

Parashat Eikev, 2021:

Who Can Make Heard All His Praise?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains a phrase, familiar to many, that is found in the first blessing (*Birkat Avot*) of the *Shemoneh Esrei*: “He is the great (*hagadol*), mighty (*hagibor*) and awesome (*v’hanorah*) G-d (*A-le*).” (*Sefer Devarim* 10:17, translation, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal*, *The Living Torah*) If it is acceptable to declare, “*HaA-le hagadol hagibor v’hanorah*,” one might think it is permissible to add other descriptions of the Almighty during the recitation of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. This approach was undertaken by an anonymous *shaliach tzibbur*, who, to his surprise, was strongly criticized by Rabbi Chanina bar Chama, as recounted in *Talmud Bavli, Berachot* 33b:

A certain [reader] went down in the presence of Rabbi Chanina and said, “O’ G-d, the great *hagadol, hagibor, v’hanorah*, majestic, powerful, awe-filled, strong, fearless, sure and honored.” He waited until he had finished, and when he completed [his prayer] he said to him, “Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this?” (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

Rabbi Chanina summarily rejected the *shaliach tzibbur*’s seven personal additions, asking him the rhetorical question, “Have you concluded all the praise of your Master? Why do we want all this?” Moreover, in the continuation of our Talmudic passage, Rabbi Chanina further teaches us that even our phrase, “*HaA-le hagadol hagibor v’hanorah*,” would not have been included in the

Shemoneh Esrei by the *Anshei Kenneset HaGadolah* (Men of the Great Assembly), “had not *Moshe Rabbeinu* mentioned them in the Torah.”

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) codified this position of the *Gemara*:

A person should not be profuse in his mention of adjectives describing G-d, and say: “The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, courageous, and strong G-d,” for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises. Instead, one should mention [only] the praises that were mentioned by Moshe, of blessed memory.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah IX:7*, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

The Rambam’s reasoning as to why one is proscribed from adding new descriptions of Hashem in the *Shemoneh Esrei* is clear: “for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises.” Quite simply, finite man is incapable of properly depicting the majesty and greatness of the Almighty. Therefore, our praises must be limited to the Torah’s own words, no matter how language-adept we may be.

Both Rabbi Chanina’s position and the Rambam’s *p’sak din* (halachic conclusion) were anticipated by *Dovid HaMelech* in *Sefer Tehillim* 106:2: “Who can speak of the mighty deeds of the L-rd? [Who] can make heard all His praise?” As Rabbeinu Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) explains in his commentary on *Sefer Tehillim*: “[*Dovid HaMelech*] provides us with the rationale as to why we laud Hashem, even though no one has the ability to [accurately] praise His mighty deeds and make known His true degree of greatness, but rather, only a portion thereof.” Closer to our own time, the Malbim’s (1809-1879) gloss on this verse, as found in his commentary on *Sefer Tehillim*, echoes this interpretation by emphasizing our inability to apprehend Hashem’s essence and the magnitude of His grandeur: “This means we praise Hashem because He is wholly good and His kindness is forever, and not He, Himself [as His essence eludes us], since it is impossible to speak of His mighty deeds *m’tzad atzmam* (as they are in reality).” (Translations my own)

With Hashem's endless beneficence, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to grow ever closer to Him. May we realize His goodness and recognize that His kindness endures, forevermore. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)