimension to the blessing – that sight is a precious gift that has been granted to us, and it is incumbent upon us to thank G-d for having given it to us. But there is a much deeper element as well. As was mentioned in the introduction, each blessing serves as a step upwards to the next blessing and it is designed to help elevate us toward the next spiritual level. The previous

blessing revolved around the recognition that there are commandments to keep, but now we have reached the point where we are able to open our eyes and *see* those commandments. Therefore, we thank G-d for having allowed us to reach this moment of comprehension that we are surrounded by innumerable opportunities to perform the commandments and to do G-d's Will.

In chapter 21 of Genesis the Torah describes the plight of Hagar and her son Yishmael. They were banished from Avraham's encampment and, having lost their way, they ended up wandering aimlessly through the desert. Yishmael was sick with fever and he needed abundant amounts of water to drink and very soon their water supply dwindled and finally disappeared. It reached the point where Hagar despaired for Yishmael's life. Unable to watch her son's pitiful state any longer she left him under a tree and moved away so that she wouldn't have to see him die of thirst. And then she did what she had seen and been taught to do in Avraham's home – she turned to the only One who could help her and she beseeched G-d to save her son. Verse 19 reads, "Then G-d opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water, she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink." Our Sages point out that the verse does not state that G-d created a new well for Hagar. Rather, it was there all along. "All" G-d did was open Hagar's eyes to what was there in front of her the whole time. So, too, in our daily lives there are occasions when we do not see things that are right there in front of our very eyes. My father used to tell me that the best hiding place is out in the open – because that is the place that most people do not think to look!

At this moment in our journey through the Morning Blessings we are ready to "open our eyes". Open our eyes to the dazzling array of commandments that reveal themselves to us every day, waiting for us to fulfill them. And that is why, at this significant juncture, our Sages saw fit to compose a blessing that reflects our eagerness to do just that.

In an even more profound approach, Rabbi David Kimche, one of the classic commentators on Tanach, writes that the spiritual darkness that accompanies each and every exile is comparable to blindness. Exile prevents us from seeing G-d clearly and, as a result, makes it incalculably more challenging to connect to Him. Rabbi Kimche concludes by writing that when the redemption that we so long for occurs, it will be like a flash of the most brilliant radiance that will illuminate our lives totally – and it will banish the blindness from our eyes forever.

BLESSING SIX: BEING JEWISH – THE VERY HEIGHT OF FASHION!

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who clothes the naked.

The sixth blessing thanks G-d for having given us clothing. Its straightforward understanding is reminding us that, as human beings, we have a higher spiritual calling than animals. G-d gives animals all the physical wherewithal that they need to be able to exist in their natural habitats. They do not require clothing, as the essence of an animal is its physicality alone. Therefore, they do not need anything other than the “fur coats” (or whatever else each animal requires) that were given to them by G-d! Humans, on the other hand, are comprised of both a physical dimension – the body – and a spiritual dimension – the soul.

The Torah relates that when Adam and Eve were created they were not given clothing by G-d. Our Sages teach that there was no need for clothes because the essence of Adam and Eve were their souls and not their bodies. Their spiritual beings defined who they were and, in effect, their bodies served as the clothing to their souls. In their reality the body was the physical, less significant part of them. Therefore, prior to their sinning when they looked at each other, they did not see an unclothed body. Rather, they saw a soul that was incased in a body.

One of the fateful consequences of Adam and Eve’s sin was that the pure and clearly discernable spirituality that shone from within them retreated to an inner, less accessible place. It withdrew to a place that was no longer obvious as it had once been. With their sin the whole perspective of the world changed. Adam and Eve, who had been deeply spiritual creations, became intensely physical ones instead. And when they now looked at each other it was in a completely different way than before. They no longer saw a soul covered by a body; rather, they saw just the body. A body that was exposed and vulnerable. Due to their sin the body had now moved to the fore of their consciousness and, by doing so, had become their essence. The body had become something that was intensely intimate and that necessitated its being shielded from others. Thus the first thing that G-d gave Adam and Eve after they sinned was clothing. Clothing that would both protect them from the elements and protect their very being from being exposed to others.

Our blessing is thanking G-d for returning our dignity to us. Because, by clothing us, G-d is declaring that we are not on the same spiritual level as the animals. We are human beings who have been created in His image. Placed here in this world to elevate ourselves and, by doing so, to reveal even more holiness. Hence, we thank G-d for having lifted us out of the more animalistic aspect of who we are.

But there is another connotation which serves as the next step on our “Stairway to Heaven”. The previous blessing gave thanks to G-d for having given us the ability to see the incredible potential

that exists in our lives. The capacity to perform the commandments. But it is not enough just to be aware of them. We must live them as well. It is as if, until this blessing, we are “bare” of that spiritual dimension. Bare of observing the commandments. But now, as we begin to fulfill them, we are clothing ourselves in the most luxurious and magnificent fabric of all.

