



June 2010

Avinu אָבִינוּ

Blessings in our Heavenly Father!

Avinu: Our Father

We are setting aside this month to honor our Father in Heaven as Americans set aside a day to honor earthly fathers (June 20 this year). What words come to your mind when you hear the word father? How about daddy, leader, provider, love, strength, guidance, protection, role model, and teacher? When earthly fathers accurately reflect God, our Heavenly Father, these qualities are all present. Sadly, this is not often the case in today's family but that does not change who God is! He remains the model Father in spite of the failing of man.

The heart of biblical fathering is intimacy of relationship. Yeshua, the Messiah, had that kind of relationship with God, His Father. He said that they were "one." (John 17:11) He also expressed the desire that His *talmidim* (disciples) would have that same oneness of relationship. A starting point for that intimacy is embracing the truth that believers in Yeshua are part of the same family. We are "*mishpochah*." We have the same Father. God is "our Father."

The Avinu Prayer

Yeshua gave His *talmidim* a model for prayer that has been called "The Lord's Prayer" or "The Disciples' Prayer" down through the ages. This prayer is part of the famous "Sermon on the Mount" in which the Messiah instructed His followers concerning the Kingdom of God. It is the only prayer written by Yeshua Himself, and has been translated into over 1,400 languages.

Since Yeshua, Jesus, was a Jew who spoke Hebrew to His Jewish followers, this special prayer was certainly spoken first in the Hebrew language. In ancient Hebrew, it was known as the "*Avinu Prayer*", based on the opening Hebrew word meaning "Our Father."

In a fascinating book, **A Prayer to Our Father: Hebrew Origins of The Lord's Prayer**, Nehemia Gordon, a traditional Jew and Hebrew linguistic scholar, and Keith Johnson, an African American Christian, explore the Hebrew origins of the *Avinu Prayer*. The authors' search for the original Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew (which includes the *Avinu Prayer*) led them on a journey which culminated in verifying the existence of 28 manuscripts of Matthew in Hebrew. Their search was based on the 1987 findings of George Howard, an American scholar at University of Georgia who proved that there was indeed an original Hebrew version of Matthew.

Some of the findings of Gordon and Johnson result in some modifications of the words we are used to reading based on the Greek translations. However, examining the *Avinu Prayer* in its original Hebraic and Jewish contexts broadens our understanding of the original, intended meaning.

Our Father in Heaven

Avinu, our Father, was an Hebraic expression long before the time of Yeshua. It is first seen in the Book of Isaiah chapter 63:15-16: "*Look down from heaven... You, O Lord, are our Father [Avinu]; our Redeemer from Everlasting is Your name.*" God, as Father, is found in both ancient and modern Hebrew prayers. Each year, at the Feast of Trumpets, Jewish people the world over recite a prayer called "*Avinu, Malkeinu*", "Our Father, Our King."

The ancient Israelites included various aspects of God as father in the names of their children. *Avi-el* meant "God is my Father," *Avi-da*: "My Father knows," *Avi-ezer*: "My Father helps," *Avi-ram*: "My Father is exalted," and *Avi-tuv*: "My Father is good."

It is interesting to note that the *Avinu Prayer* does not begin with *Avi*, "my Father," but rather *Avi-nu*, "our Father." Was Yeshua saying here that our relationship with God extends beyond ourselves? Is this a reflection of God's calling of Israel as a "people?" Are God's people today spiritually responsible for one another? Think about it. Don't most good, loving fathers long for their children—their entire family—to love one another even as they love him? Perhaps *Avinu* expresses that horizontal as well as vertical aspect of love.

God, our Father, dwells in heaven, *shamayim* in Hebrew. The word for heaven includes the word for water—*mayim*. Read Genesis 1:6-8 to understand how closely tied the Hebrew language is to the biblical text.

May Your Name be Sanctified

The King James Version of the Bible translates *שְׁמִי קֹדֶשׁ* as "Hallowed be Thy name." This translation leads us away from the original meaning of the Hebrew text. It is not a statement of fact, i.e., that God's name is Holy, but a **call to action!** We are to sanctify God's name by the way we live! [A similar phrase appears in the traditional Jewish memorial kaddish prayer: "May His great name be sanctified and magnified."] There are two phrases in Hebrew that express how a person's life either brings glory or dishonor to the name of God. *Kiddush Hashem*, literally the sanctification of the name, means to perform deeds that glorify the name of the Almighty. *Hilul Hashem*, the exact opposite, means to perform deeds that profane God's name.

