YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Thoughts about Prayer**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and
Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l,
by Debbie and David Sable

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**Shiur #02:
The Reason for Prayer, According to *Duties of the Heart* (I)**

**About *Duties of the Heart***

Let us proceed from Rav Saadya Gaon to *Duties of the Heart*,the seminal work of Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pekuda. Various similarities connect Rabbeinu Bachya's book to that of Rav Saadya Gaon. For instance, recognition of the goodness of God that He bestowed upon creation, which is a fundamental principle for Rav Saadya, constitutes the foundation for Rabbeinu Bachya’s perspective as well. Rabbeinu Bachya offers many examples to illustrate God's acts of lovingkindness in the world – in accordance with his method throughout the book, which is to illuminate each and every idea with images and examples taken from real life. Other similarities to Rav Saadya Gaon include the idea that man's purpose in this world is to serve God and that the world-to-come is the place where man will receive his ultimate reward. These principles already appear in statements of *Chazal*, but the connection between them stands out in the work of both Rav Saadya and Rabbeinu Bachya. What Rav Saadya adds is his grounding of the foundations of the Torah on logic and reason, as discussed in the previous *shiur*, and in this respect Rabbeinu Bachya is similar. Both of them differentiate between rational *mitzvot* and revealed *mitzvot*, and both say there are certain *mitzvot* that we do not understand with our reason but that are nevertheless not contradicted by it.

There are, of course, profound differences between them. The most striking difference emerges from the respective names of their works: Rav Saadya's book deals with beliefs and opinions, whereas Rabbeinu Bachya's work deals with duties. The latter is a guidebook for the service of God. An even more fundamental difference relates to the focus of man's service: Rabbeinu Bachya seeks to revolutionize the concept of worshipping God, to shift emphasis from the commandments to the duties of the heart. Of course, the duties of the rest of the bodily organs also have meaning, but the main thing is the inner work on one's character traits and emotions. The ultimate aspiration set by Rabbeinu Bachya is cleaving [*deveikut*]to God, or as he calls the last gate of his book, the Love of God. The term cleaving is used not in the sense of devotion to the fulfillment of the commandments, but rather in the sense of a high degree of inner love for God. Whereas Rabbi Akiva stated that loving one's neighbor is the great principle of the Torah, Rabbeinu Bachya focuses on a different great principle: "And you shall love the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 6:5). All duties of the Torah stem from this principle. The practical *mitzvot*, in his view, constitute only a small portion of the duties cast upon man. Moreover, at the foundation of every practical *mitzva* stands a duty relating to the intent of the heart; therefore, all practical *mitzvot* include duties of the heart. In addition, there are many duties that depend solely on the heart and on inner work.

Despite the fact that Rabbeinu Bachya sought to carry out a revolution, he did not share the fate suffered by most revolutionaries in the Jewish world, nor did he stir up controversy. Even though his novel perspective is not at all self-evident, he was warmly received by the people of Israel across the generations. Some disagree with certain points – for example, there are different approaches that run counter to his ideas concerning trust in God – but his fundamental view that the heart is the center did not encounter resistance. Perhaps this is because his approach did not detract from any practical *mitzva*, nor did he threaten anyone's religiosity, unlike other revolutions later in history that were perceived as a threat to traditional worship of God. It is also possible that his revolution was in fact not such a novelty, but only illuminated and laid out principles that arise from the Torah, and therefore the public identified his words as a revelation of the truth rather than a dangerous breakthrough.

**Prayer in the Introduction *to Duties of the Heart***

It seems natural that prayer should occupy an important place in *Duties of the Heart.* After all, prayer is "service of the heart," and if service is an obligation, prayer should be the central duty of the heart. It is surprising to find that Rabbeinu Bachya **hardly deals with the issue of prayer at all.** He mentions prayer in the introduction to his book, and it appears again much later, in the Gate of Spiritual Accounting. Apart from these two references, the topic of prayer stands out for its absence.

It can, however, be argued that the novelty in Rabbeinu Bachya's position expresses itself most of all in the subject of prayer. In the introduction to his book, prayer appears in a surprising context – among the examples of duties of the bodily organs. He mentions prayer as one of the practical *mitzvot*:

Man, we know, consists of body and of soul; both of them are marks of the Creator's goodness to us. One of these elements of our being is seen; the other, unseen. We are, accordingly, bound to render the Creator visible and invisible service. The outward service is the observance of the practical precepts, such as: praying, fasting, almsgiving, learning Torah and teaching it, erecting a *sukka* for the feast of Sukkot, waving palm branches on the festival, wearing *tzitzit*, attaching a *mezuza* to the doorposts, erecting a parapet on the roof, and fulfillment of other precepts that call for the exercise of the physical organs. Inward service, on the other hand, consists of the fulfillment of the duties of the heart: that we should acknowledge the unity of God in our hearts, believe in Him and in His laws and accept His service, revere Him, be humble and abashed before Him, love Him, trust in Him, and surrender our very lives to Him, abstain from what He hates, dedicate our activities to His name, meditate on the benefits He bestows, and similar duties that are fulfilled in thought and by the exercise of inward faculties, but that do not call for the activity of the bodily organs.

