

SHEMONEH ESREI

**TRANSFORMING YOUR TEFILLAH
WITH NEWFOUND CLARITY**

RABBI AVI WIESENFELD



This book is dedicated

l'ilui nishmas

CHANINA BEN SHIMON ע"ה

נפטר ביום שבת קודש, ז' סיון תשפ"ג

PREVIOUS LETTERS OF APPROBATION



65 Watford Way
London NW4 3AQ

T 020 8202 2263
F 020 8203 0610

beisdin@federation.org.uk
federation.org.uk

ט"ז

הרב שרגא פייבל הלוי זימערמאן
רב ואב"ד

17th June 2022

Rabbi Avi Wiesenfeld has already achieved renown for his expertise, knowledge and clarity in the presentation of relevant halachic topics through his many previous seforim, including Kashrus in the Kitchen and various booklets.

I have been told that he is about to publish a new sefer Shabbos in the Kitchen, and that it has been reviewed by numerous Talmidei Chachomim. Although I have not myself reviewed the sefer, I have no doubt that it is consistent with the standard of his previous seforim and that both the beginner and the experienced will have much to learn from its contents.

Wishing Rabbi Wiesenfeld much brocho and hatzlocho.

Rabbi S.F. Zimmerman

Av Beis Din and Rov of the Federation



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הרב חיים פינחס שיינברג
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8444 ELCHONON HAUFERN
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Phone: 01-445 4296

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בזמן תחילת שנות לימודי הדגל הרבי"ר אברהם וויזנברג שלט"א ששהה ויחד להוציא לאור
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 וקדושתם וסגולתם וזמן וזמניו וזמניו מסור וסור, ויבוא יפיהו להחלטה בזה
 להחליט חכמים ולאחרים ולחלץ חכמים וזמן וזמניו מסור וסור, ויבוא יפיהו להחלטה בזה
 אחרים להחליט חכמים ואחרים חכמים, וזהו כוח מסתתרת את הרבים אשר אין צורך לעמול
 במסגרת ביחוד (שעה בעצמן) פרק ו' ודעת אבות ב' פרק ו' ויחיד בבימות שמה ויחיד
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המליץ בכל תחום בריאות לנבוא המצור לנשים ודורשית ולכבוד ידידי המעלה הרב המהמיר

הם שהחל בן כי טוב י"ט תמוז ה'תשס"ח לכה"צ פק"ק מאגניסטער תצ"ו

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RABBI ELCHONON HALPERN
145, Golden Green Road,
London N.W.11.



שמונה עשרה

The Shemoneh Esrei:

**Understanding,
Appreciating, and
Connecting to
Our Most Sacred Prayer**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Each day after *Shacharis* in our yeshiva, *Yeshivas Beis Dovid*, the boys spend a few minutes learning about *tefillah* in order to enhance their understanding of, appreciation for, and connection to prayer. This book is the product of my daily short *shiurim* at that time on the explanation of the Shemoneh Esrei. I thank the *talmidim* of *Beis Dovid* for their eagerness to learn and grow, and for pushing me to provide them with more and more opportunities to connect to Torah and *avodah* in a deep and meaningful way.

A special word of thanks goes to Doniel Ellenberg for spending many hours listening to the *shiurim* and transcribing them into a written format. ישר כחך for an amazing job!

Rabbi Yisrael Shaw applied his fine-tuned sense of style and turned the raw manuscript into a lucid, well-written composition. In addition to editing the transcription, he made a number of valuable comments that were incorporated into the text and footnotes.

Thank you to Mrs Rifky Wajchman for doing the typesetting of this book.

The staff of *Torahanytime.com* remains committed to spreading Torah worldwide. I appreciate their valuable service making these *shiurim* accessible to the public.

Last but not least, no words will suffice to thank my dear wife, who shoulders tremendous responsibilities while allowing me to be deeply involved in the running of the yeshiva and spending time with my *talmidim*.

FOREWORD

Every Torah-observant Jew is familiar with the Shemoneh Esrei. It is part of his daily routine, recited three times a day (and more on Shabbos and festivals). The words have the power to connect the one reciting them with his Creator in a profound and intimate way. Of course, it is human nature that any activity one performs frequently carries the risk of being done by rote, without contemplation, devoid of meaning, stripped of the great inspiration that lies latent within its potential. The great benefits of reciting the Shemoneh Esrei are not accessible to a person who merely says the words in order to be “yotzei,” to fulfill the minimum halachic requirement. Rather, the quiescent wealth of the Shemoneh Esrei waits for the person who understands the words, who appreciates what he or she is saying and who connects passionately to the prayer. This modest book is an attempt to open up that wealth to those who seek it.

INTRODUCTION

Studying the Words of the Shemoneh Esrei

The Chafetz Chaim (*Mishnah Berurah* 100:3) quotes the *Taz*, who rules, “One must organize the *tefillah* before reciting it.” This means that one must think about the meaning of the words of the Shemoneh Esrei before he recites it. The commentators (such as the *Pri Megadim* and the *Graz*) add that even when one reads the words from a siddur and articulates them, one must understand the words he says.

In fact, many write that the obligation to learn and understand the words of *tefillah* comes before the obligation to learn other parts of Torah.

The Origin of the Shemoneh Esrei

The Gemara in *Megillah* (17b) teaches:

שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על
הסדר ביבנה - *Shimon ha'Pekuli organized the Shemoneh Esrei*
in the presence of Rabban Gamliel in Yavne.

Rabban Gamliel of Yavne presided over the Sanhedrin after its exile to Yavne, just after the *churban* of the second *Beis ha'Mikdash* (the *churban* occurred in the year 3828, or 68 CE).

