


# THE INEXPRESSIBLE TRUTH OF TEFILLAH

*Netanel Friedman-Rubin '26*

We all sometimes struggle with Tefillah—myself especially—reading the words without *Kavanah* instead of directing our prayers wholeheartedly to Hashem. Yet, when we do daven with *Kavanah*, when we focus entirely on strengthening our relationship with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, I truly believe we uncover the transcendent meaning hidden within every word we say.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, also known as Rebbe Nachman MiUman, opens his sefer *Sichos HaRan* with a profound yet perhaps troubling insight about Tefillah: when we experience deeply inspiring and uplifting prayers, we can never fully articulate them in concrete terms—not even to ourselves. We can only recall how they made us feel and the fact that, for a day or two, we were inspired. Despite the unsettling nature of this idea, every time I reflect on it, I find myself convinced of its truth. While this may be an accurate way to describe such meaningful Tefillos, they remain ultimately incommunicable. Perhaps, however, our inability to define them concretely is a testament to their depth and impact—the very nature of focused Tefillah defies simple explanation.

In *Parshas Yisro*, two critical questions arise regarding the Parsha's namesake. First, the Torah uses vague language when describing Moshe and Yisro's meeting:

"וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשַּׁק־לוֹ וַיִּשְׁאֲלוּ אִישׁ־לְרֵעֵהוּ לְשָׁלוֹם"

*"He bowed to him and kissed him, and they inquired about each other's well-being."*

Who is the subject of these actions? Who is bowing, kissing, and asking?

Second, Moshe recounts to him everything that had happened to the Jewish people since his return to Egypt. Rashi adds that Moshe did this to bring Yisro closer to Torah. But isn't it our tradition to not encourage non-Jews to convert?

I believe the answer to this second question is that Moshe was not teaching Yisro Torah per se. Rather, through the undeniable greatness of Hashem—both in general and specifically in His miracles for the Jewish people—Moshe knew that someone as wise as Yisro would inevitably recognize the truth of Torah.

As for the first question, elsewhere in the Torah, Moshe is uniquely referred to as an אִישׁ, a man. While Yisro is also called this, Moshe's title hints at his defining trait—האיש משה עניו מאד, "the humblest of all men." Given this, it makes sense that Moshe would be the one to show respect to Yisro through bowing and embracing him.

But what does all of this have to do with our inability to define Tefillah? The answer is that, just as Yisro could not deny the truth in Moshe's words, so too, when we focus on the truth in our Tefillos—the stories of Hashem's love for us, His absolute control over the universe—we experience something indescribable.

It is no coincidence that our most foundational and sincere Tefillah concludes with the word "אמת".

Additionally, the answer to the first question—that Moshe's humility defined him—ties directly into Tefillah. The *Shulchan Aruch* states that humility is a prerequisite for Tefillah, and *Maseches Menachos* teaches that Tefillin instills humility. It is no coincidence that Moshe, who transcribed the Torah and large portions of our Tefillos, was the most humble of all.

Attempting to express profound moments of Tefillah in tangible terms risks missing the essence of the experience. Instead, we should focus on internalizing those moments, allowing our most inspiring and uplifting Tefillos to propel us toward self-improvement and a deeper connection with Hashem.

Rebbe Nachman concludes:

*"A perception of God cannot be communicated. It is so lofty, higher than high, that words cannot express it."*

May we all merit to reach that level in our Tefillos—where they bring us to a true perception of Hashem—and may they inspire us to become better and more humble in our *Avodas Hashem.*

# THE CHALLENGE OF DISTANCE

*Elisha Horowitz '25*

"וְהִגְבַּלְתָּ אֶת־הָעָם סָבִיב לֵאמֹר הִשָּׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בָּהָר וּנְגֹעַ בְּקָצֵהוּ כָּל־הַנֹּגֵעַ בָּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת"

*"You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.'"*

After the spiritual high of *Kriyat Yam Suf, Bnei Yisrael* arrives at *Har Sinai* and receives a puzzling command: Hashem instructs Moshe that the people must not ascend the mountain or even touch its border—anyone who does so will face death. Why?