BLESSING SEVEN: FREE AT LAST

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who releases the bound.

Blessing number seven thanks G-d for releasing us. But it makes no mention of what we are being released from. It is reasonable to think that if a person goes to sleep free they will wake up in the morning just as free. In general terms, a person’s physical reality does not change intrinsically from one day to the next. And yet our Sages instituted a blessing thanking G-d for having “released the bound”. As with everything that our Sages initiated, there is an enormous depth to the blessing.

There are many different forms of being “bound”. So many things that infringe on our personal freedom, sometimes without our even being aware. For example, we are all addicted to something. As the wife of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (one of the foremost authorities in Jewish Law in the previous generation) famously put it, “My husband is like an alcoholic. It is just that he needs Torah instead of wine!” Hopefully, our addictions are nothing more threatening than a weakness for chocolate cake. But there is definitely a plethora of terrifying addictions out there that are extremely dangerous both to our physical health and to our emotional wellbeing. A person who battles against such cravings requires an inordinate amount of inner strength. Because the desires are so deep-set that they can overcome a person’s very identity. And to conquer those desires necessitates both external assistance and a constant mental awareness that their addiction is not the real them.

During the 1970s there were Jews in what was then the Soviet empire whose dream was to leave the “communist paradise” and to immigrate to Israel. Their desires came at a great personal price, because officially wanting to leave the USSR was regarded as subversive and it automatically caused them to lose their jobs. Once they no longer had a job they were labelled as “parasites” and then the official harassment began. Often they were arrested and relocated, or they were thrown into prison on trumped-up charges. In more extreme cases they were exiled to Siberia and put to work

in labor camps. At one point, in Siberia, one of these Refuseniks (as they called themselves) was found guilty of a minor infraction and put into solitary confinement for *nine months*. Writing about his experiences afterwards he related that he went through several different mental phases whilst he was there, some of which were agonizingly painful. But at some point he came to the most astonishing realization, that the Communists could take away absolutely everything from him. Except for one thing – his freedom.

Because freedom is sometimes a state of mind and not a state of being.

We are all tied down to so many things in this physical world. Things that influence us and cause us to become obsessed and consumed by their allure. Sometimes to the point that we lose sight of who we really are. “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who releases the bound.” It is G-d’s Torah and His commandments that give us the tools to combat our obsessions. They are not guarantees for success but they are the most effective method to help a person overcome them. And, so, when I start keeping the commandments, I am tapping into an inner strength that gives me the ability to shatter the chains that are restraining me. To disregard the physical and to focus on the spiritual. In effect, I am truly releasing the bound.

BLESSING EIGHT: STANDING TALL

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who
straightens the bent.**

The previous blessing acknowledges our ability to break free from the restraints of the physical world so that we can focus on our spiritual selves. Which leads us directly to the eighth blessing: “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who straightens the bent.” Who is bent over? Someone who is overburdened by the weight of the world’s problems. Someone who unceasingly feels the heaviness of that responsibility. But Judaism teaches that the existence of the world is not the responsibility of any one particular individual. The world belongs to G-d. Therefore, a person who knows with certainty that they do not have the undivided responsibility of the world’s wellbeing on their shoulders is not bowed down by that responsibility. In effect, they are able to stand up straight – because they do not have to carry a burden that is not theirs. Rather, they will be able to focus on their own personal responsibilities instead.

Of course, that is not to suggest that a person’s individual duties are not numerous and all-encompassing. They are. We are obligated to live our lives in such a way that reflects the Divine that resides within us. That is a solemn responsibility that requires much inner strength and

determination. But what we are not obliged to do is to take sole responsibility for the world. More than that, by accepting that it is G-d who directs and oversees the running of the world, we open ourselves up to our ability to contemplate our own individual obligations. To focus on the reality that G-d has tasked each of us with a particular purpose and, most importantly, with the wherewithal to fulfill it. It is an obligation that we should all embrace enthusiastically because it confers personal meaning to each and every person's existence. Yes, it may be a weighty responsibility but it is the most exhilarating concept as well.

On the 2nd of June 1953 Princess Elizabeth was crowned Queen of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The investiture ceremony is very long, full of British pomp and pageantry. The coronation clothing is heavy. Very heavy. Just the crown itself – which is worn only once in the lifetime of a monarch – weighs in at just under five pounds. Due to its excessive weight, wearing it for an extended period of time is extremely uncomfortable, perhaps even oppressively so. When Rabbi Shimon Schwab was asked by one of his children how the newly crowned queen could possibly sit there for so long wearing such a load on her head, he answered, “You’re right. It is frightfully heavy and, I am sure, it is very, very uncomfortable. But I guarantee you that at that moment she wouldn’t change places with anyone in the world!” The reason is obvious. All of that “extra” weight is not extra at all. The glorious magnificence that are the crown jewels define the wearer as the Queen of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. And it is worth every moment of discomfort to wear them!