Since names in Hebrew were directly connected with one's reputation, Yeshua is also telling His disciples to pray that they will live in such a way that God's good name, and His reputation, are not tarnished. A deep understanding of this part of the *Avinu Prayer* might have been helpful in averting the scandals that have brought reproach upon the name of God and the Body of Messiah in recent years. Like it or not, our God is judged by His representatives: Us!

Matthew 5:16 is an excellent example of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the name: "*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.*" The name of God, His reputation, grows greater when we have works that match our faith, and a walk that matches our talk. In one word: integrity.

May Your Kingdom be Blessed

Malkhut (mahl-KHOOT) is the Hebrew word for kingdom. The Hebrew Matthew manuscripts all say, "May your kingdom be blessed," rather than "May your kingdom come." Is there much difference? Potentially, there is. If the word "come" is interpreted as a future happening, then there is a big difference! Yeshua's kingdom is already here—now. The Hebrew is not speaking about a future end-time kingdom, but a very real present-day kingdom. Yeshua made reference to this present-day kingdom in Luke 17:20-21: "*Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, See here! or See there! For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.'*" On other occasions, Yeshua said, "...the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15); (Matthew 10:7).

What was the ancient Jewish concept of kingdom? Kingdom referred to lordship, rule, reign, and sovereignty. The main focus was the King and His sphere of influence and dominion over the lives of people. When Yeshua's disciples prayed for His kingdom to be blessed, they were praying for the extension of His rule in hearts and lives. This was not a prayer about territory or geography. It was about more souls bowing to the lordship of the King: Yeshua. In the Gospels, the Kingdom of Heaven is established as an ongoing process. The parable of the leaven (Matthew 13:33) is an illustration of the gradual progression and spreading of God's kingdom.

Yeshua wants us to pray along these lines: "May the rule and reign of the King be blessed! May all the citizens of the kingdom accept the rule of the King! May the influence of the King spread far and wide throughout the earth! May our King reclaim the allegiance of humanity, as the kingdom of satan and darkness is defeated. May the whole world bow before the Holy One of Israel to whom belongs all obedience, honor, and respect."

Your Will Shall be Done...

...in heaven and on earth. While the Greek version of the *Avinu Prayer* contains a call to action to do God's will, the Hebrew contains a **statement of fact**. The words in Hebrew express the idea that our Heavenly Father is All-Powerful. This was certainly Yeshua's attitude towards the will of His Father. There was never a question whether He would obey His Father's will. The prospect of an excruciating death would not even deter Him from fulfilling the will of God. God's will would be accomplished. And it was.

We know that God's angels always do the will of God: "*Bless the Lord, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word*" (Psalm 103:20). We are left wondering, however, about man's free will and his freedom of choice to disobey the will of God. In spite of this, human rebellion factor, God will still have the last word. He wins. He is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, and His rule extends to the highest heavens and the deepest parts of the earth. If we confess by faith that God's will shall be done in heaven and earth, we are ascribing strength and power to Him, as Psalm 68:34 says, "*Ascribe strength to God; His excellence is over Israel, and His strength is in the clouds.*" We believe God's will **shall** be done!

Daily Bread

The Hebrew rendering, "Give us our bread continually/daily" is somewhat complicated because of the difficulty of translating the word *tamid* which has the connotation of continually, and is found in the form *te-mee-deet* in the Hebrew Matthew. The phrase "our bread" is *lach-may-noo*, a form of the word *lechem*, the traditional word for bread in Hebrew. You will find the phrases "*lechem chukenu*" used for "daily bread" in other Hebrew translations, but again, the Hebrew has been taken from the Greek manuscripts according to Gordon and Johnson, not directly from the Hebrew Matthew.

Bread in Hebrew thought had a broader meaning than simply "bread" as we know it today. *Lechem* signified basic food, or basic nourishment. It would also have meant different things to different groups within ancient Jewish society. For example, as pointed out by Gordon and Johnson, *lechem* to shepherds would be "meat," and to fishermen it would be "fish," since most people were living at a subsistence level relying on a daily provision of food to survive.

