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THE PRAYER BEFORE PRAYING

The Sabba Kaddisha of Radoshitz, in his sefer, Niflaos (vol. 1, pp. 21–22), recorded an amazing story about the formulation of this "Prayer Before Praying." The story goes like this:

When he was a child, the Sabba Kaddisha was once visiting Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. He was conversing with chassidim from the Rebbe's inner circle in front of the Rebbe's home when several extremely tall men came and hurried into the house. When they reached the doorway, they had to stoop down to enter since they were so unusually tall. The holy Rebbe closed the door behind them before the chassidim could catch a glimpse of their faces. They waited outside until the visitors left to see if they could recognize them. Again the chassidim were astonished when the men left. They did so in such a hurry that they could not make out the men's features and just saw their backs; they left so fast they almost vanished. The chassidim realized that something unusual had just taken place, and they decided to investigate and find out what had occurred.

The elder chassidim among them approached the Rebbe and asked him to explain the strange incident. This is what the Rebbe told them:

"When I realized that most people cannot concentrate properly on their prayers anymore due to the awesome burdens of earning a livelihood, and they lack the time and the understanding to concentrate fully, I decided to rewrite the standard formula for the prayers. I would write a new, short and concise version that would be equally understood and grasped by everyone.

"The holy Members of the Great Assembly, the Anshei Knesses HaGedolah (the original authors of the standard prayers from the time of the Talmud), realized what I intended. They came here to ask me not to change even one prayer from their established formula. I took their counsel and discussed the matter with them. They advised me to establish a prayer to pray before the formal prayer service. This would help anyone who lacks the concentration and proper devotions that are necessary for all formal prayers."

This "prayer before prayers" is the Yehi Ratzon prayer printed in many siddurim in the name of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk.

The Prayer Before Praying of the holy Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk

May it be your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, who listens to the sounds of our entreaties, pleas, and supplications and who listens intently to the prayers of His nation Israel with compassion: Prepare our hearts and organize our thoughts, and make our prayers flow fluently from our mouths and listen with Your ears to hear the sound of the prayers of Your servants who are beseeching You with cries of entreaty and a broken spirit.

You are a merciful G-d, with Your abundant compassion and great kindness. Have mercy and forgive and pardon and atone for us and all of Your nation Israel. Forgive all that we have sinned, transgressing and vilifying ourselves while rebelling against You. For it is revealed and known before You that we did not, Heaven forbid, willingly and rebelliously sin and embitter the words of Your mouth and the words of Your Torah and Your commandments. Rather, it is because of the evil inclination, which constantly burns in our hearts restlessly without respite until it brings us into the clutches of the pleasures of this lowly world and its vanities. It continually confuses and confounds our minds and our thoughts.

Even when we stand in prayer before You, pleading for our very souls, the evil inclination persistently confuses our thoughts with its tricks and ruses. We simply cannot stand up against him. Our minds and brains have weakened very much, and our power of endurance has faltered due to the numerous tragedies, hardship, and suffering that have befallen us and also due to the pressures, preoccupations, and lack of time. Therefore, You, compassionate and graceful G-d, we ask of You: do as You have promised us through your faithful servant — "I shall show favor when I choose to show favor and I shall be merciful when I choose to show mercy" (*Shemos* 33:19). And our Sages teach (Berachos 7a) that this applies even to those who are unworthy and undeserving. For this is Your way: to do good for both the wicked and the good people. Our moans and groans, our sorrows and pains, are revealed and known before You, as well as our conversation about how far we are from You and how hard it is for us to draw near and take part in serving You. We wish to completely bond and sincerely connect our hearts with You.

Oh! Woe to our souls!

Oh! A very great woe is upon us, our Father in Heaven!

תְּפִלָּה קֹדֶם הַתְּפִלָּה מֵהָרֵב הַמְפֵּרְסָם אִיש א' מוֹרֵנוּ וְרַבֵּנוּ רַבִּי אֲלִימֶלֶךְ מִלִּיזֶענְסְק זְצַ"ל:

יָהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹקֵינוּ וֵאלֹקֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שוֹמֵעַ קוֹל שַׁוְעַת עַתִירוֹת, וֹמַאַזִין לְקוֹל תִּפִלַת עַפוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּרַחֲמִים. שֶׁתָּכִין לְבֵּנוּ וֹתְכוֹגַן מַחְשְבוֹתִינוּ וּתְשַׁגֵּר תְּפִלָּתֵנוּ בְּפִינוּ. וְתַקְשִׁיב אָזְנְךָ לִשְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹל תְפִלַּת עֲבָדֶיךָ הַמִּתְחַגְּנִים אַלֶּיךָ בָּקוֹל שַׁוְעָה וָרוּח נִשְבָּרָה. וְאַתָּה קֵל רַחוּם, בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הָרַבִּים וּבַחֲסֶדֶיךָ הַגָּרוֹלִים, הַמְחֹל וְתִסְלַח וֹתְכַפֵּר לָנוֹ וּלְכָל הַנָּלְוִים אֵלֵינוֹ וּלְכָל עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶת כָּל מַה שֵׁחָטָאנוּ וְהָצֵוִינוּ וְהִרְשַׁעְנוּ וּפָשַׁעְנוּ לְפָנֵיךָ, כִּי גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָנֶיךָ כִּי לֹא בְּמֶרֶד וּבְמַעַל חָלִילָה וְחָלִילָה מֶרִינוּ אֶת פִּיךָ וְדִבְרֵי תּוֹרָתְךָ וּמְצְוֹתֶיךָ, כִּי אָם מֵרֹב הַיֵּצֶר הַבּוֹעֵר בְּקּרְבֵּנוּ הָמִיד לֹא יָנוּחַ וְלֹא יִשְׁקֹט, עד אַשר מִבִיאֵנוּ אֵל תַאַוַת הָעוֹלָם הַשָּׁפֵל הַזֶּה וָאֵל הַבָּלָיו, וּמְבַלְבֵּל אֶת מַחשבותינוּ תָּמִיד, אֲפִלּוּ בִּשָׁעָה שֵאֲנַחְנוּ עוֹמִדִים לְהַתְפַּלֵּל לְפָנֵיךָ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ עַל וַפְשֵנוּ, הוּא מָבַלְבֵּל אֶת תִּפִלָּתֵנוּ וָאֶת מַחְשָבוֹתֵינוּ תָּמִיד בְּתַחְבּוּלוֹתָיו, וָאֵין אָנו יָכוֹלִים לַעֲמֹד נָגְדוֹ, כִּי נֶחֱלֵשׁ שִׁכְלֵנוּ ומֹחֵנוּ (וַלְבֵּנוּ) עַד מָאד. וָכָשַׁל כֹח הַפַּבָּל מֵרֹב הַצָּרוֹת וְהַתִּלָאוֹת וְטִרְדַת הַזְּמֵן. לָכֵן אַתָּה קֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּון. עֲשֵׂה עָפָנוּ כְּמוֹ שֶׁהִבְטַחְתָּנוּ עַל יְדֵי נָאֱמַן בֵּיתְרָ: וְחַנֹתִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר אָחֹן ְוֹרָחַמְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲרָחֵם, וְאָמְרוּ חֲכָמֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבְרָכָה: אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁאֵינוֹ הָגוּן וְאֵינוֹ כְּדַאי. כִּי כֵּן דַרְכָּךָ לְהֵיטִיב לָרָעִים וְלַטוֹבִים, כִּי גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָנֵיךָ ָאָנְקָתֵנוֹ וָצַעֲרֵנוֹ וָשִיחֵנוּ עַל אֲשֶׁר אֵין אָנוּ יִכוֹלִים לְקָרֵב עַצְמֵנוּ לַעֲבוֹדָתְרָ, וּלְדַבֶּק לְבָּנוֹ בָּדַ בַּאֲמֶת וּבְתַמִים. אֲהַה עַל נַפִּשְׁנוּ, אוֹי עַלִינוּ מִאֹד, אַבִינוּ שַבַשָּׁמַיִם. Now, please awaken Your abundant compassion and kindness toward us. Drive out, chase away, and destroy our evil inclination from our midst. Rebuke and scold it,¹ telling it to leave us and to cease tempting us away from Your service.

Let no evil thought arise in our hearts, Heaven forbid, whether it is while we are awake or dreaming, and especially when we stand before You in prayer, and when we learn Your Torah, and when we are occupied in fulfilling Your commandments. Then may our thoughts be pure, clear, lucid, strong, true, and sincere, as You desire for us in good will.

