

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

What is Real Davening?

The Friedike Rebbe once described in a *sichah*¹ what davening is all about:

Years ago—I don’t mean hundreds of years ago, but tens of years ago—there existed the concept of the *avodah* of *tefillah*. [My intention is] not that people would daven at length for a few hours; perhaps only for fifteen to twenty minutes, but it was [actual] davening. First, before davening a person would learn a bit of Chassidus; not a lot, perhaps just a few lines, maybe even only four or five lines, but he would work with them. When he would put on his *tallis gadol* and the tallis was still on his shoulder, he would think over [the few lines he had learnt], and during *tefillah* he would daven. But nowadays . . .

I would now like to speak to the Temimim, the students in the yeshiva.

A person can only be described as “older” if he works on himself and grows. If someone doesn’t work on himself, then only his body grows older, but in essence he remains an “old child.”

There are students who learn Chassidus and want to understand Chassidus. To them I say: If you want to understand Chassidus, then daven! Davening doesn’t mean singing; davening doesn’t mean crying. Rather, in davening a person should sing a *nigun*; in davening a person should cry.²

I don’t mean to daven for hours; [I mean] just to actually daven.

In general one must guard the times of learning *nigleh* and Chassidus. [Davening] shouldn’t contradict the schedule of the yeshiva.

And I don’t mean [to daven in a real manner] every day, rather from time to time, especially on Shabbos, which is the opportune time to daven. To daven with *pirush hamilos* is required by all of the *tefillos*—and fortunate is he who davens

1. *Sefer Hasichos* 5705, pp. 113–115.

2. The *sichah* then continues: “Our Sages say that ‘the sound [of the words a person says] arouses his intention.’ We once explained this saying [in a non-literal manner] as follows: the intention a person has in davening arouses him to the sound of the *nigun* he should sing.”

entirely from the siddur—but here I mean the *avodah* of davening. [It is this type of davening that must happen from time to time.]³

The question is, so what *is* real davening? It's not just to think the meaning of the words; it's not just to daven for a long time; it's not to sing; and it's not to cry. So what is it?

“Know Before Whom You Stand”

The answer to this question lies in the saying of *Chazal*: “דע לפני מי אתה עומד”—Know before Whom you stand.” Real davening means to understand what it means to speak to Hashem, to acquire a recognition of Hashem, and to forge a connection with Hashem in one's mind and heart. As the Rebbe writes in a number of letters, the meaning of “Know before Who you stand” isn't only to have a basic knowledge that you are standing before the One who can fulfill your requests, but that one must acquire a recognition of Him as well, which is accomplished through studying Chassidus. To quote one such letter (written by the Rebbe in English):⁴

. . . in order that it [your prayers] be on the proper level, it is necessary to bear in mind “Know before Whom though art standing,” which in turn requires preparatory study of the Torah and of the inner aspects of the Torah, which discuss G-d's greatness, and majesty, and wonders, etc. Such study must, of course, be in the proper spirit, namely with a view to translate it into actions and deeds in the daily life.

As is clear from this letter, learning Chassidus before davening enables one to acquire a better understanding of the One before Whom he is about to speak. This idea of acquiring knowledge of Hashem and connecting to Him is what real davening is about. And when one achieves a true recognition of and connection to Hashem, he will also sing and cry: being that his greatest enjoyment lies in knowing and connecting to Hashem, he will sing; and the experience can be so intense that he might cry.

Love and Awe

Now that we know that davening is all about developing a deeper awareness of Hashem, we can look at the effects davening is supposed to have on a person. The Alter Rebbe explains in Tanya⁵ that *daas*, knowledge of Hashem, is the result of thinking about Hashem constantly and intensely. This type of thinking produces two feelings: love of Hashem and awe of Him. So since

3. The *sichah* then continues to explain that in order to accomplish this, the *avodah* of *Krias Shema Al Hamitah* is necessary, and one must also avoid *chitzoniyus* and *blitos*. A person must really care about davening and not daven merely for others to see, and he must avoid attracting undue attention.

4. Dated 10 Sivan 5725.

5. Chapter 3.

real davening means to acquire *daas*—“Know before Whom you stand,” it will cause a person to be aroused with these two feelings.⁶

What does it mean to love Hashem and fear Him? The answer to this can be found in Hayom Yom:⁷

Just like the mitzvah of tefillin, for example, has a fixed place on the head and arm, and the person who wears them can feel the weight of the head-tefillin and the tightness of the arm-tefillin, so too is with regard to the mitzvos of loving and fearing Hashem. As the Rambam writes (*Hilchos Yesodei Hatorah*, Chapter 2, halacha 1): “It is a mitzvah to love and fear the Exalted and Awesome G-d, as it says, ‘*You shall love Hashem your G-d*’ and ‘*You shall fear Hashem your G-d*.’ ” The extent of these mitzvos is that they should be actually felt in one’s physical heart.

[Tangible love] can be compared to [what is felt by] one who meets a dear friend. Not only does he feel good as a result and forgets about all the things that are bothering him, but he also becomes rejuvenated with a strong feeling of hope [that things will work out for the good], since he feels good [just by meeting him. Similarly, realizing that you are in the presence of Hashem should energize you and cause you to feel good and full of hope and to forget about what’s bothering you.]