This is the very nation that Hashem personally took out of Egypt, for whom He performed miracle after miracle. He split the sea before them, rained mon from the heavens, and revealed Himself so tangibly at the *Yam Suf* that even the simplest Jew could point and say, *"This is my God"* (Rashi, Shemot 15:2). Why, then, must they now be distanced from *Har Sinai*?

The *Shem Mishmuel*, Rav Shmuel Bornsztain, the second Sochotchover Rebbe, offers a beautiful insight based on one of the most well-known *Midrashim* in the Torah.

The *Sifrei Devarim* (343) teaches that before Hashem gave the Torah to *Bnei Yisrael*, He first offered it to each of the other nations. *Edom* refused because the Torah prohibits murder, which they claimed was ingrained in their nature. *Ammon* and *Moav* declined because the Torah forbids adultery, something they could not part with. The *Yishmaelim* rejected it because the Torah prohibits theft, which they considered integral to their way of life. Only *Bnei Yisrael* accepted the Torah in its entirety, without hesitation.

The *Shem Mishmuel* explains that the nations of the world have a claim against Hashem. Each was tested with a commandment that directly opposed its nature. But what about *Bnei Yisrael*? Where was their test?

The answer, he says, lies in *Hagbalah*—the command to remain distanced from Hashem at *Har Sinai*. A Jew's essence is to constantly seek closeness with Hashem, to yearn for His presence and connection. To be told to hold back, even momentarily, is the ultimate challenge—it goes against our very nature as a people.

*B'ezrat Hashem*, may we all reach the level of living lives entirely dedicated to *Hityachdut*—true oneness with Hashem. And even before we reach that level, may we all be *zocheh* to feel Hashem's presence in our daily lives.

# PRESSING PAUSE

*Zach Loberfeld '27*

Good moments in life often feel like a fast-motion movie. We wish we could press pause, take it all in, and fully appreciate the experience—but more often than not, the "remote" is nowhere to be found. The moment passes, and we're left thinking, *"I wish I had appreciated it more when I had it."* But what if there was a way to slow things down? To find that "remote" and press pause?

In this week's *parsha*, we learn an incredible lesson from Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, about appreciation and the depth it adds to our lives. By learning to recognize the smaller details and the countless miracles Hashem grants us daily, we can develop the ability to press pause during life's high points—ensuring we don't just mourn how quickly they passed, but truly embrace them while they last.

After hearing about the miracles Hashem had performed for *Bnei Yisrael*, Yitro left his home in Midian and traveled to the Jewish encampment in the desert, bringing along Moshe's wife and sons. Moshe welcomed Yitro warmly and proceeded to recount all that Hashem had done to the Egyptians.

Upon hearing these incredible miracles, Yitro didn't just acknowledge them—he rejoiced. The Torah says, "וַיִּחַדְּ יִתְרוֹ עַל כָּל הַטּוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' לְיִשְׂרָאֵל"—*"And Yitro rejoiced over all the goodness that Hashem had done for Israel"* (Shemot 18:9).

Instead of merely nodding in agreement and moving on, Yitro took the time to pause and internalize Hashem's kindness. Rashi explains that he reflected on the daily miracles *Bnei Yisrael* experienced—the *mon* that fell from the heavens, the water that sustained them in the desert, the incomparable gift of the Torah, and above all, the miraculous *Yetziyat Mitzrayim*. Until that moment, Egypt's borders had been sealed, making escape impossible. And yet, *Am Yisrael* —600,000 strong—walked out in complete freedom.

Yitro teaches us that if we want to find that "pause button," we must first take the time to reflect on the smaller details within each moment. When we stop to think, we recognize that all goodness comes from Hashem, and that realization transforms even fleeting joys into something far more meaningful. The smallest details can make the biggest difference.

