YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Thoughts about Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #03:
The Reason for Prayer According to *The Duties of the Heart* (II)**

In the previous *shiur*, we encountered Rabbeinu Bachya revolutionary approach to the service of God, shifting emphasis from the practical commandmentsto service of the heart. We saw that despite the assumption that prayer would occupy a central place in such worship, Rabbeinu Bachya rarely addresses it, and what is more, he includes it among the duties of the bodily organs. Inner service refers to what takes place deep in the recesses of the soul, and therefore prayer that is uttered by the mouth is considered an act of the organs. Only at an advanced stage of the book, in the eighth gate, does Rabbeinu Bachya mention prayer, and there it is classified not as a duty of the organs but as a composite duty of the heart and the organs. Rabbeinu Bachya distinguishes between the words of prayer and its contents: the words are uttered by the mouth, but meditation upon the contents belongs to the heart. According to him, the essence of prayer is an act of the heart, and the words provided to us by the members of the *Keneset ha-Gedola* are merely an aid to prayer.

**Personal Prayer**

Prayer appears once more towards the end of the book, in the tenth gate. Rabbeinu Bachya discusses the signs of man's love for his Creator, one of them being prayer:

A further characteristic is that he prostrates himself in prayer at night and fasts by day, if he is able to do so, since prayer at night is purer than prayer by day, for several reasons. One reason is that a person is less occupied at night than by day. Another reason is that at night the desire for food and drink is less than by day. There is no social intercourse between him and others such as is occasioned by the visit of a friend or a neighbor desirous of conversing with him, or of a creditor who might come to demand payment of what was due to him. At night too, the senses have rest from their numerous sensations. At that time, a person does not see things that disturb him nor hear what would interrupt him [in his meditations]. Another reason is that at night he escapes flattery and is free from it because of the small number of individuals who are then with him, while during the day it may be impossible for him to be alone. Furthermore, at night he is better able to devote himself entirely to thoughts of God and occupy himself in solitude with Him, at a time when every lover is alone with the one who loves him, and everyone who favors a certain person is alone with the one he favors…

It is precisely nighttime prayer that merits an important place for Rabbeinu Bachya. This is a far-reaching statement: *Chazal* say that the *Ma’ariv* prayer is optional, whereas Rabbeinu Bachya turns prayer of the evening into the main thing. In effect, he establishes a new world of prayer, at the heart of which stands not *Shacharit,* *Mincha*, or *Ma’ariv*, but rather the personal prayer of the individual at night. moreover, Rabbeinu Bachya even composes a prayer of his own:

I have also composed some forcible words, rebuking and shaming the soul, by which it should be stirred to service and aroused to pray at night. These are in the Hebrew language and I entitled them "Rebuke." I have likewise appended to these some poetic verses in the Hebrew language in praise of God, thanksgiving to Him, and supplications for His forgiveness and His favors – verses which should rouse the heart of one who prays and stir his natural feelings. I have entitled the latter "Supplication." I have put both pieces at the end of this work for anyone who wishes to recite them as prayers at night or by day. Whoever proposes to do so should adopt the following method. He should recite the "Rebuke" sitting down, after having read familiar hymns or any other [devotional pieces]. Then he should stand up and, in a bowed posture, read the "Supplication" to the end. He should then kneel and utter whatever petitions he pleases and follow with *Tehillim* 119, beginning "Happy are the upright in the way," and read also the "Songs of Degrees" (*Tehillim* 120-134). If one wishes to offer up other prayers or use any other order, he may do so. I have merely suggested to you the best of the usual modes. The main thing, brother, is the purity of your soul, while you are offering up the prayer, and devoutness of the heart at that time, and that you should recite it with its accompanying [devotional pieces] slowly. Let not your tongue hurry before your heart; for reciting a little of a prayer with the heart's devotion is better than the hurried movements of your tongue in reciting much of it while your heart is empty of feeling. A pious man said: Do not offer praise that is empty because the heart is not in it, but let your heart be ever present [when you pray], as David said: "With my whole heart have I sought you" (*Tehillim* 119:10); "I have entreated Your favor with my whole heart" (*Tehillim* 119:58); "My heart and my flesh sing to the living God" (*Tehillim* 84:3).

Rabbeinu Bachya attaches value precisely to the personal prayer that an individual formulates freely on his own. Such prayer must come from the heart, since the person composes it on his own and does not merely read words. Rabbeinu Bachya also formulates a personal prayer for one who has difficulty composing it himself, with the addition of a "Rebuke" that stirs up the heart to pray. It seems that Rabbeinu Bachya does not content himself with removing prayer from the duties of the heart; it is also important to him to create the reverse process, that prayer should be part of one's inner service. He does not only compose a text in order to help a person in his regular prayer, but rather he tries to revolutionize prayer, so that it shifts from a duty of the bodily organs to a duty of the heart.

**The Parts of Prayer: Is there a Place for Supplication?**

As noted earlier, of the various parts of prayer, praise and thanksgiving accord particularly with Rabbeinu Bachya's approach, since his approach to prayer is based entirely on acknowledging God’s lovingkindness. Indeed, in the prayer that he composed and titled "Supplication," praise and thanksgiving have a much stronger presence than does supplication.

