YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #04:**

**Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (I)**

**Rabbi Yehuda Halevi Versus Philosophy**

The writing of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's *Kuzari* had both an internal and an external reason. The internal reason was a desire to articulate the Jewish faith in an orderly and comprehensible manner. The external reason is that at the time of the *Kuzari*'s writing, approaches began to be formulated that could serve as alternatives to Judaism. Christianity and Islam had become solidified, and Greek philosophy in particular was being committed to writing, in the new forms it received in the various religious streams.

The external reason also raises an internal question: What is the relationship for us, as students, between traditional Torah and philosophy? Between Scripture and the oral traditions that accompanied it, and the conclusions of intellectual reasoning? This confrontation serves as the headline for the thought of the *Rishonim*. A whole series of thinkers – Rav Saadya Gaon, Rabbeinu Bachya, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the Rambam, and others – tried to reconcile tradition with human reasoning. We will see that there are profound differences between them, but this is their common foundation.

Philosophy sets a question mark over religiosity in general, a question mark that hovers in particular over the concept of prayer. According to Aristotelian philosophy, which sees God as a perfect entity that rests within itself and maintains no direct connection with man, prayer should not be possible. This question stands in the background of the discussion among *Rishonim* concerning prayer, though we have not yet seen explicit reference to it. Through our study, we will try to trace the issue and see when it appears for the first time explicitly. We will also try to understand why it took the Sages of Israel so long to begin addressing it.

What is novel in Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's confrontation with intellectual reasoning? Let us first review the approaches we have already encountered. We saw that Rav Saadya Gaon argues that Torah can be reconciled with the human mind. Moreover, fundamentally we could have arrived on our own at the faith laid down in the Torah, but that would have required a lengthy process of intellectual clarification. For this reason, the Torah helped us and set the truth before us. Later, Rav Saadya distinguishes between the rational commandments and the revealed ones, and explains that even the revealed commandments – which are not dictated by reason – do not contradict it. For Rabbeinu Bachya, the rational course appears only in the first gate, the Gate of the Unity of God, and from then on, he notes at the beginning of each chapter that he is relying on the previous chapter. That is to say, the rational gate at the beginning is the foundation for his entire approach. Later, rational processes take up less room, apparently because the subject of the book is the service of God. In any event, "the arousal of the intellect" (*he’arat ha-seikhel*), the rational basis for the arguments in the book, appears again later. In a certain sense, it seems that motivation to serve God that comes from the intellect is more important and dominant than the basic assumptions of tradition, "the arousal of the Torah" (*he’arat ha-Torah*).

After Rabbi Yehuda Halevi would come the Rambam, and in his book, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, he would conduct a comprehensive intellectual analysis of matters of faith. On the face of it, his work is similar to the work of Rav Saadya Gaon, but there is a fundamental difference between them: Rav Saadya Gaon demonstrates how faith can be reconciled with reason, and the Rambam breaks down the issues to their constituent factors, analyzes and examines, and stands all of the concepts of faith before the critique of the mind. Reason is the examining and clarifying factor, and in its light, one must purify and refine those theological concepts that we have not grasped correctly. The Rambam, however, also emphasizes the limits of the mind's comprehension, and prophecy's superiority over it.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi was the first to confront philosophy, and he did so with rational arguments; that is to say, using philosophy’s own tools. In this way, his approach seeks to establish the boundaries of philosophy, to find the defined space to which it belongs and the realms that are beyond its understanding. He draws a line between the fourth level of creation, the level of man (above the inanimate, plant, and animal kingdoms), and the fifth level – the level of Israel. The conclusions of the philosophers bring them to the fourth level, which is managed by nature and is distant from God, whereas on the fifth level, a direct connection between man and God becomes possible. In the first part of his book, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi addresses the unique connection between God and the prophet, and in the second part, he clarifies that there exists a live and direct connection between God and the people of Israel.

In light of all this, one would expect that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's approach to prayer would be different from what we have seen thus far. We will see below both how it is similar to the approach of Rabbeinu Bachya and how they are completely different.

