

**Tefillah Focus Of The Week:**

**שמנה עשרה**

*The Fundamental Blessing*

**MEANING:** The simple translation of the prayer

You graciously endow **man with knowledge** and teach insight to a frail mortal. Endow us graciously with wisdom, insight, and knowledge. Blessed are You, Hashem, gracious Giver of knowledge.

אתה חונן לאדם  
דעת. ומלמד לאנוש  
בינה. חננו מאתך דעה  
בינה והשכל. ברוך  
אתה ה', חונן הדעת.

**WORD TO THE WISE:** Meaning within the word



This blessing, which begins with “You graciously endow man with knowledge,” is the first of six blessings in *Shemoneh Esrei* in which we voice our requests for personal needs. Yet, אתה חונן is the only request in *Shemoneh Esrei* that does not immediately begin with a request but rather, with a statement of praise אתה חונן “You graciously endow Man with knowledge.” The *Meiri* (on *Avos*) writes that the word חונן, which means that Hashem “grants favor” by giving us knowledge, refers to our innate ability to think which is granted at birth, and which is unrelated to our efforts. Whatever Hashem gives us in the way of

knowledge is חונן, a free gift (*Sefer Baruch She'amar*). At times we tend to view our ability to think and to reason as man-made, as thought is internal. We say it all the time. “Sure, I thought of that.” “That is my decision.” Or, “Hey, that was my idea.” Other functions, such as making a living, are external and therefore, it is more readily apparent that Hashem is involved. That is why this blessing must begin with a statement of praise אתה חונן לאדם דעת “You graciously endow man with knowledge.” (*Hasidur Ha'miforash Hashalem, Atah Chonain, note 9*). In fact, the verb of חונן is used three times in this short blessing in order to emphasize that all of our knowledge, insight, perception and understanding is an absolute gift from Hashem.

**THEME:**

An essential concept of the prayer

*The Gift of Our Minds*

Man's ability to think and reason, although it occurs within him, comes to him as a constantly flowing gift from Hashem.

**INSIGHT:**

Deeper meanings of the theme

*The Heart of Our Humanity*

In the twelve intermediate blessings of *Shemoneh Esrei* in which we make requests, six blessings contain requests for personal needs. The *Abudraham* (on *Atah Chonain*) cites the *Rivah* who says that these six blessings occur in descending order of importance, with this first blessing for wisdom being the most important, followed by our request for repentance, and ending with the request for prosperity.

Man's distinction from all other living creations lies in his unparalleled capabilities in knowledge, wisdom and understanding. This is why the blessing states אתה חונן לאדם דעת, “You graciously endow **man with knowledge**,” for man alone received these abilities (*Sefer Yaaros*

*Devash*). *Shulchan Aruch* (*Siman 115, Se'if 1*) concludes that because our elevated status as humans, stems from our possession of intellect, we request it first, without which we would differ little from animals and none of the subsequent blessings would be relevant to us.

From simple thinking to the height of complex intelligence, from abstract analysis to practical applications, from deducing complicated issues to unraveling the depths of the Torah—Hashem's aid is essential every moment of each day. That is why the blessing is in the present tense, for we must realize that Hashem heaps דעת upon us each and every minute in all aspects of our existence (*Sefer Olas Tamid*).

**VISUALIZE:**

Images that bring the prayer to life

*Shutting Off the Computer*

In our increasingly computerized age, more and more of our intellectual functions are relegated to the seemingly boundless intelligence of the computer. They give us directions to get where we're going, translate foreign languages, research arcane subjects, keep our homes from becoming too hot or too cold, guide surgeons



in delicate operations and often act as their hands, as well. They perform countless highly complex functions, many of which are beyond the capabilities of the human mind. But the computer cannot for even one moment claim credit for its brilliance. It is an invention of Man, and

ultimately, if Man deprives it of its power source, fails to maintain it or operate it properly, the computer's “brilliance” instantly evaporates.

Likewise, this blessing teaches us that our intelligence comes to us from our Creator. It is a tribute to His brilliance and continual care and guidance that we are able to develop an idea, experience an insight, solve a problem and most importantly, glean some understanding of Hashem and the spiritual world.

**Try This!**

► The *Siddur Yaveitz* writes that if a person has a special insight in his Torah study or even while at work, he should thank Hashem for the endowment during the blessing of אתה חונן. Rav Mattisyahu Salomon likewise points out that when one has a new insight in his Torah learning, he should recognize that what he has just experienced is a gift from Hashem.

**Did You Know**

► **Come and Get It**

If one begins praying without a siddur and suddenly requires one in order to continue *davening* properly, he may go and get one during *Shemoneh Esrei* if he knows its exact location. He may not, however, start searching around for a siddur (*Rama Orach Chaim 96:2; Chayei Adam 22:7;*

25:9; *Mishneh Berurah 104:2*). However, see *Aruch HaShulchan* (96:2).