AMIDA Elokai Netsor, praying for your own good behavior

The ‘Amida technically ends with the nineteenth and final blessing, Sim Shalom. However, before concluding the ‘Amida, we recite the “Elo-hay, netsor…” prayer, which is different from every other prayer. First, unlike every other berakha in the ‘Amida, this prayer is written in the first person singular. Why? Because this berakha, “Elo-hay, netsor…” was not originally part of the ‘Amida, but a personal prayer composed by Mor bareh deRabina, a Rabbi from around 500 of the common era. Since then, it has been adopted by all the Jewish people to conclude the ‘Amida.

The content of this prayer is also unique. In it, Mor bareh deRabina asked God to save his tongue from evil and his lips from falsehood. He recognized the huge challenge of keeping our mouths under control and asked for God’s assistance in preventing him from speaking lashon hara (negative speech) and deception, which are often the sources of conflicts between people.

In this prayer, the Rabbi also requested God’s help in behaving with humbleness, patience, composure, and calm, especially in moments of tension when one is provoked by others or hurt by others and instinctively wants to respond and hurt the aggressor back. We ask for God’s assistance to grant us the patience and restraint we need to react appropriately in these difficult situations.

This prayer is unique because it requests God’s help in refining our character and improving our behavior, unlike the other berakhot in the ‘Amida, in which we request material things such as health and a good livelihood. In this last prayer, we ask God to inspire us to do good and help us to keep away from doing evil, but we should also recognize that our behavior depends on our freedom of choice and our responsibility to make moral decisions. When we recite this prayer, we must remember that we are not asking God to control our lives and decisions but to help and inspire us to reach our potential and behave with integrity.

AMIDA (Berakha 19) The blessing of Peace

ברכת הקב ”ה היא שלום , שנאמר ה ’ יברך את עמו בשלום

The last berakha of the ‘amida, *sim shalom*, is the blessing in which we ask HaShem for Shalom/peace.

“Grant us peace, goodness, and blessing,
life, grace, kindness and mercy,
for us and on all Israel Your people.
And bless us, our Father, all of us, as one,
with the light of Your Presence…”

Shalom is the highest aspiration of the Jewish people. We do not pray for world dominion or for the death of our enemies. Our ultimate dream is to live in peace with other nations and among ourselves. From the beginning of our history the Tora’s utmost promise is that, if we will keep HaShem’s commandments we will be left alone by our enemies and live in our land, Israel, in peace and tranquility (Lev. 22:5). In May 14th, 1948, when the modern State of Israel was established, David Ben Gurion read in the Declaration of Independence “WE EXTEND our hand of peace and unity to all the neighboring states and their peoples, and invite them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land.” In our days, this Shalom/Peace is still an ideal (utopian?) aspiration. As if “Peace” could not be considered as the “normal” situation of the Jews but a God given blessing. To certain extent, “Peace” is a miracle, for which we Jews still pray everyday, three times a day.

The text of this berakha is modeled after the most important blessing to be found in the Torah: birkat kohanim. Thus, in

birkat Kohainim, we ask for God’s blessing (יברכך), then for HaShem to enlighten us with His Presence (יאר ה’ פניו) and we end by asking HaShem to grant us the blessing of peace (וישם לך שלום). In *sim Shalom* we first ask HaShem to bestow upon us all His blessings (peace, life, kindness, goodness, etc.), then we ask Him to bless us with the light of His presence (וברכנו אבינו… באור פניך) , and we end by requesting HaShem to bless us with strength and peace (עוז ושלום).

The Sephardic custom is to say the same text for this berakha in every ‘amida, while the Ashkenazi custom is to say this berakha in its entirety only when Birkat Kohanim could be recited, namely, in Shaharit and Musaf. This is why the Ashkenazi custom is to replace *sim shalom* for *shalom rab*, a shorter version, for Minha and Arbit.

AMIDA (Berakha 18). Mastering the art of gratitude

מודים אנחנו לך

The eighteenth berakha of the ‘amida, Modim, is the longest one and the main blessing of the third section of the ‘amida known as *hoda-a* (gratitude). The Hebrew word *modim* actually means: “We thank… (You God)”.

