

Rabbi Goldberg is Guest Editor of this issue of *Tradition*.

THE FIRST PARAGRAPH OF THE *SHEMONEH ESREI*

I.

Clearly, there are many ways to address the Almighty besides formal prayer. One may simply talk to God, articulating the words that arise in one's heart. Novorodock musarniks and Bratslaver hasidim emphasize this, but any person may do so at any time. Or, one may recite psalms. Indeed, the Jewish prayer book is filled with psalms, which are also a favorite of the adherents of many religions. Then there is the "recitation of the *Shema*," a specifically Jewish address to God that is deemed a "recitation" rather than a "prayer." Finally, there are "blessings." They occupy major tracts of Jewish law and their enunciation clearly forms an address to the Almighty, but their classification just as clearly indicates that they are not equivalent to "prayers." Even so, the opening phrase of each Hebrew blessing plays a major role in the most significant Jewish prayer of all. Of ancient provenance, the essential Jewish prayer is termed the "Eighteen Blessings" or *Shemoneh Esrei*.¹ It is recited by observant Jews in its full form three times a day, six days a week, and in an abbreviated form four times each Sabbath and festival (except Yom Kippur, when it is recited five times). A prayer recited so often by so many for so long emanates profound layers of meaning, subtlety, and power.

Of all the blessings in the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the most important is the first. What is "importance" in the context of prayer? It is the sense that one stands in the Divine presence. If one recites the words of the *Shemoneh Esrei* yet loses the sense that one is standing before God—if one's mind wanders—one has not discharged one's obligation in prayer. Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik adds an additional requirement for the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*: One must understand its words. This is the paragraph's specific importance. One must not only stand in God's

presence, but understand what one is saying. Obviously, it is preferable to understand all that one prays, but this is not, strictly speaking, a requirement except for the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*.²

R. Soloveitchik's distinction between the first paragraph and the rest of the *Shemoneh Esrei* is critical. It sets this paragraph apart. The opening of the *Shemoneh Esrei* requires special attentiveness and understanding. A mere forty-two Hebrew words encapsulate the essential Jewish prayer of some 2,500 years. Let us turn, therefore, to the meaning of the words in the first paragraph, entitled *Avot* or "Patriarchs."

This paragraph, like much that is profound, is deceptively simple. A careful reading of it reveals patterns that constitute profound statements about prayer, God, and Jewish destiny. There are three patterns in this paragraph, which I reproduce in full:

Blessed are You, Lord, our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, God the Powerful One, the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awesome One—God Whose Power is Supreme; Who bestows beneficial kindnesses, and Who owns everything, and Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs; and Who brings a Redeemer to the descendants of their descendants, for His Name's sake, with love, King Who Helps and Saves and Shields. Blessed are You, Lord, Shield of Abraham.³

The prayer opens with three Hebrew words—its first pattern, a pattern of three. These are the most commonly grouped words in Hebrew blessing and prayer: "Blessed are You, God." This pattern of three repeats itself, first in a grouping of one, of two, and of six Hebrew words: "our God; and God of our fathers; God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob." Within this pattern of three, the last phrase, the reference to the Patriarchs, is itself threefold—a point that will require its own analysis. The next instance of the pattern of three is three attributes of God: "Great," "Mighty," "Awesome." This pattern of three is especially fertile because an additional attribute of God both precedes and succeeds this pattern of three, making a pattern of five. The pattern of five plays a critical role in modifying the pattern of three. The pattern of three, as we shall see, speaks of God "in the language of the sons of man" (*Yevamot* 71a); the pattern of three makes prayer understandable in a way that only human language can. The pattern of five reminds us that all such language, however spiritually valuable, is ultimately subservient to an unknowable Reality. Thus, the pattern of three has its limits.

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Still, the pattern of three provides direct spiritual guidance to the pray-er. Its next instance sets forth three actions of God: He bestows beneficial kindnesses; He owns everything; He remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs. Then comes a modified pattern of three, slightly yet significantly altered. It begins: “Who brings a Redeemer to the descendants of their descendants, *for His Name’s sake, with love.*” As we shall see, the two phrases I have italicized reverse the order of meaning in the standard form of the first two elements of the pattern of three. Within this modified pattern of three, the last phrase is also threefold and also (as well shall see) slightly modified: “King Who Helps and Saves and Shields.” The final instance in the pattern of three is the closing blessing, consisting of the same three words as the opening of the paragraph: “Blessed are You, God.”

In this first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* we shall also encounter another pattern of five and a pattern of one. All of these patterns interact. They convey theological texture, intellectual sophistication, and, above all, spiritual guidance within prayer. What otherwise might seem to be an exalted but simple prayer is actually laden with relational and theological significance. The patterns within the prayer greatly enhance the possibility of a relationship between the pray-er and God.