This applies to fear of Hashem as well. A person should feel a great awe and fear [of being in Hashem’s presence], as he remembers his misdeeds in thought, speech, and action, and his heart should ache tangibly with pain from the fear of the [spiritual] punishment [for transgressing Hashem’s Will⁸], resulting from a fear of Heaven. Sometimes he can experience [a higher level of fear of Hashem—] a feeling of embarrassment [from being in Hashem’s Presence], or even a fear of the Exaltedness of Hashem.

6. The Alter Rebbe (Tanya, *ibid.*) compares the knowledge of Hashem to the union between a husband and wife. This is based on the Torah’s description of the union between Adam and Chavah with the word “know”—“*And Adam knew his wife Chavah*,” meaning that they bonded to the extent of producing children. Similarly, to “know” Hashem means to connect one’s mind to the awareness of Hashem to the extent that tangible feelings will be produced, which will then express themselves in practical application.

7. 20 Menachem Av. The bracketed additions are from the author.

8. I.e., becoming distanced from Hashem.

In other words, to love and fear Hashem means to realize that Hashem's presence in one's life is a reality that can be felt in a practical sense. And this comes about by really davening, to recognize and feel that Hashem is real and to connect to Him.

There is a famous analogy that brings out this point.⁹

There was once a simple villager who was illiterate. Whenever he would receive a letter, he would ask the local *melamed* to read it to him. One day he received a letter carrying the unfortunate news that his father had passed away. Upon hearing this from the *melamed* (who was reading the letter), the villager fainted on the spot. Later on, people asked the *melamed* why he didn't faint as well. "After all," they surmised, "it was you who was actually reading the letter!", "The letter wasn't about *my* father," the *melamed* replied. "It was about *his* father!"

The lesson we can take from this story is that even if we're dealing with the same information, it won't affect you if you don't feel that it's relevant to you. Davening means to know and recognize that Hashem is real and relevant in our lives.

Steps in a Process

This is also what lies behind the numerous sections of the daily davening, beginning with *Modeh Ani* and reaching a climax by *Shemonah Esrei*. The various parts of davening are steps of a process, helping us gain awareness of Hashem one step at a time. We begin by saying *Modeh Ani* and the morning *Brachos* to attain a general awareness of Hashem's presence in our lives, and we continue to climb the ladder of knowledge of Hashem until we reach *Shemonah Esrei*, when we achieve the ultimate awareness of "Know before Whom you stand." (The six levels of awareness will be explained in detail, with Hashem's help, in *A Practical Guide to Davening*, Part Three.)

The entire davening thus fits within this context, to enable us to "know" Hashem and strengthen and deepen our connection to Him. And this brings about two feelings—love and awe: love, the result of realizing how wonderfully good Hashem is in general and to me in particular, and awe and respect of His greatness.

In truth, even just thinking into the words of davening can help you along this process, even if you don't think through a *maamar* while davening. As long as you prepare yourself and realize what you are trying to accomplish—to achieve an awareness of and develop feelings for Hashem—you can receive all that depth from the words of davening themselves. This is what the Frierdiker Rebbe meant when he said that people used to daven for even just fifteen to twenty

9. This analogy is mentioned in *Toras Menachem* (Vol. 42, pp. 164 ff.), as well as in several other places with slight differences.

minutes, but it was real davening, because they prepared themselves to take it seriously and be affected by it.

Four Components of Real Davening

In order to achieve real davening, it is important to analyze the various components of such a davening and get a picture of the ideas that are involved. For the purpose of this *sefer*, I have divided davening into four essential components; when a person will work on all four areas, he will be able to achieve real davening, with Hashem's help. The four sections of the *sefer* reflect these four components.¹⁰

1. **Asking and thanking Hashem for one's needs.** Before attaining an advanced understanding of Hashem's greatness, a person must first cultivate a simple, basic awareness of Hashem's presence by simply speaking to Him, asking Him for what he needs and thanking Him for what He has given. The Baal Shem Tov greatly praised this type of simplicity; however, it can be harder to develop in this day and age when people are more complex.

2. **Understanding the meaning of the words of davening.** It is not enough to speak to Hashem in one's own words; one must use the words established by our *Chachomim* in the siddur, as this terminology is the Divine language of the soul. But in order for that to actually mean something to a person, he must understand and think into the meaning of the words.

3. **Learning and contemplating Chassidus.** In order to know before Whom one is standing, one must learn about and develop an awareness of Him. Learning doesn't just mean to read words in a book; it means to understand and connect to those ideas until they become part of you.

4. **Making a *cheshbon hanefesh*.** Since the main goal of davening is to be inspired to fulfill Hashem's will through Torah and mitzvos, it thus follows that an important part of davening is to be constantly aware of one's standing in *avodas Hashem*. For this to happen, one must frequently make a *cheshbon hanefesh*.

10. These four components are based on the *maamar* "Rava Chazya LeRav Hamnuna" 5690 (printed in *Sefer Hamaamorim Kuntreisim*, Vol. 1, p. 217). In this *maamar* the Frierdiker Rebbe explains that davening consists of three aspects: to ask Hashem for what one needs (which is the basic mitzvah of davening), to look in the siddur and think the *pirush hamilos*, and to approach davening with *deveikus* and *teshuvah*. The first two aspects correspond to the first two components described below, while the third aspect can be divided in two—*deveikus*, connecting to Hashem while davening *Shacharis* (especially through *hisbonenus*), and *teshuvah*, accomplished mainly through making a *cheshbon hanefesh* by *Krias Shema Al Hamitahh*. These two ideas correspond to the third and fourth components.