Rabbeinu Bachya enumerates the duties of the heart, strengthens their standing, and defines them as the center of Divine service – but prayer is not on the list. The absence of prayer among these major commandments sharpens the picture of Rabbeinu Bachya’s focus on inner service: Even prayer is not considered a part of it. Inner service refers to what takes place within the soul, and therefore prayer, which is recited by the mouth, is considered an act of the bodily organs.

The moment that Rabbeinu Bachya detaches prayer from the duties of the heart, it seems to lose its uniqueness. Many well-known statements about prayer emphasize the intention of the heart that it requires, but in Rabbeinu Bachya’s opinion, this requirement does not characterize prayer in particular. Regarding *all* the duties of the bodily organs, the main thing is the intention of the heart; prayer is just one of those duties. It is precisely because of Rabbeinu Bachya's unique objective of basing the entire Torah and all of the commandments on inner service that prayer remains off the list of inner commandments.

However, we will see below that this is not the complete picture of prayer in *Duties of the Heart.*

**The Essence of Prayer: “A Subject of Thought is Not in Need of Speech”**

The internal process that Rabbeinu Bachya outlines in his book begins with knowing God. The first section of the book is the Gate of the Unity of God, and in the second section, the Gate of Examination, Rabbeinu Bachya discusses a contemplation of creation that leads to gratitude. From the recognition of God's goodness, he comes to the third gate – the Service of God: since God has bestowed so much goodness upon us, we are obligated to worship Him.

One might have expected that this path would lead to prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Ostensibly, if God bestows goodness upon us, we should be obligated to take a *siddur* and recite psalms, to offer gratitude and praise. This would be the most natural place to introduce prayer. As stated, however, Rabbeinu Bachya deals here not with prayer, but with the obligation to serve God in light of His kindnesses to us.

Rabbeinu Bachya gets to prayer only in the eighth gate, the Gate of Spiritual Accounting:

If one is engaged in a composite duty of the heart, one that also calls for physical movement, such as the offering of prayer and praise to God, blessed be He, he should disengage his body from other activities that refer to this or to the next world, and free his mind from all thoughts that would distract his attention from prayer; then, after having cleansed himself and washed off anything dirty or foul and moved away from all offensive odors and similar objectionable things, he should take to heart Who it is to Whom he intends to offer his prayer, what he seeks therein, and how he is to address his Maker – with regard to choice of words as well as theme. For know that words are uttered with the tongue and are like a shell, while meditation on the words is in the heart, and is the kernel. Words are the body of prayer and meditation on their meaning is the spirit. If one prays with his tongue, and his heart is otherwise engaged, his prayer is like a body without a spirit, or a shell without a kernel, because his body is present but his heart is not with him while he is praying. Of such a person Scripture says: "Because this people drew near Me with their mouths, and with their lips did honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me" (*Yeshayahu* 29:13). Such a person is to be compared to a servant whose master returned home. The servant bade his wife and members of his family to show honor to the master and provide for all his needs, while the servant himself went away and indulged in pleasures and frivolity and refrained from rendering personally any service to his master, neither busying himself to show him honor nor doing anything that would have befitted him. His master was angry with him and did not accept the honor and service offered to him and refused them with insolence. Thus too, if a person is saying prayers and his heart is void of the contents of the prayer, the Almighty will not accept his prayer, which was only mechanical, a mere movement of the tongue. As you are aware, we conclude our statutory prayer with the sentence: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You" (*Tehillim* 19:15). And if a person, while praying, thinks of any worldly theme, whether permitted or forbidden, and then concludes his prayer and says "may the meditation of my heart be acceptable before You", would it not be highly disgraceful for him to claim that he communed with God with his heart and mind, while his heart was not with Him, and then petition the Almighty to accept that prayer and be pleased with its recital by him? Such a person is similar to one of whom it is said: ["Yet they seek Me daily and delight to know My ways] as a nation that did righteousness" (*Yeshayahu* 58:2). Our wise men say: "A man should estimate for himself: if he feels that he can pray devoutly, let him say the prayers. If he cannot do so, let him not say them" (*Berakhot* 30b). In the same sense, Rabbi Elazar in his last moments included in his parting admonitions to his disciples the exhortation: "And when you pray, be conscious before Whom it is that you are praying" (*Berakhot* 28b). Scripture also says: "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (*Amos* 4:12). Our wise men say: "[And when you pray] regard not your prayer as a fixed mechanical task, but as an appeal for mercy and supplications to the Omnipresent" (*Avot* 2:13). Scripture says: "When my soul was humbled within me, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came in to You into Your holy Temple" (*Yona* 2:8); further, "Let us lift up our heart with our hands to God in the heavens" (*Eikha* 3:41).