II. THE PATTERN OF THREE

A.

The primary pattern within the essential Jewish prayer is the pattern of three. All of its instances convey a consistent message. Each one repeats and reinforces the previous one, though often also refining and deepening it. We best discern this message by beginning with the fourth instance in the pattern: God is He “Who bestows beneficial kindnesses, and Who owns everything, and Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs.” Clearly, this is a pattern of three, perhaps the most obvious in the entire paragraph. It is the key.

First, God “bestows beneficial kindnesses.” Humanity needs Divine kindness; God responds. God reaches out of His unconditional sufficiency to touch humanity. God bends down, as it were. God hears humanity’s cry, so to speak. As the God Who bestows beneficial kindnesses, God is accessible, responsive, reaching from out of His eternity to the finite human being. God can be touched, affected. Prayer is not a soliloquy. There is a God Who bestows beneficial kindnesses; therefore,

the human being can and may ask for them. Call this the characteristic of God as accessible. Call this the thesis.

Second, God “owns everything.” As owner of the entire creation, God controls all and need not pay attention to any human being, any human prayer, or any cosmic force. God created the cosmos and everything in it; it responds to Him, to His will, to His power, not the other way around. There is a God Who is above all, Who controls all, Who is the opposite of a being who can be reached, touched, affected. Call this the characteristic of God as all-powerful, above all, inaccessible. Call this the antithesis.

Third, God “remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs.” This is a subtle phrase. Its action word—*remembering*—points in two directions. On the one hand, remembering is an act of control, of ownership, of power. Remembering is a powerful tool that can defeat many debilitating conditions. For example, a person may be robbed of control over his life. He may lose his health or be imprisoned (doubly restricting if the imprisonment is unjust), but still retain control of his memory. Remembering is an internal control. To illustrate, Rabbi Bezalel Zolti once asked: Why does the first Admonition in the Torah end on a note of hope, with God remembering the covenant (*Lev.* 26:42, 44-45); while the second Admonition does not end with God remembering the covenant? Why is there no note of hope at the end of the second Admonition? Answered R. Zolti: The second Admonition *does* end on a note of hope. Its last phrase, *ein koneh*—“there is no one to buy [captive Jews even as slaves]” (*Deut.* 28:68)—may also be read, “there is no ownership, no acquisition (*kinyan*), in the soul of a Jew.” R. Zolti said: A Jew’s *condition* may be servitude, but his *essence* remains freedom. Internally, his soul remains under his own control, even if he is imprisoned. That is why (said R. Zolti) a Jewish prisoner does not skip the daily blessing, “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who frees prisoners.” Like the soul—or perhaps integral to it—the act of human memory both bestows and rests on strong internal control. By extension, when “God remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs,” God is in control. A human being may lose his memory to Alzheimer’s or imprison himself within bitter memories, but God’s memory is never lost and never transmogrified. Divine memory is absolute.

On the other hand, to remember is to be affected. The terminology of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* is not God’s *omniscience*—a detached, non-relational, all-knowing Divine quality. The *Shemoneh Esrei* refers to God’s *remembering*. To remember is to select from with-

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in a pool of larger knowledge. When God “remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs,” this implies an act of Divine selection. It is the kindnesses of the Patriarchs that God deems worthy of His focus. God is affected by these human actions of the Patriarchs. God is responsive to them. God’s act of remembering implies that God bestows a benefit on account of it. This is *zekhut Avot*: Divine aid accruing to people not due to their own merits, but to the worthy acts of their ancestors. Because of the meritorious acts of the Patriarchs, their descendants benefit. God acts kindly with the descendants of the Patriarchs because the Patriarchs themselves acted kindly. The mechanism of God’s kind action is God’s *remembering*, His response from out of His eternity to the finite human being.

Remembering—the third phrase in the pattern of three—is two-dimensional. God’s remembering betokens both His control and His responsiveness. To remember is to be both self-sufficient and accessible. Out of God’s unconditional ownership of His own Self, He yet reaches out to humanity, responding to the kindnesses of the Patriarchs and favoring their descendants.

In this pattern of three, the third phrase is the synthesis of the first two. First: God is He “Who bestows beneficial kindnesses”; He bends down. Second: God is He “Who owns everything”; He withdraws into His absolute self-sufficiency. Third: God is He “Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs.” Call this twofold Divine quality—God’s act of remembering—the synthesis. Such is the pattern of three: God’s accessibility, God’s inaccessibility, and the synthesis of the two.

B.