When we recite the blessing “Who straightens the bent” we are accepting upon ourselves the leadership of G-d. And, together with His Torah, we now have the wherewithal to be guided and to have the direction needed so that we can fulfil our task in this world. We stand up straight like soldiers on parade, secure in the knowledge that it is the ultimate Monarch who is ruling over us.

BLESSING NINE: THAT SINKING FEELING

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who spreads
out the earth upon the waters.**

At first glance the language used for the ninth blessing is a bit of a mystery. “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who spreads out the earth upon the waters.” There are two immediate questions that spring to mind. Firstly, the most obvious question seems to be, what is the connection between this blessing and the rest of the Morning Blessings? We have watched the way that the blessings have developed up until now, with each blessing leading sequentially and logically to the next one. And now, all of a sudden, this blessing seems to be a complete non-sequitur. Secondly, technically speaking, the earth is not spread out

upon the waters. If anything it is the opposite – the waters of the seas and the oceans sit *in* the earth and not the other way around as the blessing states. What makes it even more puzzling is that the Rabbis teach that this blessing is a watershed (pun intended) moment in the recitation of the Morning Blessings.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer (1720-1797) – known as the Vilna Gaon [the Genius from Vilna] – explains that the Morning Blessings up until now have taken us from our starting point of nothing more than being aware of the difference between good and evil (the first blessing), to the point where we are fulfilling the commandments (the eighth blessing). But from hereon in the blessings are going to focus on our *connection* to G-d and the way that that connection has the capability to impact each person in a personal and fundamental fashion. Essentially, the first eight blessings are teaching us how to be practicing Jews, whereas the last seven blessings are designed to convey to us how to become believing Jews. But where do we see that from the words of our blessing? In what way do the waters of the world strengthen our belief in G-d?

Over two hundred years ago the Vilna Gaon taught that at the center of the earth's core is a liquid mass. That the weight of the whole world is supported by "water" (a generic term for any liquid). Only much later – in the twentieth century – did scientists corroborate his understanding by discovering that the outer core of the earth's center is a molten mass. The Vilna Gaon explains that every moment of the world's existence is dependent upon G-d. Without the Divine desire for its continuity, the enormous weight of the planet would cause the earth to sink in on itself. According to the Vilna Gaon both questions that we had at the beginning can be resolved with one answer. The peculiarity and the seeming inaccuracy of the language used for the blessing's composition are coming to teach us that the world exists only at the behest of G-d.

Thus, having reached the point where we are certain of our ability to fulfill the *physical* commandments of G-d, we are now ready to embark on a voyage of exploration into our *spiritual* commitment to G-d. And the very first stop on our journey is a blessing that emphasizes that the continued existence of the world rests solely in the Hands of G-d. Every single moment of its being is entirely dependent upon G-d. And, consequently, without G-d's continual Will that there be a world, the world would cease to exist.

BLESSING TEN: YOU'VE GOT IT ALL!

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who has provided me my every need.

The significance of the tenth blessing should not be underestimated. The blessing is not just an enormously compelling testament of our trust in G-d. It is also a powerful lesson in our belief that G-d is intimately involved in every aspect of our personal lives as well. "Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who has provided me my every need." The blessing is introducing us to an innovative and exhilarating concept. Not only did G-d place us here in this physical world, but He has given each of us the wherewithal to be able to persevere and to flourish spiritually whilst we are here.

The blessing heralds the beginning of a process that teaches us that there is an unfathomable difference between our *needs* and our *wants*. Our blessing is not suggesting that there is anything amiss with desiring things that we presently do not have. Judaism does not advocate that there is something wrong with wanting things that G-d has not (yet) given us. Rather, our Sages want us to reach the point where we are able to recognize and acknowledge that we have been given everything that we *need* – even if there is plenty more that we *want*. It is only by first accepting that G-d has given us what we need that it is possible to honestly stand in front of G-d and ask for whatever our hearts desire. Because, even if it doesn't always feel that way, we now understand that whether we are given what we want or not is irrelevant to whether we have what we need right now.

The tenth blessing is instilling within us the acceptance that not everything that we want we may get. And it is also instilling the ability to recognize that whatever we may *need* at any one given moment has been given to us. What a truly thought-provoking notion!