**Approach to Prayer: Love Versus Submission**

There are places where Rabbi Yehuda Halevi’s wording is very similar to that of Rabbeinu Bachya. For example, with respect to the role of internal devotion (*kavana*):

The tongue agrees with the thought, and does not overstep its bounds, does not speak in prayer in a mere mechanical way as the starling and the parrot, but every word is uttered thoughtfully and attentively [with *kavana*]. (*Kuzari* III, 5)

These words bring to mind the approach of Rabbeinu Bachya, which emphasized that *kavana* during prayer is necessary and that it constitutes the essence of prayer. As he continues, however, the gap between their respective approaches is revealed:

This moment forms the heart and fruit of his time, while the other hours represent the path which leads to it. He looks forward to its approach, because while it lasts, he resembles the spiritual beings and is removed from mere animal existence. Those three times of daily prayer are the fruit of his day and night, and the Sabbath is the fruit of the week, because it has been appointed to establish the connection with the Divine Spirit and to serve God in joy, not in submission, as has been explained. All this stands in the same relation to the soul as food to the human body. Prayer is for his soul what nourishment is for his body. The blessing of one prayer lasts until the time of the next, just as the strength derived from the morning meal lasts until supper. The further the soul is removed from the time of prayer, the more it is darkened by encounters with worldly matters – all the more so if necessity brings him into the company of youths, women, or wicked people and he hears unbecoming and soul-darkening words and songs that exercise an attraction for his soul which he is unable to master. During prayer, he purges his soul from all that passed over it, and prepares it for the future. (ibid.)

First, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi defines prayer here as "the heart and fruit of his time." In the *Duties of the Heart*, it took us a long time to find a reference to prayer, whereas here it stands at the center of a pious man's daily service. The second difference is: "to serve God in joy, not in submission." This characterization of prayer is completely different from that found in the *Duties of the Heart.* Rabbeinu Bachya emphasizes how to express through prayer one's submission and self-effacement.

This difference is related to a deeper point about which Rabbi Yehuda Halevi disagrees with Rabbeinu Bachya, and with religious philosophy in general. His emphasis on joy appears again in the second part of his book:

The divine law imposes no asceticism on us. It rather desires that we should keep the equipoise, and grant every mental and physical faculty its due, as much as it can bear, without overburdening one faculty at the expense of another. If a person gives way to licentiousness, he blunts his mental faculty; he who is inclined to violence injures some other faculty. Prolonged fasting is no act of piety for a weak person who, having succeeded in checking his desires, is not greedy. For him, feasting is a burden and self-denial. Neither is diminution of wealth an act of piety, if it is gained in a lawful way, and if its acquisition does not interfere with study and good works, especially for one who has a household and children. He may spend part of it in almsgiving, which would not be displeasing to God; but to increase it is better for himself. Our law, as a whole, is divided between fear, love, and joy, by each of which one can approach God. Your contrition on a fast day is not nearer to God than your joy on the Sabbath and holy days, if it is the outcome of a devout heart. Just as prayers demand thought and devotion [*kavana*], so also does pleasure in God's command and law require thought and devotion; that you should rejoice in the law itself out of love of the Lawgiver. You see how much good He has done you, as if you had been His guest invited to His festive table. You thank Him in mind and word, and if your joy leads you so far as to sing and dance, it becomes worship and a bond of union between you and the Divine Influence. (*Kuzari* II, 50)

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi asserts that the Torah moves between awe, love, and joy. Of these three movements, two relate to drawing closer to God, and only the third to distancing from Him.