Let us now examine the other instances of the pattern of three in the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. The first instance is the three-word phrase that opens the paragraph: “Blessed are You, Lord (*Hashem*, the Tetragrammaton).” On the level of form, a parallel Hebrew word for “blessed” is the Hebrew for “closed.” Grammatically, one may equate “God is blessed” (*barukh*) with “the door is closed” (*saggur*). How does a door become closed? A force closes it. A door that is closed is a door that has been acted upon. When the prayer says that God is “blessed,” this is a Hebrew form that connotes, *God is acted upon*. A God Who is blessed is a God Who is affected, accessible. The first word in the paragraph, “Blessed,” is the first word in the first instance of the pattern of three: the thesis, God’s accessibility.

The second word in the paragraph, “You,” is the second word in the first instance of the pattern of three. Addressed as “You,” God is objective, self-contained, unacted upon. “You” simply exists. The Hebrew form of the word, “You,” implies no accessibility. “You” is the self-sufficient, unaffected, absolute being of God. “You” is the antithesis, God’s inaccessibility.⁴

“Hashem” is the mysterious twofold name of God. On the one hand, “Hashem” is “I am that I am” (alternatively, “I shall be that I shall be;” *Exod.* 3:14)—the transcendent, absolute, inaccessible being of God. On the other hand, “Hashem” is the God of mercy, the God Who responds to the cries of His creations.⁵ “Hashem,” then, is the God Who is both accessible and inaccessible. “Hashem” is the third word in the first instance of the pattern of three: the synthesis.

The very opening of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, then, signals a complex relationship with God. God is able to be blessed by people; God is accessible. God is also absolutely beyond blessing; the objective “You” Who stands over against humanity. Finally, God is both; signaling the possibility of a relationship with God and the impossibility of ever knowing God. God is both accessible and inaccessible. What can this duality possibly mean? Nothing that the human being can specify with complete philosophical clarity. However, as both accessible and inaccessible, Hashem is the Being Whom people actually know. Hashem is the Being Whom people recognize in their daily lives. God is always with us, yet at times hauntingly absent. God is present, yet frustratingly not present. God is within one’s grasp, yet not so. God is here, and not here; present, and absent. God is this mysterious synthesis. God is “Hashem.”

C.

The next instance in the pattern of three is the grouping of one, two, and six Hebrew words: “our God; and God of Our fathers; God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” Within this pattern of three, the last phrase is itself threefold, a form we shall elucidate below.

Let us begin at the beginning, with “our God.” Who is “our God”? It would seem unnecessary for “our God” to be merely a shortened nomenclature for the next phrase, “God of our fathers.” If the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* merely asked us to understand our God as the God of our fathers, the prayer could simply have said, *God of our fathers* and omitted a prior, redundant reference, *our God*. And if this

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paragraph merely asked us to understand the God of our fathers as the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the prayer could simply have omitted a prior, redundant reference, *God of our fathers*. The inclusion of *our God* and *God of our fathers* suggests a distinction between two levels in “our” relationship to God. The first level is His relationship to us; this is “our God.” This is the God of people who are praying to Him now—the God of all the living; or, perhaps, the God of those in the specific congregation in which I am now praying. When God is “our God”—the God of a living group of people—He is accessible because, of necessity, His response to living individuals takes into account their individuality and each one’s ever changing relationship with Him. “Our God” is the God Who is affected, touched—acted upon. The first word in this second instance of the pattern of three, “our God,” is the thesis.

The second phrase in this pattern of three is “and the God of our fathers.” If “our God” is the God of the living, the God of “our fathers” is the God of the dead. Whatever our ancestors achieved in their relationship with God is of the past. It is a matter of record. It is set. Finished. It cannot be varied. It is analogous to “You,” to the second word in the first instance of the pattern of three. “You” is unacted upon. The “God of our fathers” *was* acted upon, but no longer is. He cannot be subject to the prayers of the fathers, since the fathers are gone. In whatever sense the prayers and spiritual struggles of our ancestors revealed something about God, that understanding is now history—fixed and unchangeable. The “God of our fathers” is the unaffected, absolute being of God. This God is the antithesis.

The third phrase in this pattern of three is “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” This phrase seems merely to amplify the meaning of “God of our fathers.” Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob betoken a relationship in and of the past, and therefore a fixed, unchangeable relationship. Indeed, because our fathers are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the phrase merely seems to identify just who “our fathers” are. However, this phrase is actually the synthesis of the two phrases that precede it.

On the one hand, it is true that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are dead and their levels of relationship with God, however exalted, are of the past, fixed and unchangeable. But the phrase mentions “God” three times: “God of Abraham,” “God of Isaac,” “God of Jacob.” The God of each of the Patriarchs was different in the sense that each Patriarch achieved a different relationship with God. In this sense, the God of one was not the same as the God of the other. In this sense, the God of each

was variable, and therefore this third phrase, in its totality, is analogous to “our God”—to the God of the living, to the infinitely varied possibilities in the relationship between God and His human creatures. The initial relationship between God and His human servants was varied in these three senses: the sense of Abraham’s, the sense of Isaac’s, the sense of Jacob’s. Taken collectively, the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob” is the accessible, acted upon God of the three Patriarchs. On the other hand, the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob *is* the God of the dead—fixed, unaffected, inaccessible. The “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob” is the synthesis.