After having focused in the previous blessings on what we need and want from God, now we turn our attention to all what we have been given by God. Gratitude, Jewish gratitude, consists in the acknowledgment that God is the ultimate source of what we are, of what we have, and of all good things that happen to us.

The psychological effect of this berakha cannot be

underestimated. “Modim” educate us. It trains us to feel a sense of endless indebtedness toward God. As if for a moment, we abandon our selfish sense of entitlement and we reassess the blessings that we usually take for granted. By enumerating the multitude of “gifts” we constantly receive from HaShem, this berakha opens our eyes to appreciate. Appreciation is the prerequisite for gratitude.

It is important to notice that we begin by thanking haShem for being our God. In other words, we express our gratitude to God for having chosen us among the nations.

Then, we turn our attention to the fact that we still exist as a nation, despite having so many enemies who wish we were not here. We acknowledge that our physical survival depends on Him.

This is the beginning of Modim

“We thank You, that You are HaShem, our God,
and the God of our fathers. (You are our God) for ever.
You are the Protector (tsur=rock) of our lives.
You are our Shield and Savior.

This berakha is so important (second only to *magen Abraham*) that our rabbis instructed us to bow-down at the beginning (*modim anahnu lakh*) and at the end of this blessing (*hatob shimkha…*).

AMIDA (Berakha 17) Prayers or sacrifices?

This blessing, *birkat ha’aboda*, inaugurates the third section

of the Amida known as *hoda-a*, ‘gratitude’.

Here, we express our gratitude to God for having chosen us and giving us the privilege to serve Him.

Serving God includes keeping His commandments and worshiping Him. God’s worship consists of two elements: prayers (tefila) and sacrifices (qorbanot).

In this blessing we first ask God to accept us and our prayers:

May You, HaShem our God, accept Your people Israel and attend to their prayers Then, we beseech God to restore His House, the Bet haMiqdash, where we will offer our sacrifices the way our ancestors did two thousand years ago.

*And restore the Holy service to the Sanctuary of Your house*Now, in the Bet haMiqdash, there were sacrifices and also prayers. As it is written in Yesha’ayahu (56:7) “For My house [the Temple in Jerusalem] will be called a House of Prayer for all nations” , After the destruction of the second Bet haMiqdash, 68 CE, prayers replaced the sacrifices. This is not to say that during the time of the Bet haMiqdash people did not pray. Actually, it seems that at the individual level very little changed after the Bet haMiqdash. The main change took place in the public services: the establishment of minyan, public prayers, bet hakeneset, etc.

Accordingly, we convey our aspiration to offer again both, our sacrifices and prayers.

So that You will accept lovingly the sacrifices given by the people of Israel and their prayers,

God chose our ancestors out of unconditional love (see Debarim 7,7). Now, we ask God to consider us too, worthy of that privilege. To love us as He loved our fathers. To accept our prayers as He accepted the prayers of our ancestors. Even

though we might not be meritorious as our fathers, who were able to serve God in the Bet haMiqdash. That is the meaning of the next statement:

And You, with Your great mercy, care for us and accept us…

Finally, we express our wish to see in our own days the return of God's presence to Zion and Jerusalem, to embrace us again as the People He has chosen, to serve Him.

and may our eyes see Your return to Zion….. AMEN.

AMIDA (berakha 16) Please, listen (or ignore) my prayer

This is the sixteenth and last berakha of the section called 'requests' (*baqashot*).
In this berakha we ask HaShem to listen to our prayers, to accept and fulfill our requests. According to the Rabbis, in this berakha we could also include any particular petition that was not specifically covered in the previous twelve berakhot. For example, since there is no berakha that deals with Shiddukh (=finding a spouse) or having children, etc., we could make those request here.
We ask God to listen to our prayers, knowing that no matter how much we believe we deserve God's attention, or how noble our cause is, etc., there is no guarantee that we will be granted what we have asked for. HaShem *always* listens to our prayers, we assert in this Berakha, but sometimes His answer is "NO".Why? Basically, for the same reason a good parent will not necessarily fulfill all of his children's request. Many times, a parent would ignore the petition of his children, sometimes, for his children's own benefit. Imagine you are going for a job interview, and you are eager to get this job, and you pray and beg God to help you getting *this* job, if HaShem knows that this job is not good for you, or that there will be a better job, would you want Him to listen to your prayer?
Rabbenu Bahye ibn Paquda (Zaragoza, Spain, 11th Century) quotes in his famous book, "The duties of the Heart", a superb prayer, which I believe encapsulates beautifully the message that HaShem knows better