In furtherance of this concept there is a fascinating detail contained within the blessing that helps define it. This is the only blessing in the whole series of the fifteen Morning Blessings that uses the word "*li*" – "*me*" in Hebrew – as a separate word. The blessings tend to speak in the third person plural as they are mostly applicable to everyone. And yet, here, our Sages chose to express themselves in the singular. What is fundamentally different between this blessing and the majority of the other blessings? By using the word "*me*" our Sages are conveying a principle that is of paramount consequence. Only *I* can assert that I have everything that *I* need. No one else can make that declaration in my place. And, in exactly the same way, I cannot make that declaration for anyone else. The terminology used in the blessing is a lesson that the great nineteenth century ethicist Rabbi Yisrael Salanter would repeat to his students constantly. That one should worry

about one's own spiritual needs and worry about the physical needs of others – not the other way around.

Now, after recognizing that G-d sustains and oversees the running of the world, we are ready to accept that the only person who is spiritually and emotionally capable of making such a grandiose declaration that G-d “has provided *me* my every need” is me alone. And on reciting the blessing I am attaining both the loftiest spiritual levels of connection to G-d and the most basic physical levels as well – through feeling a sense of complete dependency on Him.

BLESSING ELEVEN: STEP IN TIME!

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who firms
man's footsteps.**

Many years ago during a summer break in England I took my (then) young children to watch the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. Possibly the most famous tourist attraction in London, it was replete with marching soldiers in their striking red uniforms and their imposing bearskin hats; a full military brass band and beautifully groomed horses ridden by exquisitely turned-out officers with gleaming breastplates and drawn sabres. On entering the palace grounds, the rows of marching soldiers started a convoluted series of maneuvers that were fascinating to watch. For well over half-an-hour they marched in a detailed and intricate fashion on the parade ground, never missing a step. Together with the thousands upon thousands of visitors I was transfixed, until one of my sons innocently asked me where the soldiers were marching to. Momentarily flummoxed I tried explaining to him that they weren't actually going anywhere, and that what we were watching was all for the audience's enjoyment (including him!). But, shrugging his shoulders, he failed to understand what the point of it all was. And I must admit that, after that, it wasn't really the same – regardless of how entertaining it was.

It is true that the soldiers at Buckingham Palace were spending an inordinate amount of time marching up and down the palace parade ground without going anywhere in particular. Nevertheless, they had not a moment's doubt as to what was required of them. *And* how they were supposed to execute it. Because, as soldiers, their whole essence is to do as they have been commanded to do. And the sound of their marching boots, all in perfect unison, reverberated around the parade ground.

“Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who firms man’s footsteps.” How does our blessing fit into the sequence of the Morning Blessings? What is the connection between the way I walk and my relationship with G-d? It is now that we have reached the moment within the blessings that we get to select to *where* we are going to “walk” on our journey through life. Which direction we are going to choose to take. Judaism teaches that there are two core possibilities. The first is the choice to walk along the path that has been given to us – and defined for us – by G-d through His Torah. And the second is to choose not to. It is really that simple. And that complex. Our blessing is coming to teach us that the person who walks with firm footsteps is an individual who has an unquestionable sense of purpose. Not just that, but because they are secure in the knowledge that the Torah and the Commandments are everything that they need to give them the correct direction in life, they also have a detailed strategy of how they are going to reach their objective. Such a person can stride through this world with confidence because they know that they are an integral component in G-d’s “honor guard”. Devotedly marching to the beat of the true Commander in Chief.

BLESSING TWELVE: HOW STRONG ARE YOU?

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who girds
Israel with strength.**

It is now apparent that G-d has granted us, His Chosen Nation, a task. We are commanded to become a “light unto the nations” (see Isaiah 49:6) and it is our mission to represent G-d in this world. We are G-d’s ambassadors and we are supposed to epitomize the potential for Divinity that exists within humankind. We have been given a full-time job. And it requires focus and inner strength to be successful.

I had a student who used to compete at state level in power-lifting competitions. He told me that his personal record was just under 120 kilos (260 lbs.)! In class one day he explained to us that when he was lifting he had to be completely and absolutely focused on what he was doing. To lose concentration for even a second would mean failing to lift at all or, even worse, causing himself an injury. He then described the feeling after succeeding in lifting his heaviest weight. He told us that however difficult it sounds to lift such enormous weights, once he was in the right state of mind it was “relatively simple” to do. It was interesting, although I wasn’t sure how connected it was to what we were learning. But then he added a sentence that turned an interesting conversation into

a riveting one. He told us that when he utilizes that same inner fortitude and endurance to living his life as a Jew, keeping the commandments becomes easy. “After all,” he added, “it is inconceivable that G-d would expect us to keep the commandments if we weren’t physically or emotionally capable of doing so!”

“Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who girds Israel with strength.” Strength for what? The strength to live our lives in a way that reflects the sense of G-dliness and holiness that is inherent inside each and every one of us. This is not an allusion to physical strength. Rather, the blessing is affirming that we are capable of so much more in the spiritual realms. The secret to getting there is that we have to focus, laser-like, on our inner dimensions. Our blessing is referring to “spiritual adrenalin”. When a person becomes infused with adrenalin they can achieve the most incredible things. Even “superhuman” things. In 1982, in Lawrenceville, Georgia, Tony Cavallo was working on a Chevrolet Impala. He wriggled under the chassis to fix something and the jacks that were holding up the car gave way. The car immediately collapsed, pinning him underneath it. His mother(!) instantaneously jumped into action and she lifted the car high enough and long enough for two neighbors to replace the jacks and pull Cavallo out from beneath the car! Please do not think for one minute that this was the kind of thing Mrs. Cavallo did in her spare time. Panic-stricken, her body was flooded with adrenalin and she found herself inundated with herculean strength. Able to do something that she could never have been able to do under normal circumstances.

Our blessing is teaching us that in our spiritual lives we are also capable of accomplishing such heroic feats. Probably not to pick up a Chevrolet Impalas singlehandedly. But to feel confident that we can push beyond ourselves to serve G-d, exceeding what we thought was our limit. Because our blessing is letting us know that G-d has given us hidden reservoirs of inner strength that we can tap into. Strength that will allow us to continue to flourish and thrive. And, by doing so, we are now equipped to break new records in our own personal spiritual “power-lifting”!

BLESSING THIRTEEN: “FACING” REALITY

Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who crowns Israel with splendor.

Our Sages explain that the “splendor” mentioned in our blessing is the *Tefillin Shel Rosh* – Tefillin that are worn on the head. In a certain sense, donning the *Tefillin Shel Rosh* in the morning is the final moment in our preparations to beginning our day. We have clothed ourselves physically and now we “clothe” ourselves spiritually. The Tefillin sit on the crown (pun intended) of the head and the Rabbis teach that they open up a conduit between ourselves and G-d that gives us the opportunity to connect to Him in a significantly enhanced manner. Why is that? Because Tefillin are a means of connecting our intellectual selves to the spiritual dimensions. Anecdotally, in 2002, an article appeared in the Chinese Journal of Medicine (of all places) that mentioned Tefillin. The writer explained that the spot where the Tefillin sit on the cranium is precisely the same location where acupuncture needles are inserted in order to increase spirituality and to purify thoughts!

The head is the seat of the intellect, and Judaism teaches that it is not by chance that the head is also the highest part of the body. The Maharal of Prague explains that, unlike animals, humans are created to walk in an upright position because it is a reflection of our spiritual potential. We are the only creation that has the ability to be both physical and spiritual. Our feet represent the more physical part of us, firmly placed on the ground, and the head represents the spiritual side of us pointing upwards towards the spiritual realms. Interestingly enough, it is the face that reflects our emotions. Physiognomy – the means of assessing the character of a person by studying their facial features – has always been around. Since the beginning of time it has been used to judge the emotional state of a person and also to make broad judgments about a person’s character. It was extremely popular among the ancient Greeks, during the Middle Ages, and in the eighteenth century it became the biggest fad of its era. In fact, it is still studied today. It should come as no surprise that Judaism also teaches that the face is the most expressive part of the body. It reveals our thoughts and feelings – even when, sometimes, we wish that it wouldn’t! In Hebrew the word for face is “*panim*”. The word *panim* comes from the word “*pnim*” – inner. Revealingly, the word “*panim*” is plural because the face is the meeting point between the two worlds that we inhabit simultaneously – our inner persona and our outer one. It is our face that reveals our inner identity to the outside.

The Rabbis teach that the face is the portal to the soul. That is why the face of a truly spiritual person will reflect their innate sense of Divine connection. The saintly Chofetz Chaim used to ask why people polish their gold and silver and their jewelry. He pointed out that they were not worth any more than they were before they were polished. So why bother? And he would answer that the

polish reveals the true splendor of the article. It is obvious that without polishing them it is absolutely impossible to appreciate their true beauty.

So, too, a person who spends their entire life “polishing” their soul and perfecting their character will be readily identifiable to the spiritual connoisseurs of this world. That is why truly spiritual people often have an otherworldly glow to their faces because what we are seeing is their *pnimius* – their inner essence.

Now we have reached the point in our journey through the Morning Blessings that our connection to G-d is so real – it is so palpable – that it is inescapable. And at this momentous occurrence we recite the blessing, “Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who crowns Israel with splendor.” Because there really is nothing more glorious – more *splendorous* – than the knowledge that our relationship with G-d can both transcend the physical and affect the physical at the same time.