D.

This three-part phrase conveys a still more subtle level in the pattern of three: the actual relation between Abraham’s, Isaac’s, and Jacob’s relationship to God. Abraham’s relationship was the thesis, Isaac’s the antithesis, and Jacob’s the synthesis.⁶ Here is a skeletal illustration of the Patriarchs’ embodiment of this pattern of three:

Abraham, the discoverer of God, the bold initiator and disseminator of monotheism, succeeded in becoming the model of faith for the generations because he listened. His life may be drawn as a series of responses: to God’s existence and ethics, to potential converts’ belief in God, to Lot’s needs for separate fields, to Lot’s captivity, to Sarah’s demand that Hagar be expelled, to Hagar’s and Ishamel’s claim on his love, to God’s commands and especially to His command to sacrifice Isaac, and to Sarah’s need for burial. Abraham is receptive. Abraham is the thesis. With this observation we begin to discern the repetition of the pattern of three in the first paragraph. In the first instance of the pattern, its first element is this: God is “blessed,” responsive, accessible. In the second instance of the pattern: God is “our God,” also responsive, accessible. In the third instance of the pattern: Abraham is the Patriarch whose leadership is rooted in his responsiveness.

Now comes Isaac. He is the opposite of Abraham. Almost slain on the altar, Isaac becomes “a perfect burnt offering” (Rashi, *Gen.* 25:26), that is, a human being almost in form only, a spiritual being, an occupant of the next world while in this one, so to speak; a person who is silent, inaccessible. Isaac, as it were, is of a piece with eternity. When his wife Rebecca wishes him to bless Jacob, rather than Esau, why does Rebecca not simply approach Isaac directly to offer her analysis of the respective characters of their two sons? Why all the convolution in

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orchestrating a situation in which, finally, Isaac does bless Jacob, not Esau? Why? Because Rebecca cannot talk to Isaac—because Isaac does not talk. The Biblical text records him speaking no more than a few words in his entire lifetime. He says nothing or almost nothing to his parents, his wife, his sons (except in formulaic blessing), to Avimelekh, to Avimelekh's general Phikhol, to the herdsmen of Gerar—to anyone. He is, as Rabbi Emanuel Feldman put it, "the Silent Patriarch," for he is a burnt offering.⁷ To be sure, he is not sedentary; he travels to the Negev, to Gerar, and to Beersheba. He confronts Avimelekh and sows the land successfully. Throughout, however, he is silent, and he alone among all the Patriarchs and Matriarchs never leaves the holy land. Isaac is a holy man; his spirituality blows with a gale force, as it were, forcing Rebecca off her camel the very first time she gazes upon the ungazeable: Isaac's unapproachable holy presence (*Gen.* 24:64). Isaac is "You"; he is analogous to that quality of God that is absolute, inaccessible, unapproachable. Isaac is the antithesis.

Now comes Jacob. In the first part of his life Jacob is like Abraham, responsive, accessible. In the second part of his life Jacob is like Isaac, removed, inaccessible, living in a world all his own. In the first part of his life Jacob is responsive to the call of God. When it becomes clear that Esau will not assume the responsibilities of the birthright, Jacob—by nature a "dweller of tents," a quiet, introspective, scholarly man—changes course. He responds to God's mission, assuming the responsibilities of the birthright.⁸ This ultimately entails flight and suffering under his father-in-law Laban, but Jacob perseveres in his responsibility to found the Jewish family, to go beyond both Abraham and Isaac in sustaining all of his children under the sign of God, however backsliding these children at times might be. Jacob embraces his mission even when confronted by the trickery of Laban. Earlier, receptive to Rachel, Jacob weeps when he first meets her, seeing her as the destined partner for his mission, even though he will not be buried with her (Rashi, *Gen.* 29:11). When Leah is foisted upon Jacob, he accepts this, too. Like Abraham, Jacob is responsive to the call of God in all its varied and unexpected turns. Like Abraham, Jacob is the thesis.

Then, with his children grown, Jacob's life takes an opposite turn. His sons quarrel and ultimately his son Joseph is, to Jacob's knowledge, killed. Jacob's life slides into paralysis. The scene of action shifts from Jacob to his sons. Jacob becomes desolate, unreachable. He is unresponsive to reason. When his sons, caught in a famine, tell him that they cannot return to Egypt for grain without Benjamin, Jacob does

not want to hear this. Jacob resists. He lives in his own world of unmitigated grief. By the time Joseph is discovered twenty-two years later and Jacob is reunited with him, Jacob is a broken man, bearing little if any resemblance to the younger Jacob who responded to his Creator's mission with a passion. Like Isaac, Jacob is analogous to that quality of God that is unapproachable. Jacob is too saddened to be receptive to anything but his grief, and when his grief is lifted, Jacob is permanently changed, constricted, inaccessible. On his deathbed Jacob blesses his sons from a position of absolute authority. There is no dialogue; he switches the order of the blessing of Joseph's sons, ignoring the guidance of the one son, Joseph, with whom he retains a close relationship (*Gen.* 48:1-20). Like Isaac, Jacob is the antithesis.