Awaken our hearts and the hearts of all Your nation Israel to unify You in truth and love; to serve You with integrity so that our service shall be acceptable before Your Throne of Glory. Establish Your faith in our hearts, constantly without stop, and may our faith in You be tied fast and strong as an immovable peg. Remove all barriers and partitions which separate us from You, our Father in Heaven. Rescue us from all obstacles, from failures and mistakes. Do not forsake us and do not abandon us and do not embarrass us. Be with our mouths when we speak, with our hands when we act, with our hearts when we think.

Oh, our Father in Heaven! Aid us in meriting, Powerful One, O G-d full of mercy, to unify our hearts and minds, our speech and our deeds, and all our actions and feelings and emotions, whether we are aware of them or not [whether they are conscious or subconscious, voluntary or involuntary], revealed or hidden. May it all be unified for You in truth and sincerity, with no ulterior motives or invalid thoughts, Heaven forbid!

Purify our hearts and sanctify us; douse us with pure water and cleanse us with Your love and compassion!² Plant firmly in our hearts Your love and divine fear and reverence forever with no disruptions, at all times, every moment and in all places. When we walk and when we sit, when we lie down and when we rise, the fire of the holy spirit should burn within us constantly. We are constantly sustained by You and Your greatness, love, and fear. And we are supported by Your holy Torah, both written and oral, hidden and revealed, and by Your commandments in order to unify Your great and awesome Name.

Safeguard us from ulterior motives, from haughtiness and vanity, from anger, pedantry and bearing grudges, sadness, slander, and other bad character traits. Save us from all things that destroy and prevent Your pure, holy service which is so dear to us.

וְעַתָּה תְּעוֹרֵר נָא עָלֵינוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ וַחֲסָדֶיךָ הַגְּדוֹלִים וְהַמְרֻבִּים לְגָרֵשׁ וּלְבַעֵר אָת יִצְרֵנוּ הָרַע מִקּרְבֵּנוּ, וְתִגְעַר בּוֹ שֶׁיָסוּר וְיֵלֵךְ מֵאתָנוּ, וְאַל יָסִית אוֹתָנוּ ּלְהַדִּיחֵנוּ מֵעֲבוֹדָתְךָ חָלִילָה. וְאַל יַעֲלֶה בְּלִבֵּנוּ שוּם מַחֲשָׁבָה רָעָה הֵן בְּהָקִיץ הו בַּחַלוֹם חָלִילָה, בִּפְרָט בְּעֵת שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ עוֹמְדִים בִּתְפִילָה לְפָנֶיךָ, אוֹ בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ לוֹמְדִים תּוֹרָתְדָ, וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ עוֹסְקִים בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ, הְּהֵא ַמַחְשָׁבוֹתֵינוּ זַכָּה צְלוּלָה וּבְרוּרָה וַחֲזָקָה, בָּאֱמֶת וּבְלֵבָב שָׁלֵם, כִּרְצוֹנְךָ הַטוֹב עָפָנוֹ. וֹתַעוֹרֵר לָבָבֵנוּ וֹלְבַב כָּל יִשִׂרָאֵל עַמִּךַ וֹלְבַב כַּל הַנְּלְוִים אֱלֵינוּ, וֹלְבַב ַכָּל הַחַפַּצִים בָּחַבָּרָתֵנוּ, לִיַחַדָּךָ בַּאֲמֵת וּבְאַהַבָּה, לִעָבִדְּךָ עַבוֹדָה הַיִשְׁרָה הַמְקַבֶּלֵת לִפָנֵי כְּפָא כָבוֹדֶךָ. וִתִקבַע אֵמוּנָתְךָ בִּלְבֵנוֹ תַּמִיד בָּלִי הַפְּסֵק, וֹתְהַא אָמוּנָתְרָ קשוּרָה בְּלִבֵּנוּ כְּיָתֵד שֶלֹא תִּפוֹט, וְתַעֲבִיר מֵעָלֵינוּ כָּל הַפְּסַכִים הַפַּבְדִּילִים בֵּינֵינוּ לְבֵינָךָ אָבִינוּ שֵבַשָּמַיִם, וְתַצִילֵנוּ מִכָּל מִכְשוֹל וְטָעוּת, אַל תַעַזְבֵנוּ וָאַל תִּטִשׁנוּ וָאַל תַּכִלִימֵנוּ, וֹתָהֵא עָם פִינוּ בִּעַת הַטִּיפֵנוּ, וַעָם יָדֵינוּ בְּעֵת מַעְבָּדֵנוּ, וְעִם לִבֵּנוּ בְעֵת מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵינוּ: וֹתְזַבֵּנוּ, אָבִינוּ שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם קַל מָלֵא רַחַמִים, שַּנְיַחֶד אֵת לָבָבֵנוּ וּמַחִשָׁבוֹתֵינוּ וִדְבּוֹרֵנוּ וּמַצַשִּינוּ וְכָל תִּנוֹעוֹתֵינוּ וָהַרְגָּשׁוֹתֵינוּ, הַיִּדוֹעוֹת לָנוּ וִשְאֵינָן יִדוֹעוֹת לָנוּ, הַנָּגְלוֹת וְהַנָּסְתָּרוֹת, שֵׁיָהֵא הַכֹּל מְיָחָד אֵלֶיךָ בֶּאֶמֶת וּבְתָמִים בְּלִי שוֹם מַחֲשֶׁבֶת פְּסוּל חָלִילָה, וְטַהֵר לָבֵנוּ, וְקַדְשֵׁנוּ, וֹזְרֹק עָלֵינוּ מַיִם טְהוֹרִים וְטַהֲרֵנוּ, בְּאַהֲבָתְרָ וּבְחֶמְלָתְרָ, וְתִּשַׁע אַהַבָּתָךָ וִיִרָאָתַךָ בִּלְבֵּנוּ תַּמִיד בִּלִי הַפְּסֵק, בִּכַל עֵת וֹבְכָל זְמַן וֹבְכַל מַקוֹם, בָּלֶכְתֵנוּ וֹבִשְׁבָתֵנוּ וֹבִשָּׁכָבֵּנוּ וֹבִקוֹמֵנוּ, תִּבְעַר תַּמִיד רוֹחַ קַדְשָׁךָ בִּקּרבֵּנוּ, וָגִשְעָנִים הָמִיד בְּדָ וֹבִגְדֻלָּתְדָ וֹבְאַהֲבָתְדָ וֹבְיִרְאָתְדָ, וֹבְתוֹרָתְדָ שֶׁבִּכְתָב וְשֶׁבְּעַל פָה הַנִגְלֵה וָהַנִּסְתָּר, וּבִמְצִוֹתֵיךָ, הַכֹּל לְיַחֵד שִׁמְךָ הַגִּבוֹר וְהַנוֹרָא. וְתִשִׁמְרֵנוּ מן הַפָּנִיוֹת וָהַגָּאוֹת וֹמָן הַכַּעַס וָהַקַפְּדָנוֹת וָהָעַצְבוֹת וְהָרָכִילוֹת וֹשְׁאֶר מְדּוֹת ָרָעוֹת, וּמִכֶּל דָבָר הַמַּפִסִיד צַבוֹדָתְדָ הַקִּדוֹשָה וְהַפִּהוֹרָה, הַחֲבִיבָה עַלֵינוּ. Bring down upon us the influx of blessings and Your holy spirit so that we may cleave passionately to You in rapture. May we desire You more and more!

