THE AMIDA: First Berakha, ABOT. The Three Levels of Divine Protection

Last week we began explaining the first blessing of the Amida, Abot, "Fathers," named for Abraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. In this blessing we do not ask God for anything. We praise Him, and we acknowledge that He has protected us from the days of our ancestors until today.

"Blessed are You, HaShem, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Yitzchak and God of Yaakov, the great, mighty and awesome God, God Most High, who does great acts of kindness, who created all things, who remembers the good deeds of our ancestors, and who will bring a redeemer to their children's children, for the sake of His name and out of love [for us]. HaShem is a King who helps, rescues and protects. Blessed are You, HaShem, Shield of Abraham."

We are not "asking" HaShem for protection. We are affirming that the people of Israel still exist, against all logic and against everyone who rose up to destroy them, and that this was no accident: just as HaShem protected Abraham, He protects us today.

FOUR WORDS

The berakha ends with four words: □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□, "a King who helps, rescues and protects." They are not synonyms. The first, Melekh, tells us Who protects us. The other three tell us how: they are three levels of protection.

In his remarkable book Jewish Meditation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan z"l suggested picturing a battlefield.

MELEKH, "King." In chess, the pawns are sacrificed to protect

the king. With HaShem it is the other way around: the King, God, protects His soldiers.

OZER, “helps.” This is the most basic level. The soldier calls for help, and the King Himself comes to his aid. HaShem answers when we ask.

MOSHIA, “rescues.” HaShem does not just come to help the soldier. He also rescues him. He treats the wound and carries him off the battlefield. At this level we recognize that God gives us not only what we ask for, but more than we ask for.

MAGEN, “shield.” This is the highest level of Divine protection. Picture the soldier, wounded and unconscious, whom the King comes to find and carries off the battlefield. As He carries him, the enemy fires without mercy. The King covers him with His own body, like a shield, and the soldier never even knows about the dangers around him. “Magen” means that HaShem protects us even when we do not know we are in danger.

And this is probably the most common level of His protection.

It is also where it all began. The first time the Torah alludes to Divine protection, HaShem says it to Abraham:

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“Do not fear, Abram, I am your shield (magen)” (Bereshit 15:1)

Our berakha closes with these words: “Magen Abraham,” alluding to the protection HaShem promised Abraham, which, without our knowing it, continues to protect his descendants.

IN PRACTICE

*Abot is the berakha that demands the most concentration: if there is one moment in the Amida when we cannot let our minds wander, this is it.

*If one did not pay attention to what is being said in this berakha, one should say the Amida again.

*When we say “Barukh Ata,” at the beginning and at the end of this berakha, we bow as a sign of reverence.