The first part of Jacob's life is like the responsiveness of Abraham, the second part of his life is like the inaccessibility of Isaac. In his status as the "choicest of the Patriarchs,"⁹ the only Patriarch whose children all remain within the fold, Jacob combines the practical accessibility of Abraham and the visionary, distant world of Isaac. Jacob hews from the quarry of life the dual quality that allows a parent to sustain the teachings of God within his own family. To retain one's children's loyalty to one's ideals, as Jacob alone does, he must listen and also withdraw, direct and also disengage, "be there" and also be absent. Jacob is vulnerable and passionate on the one hand, and removed and inaccessible on the other. He both invests in his children and removes himself from them. He bespeaks a totality whose quality of synthesis is demonstrated by its results: the continuity of the Jewish line. Jacob is the synthesis.

E.

Embedded within the pattern of five (to which we come shortly) is another pattern of three. In a list of five descriptions of God, these three appear in order: God "the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awesome One."

What is meant by God's being "the Great One" (*gadol*)? Rabbi Issachar Frand observes: To be "great" (*gadol*) is to be responsive. When Moses grew up, *Exodus* puts it this way, "And Moses became great (*va-yigdal Moshe*)."¹⁰ Being great, Moses "went out to his brethren and observed their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren. He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (*Exod.* 2:11-12). When Moses became great, Moses became

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responsive to the sufferings of his brethren. Similarly, the chief priest in the Temple is not the “first priest” but the “great priest” (*kohen gadol*). He is great because on Yom Kippur he is vulnerable to the pleas to God of the entire nation of Israel, and performs the service of atonement on its behalf. With God as “Great,” the first element in the pattern of three is consistent. “Blessed,” “our God,” “Abraham,” “Great”: they all connote accessibility. God “the Great One” is the thesis.

Now comes God “the Mighty One.” What is meant by God’s being “the Mighty One” (*gibbor*)? In the second paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, God’s might denotes primarily His power to give life to the dead. This is an absolute power, totally removed from humanity and totally reserved for God. God the Mighty One is the owner of the entire creation, which responds to His will, His power, not the other way around. Mighty God is the God Who is above all, controls all, the opposite of a being who is responsive. With God as “Mighty,” the second element in the pattern of three is consistent: “You,” “God of our fathers,” “Isaac,” “Mighty”: they all connote inaccessibility. God “the Mighty One” is the antithesis.

Now comes God “the Awesome One.” What is meant by God’s being “the Awesome One” (*nora*)? Like the word remembering, *awesome* points in two directions. On the one hand, God’s awesomeness conveys His utter separation, His complete inaccessibility. Awesome, God is incomprehensibly beyond any quality that a human being can grasp. On the other hand, the word implies a relationship, just as the word remembering does. A being is awesome only in the perception of someone else. God’s awesomeness implies a relationship with humanity. In awe of God, a person may figuratively or quite literally fall on his face, stretch out his body, and shudder in fear or gratitude for the presence of God. The Awesome One is at once above all, beyond, overpowering; and, at the same time, accessible and, in His very majesty, even intimate. With God as “Awesome,” the third element in the pattern of three is consistent. “Hashem,” “God of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob,” “God of Jacob,” “Awesome”: they all connote God’s simultaneous inaccessibility and accessibility. God “the Awesome One” is the synthesis.

III. THE PATTERN OF FIVE

Here is the pattern of five: “God the Powerful One, the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awesome One—God Whose Power is Supreme.”¹⁰ What right do we have to extract the middle three of these five descrip-

tions of God and call them a pattern of three? If there is to be a pattern of three within the pattern of five, why not the first three of the five descriptions? Why not the last three? Why the middle three—Great, Mighty, Awesome?