than us what is better for us. Paraphrasing it with my own words, this Berakha says: HaShem when I pray to You, when I request something for me or for my loved ones, if YOU believe that the fulfillment of that request is not the best for us, please, do as YOU see fit, and please, ignore my petition. I trust YOUR judgment over my own judgment. I leave it up to YOU. YOU should choose to accept or ignore my request, and I will readily accept YOUR verdict. “
This should be our state of mind when we ask haShem to listen to our prayers. At the end of the day, if HaShem decides to ignore my request, I know HE loves me, and I know HE knows better.

THE ORIGINAL PRAYER FROM “HOBOT HALEBABOT”

(*heshbon hanefesh,* Chapter 3)

“My God, I dare to stand in front of You, not by ignorance of my own little stature and my inadequate knowledge of Your greatness and transcendence, for I know that You are High and Exalted and I’m of too little account, too lowly and small to petition You, to praise and sign hymns to You or to sanctify Your name which is sanctified by the voices of the High and Holy angels. Rather, what gave me the courage to address You is that You have commanded me to pray to You, and You have permitted me to praise Your exalted name according to my limited understanding of You and my limited grasp of Your glory, so that I will express my service to You with humility.

And You know better than me what is best for me, and the ways in which I should be guided. I am therefore informing You of my needs, not so as to call Your attention to them, but so I will become conscious of my great need of You and of my trust in You. So, If I should ask You , out of my ignorance, for something that is not good for me or of no benefit to me, I accept Your choice rather than my choice. And so I leave the fulfillment of all my interests to Your lasting determination and supreme governance, as David said “God, my heart is not haughty, my eyes are not raised high, I do not presume to grasp things too great and mysterious for me. Thus, I have commended myself to You, like a weaned child, who depends entirely on his mother…” (Tehillim 131:1-2)

AMIDA (Berakha 15) Praying for the real Messiah

This berakha ends the section of "National Requests", the six blessings in which we pray God for our *gueula* (=redemption) which is actually our desire for *normalization* as the nation of Israel. Our desire to be established in the land of Israel, following the Law of Israel.
This *gueula* process will culminate with the coming of the Mashiah.
The Mashiah will be a King, a political leader, who like King David will be completely committed to serve God.
But how will we suppose to recognize who the Mashiah is?
The Rabbis did not give us an explicit list of the Mashiah characteristics. But Maimonides did (MT, H. Melakhim, Ch.11).
For Maimonides, everything we should know about the potential Mashiah is learned from Bar Kokhba. How so? Because Rabbi Aqiba believed that Bar Kokhba was the Mashiah, until Bar Kokhba was defeated and killed. Then, Rabbi Aqiba realized that althought Bar Kokhba possessed the necessary requisites to be Mashiah, evidently he was not. Now, Maimonides reasons, whatever rabbi Aqiba saw in Bar Kokhba is what we should expect to find in the potential Mashiah.
He then mentions the three preconditions for the Mashiah.

1. Like bar Kokhba, the Mashiah needs to be a descendant of King David.
2. The second condition is that he will be committed to Torah study and meticulous observance (□□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□), aspiring to establish a Jewish Kingdom where HaShem will be the Supreme King.
3. The third condition, as per Maimonides, is that the candidate for Mashiah will be a military man, actively fighting the wars of Israel. Not "fighting" in a symbolic army (a sort of a Jewish "Salvation Army") but in the real Jewish Army, like the brave Bar-Kokhba who was a soldier and then the commander of the Jewish army that fought against the enemies of Israel (in 130 ACE, the Romans).

Maimonides explains that if a Jewish leader possesses these three conditions he could be considered the Mashiah. If he also gathers the remnants of the Jewish people into the land of Israel, and he builds the Bet haMiqdash, then he should be declared *officially* as our Mashiah Tsidqenu. (*B"H, bimhera beyamenu!*)

Recommended reading on this subject

‘The Real Messiah?’
by Aryeh Kaplan.