In שמונה עשרי, during Modim, we thank Hashem for "ניסיך...נפלאותיך"—

"*Your miracles…Your wonders.*" The *Etz Yosef* explains the distinction: *Nissim* (miracles) are extraordinary events that are undeniably acts of Divine intervention, while *Niflaot* (wonders) are the everyday occurrences we often overlook—breathing, rainfall, growth. We've become so accustomed to them that we fail to recognize them as the wonders they truly are.

Thus, during the good times in our lives—whenever they may come—we must train ourselves to notice the *Niflaot*, the wonders we often take for granted. Only then will we truly be able to press pause and savor each and every moment.

# LEADERSHIP THROUGH HUMILITY

*Shira Nyer '26*

*Parshat Yitro* marks a pivotal moment in the Torah, beginning with the arrival of Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, who hears of the miracles Hashem performed for *Bnei Yisrael*. His arrival not only reunites him with Moshe but also imparts a crucial lesson in leadership.

Observing Moshe single-handedly judging the nation, Yitro advises him to delegate responsibility to capable eaders, establishing a system of courts to handle smaller disputes.

This guidance underscores the importance of collaboration and delegation in leadership. Despite his own greatness, Moshe humbly accepts Yitro's advice, teaching us that even the most capable leaders need support and cannot do everything alone.

*Parshat Yitro* offers profound lessons on leadership, humility, and community. From Yitro, we learn the value of sharing responsibility, and from Moshe, we see the importance of being open to guidance.

*Rabbi Moshe Nachbar*

*Adapted from a Dvar Torah from my dear Rebbe and dear friend, Rav Judah Mischel:*

Rebbe Yosef Yitzchok zy'a, the Freidiker ("Previous") Rebbe of Lubavitch was on a leisurely walk through the forest with his father, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber zy'a, when Reb Yosef Yitzchok absentmindedly plucked a leaf off a tree as they passed by it on the trail. Surprised, the father turned to his son and scolded him for his seemingly harmless action:

"The leaf you tore from its branch was created by the Ribbono Shel Olam for a specific purpose! It is alive, its physical structure is like a body, it has a Divine life-force, it's guided by *Hashgacha Pratis* (Divine providence).

Every blade of grass, every leaf on every tree is beaming with G-d's own vitality, created intentionally, each with a Divine spark, part of a 'soul' that has come down to earth to find its correction and fulfillment. How can you be so callous towards a creation of G-d?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov taught: The Oneness of G-d is the ultimate reality; all Creation is an expression of the Infinite. Thus, every part reflects the whole. The Holy Baal Shem Tov vividly perceived the interconnectedness of Creation where all things share the same root and all pulse with the same Divine heartbeat. All of Creation is branches of one tree.

Torah itself is called "*Eitz Chayim*, a Tree of Life for all those who grab onto it (Mishlei 3)." When we grab hold of a single leaf at the very edge of the tree, a small twig, flower or fruit, we are "*ocheiz b'kulah*", holding on to the entire tree as well, connected to the whole of Truth and Wisdom. (as explained by the *Baal Shem Tov* on Parshat Naso)

In the same way that the Rebbe, Reb Sholom Dov Ber was sensitive to every blade of grass, every flower petal, so do we need to cherish every word of Torah learnt, every letter, every mitzvah. Connecting with just one idea or verse of Torah, uttering a single word of prayer, we are bound to the entirety of the infinite universe of Jewish experience and knowledge.

Part of the Torah is the whole of Torah; every detail is equally connected to the Source and the same Divine current flows through every single point and every authentic commentary and idea throughout time.

This week, we relive Matan Torah in Parshat Yitro, and through that we should reconnect ourselves to our roots, even when we feel like we are distant. We should always know that even a "leaf" or "shrub" of Torah is precious to our Father in heaven

*Tu b'Shvat Sameach*, a meaningful and sweet New Year for the Trees to you and to all of us who strive to cling to any and every part of it!

# שבת שלום!


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