The first and the fifth descriptions of God serve as a protective enclosure, so to speak. They wrap the middle three at each end. They protect the ultimate meaning of God, which is *not* within the pattern of three. The first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* contains a pattern of five in order to modify and limit the pattern of three. The pattern of three is very subtle—thesis, antithesis, synthesis. There must be more straightforward, simple, unequivocal names of God—the first and fifth terms in the pattern of five. The ascription of certain characteristics to God—the essence of the pattern of three—must be placed within an absolute limitation because no human characterization of God is ultimately valid. The ascription of qualities to God helps the human being pray to God, but the human must know that God is beyond human understanding. The pattern of three within the pattern of five is surrounded on each end in order to convey a clear message: *as it were*. Yes, Hebrew terms for God may be understood by the human being; and a pattern of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis may help the worshipper understand the God before Whom he stands. But know: There is an ultimate limitation on all such understandings. The first and the fifth descriptions of God denote His absolute transcendence, beyond all human reach and description. On the front end of this pattern of three is this name of God: “God the Powerful One” (*El*). God is a power above even human descriptions of God. Only within the understanding of God’s absolute transcendence of human understanding may there reside a helpful pattern of three: the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awesome One. To make the point even more clear, the back end of this pattern of three is a still more absolute characterization of God: “God Whose Power is Supreme” (*El elyon*). The pattern of five, then, is an ultimate limitation on the pattern of three.

There is a second pattern of five. It hints at the Torah, and the Torah’s relationship to God. Imagine, for a moment, a ladder. The second through the sixth rungs represent the first pattern of five. Backing down one rung to the first rung of the ladder, we reach the phrase just before the pattern of five. This phrase is “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” This represents the narrative of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs—the first book of the Torah, *Genesis*. The next four words represent the next four books of the Torah. Together, they form

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the second pattern of five. Above, we presented a skeletal version of the Patriarchs' embodiment of the pattern of three; here, we present an even more skeletal version of the entire Torah—the Torah in five words. This version of the the Torah, rough edges notwithstanding, sets forth an essential understanding of each of its books and, taken in aggregate, of their relation to God.

“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob”: this summarizes *Genesis*, the book of the founding of the Jewish family. Next is “God the Powerful One.” This summarizes *Exodus*, the book of Divine power: the book of God’s power to inflict plagues (on Egyptians in the beginning of *Exodus*, on Jews in the middle of the book); the book of God’s overthrow of the most powerful human ruler and of nature itself; the book by which God breaks through human limitation to reveal Himself at Mount Sinai and His presence in the Tabernacle. Next is God “the Great One.” This summarizes *Leviticus*, the book of Divine service, of God’s responsiveness to human striving; the book in which God prescribes a system of animal sacrifices, a ritual mechanism for human beings to reach out and affect Him; the book in which God prescribes a system of ethics, an interpersonal mechanism for human beings to make His ways accessible; the book in which God prescribes a system of sabbaticals, an agricultural mechanism for human beings to elicit His ultimate concern—sustenance. Next is God “the Mighty One.” This summarizes *Numbers*, the book of absolute Divine control over life: the book of the Pillar of Cloud and the Pillar of Fire; the book of the imposition of forty years of wandering in order to kill off the slave generation of Egypt; the book of Divine aid in venemous conflicts—battles of life and death within and without the society of His people. Finally is God “the Awesome One.” This summarizes *Deuteronomy*, the book of man and God; the book, in large part, in which Moses addresses his people through his own words and which God then ratifies as His own words.¹¹ Two-directional, *Deuteronomy* is uniquely awesome in the history of spiritual leadership.

“God the Awesome One” (*Deuteronomy*) ends the second pattern of five—and what follows? “God Whose power is Supreme.” This points to God’s relationship to the five books of the Torah. Even though the Torah is God’s instrument for reaching His people, for conveying His will, and even though the Torah is immutable, there remains something beyond the Torah: transcendent God, wholly inaccessible—the God Whose power is Supreme. In possession of the Torah, of the unique medium of access to God, the worshipper must still acknowl-

edge that God remains ultimately a mystery. He is beyond even the Torah. The “side” of God that He reveals to humanity is the immutable Torah, but even this cannot exhaust God.

Once the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* makes the point that God is He Whose power is Supreme (*El elyon*), the first paragraph may continue with the pattern of three. Once the worshipper knows that nothing he understands of God, whether in prayer or in Torah, can exhaust God, he proceeds to the three-stage description of God that makes Him understandable to the human being. After the first paragraph states that God is He “Whose power is Supreme,” it proceeds to the clearest and fullest instance of the pattern of three—the pattern with which we began: God is He “Who bestows beneficial kindnesses, and Who owns everything, and Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs.”

IV. A MODIFIED PATTERN OF THREE

The first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* now turns in a different, climactic direction. The paragraph has set forth the pattern of three, the complexity of God’s relationship to human beings who stand in prayer before Him; and the pattern of five, the simplicity and superiority of God Himself. The paragraph has said much about God. Theology, however, is more than God, and more than God in relation to individuals. Theology is God in relation to the mission of His people as a whole—to Jewish destiny. The first paragraph now proceeds: “And Who brings a Redeemer to the descendants of their descendants” In this phrase, all of history is skipped. From the God “Who remembers the kindnesses of the Patriarchs,” the prayer reaches directly to the final Redemption, to the Messiah, who is being brought to the Patriarchs’ descendants.