See here

AMIDA (berakha 14), Yerushalayim, a city and its soul

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In this blessing we ask HaShem 1. to restore His Presence in Yerushalayim. and 2. to reestablish the Throne of David. This double request alludes to the spiritual and the political aspects of Jerusalem.

First of all, Yerushalayim is the city of the Bet haMiqdash . The Bet haMiqdash was the Holy Temple. The soul of the Jewish people. We Jews believe in God’s Omnipresence (=God is everywhere). However, the Tora asserts that in the Sanctuary there was a special “Divine Manifestation” (Shekhina), a feeling of God’s presence which could not be experienced anywhere else. It is impossible to describe with words how this “God’s Manifestation” was felt. However, if upon visiting the Western Wall (one of the outer walls of the Temple) you are overcome by an incomparable sensation of Holiness and closeness to HaShem, the feeling you experience in the Wall, is a tiny reflection of that overwhelming “Divine Manifestation” felt in the Bet HaMiqdash. In this Berakha we first request God to reestablish His Manifestation in Yerushalayim. Restoring His Sanctuary, the Bet HaMiqdash.

We also pray in this Berakha for the reestablishment of the “Throne of David”. Aside from being the spiritual center of the Jewish people, Yerushalayim was also the political capital of the Jewish Nation. All National Institutions were established in Yerushalayim. In this aspect, Yerushalayim was to the Jewish Nation what Washington DC is to the USA. The Jewish King had his palace and residence (=the White House) in Yerushalayim. Yerushalayim was the residing place of the Bet

Din haGadol (= the U.S. Supreme Court of Justice) and Yerushalayim was the city of the Sanhedrin (= the U.S. Congress). When we cry for the destruction of Jerusalem we lament not only the destruction of the Bet HaMiqdash, but also the eradication of all our political and governmental institutions. Thus, in our Berakha, when we pray to HaShem for the reestablishment of Yerushalayim, we also pray for the restoration of the Jewish Government (David's Throne).
Today, Baruch HaShem, we have Yerushalayim again. But we still don't have the Bet HaMiqdash. The Bet HaMiqdash is to Yerushalayim what the soul is to the body. Now, if Yerushalayim is today the most beautiful city in the world, and this is Yerushalayim without her soul, imagine how magnificent Yerushalayim will be, once her soul, the Bet HaMiqdash, is restored!

AMIDA (berakha 13) Take care of those who take care of us

[illegible]

In this blessing we ask haShem to protect and help the righteous and pious. Those who are committed to pursuing kindness, justice, the knowledge of God and the obedience of His commandments.

We ask for the righteous in this particular section, the section which deals with "National" requests. Because the Tsadiqim are our national heroes, our role model and inspiration.

This berakha begins by mentioning two types of good people: Righteous (*tsadiqim*) and pious (*hasidim*). Righteous are those who strictly follow God's commandments. Hasidim -pious -is a level above righteousness. Hasidim are righteous people who outdo their religious duties in one particular category of Mitsvot: Hesed. Hesed means kindness. And it includes the performance of the good deeds we do for other people: visiting the sick, comforting the mourners and helping those in need. While excess in certain ritual areas might be counterproductive, objectionable or a symptom of arrogance, in the area of Hesed doing more than what we are required is unquestionable and noble.

In this berakha we ask HaShem to protect and reward the righteous and all those who put their trust in God. It is important to notice that anyone might belong to the category of *righteous* or *pious*. Depending exclusively on one's actions and intentions. Thus, we ask HaShem to inspire us to follow the footsteps of the righteous, so we could also be counted as such: "Place our lot among them, and let us never be shamed for in You we have trusted."

It seems that the Tsadiqim and the Hasidim deserve a special protection. Why? Because the real righteous and pious people live according to standards of altruism which are very different from the rest of us. The Tsadiqim behave as if they have come to this world to give, not to take; to defend others, not themselves; and to care of other people, not of their own needs. And while usually people who benefit from the kindness of the Tsadiqim appreciate their unselfishness, many times the noblest Tsadiqim are vulnerable and exposed to ingratitude and even abuse. We pray to HaShem for an ideal situation in which, while the Tsadiqim take care of other people, HaShem will take special care of the Tsadiqim.