Raise us up from one level to the next, until we merit to reach the level of our holy patriarchs Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.³ Hear our prayers in their merit so that we may be answered whenever we beseech You, whether praying on our own behalf or on behalf of someone else from Your nation Israel, whether an individual or a group.

Rejoice and glorify Yourself through us. May our prayers bear fruit above and take root below.

Do not remember our sins and iniquities, especially the sins of our youth, as King David prayed: "The sins of my youth, remember not!" (*Tehillim* 25:7). Transform our sins and iniquities into merits.⁴ Bring down upon us always from the spiritual realm, from the world of repentance, the desire to repent and return to You wholeheartedly, to rectify and restore what we have damaged in Your pure holy divine Names.

Protect and shield us from jealousy between fellows. Let not jealousy enter our hearts and may others not be jealous of us. On the contrary, place in our hearts the ability to see only the good in our friends and not their shortcomings! May we speak to each other in a way that is straight and desirable in Your eyes. May there be no hatred between friends, Heaven forbid.

Strengthen our ties and our bond to You with love, as it is revealed and known to You that we strive to give You only satisfaction and pleasure. This is our primary intention. If we do not have the intellect to properly direct our hearts to You, please teach us how to know in truth the intent of Your will, which is always for the best.

Above all, we beg of You, plead before you, O G-d of mercy: accept our prayers with compassion and goodwill.

Amen, may it be Your will.