The role of each praying Jew is to focus on the consummation, the final rectification of humanity. Nothing less than the perfection, the absolute elevation of all people under God, is the climactic theme of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. Although the phrase is in the third person (“descendants of their descendants”), the meaning is in the first person: We who are uttering this prayer, who are the descendants of the Patriarchs, are the people to whom the Redeemer is being brought. This process is not merely for some distant generation. We ourselves are descendants of the Patriarchs.

Why, then, has the Redeemer not yet arrived? The answer is in the

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conclusion of the phrase. It begins with a two-part message: God brings a Redeemer to the descendants “for His Name’s sake, with love.” These two phrases initiate a modified pattern of three. Let us begin with the second phrase, “with love.”

God brings the Redeemer “with love.” A loving God is a responsive God. To bring the Redeemer, God reaches out of His unconditional sufficiency. Lovingly, He touches all of humanity. God brings the Redeemer because He is affected by humanity’s cry. God bestows the ultimate beneficial kindness. Call this the thesis.

God also brings the Redeemer “for His Name’s sake.” This focuses on God as self-contained, inaccessible, unacted upon. In bringing the Redeemer, God acts as the owner of everything; God is above everything, including human prayer. God brings the Redeemer not because He is affected by humanity’s cry, but for its own sake. Call this the antithesis.

Note: The order of these two phrases, “for His Name’s sake, with love,” reverses the standard order in the normal pattern of three. In the normal pattern (in all of its other iterations), God’s accessibility comes first. For example, God is first “Blessed”—He is accessible to the human utterance. Only then is God “You”—self-sufficient, objective, unaffected by human utterance (*“Blessed are You”*). The normal pattern of three begins with God’s accessibility—this is the initial human encounter with God. Not so here, in the context of the Redeemer, the Messiah. God’s self-sufficiency comes first: “for His Name’s sake, with love.” The emphasis is on God’s absolute, independent being.

Now, what is the third phrase in the pattern of three—the synthesis? The actual arrival of the Messiah depends on this. Will the synthesis connote an even balance between God’s Name and God’s love—between God’s inaccessibility and His accessibility, between God’s self-sufficiency and His relational quality? Will God show His mysterious, impenetrable synthesis—His meeting point combining absolute independence of, and absolute concern for, humanity? Or, will the balance tip in the one direction or the other—toward a strictly or preponderantly Divine action, or a strictly or preponderantly human effort (such as the rectification of sin)? Is the arrival of the Messiah dependent on God or on man?

The modified pattern of three indicates that the Messiah’s arrival will be due primarily to Divine decision, not to human rectification. For the final element in this pattern of three, like its first two elements, is slightly yet significantly modified. The first two phrases in the final pattern of three are in reverse order, emphasizing the self-sufficiency of God, and it is precisely on this note that the modified pattern of three concludes.

The third element, the synthesis, in this pattern of three reads: “King Who Helps and Saves and Shields.”¹² The synthesis is itself three-fold (like the third element in the second pattern of three, “God of Abraham, God Isaac, God of Jacob”). As a Helper, God is a participant in human redemption that human beings themselves advance. God is affected by the human striving for redemption; He helps. As such, God is accessible. This is the thesis. As a Savior, God rescues totally. To be a *moshi’a* (a savior) is to rescue from destruction entirely without reference to any participation by another party. As a Savior, God is unaided even by human outcry or striving. God is inaccessible. This is the antithesis. As a Shield, God is a defense. This is more than a “help” and less than a “salvation.” As a shield, God does more than help; He provides a level of absolute aid—a defense. At the same time, God does less than save; He does not actively rescue, He merely provides a defense. As such, God is both accessible and inaccessible. As a Shield, God is the synthesis.

Note: There is an additional element in this pattern of three. Literally, the phrase reads: “King Who Helps and Saves and Shields.” This means: the Helper is the King, the Savior is the King, the Shield is the King. The single additional word at the pattern’s beginning, “King,” gives this pattern of three a clear emphasis. Each of the three elements in the pattern is modified by the initial characterization of God: He is King! Absolute. Bringer of the Redeemer to the descendants of the Patriarchs—He, the King. The arrival of the Messiah ultimately depends on God, notwithstanding the element of human participation signified by God as Helper, and notwithstanding God’s sensitivity to the human outcry, signified by God’s bringing the Redeemer “with love.” The modified pattern of three, whose subject is the final redemption of humankind under God, concludes with a synthesis in which Divine self-sufficiency outweighs Divine responsiveness. Through act and word, people may turn to God throughout history and entreat his response; history’s summation, however, is primarily the act and word of God.

