THE AMIDA: The 3-6.6.1-3 Structure

The Amida is the most important prayer in Judaism. So important that, in the language of our Sages, the word "Tefila," with nothing added, means the Amida. Its name means "standing," because we say it on our feet, aware that we are standing before HaShem.

It was composed by Anshe Keneset HaGedola, the Men of the Great Assembly, in the fifth century BCE. Its text follows a very precise and sophisticated structure, which we will briefly describe here.

The weekday Amida has 19 berakhot, or blessings, and each one is devoted to a specific theme. They are not a random list of requests. So before we explore the meaning of each berakha, it helps to understand the architecture of this prayer.

The 19 blessings are divided into three sections: praise, requests and thanks. Counting the berakhot in each section and subsection, the structure can be summed up like this: 3 – 6.6.1 – 3.

PRAISE (SHEVACH)

The first section has three berakhot. Here we don't ask HaShem for anything. We open the Amida by praising Him and recognizing before Whom we stand: the God who protects us, as He protected our ancestors, and on whose kindness (chesed) and mercy (rachamim) our survival depends entirely.

(1) Avot (Magen Abraham): we remember Abraham, Isaac and Ya'akob. The God we are addressing is the same God who accompanied and protected our patriarchs.

(2) Gevurot (Ata Gibor): we acknowledge His power over life.

HaShem sustains the living, heals the sick, lifts up the fallen and revives the dead.

(3) Kedushat HaShem (Ata Kadosh): we declare His holiness.

REQUESTS (BAKASHOT)

The second section has thirteen berakhot. In them we ask HaShem to provide for our needs.

PERSONAL NEEDS

The first six blessings focus on our basic personal needs. But we say them in the plural: we always ask as part of the community.

(4) Ata Chonen: wisdom and understanding.

(5) Hashivenu: help in returning to HaShem (teshuva).

(6) Selach Lanu: forgiveness for our wrongs.

(7) Re'e ve'Onyenu: that He free us from our troubles (our personal enemies).

(8) Refa'enu: health.

(9) Barekh Alenu: a livelihood, a decent way to make a living.

It is telling that the first request is wisdom. Before we ask for health or a livelihood, we need the clarity to know what is right and to make good decisions. And before anything material, we ask to be able to fix our mistakes and live with a clear conscience.

NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

The next six berakhot are also requests, but national rather than personal. We move from our own needs to the aspirations of the people of Israel.

(10) Teka beShofar: that HaShem, soon in our days, gather our

scattered people into the land of Israel.

(11) Hashiva Shofetenu: that He restore to us just judges and leaders.

(12) VeLamalshinim: that He put an end to slanderers and to evil.

(13) Al HaTzaddikim: that He protect the righteous.

(14) Bone Yerushalayim: that He rebuild Yerushalayim.

(15) Et Tzemach David: that He restore the dynasty of David.

This way, the Amida teaches us to think beyond ourselves. When we pray, we remember that we belong to a people with a land, a history and a mission.

SHOME'A TEFILA

(16) Shema Kolenu: the last berakha of this section ends with the words "Shome'a Tefila," "who hears prayer." Here we ask HaShem to hear all our previous requests. And since this berakha isn't devoted to any specific theme, we can add to it, in our own words, any request not included before: finding a spouse, having children, the release of the hostages, and so on.

THANKS (HODA'A)

The third section has three berakhot.

(17) Retze: we ask HaShem to accept our prayers and to restore the conditions to serve Him once again in His Temple, with prayers and offerings.

(18) Modim: the central berakha of this section, the blessing of thanks. We thank Him for our lives, which are in His hands; for our souls, entrusted to His care; and for the miracles that are with us every day, even the ones we stop noticing because they are daily.

(19) Sim Shalom: finally, we ask HaShem to grant peace, shalom, to the people of Israel. Shalom is the highest aspiration of the Jewish people, both personal and national.

First we praise. Then we ask. At the end, we give thanks.