YOU HAVE LOVED US DEEPLY

The Hebrew root alef-hei-vet, meaning “love,” appears six times in this passage (both as the noun and verb). Reuven Hammer points out that three of them speak of our love for God and three speak of God’s love for us. While reciting this brakkah, the worshipper can anticipate the seventh occurrence, which is found in the first paragraph of the Sh’ma: “You shall love Adonai your God.”

AVINU MALKEINU

Literally, “our father, our king.” The pairing of the two words emphasizes that God is at once both intimate as a close relation and distant as a monarch. The word av, “father,” suggests the image of God as source or progenitor, and therefore it may also be translated as “creator.”

LAWS OF LIFE

The word “Torah” encompasses many different meanings. In its most limited usage, it refers to the Five Books of Moses. But in a larger sense it refers to all of Scripture, and even to all of later Jewish teaching. Thus, the rabbis of the Talmud spoke of the “Written Torah” and the “Oral Torah,” the latter referring to the teachings of the Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud—and even to “whatever new teaching a student of wisdom might impart until the end of time” (Leviticus Rabbah 22:1). In this prayer, “Torah” embraces the widest meaning: the laws of life—all those teachings that instruct us concerning a full ethical and religious life.

TO UNDERSTAND AND DISCERN . . . OBSERVE, FULFILL, AND PERFORM

This sequence implies that study is intimately linked with action—indeed, that study should lead to action.

GATHERING THE TZITZIT.

Many observe the custom, originating in the late Middle Ages, of gathering the four tzitziyot (plural of tzitzit) of the tallit while reciting the words “bring us safely from the four corners of the earth,” thus symbolizing Israel’s unity and ingathering. The tzitziyot are then held through the third paragraph of the Sh’ma, and kissed when reciting the word tzitzit (which appears three times in that paragraph). By this practice, we indicate that we are lovingly undertaking to observe these words of Torah, and we hope that our commitment to strive for holiness will lead to greater unity. We are also gathering within us all our positive intentions.