V. THE PATTERN OF ONE

The paragraph concludes with a pattern of three (the standard form of blessing) and then with a pattern of one: “Blessed are You, God, *Shield of Abraham*.” To state His relationship to Abraham, God needs no pattern of three (or of five), only a pattern of one: Shield of Abraham. The conclusion of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* has three implications. First, God’s final relationship with humanity is the synthesis,

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the vital yet mysterious combination of God's accessibility and inaccessibility; His responsiveness to human need and absolute self-sufficiency—God as the Shield. Second, the final name for God is a relational one—not, for example, “God Who is Powerful” or “God Whose Power is Supreme”—but the Shield of a human being. Third, oneness is the key. There is only one founder, Abraham. Abraham holds a special place in God's dispensation. The Redeemer is being brought to the descendants (plural) of the three Patriarchs (plural), but there is only *one* founder, Abraham. Finally, and most significantly, there is only one God. He may be understood in three ways, or in five ways, both of which aid the worshipper in striving to address God, but none of which ultimately describe God. God is the One and Only. Ultimately, God is understood in only one way. The Shield of Abraham.

NOTES

1. One-hundred-and-twenty elders and prophets formulated the *Shemoneh Esrei* roughly 2,500 years ago. See *Megillah* 17b-18a.
2. *Hiddushei Rabbeinu Chaim ha-Levi al ha-Rambam, Hilkhos Tefillah*, no. 1. R. Chaim Soloveitchik determines the special status of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei* by resolving two apparently contradictory sources in Maimonides' *Code*.
3. “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob”: *Exod.* 3:15. “God the Powerful One, the Great One, the Mighty One, the Awesome One”: *Deut.* 10:17. “God Whose Power is Supreme”: *Gen.* 14:18-20, 22. “And Who owns everything”: cf. *Gen.* 14:19, 22 (“Owner of heaven and earth”). “Shield of Abraham”: see *Gen.* 14:20 and *Pesahim* 117b.
Five early versions (*nuscha'ot*) of this paragraph are cited in Y. Jacobson, *Netiv Binah* (Tel Aviv, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 272-73. The *nusah* in *Mahzor Vitri* is precisely the same as our own. The other four are precisely the same as our own for roughly sixty to eighty percent of the paragraph; then they diverge in wording or content or both. I thank Rabbi Michael Shmidman for pointing *Netiv Binah* out to me.
4. Traditional Hebrew prayers and blessings are widely understood as putting their reciter in the position of addressing God as both close and distant; see *Netiv Binah* (note 3), pp. 60-63. For example, “You” is often coupled with “Who has commanded us,” the *You* conveying closeness to God for being in the second person, and the *Who has commanded us* conveying distance from God for being in the third person. *Who has commanded us*, however, is not found in the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, nor are other standard, Hebrew, third-person phrases of prayer or blessing. Notwithstanding the validity of the *You-Who* couplet per se, I do not believe that *You* must always indicate closeness. *You* must be taken contextually, and in the context of the first paragraph of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, *You*

- is coupled with Blessed. As such, *You* can indicate the exact opposite of closeness, as I elaborate in the body of this article.
5. Rashi, *Exod*, 34:6; see *Rosh Hashanah* 17b.
 6. The full elaboration of this point would require a study unto itself, for two reasons. First, in a Divine text, the possibilities of interpretation of the personalities and actions of the three Patriarchs are virtually limitless. No summary, such as this, can but hint at their character. Second, I set down here only the rough edges of my own interpretation of each of the Patriarchs' relationship to God; and when dealing with such fertile, complex figures as the Patriarchs, rough edges are given to ambiguity. For a fuller elaboration, see my *Illuminating the Generations* (Brooklyn, 1992).
 7. Emanuel Feldman, "Isaac, The Silent Patriarch," *The Biblical Echo* (Hoboken, 1986). See also the penetrating comment of Netsiv, *Ha'amek Davar* on *Gen.* 24:65.
 8. R. Joseph J. Hurvitz, "Darkei ha-Hayyim," *Madregat ha-Adam* (Brooklyn, 1948).
 9. *Genesis Rabbah* 76:1; see also *Zohar* I:119; 163, 201; II:26.
 10. In *ha-el ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-ha-nora*, the second through the fourth words may be either adjectives or nouns. I read them as nouns. For example, *ha-el ha-gadol* may connote either the adjectival "the great God" or "the Powerful One, the Great One."
 11. Maharal and *Keli Hemdah*, cited in Yehudah Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah: The Classical Interpretations of Major Topics and Themes in the Torah*, trans. Shmuel Himmelstein (Brooklyn, 1991), pp. 1186-1190.
 12. In *melekh ozer u-moshi'a u-magen*, the second through the fourth words may be either nouns or verbs. I read them as verbs. For example, *melekh ozer* may connote either "God Who is King, God Who is a Helper" (noun) or "the King Who Helps" (verb).