AMIDA, FIRST BERAKHA: How does God protect Israel?

In the coming days, BH, we will analyze one by one the Berakhot of the ‘Amida, the main prayer.
The ‘Amida consists of nineteen blessings (berakha, pl. berakhot). The first blessing of the ‘Amida is called ‘Abot’, which literally means ‘Fathers’, referring to our patriarchs Abraham, Yitzhaq and Ya’aqob.

This blessing belongs to the first section of the ‘Amida: “Praise”. Our first prayer to God, before asking anything, is to praise Him for protecting the Jewish people.

TEXT: *“Blessed are You, HaShem, our God and the God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Ya’aqob, the Great, Mighty and Awesome God, the Most High, Who makes acts of goodness, Who has created everything, Who remembers the good deeds of our ancestors, and Who will bring a redeemer to the children of his children, by His Name [=promise] and out of love. Blessed are You, HaShem, the protector of Abraham. “*

In this blessing we affirm that HaShem protected Abraham, Ytshaq and Ya’aqob. We also describe in three words what we are able to understand, given our limitations, as to the powers of God. We say that He is Great, Mighty and Awesome (lit. “fearful” = that inspires awe, reverence and submission). That there is no power above or beyond His control (‘elion’). And that HaShem uses all His powers with kindness (gomel hasadim tobim) to protect us and ensure our continuity.

We declare that because of the merit of our ancestors (Zokher Hasde Abot), God grants us His protection in the present, and will bring our redemption in the near future (umebi go-el).

We also affirm that HaShem promised (lema'an shemo) to our ancestors that he will never allow the Jewish people to disappear. He will never abandon us because He loves us unconditionally, as the Tora says in Debarim 7: 7.

God protected us even before we became a nation, when we were just the family of Abraham or an incipient tribe, and we were extremely vulnerable.

It is worth clarifying that in this Berakha we are not ASKING for the protection of HaShem. Nor are we stating that HaShem protects every Jew by virtue of being Jewish. God's protection of the Jewish individual is NOT the subject of this blessing. In this Berakha we affirm that God miraculously granted us our survival as the Nation of Israel, and we praise Him for keeping us alive, in spite of all who stand up to destroy us and against all odds.

Finally we say that HaShem is our King (melekh). A King who loves and cares for His subjects: us.

These four last words, □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□ "the King that helps, rescues and protects" also represents a progression of the different levels of protection that God grants Israel, which is the main theme of this blessing. "Meditating" on these levels of protection, we will get to feel how much HaShem loves us, and it will inspire us to love Him even more (which is, of course, one of the main goals of the Jewish prayer).

Let's see what these four words are teaching us:

□□□ "The King," Melekh, it reminds us that normally the subjects are in charge of protecting the King. But in the case

of HaShem, even though He is the King, it is He who protects us!

□□□□ "who helps us." – At this level, we acknowledge HaShem for the fact that He helps our endeavors. This means that when we are trying to accomplish something, HaShem helps our efforts and enables us to succeed. It is not difficult to recognize HaShem's help. After all, if–say–I am starting a new business and ask HaShem to help me, I can recognize Him in my eventual success. In the famous Psalm of Tehilla LeDavid (Ashré, Ps. 145), God's help at this level is described as "Retson Yereav Ya'ase" (He fulfills the will of those who fear Him) (v. 19). Again, this is HaShem's intervention in the positive aspects of our lives: He enables us to succeed.

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan z"l suggested that in order to understand these different levels of protection, they could be analogized with a soldier fighting in the battlefield. HaShem, the King for Whom I am fighting, not only is He in the battlefield with me (unlike most kings who stay in the safety of their encampment) but He actually helps me. Me! His soldier.

□□□□□ "who rescues us," – Now, we acknowledge HaShem's redemption. HaShem saves me when I get in trouble. This kind of intervention is a little more subtle. It takes a great person to realize that, after having gone through a difficult time and coming out from it, HaShem was the One who ended the bad situation. Who saved me. It is far easier to focus on the trouble I was in, than on the fact that the trouble eventually ended (as all troubles do). But a Jew praying the 'Amida is expected to stop and think about HaShem's redemption. In Tehilla LeDavid, this divine redemption is described as "VeEt Shav'atam Yishma' VeYoshi'em" (…and their [those who fear Him] cries, He hears, and He saves them) (v. 19).

Again, in the example of the battlefield, the wounded soldier asks for help. The soldier got in trouble. The King, who was helping the soldier, now also rescues him from the battlefield, saving his life.

□□□ "who is our shield". – This is the deepest level of HaShem's protection. It may be the most prevalent in our lives, but it also is the most subtle. Only a very sensitive person can perceive HaShem's guidance when nothing is happening. This was Abraham's greatness. He was able to

perceive HaShem behind all the troubles that could have, and didn't, happen to him. And so did King David when he said in Tehilla LeDavid, "Shomer A-donay Et Kol Ohavav…" (God protects all those who love Him) (v. 20). Abraham was the one person that God ever called "Ohavi" (the one who loves me). He also is the one after whom this Berakha follows "Magen Abraham."

Higher than "rescuing" us from the battlefield, is "Magen" (lit. shield). It means that the King protects the soldier even before anything bad happens. My enemies are shooting at me but the King shields me. I'm not asking for His help, because I'm not aware of the dangers I'm facing…

We end this prayer by blessing (= acknowledging) HaShem for granting us our survival as a Jewish people, protecting and rescuing us when we ask for His help, and also when we do not realize that we should ask for His help. Ever since the times of Abraham Abinu (Magen Abraham, Bereshit 15: 1 □□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□ □□□□□) until our own days.