Already in the first part of the book, when Rabbi Yehuda Halevi brings the words of the philosopher, it is possible to see how the service of God that stems from philosophy is formulated:

Keep just ways as regards character and actions, because this will help you to effect truth, to gain instruction, and to become similar to this Active Intellect. The consequence of this will be contentment, humility, submission, and every other praiseworthy inclination. (*Kuzari* I, 1)

At the end of his remarks, the philosopher formulates principles for service: according to his approach, one should adopt proper actions and arrive at the proper character traits. These are traits that stem from the consciousness of the fundamental detachment from God, which accompanies the philosophical approach. It is understandable, then, that the Jewish thinkers who followed in the footsteps of philosophy also set these traits in the center – submission expresses the gap between God and man. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi does not follow this path; he emphasizes the love and joy that express connection and closeness. He also opposes the notion that piety depends on being satisfied with little: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi attaches importance to worldly pleasures, so that we may encounter God's goodness and thank Him for it (III, 17). Of course, sensual pleasures may also pose a danger; they may bring a person to materialism and disengagement from God. However, instead of contending with the danger by disengaging from sensual matters, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi prefers to develop pleasure in the proper way, which can strengthen the bond with God.

**What Happens Internally During Prayer**

Another point that arises from Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's description of prayer is his entry into the inner world of the worshipper. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi brings us into the inner laboratory of a pious person, and shows us how he worships God with prayer.

The vitality of prayer for the soul is a novel idea that we have not yet seen in our study. The description of prayer as air for breathing, as oxygen for the soul, appears for the first time in the book of the *Kuzari.* We did not encounter such expressions in the writings of Rav Saadya Gaon or Rabbeinu Bachya. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi compares prayer to food: Just as the body cannot survive without food, so too the soul cannot survive without prayer. Thus far, we have spoken about service before God, and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi adds the service that takes place between the person and himself, the service of purifying the soul. Prayer purifies and refines a person from within.

**What Happens During Prayer vis-à-vis the *Shekhina***

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi spells out in detail the process that takes place throughout the order of prayers, from the beginning of the blessings of *Keri'at Shema* through the *Amida* prayer:

The blessing "He who created the lights" places before his eye the order of the upper world, the greatness of the heavenly bodies and their usefulness, that in the eyes of their Creator they are no greater than worms, though they appear to us immense on account of the benefit we derive from them. The proof that they are in the view of their Creator as I have said, is that His wisdom and power observable in the creation of the ant and bee is not less than in that of the sun and its sphere, but the traces of this providence and wisdom are finer and more wonderful in the ant and bee, because, in spite of their minuteness, He put faculties and organs into them. This he bears in mind lest the light will appear to him too great, and the Satan lead him into adapting some views of worshippers of spirits and make him believe that the sun and moon are able to help or injure independently, while they can only assist to do so indirectly, like the wind and fire. It is written: "If I behold the sun when it shines… and my heart has been secretly enticed" (*Iyov* 31:2-27). At the blessing beginning: "with eternal love," he, in a similar manner, bears in mind the attachment of the Divine Influence to the community which was prepared to receive it, as a smooth mirror receives the light, and that the Law is the outcome of His will in order to establish His sway on earth; as it is in heaven. His wisdom did not demand of Him to create angels on earth, but mortals of flesh and blood, in whom natural gifts and certain characteristics prevail according to favorable or unfavorable influences, as is explained in the Book of Creation. Whenever some few, or a whole community, are sufficiently pure, the Divine light rests on them and guides in an incomprehensible and miraculous manner which is quite outside the ordinary course of the natural world. This is called "love and joy." The Divine Influence, however, found next to the stars and spheres none who accepted his commands and who adhered to the course He had dictated, with the exception of a few between Adam and Yaakov. When they had become a people, the Divine Influence rested upon them out of love, in order to be a God to them. In the desert, he arranged them in the manner of the sphere in four standards, corresponding to the four quarters of the sphere, and in twelve tribes, corresponding to the twelve signs of the zodiac, the camp of the Levites being in the center, just as it is stated in the Book of Creation: "The holy Temple is exactly in the center, but God carries them all." All this points to love for the sake of which the blessing is recited. In the reading of the *Shema*, which then follows, he accepts the obligations of the Law, as in the piece beginning "True and certain," which expresses the firm resolution to observe the Torah. This is as if, after having clearly and unmistakably imbibed all that preceded, he binds his soul and testifies that the children should submit to the Law forever, just as the forefathers had done, according to the words: "Upon our fathers, and upon us, and our children and our (coming) generations… a good word, firmly established, that never passes away." To this he attaches these articles of creed which complete the Jewish belief, viz. the recognition of God's sovereignty, His eternity, and the providential care which He bestowed on our forefathers; that the Torah emanated from Him, and that the proof for all this is to be found in the delivery from Egypt. This is alluded to in the words: "It is true that You are the Lord our God; truly from everlasting is Your name… the help of our fathers… from Egypt did You redeem us." He who unites all this in pure thought is a true Israelite and worthy of aspiring to the Divine Influence which among all nations was exclusively connected with the children of Israel. He finds no difficulty in standing before the Divine Presence, and he receives an answer as often as he asks. (*Kuzari* III, 17)