וְתַשְׁפִּיעַ רוּחַ קָדְשְׁךָ עָלֵינוּ, שֶׁנִהְיֶה דְבַקִים בְּדָ, וְשֶׁנִשְׁתּוֹקֵק תָּמִיד אֵלֶיךָ יוֹתֵר וִיוֹתֵר. וּמִפַּדְרָגָה לְמַדְרָגָה תַּצַלֵנוּ, שֵׁנְוֹכֶה לָבוֹא לְמַצַלַת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ הַקְּדושִים אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וַיַעַקב, וֹזְכוּתָם יַעַמֹד לָנוּ, שַתִּשְׁמַע בִּקוֹל תִפּלָתֵנוּ שָׁנְהְיֶה תָּמִיד נַעֲנִים בְּעֵת שֶׁנְתְפַּלֵל אֵלֶיךָ עָלֵינוּ אוֹ עַל שוּם אֶחָד מֵעַמְּךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל יָחִיד אוֹ עַל רַבִּים. וְתִשְׂמַח וְתִתְפָּאֵר בָּנוּ, וְנַעֲשֶה פְּרִי לְמַעְלָה ושרש לְמַשָּה. וָאַל תִּזְכָּר לָנוּ חַשֹּאתִינוּ, וּבִפָּרָט חַשַּאת נְעוֹרֵינוּ, כִּמַאֲמֵר דָּוִד הַפֶּוּלֶךְ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם: חַפֹּאת נְעוּרֵי וּפְשָׁעַי אַל תִּזְכֹּר, וְתַהֲפֹּךְ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וּפְשָׁעֵינוּ לִזְכוּת, וְתַשְׁפִּיעַ עָלֵינוּ מֵעוֹלָם הַהְּשוּבָה הָמִיד הִרְהוּר לָשוּב אַלִיךַ בָּלֵב שָׁלֵם, וּלְתַקַן אֵת אֲשֵׁר פָּגַמָנוּ בִּשְׁמוֹתֵיךַ הַקְּדוֹשִים וָהַטְּהוֹרִים. וָתַצִילֵנו מִקּנָאַת אִישׁ מֵרֵעָהוּ, וַלֹא יַעֲלֵה קִנָאַת אָדָם עַל לָבֵּנוּ וַלֹא קִנְאָתֵנוּ עַל אֲחַרִים, אַדְּרַבָּה, הֵּן בְּלִבֵּנוּ שֶׁנִּרְאֶה כָּל אֶחָד מַעֲלַת חֲבֵרֵינוּ וְלֹא חֶסְרוֹנָם, וְשַׁנְרַבֵּר כָּל אָחָד אָת חַבַרוֹ בִּדָרֵךְ הַיָּשָׁר וְהָרָצוֹי לְפָנֵיךָ, וְאַל יַצֵלֶה שוּם שִּנָאָה מֵאֵחָד עַל חַבֵּרוֹ חָלִילָה. וֹתְחַזֵּק הִתְקַשִּׁרוֹתֵנוֹ בִּאַהַבָּה אֵלֵיךָ, כַּאֵשֵׁר גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפָגֶיךָ, שֶׁיְהֵא הַכֹּל נַחַת רוּחַ אֵלֶידָ, וְזֶה עִפַּר כַּוָנָתֵנוּ. וְאִם אֵין לָנוּ שַׂכֵל לְכַנֵן אֶת לְבָבֵנוּ אֱלִיךָ, אַתָּה תִּלַמִּדֵנוּ אֲשֵׁר נֵדַע בַּאֲמֵת כַּוַנַת רִצוֹנְךַ הַטוֹב. וְעַל כָּל זֹאת מִתְחַנְנִים אֲנַחְנוֹ לְפָנֶיךָ כֵל מָלֵא רַחֲמִים, שֵׁתִּקבֵּל אֶת תִפְלַתֵנוּ בַּרָחֲמִים וּבָרַצוֹן. אַמֵן כֵּן יִהִי רַצוֹן:

Notes:

- 1. See Zechariah 2:3.
- 2. This idea is based on Yechezkel 36:25.
- 3. Our Sages taught in the Midrash *Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu* 25: "Every man should say to himself: When will my own deeds measure up to those of my forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?" See also *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Devarim* 830.
- 4. This teaching is found in the Talmud (*Yoma* 86b) that he who repents out of fear of punishment or divine retribution, his intentional sins are transformed into unintentional accidental sins, and he who repents out of his love for Hashem his intentional sins are transformed into merits.