BLESSING FOURTEEN: THE PRICE OF GREATNESS IS RESPONSIBILITY (WINSTON CHURCHILL)

**Blessed are You, Hashem, Our G-d, King of the universe, Who gives
strength to the weary.**

The source for the fourteenth blessing is found in the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah (40:29) proclaims, “He gives strength to the weary and grants abundant might to the powerless.” Our blessing is a Divine promise that, despite our exhaustion from this seemingly never-ending exile, the Jewish Nation will always persevere. G-d will grant us the strength to tolerate the intolerable and to overcome the suffering and the persecution that is an inescapable feature of the Jewish landscape.

And that is why this blessing appears here, just before the end of the Morning Blessings. In our ascent up the “Stairway to Heaven” we have reached the moment where we now radiate a sense of holiness. We have come so far – we have climbed so high – in order to be connected to G-d in the most effective possible way. Our relationship with G-d is no longer defined by theoretical concepts but, rather, it is actual and it is tangible. Not just to ourselves but to others as well. And that begs the question. Who is the real beneficiary of this extraordinary journey that the Morning Blessings have taken us on?

There is no doubt that the grammatical structure of the blessing is referring to G-d's giving us the strength to continue until the dawn of the Messianic Era. But there is something deeper here as well – something truly wondrous. Our Sages teach that our task in this world is to try to emulate G-d to the best of our abilities. We are not G-d, and there is no way that we, as human beings, can emulate the *infinity* that is G-d. But we can strive to replicate the way that G-d gives to others. That means to look out for the next person; to worry about your neighbor; to truly care about all those around you. It means to search out the weary and to give them from your own strength. Judaism is teaching us that true greatness is not only measured in how brilliant a person is, but it is also measured by how compassionate they are. How caring and how thoughtful they are. There is a famous maxim that says, “Important people take care of the little things. Little people may ignore even the important things.”

As a rule, in the secular world the more successful a person becomes the more inaccessible they become. As they move up the ladder of success the number of secretaries and personal assistants they have grows exponentially because they are status symbols. Symbols of their triumphs and their accomplishments.

But in the Jewish world that is not the case. Paradoxically, the greater someone becomes – renowned for their piety, their erudition and their leadership qualities – *the more accessible they need to be*. Because they are now beholden to provide for all those who need their help. It is an extraordinary sight that repeats itself night after night. Long lines of people – from all different backgrounds – stretching out from the doorways of the homes of our spiritual leaders. All waiting patiently for their turn to be able to speak with the venerated Rabbi and gain his insight into what is troubling them. It often requires great patience. Not because there is a gamut of assistants to get through before you are granted an audience, but simply because there are so many other people waiting in line in front of you.

That is true greatness. To unstintingly give to others without limits. But that requires a huge reservoir of strength. Whether it is for personal advice, or a ruling in Jewish Law, or a debate in Talmudic minutiae, they have to be available (often at all hours) to help all those who call out for their assistance. And when they do so, they are truly giving strength to the weary.

In his generation Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986) was the acknowledged authority in Jewish Law. He was a spiritual titan, revered for his encyclopedic knowledge, his piety and – perhaps most of all – for his gentleness, sincerity and empathy for anyone in need. Slight in build he carried the spiritual needs of the Orthodox Jewish world on his narrow shoulders. Assuredly ruling on every single facet of Jewish Law whilst never failing to show incredible personal warmth and concern for each and every individual who approached him. He was blessed with spiritual strength that was truly beyond our comprehension, and yet he cloaked it all in an aura of simplicity and humbleness. And G-d blessed him and re-blessed him with extraordinary faculties to be able to

listen to the Jewish People's sorrows, pain and anguish and to offer everyone advice, succor and assistance. The greater he became the more strength he was granted from Above. And the more strength he was given from Above the greater he became. Because the strength to lead, the strength to advise, the strength to rule on all aspects of Jewish Law is a blessing that is given to the individual by G-d. And when that person has fulfilled their task here in this world, that phenomenal strength is removed from them. Tellingly, the very last words that Rabbi Feinstein said before his passing were in Yiddish, "Ich hob mehr nisht ken koach - I have no more strength".

As we arrive at the penultimate blessing in the Morning Blessings, we, too, have reached the moment where we are now worthy to "lead". Not, perhaps, as Rabbi Feinstein did. But each of us in our own small way. To become the recipients of Divine strength by helping and assisting those who are "weaker" than we are. And the more we help others the greater the blessing will be.

THE FIFTEENTH AND FINAL MORNING BLESSING: THANKFUL TO BE HELPLESS

"Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids. And may it be Your Will, Hashem, our G-d, and the G-d of our forefathers, that You accustom us to Your Torah and attach us to Your commandments. And do not bring us to error, or to transgression, or to sin, or to challenge, or to humiliation, and that the Evil Inclination should not rule over us. Distance us from an evil person and from an evil friend. Attach us to the Good Inclination and to good deeds, and force the [Evil] Inclination to be subservient to You. Grant us today, and every day, grace, kindness and mercy in Your Eyes and in the eyes of all who see us, and bestow beneficent kindness upon us. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who bestows beneficent kindness upon His people, Israel."