However, the Gemara there seems to give a different

origin for the Shemoneh Esrei when it continues and says:
מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים זִקְנִים וּבֵהֶם כַּמָּה נְבִיאִי תִּיקְנוּ שְׁמוֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה בְּרֻכּוֹת
עַל הַסֹּדֶר - *One hundred and twenty elders, and among them were
a number of prophets, instituted the order of the Shemoneh Esrei
blessings.*

These 120 elders were the members of the *Anshei Knesses ha'Gedolah* during the time of Ezra ha'Sofer (see Rambam, *Hilchos Tefillah* 1:4). Ezra led the Jewish people when they returned to the Land of Israel after the seventy-year-long Babylonian exile and rebuilt the *Beisha'Mikdash*. Considering that the rebuilding of the second *Beisha'Mikdash* commenced in the year 3408 (352 BCE), how is the Gemara here to be reconciled with the earlier Gemara which says that the court of Rabban Gamliel in Yavne established the Shemoneh Esrei (over 400 years later)?

The *Sefer ha'Chinuch* (433) explains that both accounts are accurate. The original court of Ezra standardized the Shemoneh Esrei with a specific order, but over the course of time (and the absence of printed siddurim), the intended order was lost, and it was Shimon ha'Pekuli who restored the order (as the literal meaning of the words of the Gemara imply, “הַסִּדִּיר... עַל הַסֹּדֶר”).

It is very significant that the Gemara adds that “among them were a number of prophets.” Among those prophets were Chagai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The Gemara wants us to know that the words we say when we pray were instituted by actual prophets, with prophecy!

Imagine that a person involved in a new business hears that a convention of the most successful and brilliant

business leaders in the world is being held in his city. He would make every effort and spare no expense to hear their insights and seek their advice. How much greater is our opportunity to listen to the insights of the prophets who wrote the text of the Shemoneh Esrei! If we would make the effort to understand each word, it would be like hearing a *shiur* from the wisest men that ever lived. Rav Avigdor Miller ז"ל says, "Just as a person in yeshiva spends hours on a single Mishnah in an effort to understand each word and every nuance, he is able to spend hours understanding every passage in the Shemoneh Esrei, which was also composed by the wisest sages who ever lived." Each and every word is so powerful and should be treated as such by being studied and understood.

Taking Time to Understand the Words

The Mishnah (*Berachos* 30b) relates that the *Chassidim ha'Rishonim* (the early pious ones) would meditate for an hour before they prayed in order to conjure the proper focus. The Beraisa there (32b) elaborates and says that they meditated for an hour before they prayed, they spent an hour praying Shemoneh Esrei, and they meditated for an hour afterwards, for a total of three hours for every Shemoneh Esrei. (See the Gemara there which explains how they were able to learn Torah and earn a living if they spent nine hours a day in prayer!) We see from there that if they spent a full hour reciting the Shemoneh Esrei, and there are approximately 600 words in the Shemoneh Esrei, this means that they spent six seconds on every word. That is the deep concentration that they had.

Watching the Gedolim During Shemoneh Esrei

In our efforts to develop our own, unique relationship with prayer, we can learn a lot about how to approach prayer by observing how the *Gedolim* conducted themselves during Shemoneh Esrei.

Rav Moshe Feinstein ז"ל would stand erect and motionless when he davened the Shemoneh Esrei. When asked why he stood so still, he related that he was once brought in for an interrogation by the Communist authorities in the city of Luban, Russia, where he served as the Rav. He was forced to stand at attention during the entire ordeal. Rav Moshe resolved that from that time on, he would do the same when davening Shemoneh Esrei. After all, he reasoned, standing at attention in Luban was a display of reverence and submission to the Russian authorities; surely standing before Hashem, the King of Kings, should be done with at least the same degree of reverence and submission.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky ז"ל related about his *rebbe*, the Alter of Slabodka, that during World War I he was in the middle of Shemoneh Esrei when bombs began to fall. Instinctively, everyone in the room threw themselves to the floor, with the exception of the Alter, who stood erect until he finished his prayer. He then looked around and asked in all innocence, "What happened here?"

Someone once approached the Manchester Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yehuda Zev Segal ז"ל asking for forgiveness. The Rosh Yeshiva was puzzled by this and asked what he had done. The man responded that he had written his name in the margin of the Rosh Yeshiva's *siddur*, next to the

blessing for *Refu'ah* (healing), in the hope that the Rosh Yeshiva would daven for him. As it turned out, the Rosh Yeshiva had not even noticed, as his attention was exclusively focused on the words of the Shemoneh Esrei and on nothing else, not even the margin beyond the words.

Why Eighteen?

Before we begin to delve into the meaning of the words of the Shemoneh Esrei, we need to address two basic questions. First, why are there eighteen blessings in the first place? Second, there are really nineteen blessings, so why do we call it the “Shemoneh Esrei,” which means “eighteen”?

There are several verses throughout Tanach which serve as the source for the enactment of the specific number of eighteen blessings of Shemoneh Esrei (the commentators discuss in depth what the connection is between the prayer of Shemoneh Esrei and these sources):

- Hashem's Name is mentioned eighteen times in chapter 29 of Tehillim, *הבו לה' בני אלים*.¹
- Hashem's name is mentioned eighteen times in *Keri'as Shema*.²
- There are eighteen sets of joints that make up the spine (which protrude when a person bows down during Shemoneh Esrei).³
- Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov are mentioned together eighteen times in the Torah.⁴

1 *Berachos* 28b.

2 *Ibid*.

3 Midrash Tanchuma (*Parshas Vayera*).

4 Yerushalmi *Berachos* 4:3, Midrash Tanchuma (*Parshas Vayera*).