

Welcome to this session of Take 5 for Tefila, a program sponsored by the Orthodox Union, as part of their Tefila Education Initiative. In this session, I will try to answer the question: why did Chazal choose Brachos as the structure around which they built the Tefilos?

Let us begin with a short history lesson. There are two key dates in the history of Tefila: the date on which the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, the year 70 of the Common Era and the date on which the printing press was invented, 1439. The date the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed is significant because it sets the date after which the Siddur, the order of prayer, began to develop. Whether fixed prayer in the form of Shemona Esrei was regularly recited before the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash is an issue that I will leave for scholars to debate. However in terms of when Chazal established an order of prayer; a practice of reciting Shemona Esrei at least three times a day and Tefila B'Tzibbur, Tefila in which at least ten adult men recite Shemona Esrei together, undoubtedly they all began as regular practices only after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.

What is the significance of the date on which the printing press was invented? Ask yourself the following question: how much of the Siddur do you know by heart? Imagine a world in which obtaining a written copy of the Tefilos was not easy because any copies that were available were handwritten, copied from another handwritten Siddur. We take it for granted today that when we walk into a synagogue, we will find a Siddur. Think of how different your experience in synagogue would be if you had no Siddur from which to pray. Under those circumstances, you would have to recite the Tefilos from memory or you would need to listen closely to the Brachos that the Schaliach Tzibbur, the prayer leader, recited and answer Amen to each Bracha. That is why the date when the printing press was invented is so important for understanding Jewish prayer. That invention provided anyone who wanted to recite all the words of the Tefilos the opportunity to pray from a written Siddur.

After that short introduction, you can appreciate the challenge that Chazal faced after the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. Chazal were encouraging the Jewish community to adopt the fixed prayers and to recite them three times a day. How were they to transmit that information to the public when the transmission was done primarily through verbal means? The solution to the problem was found by structuring the Tefilos around Brachos. The Brachos provided a solution to two problems: transmitting the Tefilos to as large a group as possible as quickly as possible and involving the community in prayer when most of the community did not know the words of the prayers. The Brachos were easy to remember and the Brachos provided a mechanism by which many could fulfill their obligation for prayer through the efforts of only a few. Brachos were easy to remember because the opening words of all Brachos followed a pattern. Once you knew the words Baruch Ata Hashem or Baruch ata hashem Elokeinu Melech Ha'Olam or Baruch ata hashem Elokeinu Melech Ha'Olam Asher Kiddishanu B'Mitzvotav Vi'Tzeivanu, you knew half of all the Brachos. In addition, the Brachos served as mnemonic devices that helped in remembering the content of each of the Brachos. That is why Chazal established the rule that the theme of the Bracha must always be stated just before the concluding Bracha. By employing Brachos as the structure of the Tefilos, Chazal were able to quickly train those who could perform as prayer leaders. Being

able to train prayer leaders quickly solved the second problem. Once prayer leaders knew the Tefilos, they could spread out among the communities so that they could act as the mechanism by which many people could fulfill their obligation to recite the Tefilos by simply answering Amen to the Brachos of the prayer leaders.

That further demonstrates the significance of the invention of the printing press. Until the printing press was invented, the Schaliach Tzibbur, the prayer leader, was a very important member of the community. Once written Siddurim became available to everyone at affordable prices, anyone who could read and understand Hebrew could act as the Schaliach Tzibbur. Until then acting as a Schaliach Tzibbur was a profession and a good one at that. If you were born into a family in which your father was a professional Schaliach Tzibbur, chances were that you would become a Schaliach Tzibbur because your father would teach you the words of the Tefilos starting from a very young age. That is why in the Middle Ages we see examples of families who from generation to generation acted as Schluchai Tzibbur.

The significance of what Chazal accomplished by structuring the Tefilos around Brachos can also be seen by answering another question: Was the word “אמן” responsible for the fact that the Jewish religion survived after the destruction of the **בית המקדש** and throughout the long Diaspora? An argument can be made for that hypothesis if you agree with me that it was the requirement that ten men congregate together to pray and to listen to **קריאת התורה** that kept the Jewish People alive. That practice resulted in Jews living near each other in order that they could practice their religion to the fullest. The synagogue then became the center of the community and served both the religious and the social needs of the community. Why was the word “אמן” so important? Answering Amen to the **ברכות** provided the mechanism by which many fulfilled their obligation to recite the **תפילות** by the act of one person.

The significance of what Chazal accomplished can further be seen from my own family's experiences. My father ז"ל, a Holocaust survivor, told me that wherever he was during the war, and he was in Auchwitz, as well as in other concentration camps, he always knew which days were Shabbos and which days were the holidays. And in whatever few minutes he and his fellow captives had, they tried to recite as much of the Tefilos as they could. Did they need Siddurim to do so? No. As long as one of them could recite the Tefilos from memory, then all those present could fulfill the Mitzvah of Tefila by answering Amen to the Brachos of the one reciting the Tefilos.

So the next time you answer Amen to the Bracha of the Schaliach Tzibbur think not only about the Halachic reasons for doing so. Remember too how the word “Amen” kept the Jewish people alive as a people throughout the many difficult moments of Jewish history.

Thank you for listening to me. I look forward to spending more time with you studying Tefila.