The final blessing stands out for two immediate reasons. First, it is uncharacteristically lengthy. And, second, its syntax is different from that of the other blessings. If the blessing would have been comprised of just the opening sentence, it would have effortlessly matched the preceding fourteen blessings, and the blessings would have flown seamlessly one into the other. But it does not.

As we have learned together, the sequence of the blessings has carried us higher and higher, to the point where we have reached the elevated level of being able to give strength to the weary. Effective leadership requires foresight and clarity. A successful mentor is one who can offer coherent spiritual, practical and emotional advice. Such a leader requires eyes that see only the truth. Eyes capable of discerning what is being asked – and *why* – so that the appropriate answer can be given. For this reason, the spiritual leadership of the Jewish Nation is described as the “eyes” of the people.

The opening sentence of our blessing spells out this idea straightforwardly and clearly: “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids.” To be blessed with unerring spiritual vision should be the climax of everything that we strive for. Therefore, we thank G-d for removing the “spiritual cataracts” that blur our vision and cloud our judgment. And if the blessing were to end here, it would be a perfect finale to the incredible journey that the Morning Blessings have taken us on.

But we have not yet reached the end of the blessing. The final blessing continues, at great length. What is even more surprising is that the continuation of the blessing seems to have nothing whatsoever to do with its opening sentence. To compound the issue, however important the concepts mentioned throughout the remainder of the blessing may be, they do not seem to fit into the typical structure of the Morning Blessings. From the get-go, the blessings have been motivating us to move continuously upwards in our spiritual quest to draw closer to G-d. They have been spurring us on to climb another step, and another step – one after the other – using a logical and systematic method. Each step brings us within reach of the ultimate goal, which is to serve G-d to our utmost.

And then, as the very pinnacle of our hopes and desires are within reach, our blessing lists an entire series of requests to G-d that seem almost simplistic. Certainly they are all crucial to our spiritual growth and they are absolutely fitting for the Morning Blessings, but why do they appear in the final blessing? They would seem to be more suited to have been mentioned towards the beginning of the Morning Blessings, which deal with the more rudimentary dimensions of our relationship with G-d.

To exacerbate the situation, there is a general rule that whenever we invoke the Patriarchs within prayer, it is an indication that we are about to ask for something that requires more than our own merits alone. Including the Patriarchs in our prayers is an admission that without their merits there is little, if any, chance that our supplications would be answered based solely on merits.

And here, after the opening sentence of our blessing, we continue, “And may it be Your Will, Hashem, our G-d, and the G-d of our forefathers, that You accustom us to Your Torah and attach us to Your commandments. And do not bring us to error, or to transgression, or to sin, or to challenge, or to humiliation, and that the Evil Inclination should not rule over us. Distance us from an evil person and from an evil friend. Attach us to the Good Inclination and to good deeds, and force the [Evil] Inclination to be subservient to You. Grant us today and every day grace, kindness and mercy in Your Eyes and in the eyes of all who see us, and bestow beneficent kindness upon us. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who bestows beneficent kindness upon His people, Israel.”

Not only do we mention the Patriarchs, but, on reading through the blessing, it seems as if we are asking for their assistance in things that do not seem to be all that difficult to accomplish. We do not seem to require their intervention in these matters. Certainly, learning Torah, not making mistakes, not sinning, not allowing the Evil Inclination to rule over us, not being exposed to evil people nor to evil friends, and being attached to the Good Inclination, are all vital ingredients in our spiritual growth. There is no doubt that they give us the wherewithal to belong to something that is infinitely greater than our physical existence. But to invoke the Patriarchs for such a list would seem, at first glance, to almost be like turning to the President of the United States to take care of a parking violation – effective but exaggerated.

Why, then, does this last blessing in the series – which represents the very pinnacle of our spiritual aspirations – seem to focus on the more foundational concepts? And why is it uncharacteristically long? It would seem to have been more fitting for this blessing to emphasize thoughts that are loftier, and that reflect the heights that we have reached on our voyage. Yet the beauty of this final blessing is that, now, at the very end of our remarkable journey, we are being taught the most fundamental and essential lesson of all.

Without G-d it is not possible to succeed.

We are supposed to live our lives with the awareness that G-d is accompanying us in all that we do. But frequently, and paradoxically, the greater our accomplishments, the more we attribute our triumphs to our own personal acumen. Somewhere along the way, G-d's participation becomes less and less palpable. And that is a terrible mistake. Because, as our blessing states, without acknowledging that G-d is an integral dimension in our lives, even our most basic responsibilities become almost insurmountable. Or, to put it another way: A "little" humility wouldn't hurt.

