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“Who Knows What’s Best?”

In the invitation to his son's bar mitzvah in the year 5713, Reb Bentzion Shemtov wrote that he is inviting the guests to "bless my son that he be a Chossid, yarei Shamayim, and lamdan in accordance with the will of the Rebbe."*

At the time, this was unique terminology. A young man living in London at the time named Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (today the head of the Beis Din of Eidah Hachareidis in Eretz Yisroel), approached Reb Bentche and asked: "How could you write that we should bless your son that he be a Chossid, yarei Shamayim, and lamdan 'in accordance with the will of the Rebbe?!' You should write 'In accordance with the will of Hashem' or 'in accordance with the will of the Torah!'" Reb Bentche suggested that Reb Moshe address the question to the Rebbe. Some time later, Reb Bentche heard a knock on his door. It was Reb Moshe, his face white. "I followed your instructions and wrote to the Rebbe," he said. "The Rebbe wrote back, responding to each question al pi nigleh, no less." In the letter, the Rebbe explained that a person may not know what he himself needs, or a person may fear the yetzer hara's influence on his tefillos; for these reasons a person should connect his tefillah to someone else's intention. The Rebbe supported all this with various sources in nigleh, later showing how these proofs are uniquely connected with a bar mitzvah.



11 Nissan 5713

In reply to your letter of 16 Adar, in which you question the terminology used in the invitation you received from the venerated, G-d fearing, honorable activist and Chossid Reb Bentzion Shemtov, in which he requests a blessing that his son should be a *yarei Shamayim*, a Chossid, and a *lamdan* in accordance with my intention and will. You question how one could make a Yid's prayerful wish contingent on the intentions and will of a human being.

(When can someone else's intentions help you?)

1. As is well-known, *tefilla* is an *avoda* of **the heart** as our *chachamim* teach us¹, and it must be **spoken**. This means that in order for the *tefilla* to be effective one's heart and mouth must be concurrent. The *nusach* of our davening also demonstrates how important it is that a person specify exactly what they need, not relying on a general *tefilla*—which is why we say 12 middle *brachos* of *Shemoneh Esreh*, and not simply a general request, as each of these *brachos* themselves contain many particulars. If someone isn't certain that he will be able to properly detail his *tefillos*, for whatever reason, but he has an acquaintance who wishes to bless him

with all good things, and the acquaintance has a deeper and more detailed understanding of what he needs, it is only natural that the individual, when he davens, will ask Hashem to fulfill his request "in accordance with the will of so-and-so"—his acquaintance.

We find similar concepts throughout *halacha*, including in the topics of *heter iska*², where [because of the complicated nature of this legal arrangement we don't require the person signing to understand the logic, but instead] we write "as per the enactment of our *chachamim*." Even an ignorant person writes this, and Torah law considers this effective, because he is relying on the knowledge of the *chachamim*.

(The Rebbe gives another reason why a Chossid should rely on the Rebbe's kavana: The Yetzer Hara may try to distract a person's thoughts in his tefilla. By relying on the Rebbe's intention, this is prevented.)

2. In addition, who can know what a person's desires are? The *yetzer hara's* tactics are skillful, changing from person to person, as the *chachamim* tell us. The *yetzer hara* tries many methods to confuse a person, especially during an *eis ratzon*, when the *yetzer* fears that the person's *tefillos* will be accepted.



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REB BENTZION SHEMTOV FARBRENGS IN LONDON.

During such a time, there is greater reason to be concerned that the *yetzer hara* will confuse the person and include something inappropriate in the *tefillos*. The more *ruchniyusdik* a *tefilla* is, the more the *yetzer hara* tries to confuse the person. In this instance, the request is that he be a *yarei Shamayim*, but that's not enough—he should also be a Chossid, one who goes beyond the letter of the law that *yiras Shamayim* requires. And even this is not enough—he adds that he be a *lamdan*, that he use the power of Torah to be a *yarei Shamayim* and a Chossid. The Torah is the Torah of truth ([and as the Midrash states], Truth³ told Hashem not to create the world).⁴ It is clear that the *yetzer hara* will do everything he can to confuse this *tefillah*—if not the words, then the intent the person has. As the Rambam says at the end of *Hilchos Temurah*, “The Torah descended to the bottom of a person's thoughts and the scope of his *yetzer hara*... Even though he made a vow or consecrated something, it is possible that he will reconsider, change his mind.”⁵ The only solution is to make his *tefillah* reliant on the intent of someone else, someone that isn't biased in this matter and wants only good for him. Doing it this way will cause the words and the *kavana* to be aligned. For this, too, there are many examples in *nigleh*. One of them is the teaching of our *chachamim*:⁶ “He [Moshe Rabbeinu] said to them: ‘Know that I am not making you take an oath according to your own understanding, but rather

according to my understanding and Hashem's understanding.”⁷

3. You also ask that it seems obvious that the *tefilla* should be a request that he be someone that fulfills Hashem's will, without stipulating the path he wishes to take to attain this. With all due respect, this is not the case. As mentioned earlier, it is obvious from the *nusach hatefilla* established by our *chachamim* that the requests and *tefillos* are made as specific as possible. The only reason they didn't make the *tefillos* even more specific was so that there could be one *nusach* that would be universally applicable for all Yidden. But even this [universal] *nusach* is quite detailed. See Rambam *Hilchos Tefillah* chapters 1 and 6.⁸

