

THE TWENTY-FOUR-HOUR CYCLE (PART I)

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Just as every person's life has its periods of Night and Day, so each and every day has its "Nights and Days," its moments of Darkness and Light. This becomes especially clear when seen in terms of the set of daily prayers which take a Jew through the twenty-four-hour cycle.

It was the Patriarchs who introduced the three daily prayers. Avraham initiated the Morning Prayer, Yitzchak the Afternoon Prayer, and Yaakov the Evening Prayer (*Berakhot* 26b). Our Sages taught that the morning and midday prayers are compulsory, whereas the nighttime prayer is optional (*Berakhot* 27b). Nowadays, the Evening Prayer has also been made compulsory (*Orach Chaim* 237:1).

When these dinim abound – when Night falls – one must be able to see beyond the Night, beyond the difficulties and confusions that beset him (Likutey Halakhot, Arvit 4:1,2).

This is how prayer gets us “through the Night.”

Ma’ariv, The Evening Prayer. Rebbe Nachman teaches: We should try to make “one” out of our prayers. This is done by keeping in mind the very first letter we utter until we finish saying the very last word. Then the prayer is one unit. By doing this, we can remove our gaze from this world completely and be unified with the One, with God. We will then always be able to overcome our troubles, because we can see beyond the physical world and gaze upon the “end,” the goal, which is The One. Then we will recognize that all is good and will merit being happy (*Likutey Moharan* I, 65).

The Jewish twenty-four-hour cycle begins at night. Night is confusion and difficulty, which in the terminology of the Kabbalah is known as judgments or *dinim* (as opposed to Day which refers to kindness or *chesed*). The Evening Prayer, which is the first of the daily prayers, is therefore recited at the onset of the judgments. When these *dinim* abound – when Night falls – one must be able to see beyond the Night, beyond the difficulties and confusions that beset him (*Likutey Halakhot, Arvit* 4:1,2). This is how prayer gets us “through the Night.”

Reb Noson writes: Seeing that there is no commandment to recite the Evening Prayer, and that one offers a prayer at night out of an inner desire and not as a fulfillment of one’s obligation, why did Yaakov have to initiate it? Would anyone have assumed that it is forbidden to pray at night, that Yaakov had to establish a precedent to show that nighttime prayer is permissible? Besides, of what value is the implementation of an optional custom or devotion? However, Yaakov foresaw the forthcoming exiles, the long Nights and the ever-increasing obstacles to serving God. He anticipated the extended Darkness created by the power of the resistance to spirituality. Therefore, Yaakov established the Evening Prayer. He initiated Ma’ariv to show that even in our darkest moments, we have a path by which we can always return to God.

He also foresaw that because of the great Darkness which the long exile would generate, it would be impossible to force someone to pray. The bitter exile, Night, is a concept of silence. It is as if a person is intimidated by his

surroundings, bound into a long silent suffering, where he sees no end and cannot raise his voice to cry out over his situation. Indeed, were it not for the great Tzaddikim – whose spiritual strength and foresight prepared various means and counsels to guide us through this long Night – we would never have been able to withstand the pressures and oppression of the exiles. People would long ago have given up all hope of praying to God and returning to Him. Thus, Yaakov “came to the place and spent the night there... He dreamt a dream in which he saw a ladder standing on the ground, and its top reached up to heaven” (Genesis 28:11,12). By spending the Night there and descending to where he descended, only to then rise up all the way to Heaven, Yaakov did indeed set the precedent that even in the darkest Darkness of the longest Night we have to awaken with strong desires to pray and return to God. This is the Evening Prayer. We must never despair!

But if the Evening Prayer is so important, then why, indeed, was it originally left optional? We can understand this by looking at the reason why the daily liturgy was established in the first place. This was done to help those who would not be able to entreat God without the aid of a formalized rite for presenting the prayers. However, the most productive and complete prayer is one that a person says straight from his heart; the private, secluded prayer known as *hitbodedut*. This is what Yaakov had in mind – a spontaneous prayer, one that a person can always offer, no matter where he is or what he has done in the past. This is the optional prayer introduced by Yaakov as the Evening Prayer. His intention was to instill in us the courage never to give up – never – even in the darkest moments (*Likutey Halakhot, Minchah 7:89*).

Taken from the book Crossing the Narrow Bridge – chapter 11 – Day and Night