It is proper, brother, for you to know that our devotion [*kavana*]in prayer is nothing but the soul's longing for God, humbling itself in His presence, exalting its Creator, offering praises and thanksgiving to His name, casting all its burdens upon Him. Since it is difficult for the soul to recall all this without orderly composition and arrangement, our teachers wrote down what most people need, and in which their lack and dependence upon God are most evident. These constitute the order of our prayers, properly arranged and set forth, with which the soul can worthily greet its Creator without being ashamed when it prostrates itself before Him. In reciting these well-ordered prayers with a devout heart, the soul's humility and lowliness before God are manifested. And because thought changes rapidly and is unstable, owing to the swiftness with which fancies pass through the mind and it would be difficult for every [individual] to arrange the subjects of prayer for himself, our wise men, peace be upon them, arranged them in suitable terms which the individual should repeat in the proper order. For the soul's thought follows expression and is drawn forth by words. Prayer consists of words and [their] meanings. **Words need a subject [of thought], but a subject of thought is not in need of speech, if it is possible to set it in orderly fashion in the heart. The latter is the essence of our devotion [*kavana*], and the chief aim to which our attention should be directed. Hence, our teachers, of blessed memory, said: In urgent circumstances, one who is ritually unclean should meditate the prayer in his heart but should not recite the benedictory formula that introduces it, or the one that concludes it. So also they permitted condensing the regular form of prayer into a short summary** (*Berakhot* 20b). Therefore, my brother, arrange the contents of your prayer in proper form in your heart. Let it correspond with the words which you utter. Let both the words and the thought be directed to God. Keep your body free from any movements. Restrain your senses and imagination during prayers, so that these shall not be engaged with any worldly matter. Let your behavior be the same as it would be while standing in the presence of the sovereign, engaged in praising and lauding him and recounting his good deeds, even though he is ignorant of what is in your heart. How much more should such be your behavior towards the exalted Creator who contemplates your external and inward being, who sees what is visible in your life and what is concealed. It is a wonder that your recital of prayer is [a mark of] the Creator's faith [in you], for He has put it into your hands and placed it under your control while none beside Him contemplates it. If you pray as the blessed Creator bade you, you will have discharged the obligation imposed by His faith in you and the Creator will accept it from you. But if you are not faithful in this regard with your heart and with your tongue, you will be in the category of those who rob Him of His faith in you, and of such people Scripture says: "For they are a very froward generation, children in whom there is no faith" (*Devarim* 32:20). [On the other hand,] concerning the people of faith who conduct themselves in accordance with their laws and rules, Scripture says: "My eyes are upon the faithful of the land that they may dwell with Me" (*Tehillim* 101:6).

In this passage, prayer is no longer classified as a duty of the bodily organs, but as a composite duty of the heart and the organs. Rabbeinu Bachya distinguishes between the words of prayer and the contents. The words are uttered by the mouth, but thoughts about their contents belong to the heart. According to him, the essence of prayer is an action of the heart, as is proven by the fact that in certain circumstances the Sages permit the recitation of a shortened version of the prayer, and even meditation upon the prayer in one's heart. From here we see that the obligation of prayer does not require the recitation of certain words, but rather turning one's heart to God. The words set by the Sages are only an aid, and since we are talking about members of the *Keneset ha-Gedola*, this is probably the best help that we could have gotten. Still, it is only an aid to prayer, and the main thing is the prayer in a person's heart. To sharpen this novel point, note that standard halakhic guidance is to recite the entire prayer with the proper focus (*kavana*), and if that is too difficult, to maintain that mindset only in certain parts of the prayer. According to Rabbeinu Bachya, one must maintain focus throughout the prayer, because the essence of prayer is reflection on its content and not the recitation of the wording.

Here we see that Rabbeinu Bachya does in fact consider prayer as one of the duties of the heart – though not the speech that is performed by the mouth, but only the action of the heart, which is the essence of prayer.

In the next *shiur*, we will continue to study Rabbeinu Bachya's remarks about prayer towards the end of his book, and see how they give prayer added meaning.

(Translated by David Strauss)