Since most of us no longer understand that our lives depend on God's continual provision, the idea of "daily bread" is lost on us. This is not the case with millions of people around the world. As you read this letter, our oldest son, Jonathan, will probably be in the Sudan. In the past few months, he has been with the Dalits, the "Untouchables" in India, and in Kenya and Uganda ministering among the poorest of the poor. His heart has been broken as he has seen extreme poverty, deprivation, abuse, and man's inhumanity to man. He has witnessed multitudes praying for their daily bread.

There is another meaning for bread in Hebrew thought; it is often a metaphor for the Word of God, which sustains the universe and nourishes the human soul. Man needs more than physical nourishment as expressed in Deuteronomy 8:3: "*...man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.*" The *manna*, the heavenly bread, that God sent His children daily in the wilderness for forty years was part of the same message.

Living with God is a one-day-at-a-time experience. He is not found in the past. He is not found as we project to the future. He is the Great I AM who is only found in the present. We need Him daily.

We need Him continually. He is our daily source, our daily provision, our daily Bread, and Yeshua, our Messiah, identified Himself as the "true bread from heaven." *"For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* (John 6:33)

Forgive Us the Debt of Our Sins...

Forgiveness has always been a central part of Judaism. One of God's names is *El Nosay* (pronounced *no-SAY*), the forgiving God, literally "the God who bears the burden of sin." The Torah teaches that just as God forgives us, we must forgive one another. (See Leviticus 19:17-18.) According to the Hebrew principle of *midah ke-neged midah* or reciprocal justice, God treats us the way we treat others.

The Hebrew word for forgiveness, *mehol*, literally means "to cancel a debt." When God forgives us, through Yeshua, the debt of our sin is paid in full! Note the use of the word "us" instead of "me." The authors explain this usage: "In Hebrew thought, a person bears both an individual responsibility for his own actions as well as a collective responsibility for the society in which he lives." We see clearly in the Bible that Israel was both blessed and punished **as a nation**. During the National Day of Prayer last month, we joined with others all over our nation to repent not only for our individual sins, but also for the sins of our nation, that we have done little to correct. (See 2 Chronicles 7:14.)

Yeshua, continuing in this Jewish tradition, made forgiveness a primary emphasis of His teaching. Both aspects of forgiveness were crucial: God forgiving man, and man forgiving man. In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18:23-35, Yeshua re-emphasizes that if we do not forgive our brothers from our heart, our heavenly Father will not forgive us. This dovetails with another of Yeshua's kingdom principles: *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy"* (Matthew 5:7).

Do Not Bring Us Into the Hands of a Test...

Gordon and John maintain that in the original Hebrew, the word "test" rather than "temptation" is used in verse 13 (the same word as seen in Matthew 16:1). An almost identical ancient prayer is found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot 606*, "Do not bring me into the hands of sin, or into the hands of a test, or into the hands of shame."

While it might be preferable to go through life without tests, they are necessary and unavoidable. Tests show us how much we really love God, and they reveal much about our character and faithfulness. Job was tested. Abraham was tested. Yeshua was tested. These tests did not happen as a result of sin. But there are tests that we bring upon ourselves by stepping out of the will of God and opening ourselves up to deception and evil. Matthew 6:13 is really one thought and an example of Hebrew parallelism: Do not bring us into the hands of a test and protect us from all evil means: "Help us to escape being in a position where our sin brings us to a place of testing." In other words: Evil (*ra* in Hebrew) is real, and we need our Father to help us recognize it, resist it, and defeat all forms of evil in our lives.

Amen!

Yeshua ended the *Avinu Prayer* with the word "Amen," a Hebrew word which has a root meaning truth, *emet* in Hebrew. Amen is also related to the Hebrew *emunah* meaning "faith" and "belief." Therefore, Amen implies "true faith" and "true belief." According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Amen is the most widely known word in human speech.

While the traditional benediction at the conclusion of the *Avinu Prayer* does not appear in many manuscripts of the New Testament, including Hebrew Matthew, we would like to close with the famous words of praise which certainly are true:

"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

May you receive the Love of *Avinu*, Our Heavenly Father, in a special way this month!

P.S. May all Fathers be especially blessed and strengthened to do the will of *Avinu Shebashamayim*.