Is Our Most Famous Prayer a Prayer?
The Counterpoint of Speaking and Listening in Avodat Hashem

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
**IS OUR MOST FAMOUS PRAYER A PRAYER?**

**THE COUNTERPOINT OF SPEAKING**

AND LISTENING IN AVODAT HASHEM

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Menahot 99b

GEMARA: The mishna teaches that according to Rabbi Yosei, even if the priest first removes the old shewbread entirely, and only then places the new shewbread upon the Table, this fulfills the requirement that the shewbread always be on the Table. Moreover, it is taught in a baraita that Rabbi Yosei says: Even if the priest removed the old shewbread on the morning of Shabbat, and arranged the new shewbread toward evening, there is nothing wrong with that. Rather, how do I realize the meaning of the verse: “And you shall set upon the Table shewbread before Me always” (Exodus 25:30)? This means that the Table should not be left overnight without bread upon it.

The baraita teaches that according to Rabbi Yosei, even if the old shewbread remained on the Table for a short while in the morning, and the new shewbread was placed on the Table toward evening, and even though it did not reside constantly on the Table, this fulfills the requirement that the shewbread should always be on the Table. Rabbi Ami says: From Rabbi Yosei’s statement we may learn that even if a person learned only one chapter of the Mishna in the morning and one chapter of the Mishna in the evening, he has thereby fulfilled the mitzva of: “This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall contemplate in it day and night, that you may take heed to do according to all that is written in it, for then you shall make your ways prosperous, and then you shall have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: Even if a person recited only the recitation of Shema in the morning and in the evening, he has fulfilled the mitzva of: “This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth.” And it is prohibited to state this matter in the presence of ignoramuses [amei ha’aretz], as they are likely to get the impression that there is no need to study Torah beyond this. And Rava says: On the contrary, it is a mitzva to state this matter in the presence of ignoramuses, as they will realize that if merely reciting the Shema leads to such a great reward, all the more so how great is the reward of those who study Torah all day and night.
The dispute between the Rabbis and Rabbi Yehuda with regard to the times beyond which the different prayers may not be recited is rooted in a profound disagreement, also manifest in a later amoraic dispute. **It was stated: Rabbi Yosei, son of Rabbi Hanina, said:** The practice of praying three times daily is ancient, albeit not in its present form; prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs. However, **Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said** that the prayers were instituted based on the daily offerings sacrificed in the Holy Temple, and the prayers parallel the offerings, in terms of both time and characteristics.

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The Gemara cites similar interpretations of verses: **Reish Lakish said:** What is the meaning of that which is written: “This is the law [torah] of the burnt offering, of the meal offering, and of the sin offering, and of the guilt offering, and of the consecration offering, and of the sacrifice of peace offerings” (Leviticus 7:37)? This teaches that anyone who engages in Torah study is considered as though he sacrificed a burnt offering, a meal offering, a sin offering, and a guilt offering.

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The Gemara now cites a further teaching in this regard: **Rabbi Shmuel bar Inya said in the name of Rav:** Torah study is greater than the offering of daily sacrifices, as the angel said to Joshua: “I am now come,” i.e., on account of the second sin, demonstrating that neglect of Torah study is a more serious offense than neglect of the daily offerings.
May the LORD bless you and protect you.  
May the LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.  
May the LORD turn His face toward you and grant you peace.  

These are the things for which there is no fixed measure:  
the corner of the field, first-fruits, appearances before the LORD [on festivals, with offerings], acts of kindness and the study of Torah.  

These are the things whose fruits we eat in this world but whose full reward awaits us in the World to Come:  

honouring parents; acts of kindness;  
arriving early at the house of study morning and evening;  
hospitality to strangers; visiting the sick;  
helping the needy bride; attending to the dead; devotion in prayer;  
and bringing peace between people – but the study of Torah is equal to them all.
The LORD said to Moses, “Command the Israelites and tell them: ‘Be careful to offer to Me at the appointed time My food-offering consumed by fire, as an aroma pleasing to Me.’ Tell them: ‘This is the fire-offering you shall offer to the LORD – two lambs a year old without blemish, as a regular burnt-offering each day. Prepare one lamb in the morning and the other toward evening, together with a meal-offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives. This is the regular burnt-offering instituted at Mount Sinai as a pleasing aroma, a fire-offering made to the LORD. Its libation is to be a quarter of a hin [of wine] with each lamb, poured in the Sanctuary as a libation of strong drink to the LORD. Prepare the second lamb in the afternoon, along with the same meal-offering and libation as in the morning. This is a fire-offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.’”

What is the location for sacrifices? The holiest offerings were slaughtered on the north side. The bull and he-goat of Yom Kippur were slaughtered on the north side. Their blood was received in a sacred vessel on the north side, and had to be sprinkled between the poles [of the Ark], toward the veil [screening the Holy of Holies], and on the golden altar. [The omission of] one of these sprinklings invalidated [the atonement ceremony]. The leftover blood was to be poured onto the western base of the outer altar. If this was not done, however, the omission did not invalidate [the ceremony].

Rabbi Yishmael says:
The Torah is expounded by thirteen principles:

1. An inference from a lenient law to a strict one, and vice versa...
The blessing: An abounding love, is about God’s love for us and includes praise for His giving us the Torah. Therefore, Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: One who arose to study, until he recites Shema he must recite a special blessing over the Torah. If he already recited Shema he need not recite that blessing, as he has exempted himself by reciting the blessing of: An abounding love, which includes the components of the blessing over the Torah.
The baraita teaches that according to Rabbi Yosei, even if the old shewbread remained on the Table for a short while in the morning, and the new shewbread was placed on the Table toward evening, and even though it did not reside constantly on the Table, this fulfills the requirement that the shewbread should always be on the Table. Rabbi Ami says: From Rabbi Yosei’s statement we may learn that even if a person learned only one chapter of the Mishna in the morning and one chapter of the Mishna in the evening, he has thereby fulfilled the mitzva of: “This Torah scroll shall not depart from your mouth, and you shall contemplate in it day and night, that you may take heed to do according to all that is written in it, for then you shall make your ways prosperous, and then you shall have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

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Siddur • The Shema (Deut. 6)

Listen, Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.

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Siddur • Amida

Listen to our voice, LORD our God. Spare us and have compassion on us, and in compassion and favor accept our prayer, for You, God, listen to prayers and pleas. Do not turn us away, O our King, empty-handed from Your presence, for You listen with compassion to the prayer of Your people Israel. Blessed are You, LORD, who listens to prayer.