The Torah describes Moses – the greatest person in world history – as the humblest of people (Numbers 12:3). Initially, this seems incongruous. How can those two descriptions coexist harmoniously? Infinite greatness and immeasurable humbleness do not seem to be dimensions that sit easily with each other. More than that, in order for Moses to reach the ultimate level of connection to G-d that he did he had to be absolutely aware of not just his own personal greatness, but of the eternal impact that he was to make in the world. And, yet, the Torah, in defining Moses for posterity, chooses to describe him as a humble person. Because knowing one's greatness is no contradiction to humility. On the contrary, it was precisely his understanding of this point that caused Moses to be so humble. Ultimate humility is achieved only by a person who excels in good attributes but takes no credit for his greatness. A person who realizes that all of his achievements come from G-d cannot be conceited or self-congratulatory. That is why the Torah emphasizes that Moses' greatness was the source of his humbleness. Judaism is conveying that to reach the level of true humbleness, you must be completely aware of how great you are and of your achievements. But it also requires continual awareness that whatever you have attained, you did so because G-d gave you the abilities and the strength to do so.

And that is the essence of our final blessing. A detailed list of things that I am begging G-d to assist me with. Yes, they seem simplistic, and, at first glance, they sound as if the right place for them should be nearer the beginning of the Morning Blessings than at the end. But, in reality, they symbolize my absolute recognition that as I reach upwards towards greatness, the more completely

dependent on G-d I become. With this blessing I am definitively declaring that without continuously “working on” that awareness, I am helpless. And, to reach such a remarkable level of comprehension is the greatest achievement that I can realize.

ASCENDING THE STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN – THE GRAND FINALE

We reached the fifteenth and final blessing in the series of the Morning Blessings. We recite these deceptively innocuous blessings each morning. In fact, they are the “opening salvo” in our daily prayers. Due to the pressures of the morning and our rush to begin our day, it is possible that they might sometimes be recited without the required intent.

We have been travelling together on a voyage of exploration. A voyage that has delved not just into the fifteen Morning Blessings but, perhaps more significantly, into ourselves as well. What we have learned, among many other things, is that each blessing is integral to the structure of the Morning Prayers. Not only that, but each blessing is also essential to my own understanding of myself and my responsibilities in our physical world. And by arranging all the blessings according to their deeper understandings we will be able to scale the Stairway to Heaven together.

- It all began with the very first blessing. A blessing that delineated the fact that the concepts of good and evil are universally innate within every person – Jew and non-Jew alike.
- The second blessing begins the triumvirate of blessings that all begin with the words, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, for not having made me...” The first of these three blessings starts our journey in earnest, as it acknowledges the most fundamental characteristic of all – that we are Jews and we belong to G-d.
- The third blessing thanks G-d for having given us our freedom. Not freedom in the conventional, secular understanding. But freedom to serve G-d the way that G-d wants us to.
- Blessing number four introduces us to the commandments and our obligation to keep them.
- The fifth blessing “opens our eyes” to the fact that the opportunity to perform the commandments is ubiquitous.
- The sixth blessing brings us to the next stage where we are actively performing the commandments.
- Blessing number seven teaches us that by living our lives according to the commandments, where we are able to release ourselves from the negative influences in this physical world that distract us from our spiritual obligations.
- The eighth blessing shows us that we have a purpose in this world. That we can stand up straight safe in the knowledge that we have a defined objective waiting to be achieved.

- The ninth blessing is pivotal as it takes us into the realm of building a relationship with G-d that is founded on belief as well as actions.
- Blessing number ten is the astonishing declaration that I have all that I need (not necessarily *want!*). This blessing truly reflects my complete conviction that G-d is with me in all my endeavors.
- The eleventh blessing is the certainty that I will be able to “march” to the beat of the Torah and the commandments.
- Blessing number twelve is the assurance that I have been granted the strength to succeed in the tasks that have been allocated me by G-d.
- The thirteenth blessing reflects my spiritual growth up until now. I am now crowned with a spiritual aura that is discernible to those around me.
- The penultimate blessing spells out the obligation of all of my spiritual development – that I have a responsibility to assist and support those who are weaker than I.
- And the fifteenth and final blessing is the resounding affirmation that the only way that I can truly accomplish what I need to do in this world is by internalizing the absolute knowledge that without G-d’s permanent presence in my life, I cannot succeed.

What a journey! Fifteen blessings recited each morning that are our means of identifying our true selves. Fifteen blessings that raise us up and introduce us to a startling new vista of spiritual potential. They are so fundamental to our ability to serve G-d properly that these fifteen blessings should be said slowly, with pleasure and delight. Every morning we should savor each blessing, appreciating its depth and its clarity. And by doing so each day we will ascend the Stairway to Heaven anew.