AMIDA (Berakha 12) Religious and Political Betrayal

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The 'amida was composed around the Fifth Century BCE. Originally, the 'amida was known as the *shemona 'esre* (=eighteen) prayer, because it consisted of eighteen blessings. Around the year 100 ACE, with the advancement of Christianity, Shemuel haQatan composed a new berakha which was introduced to the 'amida by Rabban Gamliel and its Court. This berakha is known as *birkat haminim*, the prayer in which we request God's assistance to deal with those who wish to destroy Am Israel physically or spiritually. Particularly, the traitors among the Jewish people. But who qualifies for this shameful categorization? Is this berakha referring to a Jew who abandons Jewish observance? Absolutely not! Judaism is very understanding of Jews who, for different reasons fail to keeping the Mitsvot (*tinoq shenishba ben*

hagoyim). Actually, we are encouraged to inspire all our brothers and sisters, and bring them closer to HaShem. We are commanded to love them and embrace them, not, God forbid, to ask for their destruction.
This Berakha is meant for two very specific types of "betrayal".
1. Religious Treason (minim) which alludes to those Jews who abandon Judaism and now dedicate their efforts to proselyte and actively try to convert other Jews to their new beliefs (i.e., Jews for Jesus, etc.).
2. National Treason (malshinim) which refers to those Jews who join the political enemies of Israel. Think about Medinat Israel today, the nations who, like Amaleq, seek the destruction of Israel. Unfortunately, there are Jews who actively join these nations, movements or political parties, and align themselves with those seeking to wipe Israel off the map. A Jewish individual who does this, places himself or herself at a point beyond redemption. That is why we do not pray for their return. Because the damage they have done to Israel is beyond repair. We ask for God's help to deal with them, because there is little we can do to defend ourselves against "our own brothers".

Shabbat Shalom!

Candle lighting in NYC 5:20 pm
Shabbat ends in NYC 6:19 pm

AMIDA (Berakha 11) All you need is love

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Previously, we explained the blessing *teqa' beshofar gadol* "Make sound the Shofar… that will announce our redemption… and bring us back to the Land of Israel".
In this blessing *hashiba shofetenu* we ask God to provide us with the right political leaders *kebarishona* "like those we had in the past".
Our first and greatest leader was Moshe Rabbenu.
What was so special about Moshe?
1. When the people of Israel worshipped the golden calf, Moshe Rabbenu (see last week's Parasha) rejected God's offer to get rid of the "stubborn Jews" and make him a leader of a new Nation. Moshe Rabbenu

begged God to forgive the people of Israel. And he told God, “If not, please erase me too from Your Book”. For Moshe the whole concept of leadership would not make any sense if it would hurt the people of Israel. A good Jewish leader is the one that loves Am Israel more than he loves himself.
2. Why Moshe broke the tablets, when he saw the people dancing around the golden calf? According to one opinion, Moshe broke the tablets in an effort to defend the people of Israel. How so? The tablets,(“YOU SHALL NOT HAVE OTHER GODS”) were the most clear evidence against the people’s sin. Moshe choose to cover-up for them, breaking the incriminating document. In a sense, Moshe was willing to bring upon himself a more serious sin (breaking GOD’S tablets!) just to downplay as much as possible the sin of Israel.
3. Moshe’s love for Am Israel made him the best advocate we Jews ever had. God said: “Let me get-rid of this stubborn people”. “Stubborn”, because I took them out of Egypt, I opened for them the sea, I gave them the Manna, I gave them the Tora, I revealed Myself to them, and now, they abandon Me and worship a calf?!”. Moshe said: You’re right, the Jews are stubborn. But once they get it, once they will have You as their God, *because of their stubbornness,* they will NEVER abandon You. They will be forced to convert, but they will resist. They will embrace You and Your covenant, no matter what. They will be willing to suffer humiliation, persecution, torture and death, and still be loyal to You. They will even go to their deaths saying ‘Ani Ma-amin’. This is going to be Your ‘stubborn people’.”

ahabat Israel, love for the People of Israel, is the prerequisite for the right Jewish Leader.