The limited place assigned to petition is not surprising for another reason: In the Gate of Trust in God, Rabbeinu Bachya presents his unique position regarding God's absolute control of reality as opposed to the weight of human effort. God's absolute control greatly reduces the significance of human striving in Rabbeinu Bachya’s perspective. In light of this, it seems that there really is no place for petitionary prayer. If every detail is managed exclusively by God, what is there to ask for?

On the other hand, ultimately supplication is indeed part of our prayer, and it must have a place in the world of Rabbeinu Bachya as well. It is possible that precisely because of the premise that the results of our endeavors depend solely on God, prayer must include petition: we appeal to God because everything is in His hands. Such prayer, from a position of submission, is an expression of the trait of trust. We will explore this concept through studying a section from the Gate of Trust, in which Rabbeinu Bachya outlines the process of developing trust in God, step by step:

If his knowledge of God becomes more mature, he will put his trust in God in matters wherein some planning is useful, as for example, when one gives up perilous callings or occupations that are exhausting, and trusts in God that He will provide an easier occupation by which to earn his livelihood.

And if his knowledge of God increases further, he will put his trust in God in all his affairs, difficult or easy; and, while occupied with them, his aim and intent will be directed to the service of the Almighty and the observance of His commandments.

And if, in the Creator's mercy to His creatures, the man's realization of God becomes still stronger, he will accept with heart and mind, inwardly and outwardly, whatever God decrees to him. He will rejoice in whatever God sends to him, whether it be death or life, poverty or riches, health or sickness. He will not yearn for aught but what God has chosen for him. He will be only pleased with what it has pleased God to give to him. He will be wholly devoted to God. He will surrender his body and soul to God's judgment. He will not ascribe superiority to one business over another nor choose a position other than the one in which he is placed…

When his knowledge of God becomes still stronger, and he perceives the purpose for which he was formed and came into this transient world, and realizes the high degree of the hereafter which endures, he will think lightly of the world and its means. With mind, soul, and body, he will flee from the world and surrender himself to the blessed God, and delight in remembering Him in solitude. He will feel desolate, when he is not meditating on His greatness.

It is possible that the pious believer who reaches the uppermost level does not petition God for anything. At that high level, at which a person is happy with whatever God gives him, he does not ask for anything connected to mundane matters. The supplication that could still appear in his prayer is a petition relating to his spiritual world, e.g., a petition for repentance and pardon.

The way to understand Rabbeinu Bachya’s views on supplication in prayer is to examine his own prayer, in the formulation that he composed, and see what place he assigns to petitions there. Rabbeinu Bachya does include petitions in his prayer, but they are petitions with a single purpose – to serve God. A person can pray for his personal needs, but only so that he will be free to serve God without worries. Rabbeinu Bachya concludes his prayer with a supplication for redemption. In fact, one can see our fixed prayer in a similar light, that all of the blessings of petition lead to the request, "And let our eyes see." Our whole goal is for the *Shekhina* to return to Tzion and for us to serve Him there. Rabbeinu Bachya, then, does not abandon the dimension of petition but rather finds room for it among the duties of the heart.

**Prayer of Supplication as an Expression of Surrender**

Indeed, in the Gate of Spiritual Reckoning, in the central passage addressing prayer, Rabbeinu Bachya explains prayers of supplication and how they fit in among the prayers of praise and thanksgiving:

It is proper, brother, for you to know that our devotion 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.

Submission is the central element in the service of God and it is also the central element in prayer. Submission leads one to exalt his Creator and to offer praises and thanksgiving to His name. How does submission lead to prayers of petition as well, addressing not the virtues of the Creator but the needs of man? Rabbeinu Bachya answers this question by arguing that supplications express that which a person lacks, and that directing supplications to God expresses one’s submission before Him. In this way, petitions find their place in Rabbeinu Bachya's world, which directs all of a person's life to self-effacement in order to serve God.

**The Peak of Prayer and Service – The Longing of the Soul**

In conclusion, let us take another look at one sentence in the central passage dealing with prayer in *Duties of the Heart,* in the Gate of Spiritual Reckoning, that was cited above:

Our devotion 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.

It seems that Rabbeinu Bachya is offering a definition of the concept of prayer. The striking idea in this definition, "longing of the soul," appears only once again in the book – at its highest peak, in the Gate of the Love of God, with which the book concludes. There he writes that love of God is "the soul's longing for the Creator, and turning to Him of its own accord." If a person succeeds in making his way through the entire process and reaching the longed-for love of God, prayer is the expression of that level. It communicates the longing of one's soul for God.

Rabbeinu Bachya presents prayer as a ladder that stands on the ground, among the duties of the bodily organs, with its top reaching heaven, to an inner expression of the longing of the soul. When a person succeeds in expressing in his heart, even without any external articulation, the feelings of submission to and yearning for God – then prayer has a most significant place in the service of God.

(Translated by David Strauss)