Truth be told, I wasn't sure whether to answer your questions. Unfortunately there have always been people, and especially nowadays, whose intention with their questions is [not to seek understanding, but] only to question. (This is especially true when it comes to [questioning] a lifestyle that they personally don't lead, and when they ask themselves why they avoid that way of life, the easiest excuse is that there are “questions” about that way of life.) In that instance, an answer is hardly beneficial, because “the gates of questions are never closed” [i.e. they will just look for some other difficulty to raise once the first question is answered].

However, since I don't know you personally, I say that [like all Jews] you are assumed to have the proper status (“בחזקת כשרות”),—I therefore assume that you have



good intentions; that you are seeking an explanation for something you haven't yet seen in any other letter before, although many such examples [this type of *tefilla* and wish] do exist [in Jewish sources], as stated.

May you be blessed with a kosher and joyous Pesach.

P.S. If you have any remarks about this, I would be interested in reading them, and I will endeavor to reply to the best of my ability.

Note: I specifically mentioned these two examples [about an oath in part 2, and about lending with interest in part 1] because taking an oath is a part of a person's *avoda* that begins at bar mitzvah, for that is when he becomes bound by the oath [to fulfill the Torah] taken at Har Sinai. I had in mind the concept of lending with interest by way of *heter iska*, as explained in the *maamar dibbur hamas'chil* "Taamah Ki Tov Sachra" of 5709*.⁹

I have included a copy of my public letter written for the upcoming Pesach, which you will certainly read with interest.

1. Taanis 2a.

2. A *halachic* arrangement in which a loan can be repaid with interest without violating the mitzvah not to lend money with interest. The wording and halachic details can be quite complex, so the standard text simply says that it should be "in accordance with the enactment of our *chachamim*" without going into detail. The individual signing is not required to understand this enactment.

3. The quote in the letter is written as "חסד אמר אל יברא". This seems to have been a typo instead of the original quote from the Midrash, "אמת, אמר".

4. I.e. it is extremely difficult to maintain a "true" level of *yiras shamayaim*, since the attribute of truth is almost incompatible with this world.

5. The Rambam continues that since a person might regret his pledge and redeem it for less than its worth, the Torah therefore requires that one-fifth of its value be added. In reference to our case, this is an example of the Torah taking into account a person's intent and his *yetzer hara*. This—the Rebbe explains—is being done here as well through relying on the intention and will of the Rebbe, and thus preventing the *yetzer hara* from having any sway on what the person really means in his *tefilla*.

6. *Nedarim* 25a.

7. The Gemara is discussing instances where a person might take an oath but will privately have in mind something deceitful. It tells the story of a borrower who made a cane, placed the money he owed in it, had the creditor hold the cane, and then swore he had given back the money. This was technically true, but he had no intention of the creditor actually receiving the money owed. To prevent this type of deception, the person is told that he must take the oath according to the understanding of the *beis din*. The Gemara then relates that when Moshe made the Jewish people take an oath to be faithful to Hashem (towards the beginning of Parshas Nitzavim, Devarim 29:13), he made clear that they were to take the oath based on the intentions of Hashem—not their own. In our case, by relying on the intentions of the Rebbe, the Chossid ensures that even if the *yetzer hara* were to try and put the wrong intention in his heart, the *tefillah* will still be for the right things.

8. *Hilchos Tefillah* ch. 1 describes the history of personal prayer—how everyone used to pray using their own words, but then came a time that people no longer could do that on their own, so the *chachamim* established a set, universal *tefillah*, containing "things that serve as general categories for the desires of each and every person and the needs of the whole community." *Hilchos Tefillah* ch. 6 says that one may add personal requests to the middle *brachos* of *Shemoneh Esreh*.

9. Hashem lends Yidden the strength to learn Torah and do mitzvos. This "loan" of *kochos* is repaid by the *Yidden* through them using it in their *avoda*. In the *maamar* he explains that he is given these *kochos* from Hashem through a *Heter Iska*—that the lender, too, gains—Hashem gains. Because through a *Yid's avoda* the illumination in the spiritual worlds is increased as well.