The blessings of *Keri'at Shema* open with the blessing of "He who created the lights," in which we encounter all of creation, including the world of the angels. This blessing strengthens our faith and confronts idolatry, but is also liable to create a sense of disparity and distance, similar to the consciousness that is built by philosophy. Therefore, this blessing is followed by the blessing of "eternal love," in which God's love for Israel is revealed. This blessing comes to express God's desire for closeness, for connection and for resting His *Shekhina* among us. Here too we find the two fundamental concepts that we encountered above – "this is called love and joy" – which parallels our love and joy in the worship of God. His attitude towards us is an attitude of love and joy, and our attitude towards Him is an attitude of love and joy. From there, we move toward *Shema* and acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, then to the blessing "true and certain," which establishes the recognition of God's kingdom. This progression brings us to a special level: "He who unites all this in pure thought is a true Israelite and worthy of aspiring to the Divine Influence which among all nations was exclusively connected with the children of Israel."

After this long journey, one merits to actually stand before the *Shekhina*. Here is realized the superior level of the people of Israel, by way of which they stand apart from all the nations. The direct connection with God, the closeness to God that was spoken about above, all this takes place during the *Amida* prayer.

When precisely does this encounter take place? Let us continue to follow the course of the *Amida* prayer itself:

In the first paragraph, entitled "Fathers," the worshipper considers the piety of the Patriarchs, the establishment of the covenant with them on the part of God for all times, which never ceases, as is expressed in the words: "He brings the Redeemer to their children's children." The second blessing, known as "Mighty Deeds," teaches that God's is the eternal rule of the world, not however, as natural philosophers assert, that this is done by natural and empirical means. The worshipper further considers that He revives the dead whenever He desires, however far this may be removed from the speculation of natural philosophers. Similar ideas prevail in the words: "He causes the wind to blow, and the rain to descend." According to His desire He "delivers those in bondage," as may be established by instances from the history of Israel. Having read these paragraphs which enlighten him in the belief that God keeps up a connection with this material world, the worshipper extols and sanctifies Him by the declaration that no corporeal attitude appertains to Him. This is done in the paragraph beginning: “You are holy," a blessing which inculcates belief in the attributes of sublimity and holiness commented upon by philosophers. This paragraph follows the others in which the absoluteness of God's sovereignty is laid down. They convince us that we have a King and Lawgiver, and without them we had lived in doubt, the theories of philosophers and materialists. The paragraphs of "Fathers" and "Mighty Deeds" must therefore precede that of the "Sanctification of God." After this, the worshipper begins to pray for the wants of the whole of Israel, and it is not permissible to insert other prayers except in the place of voluntary supplications. A prayer, in order to be heard, must be recited for a multitude, or in a multitude, or for an individual who could take the place of a multitude. None such, however, is to be found in our age.

The beginning of the *Amida* prayer is still part of the inner process that the worshipper undergoes. The main expression that characterizes that process of developing consciousness is "the worshipper considers" (*ve-yiten el libo*). The prayer builds within him faith and knowledge of God. This is not yet the point of encounter. Afterwards, the worshipper begins to petition for worldly matters; at this stage as well, the meeting does not yet take place.

The first place [of the second group of blessings] is very appropriately given to the prayer for intelligence and enlightenment to obey God. Man prays to be brought near to his Master. He, therefore, says first: "You graciously give reason to man," which is immediately followed by "He who takes delight in repentance." Thus "wisdom," "knowledge" and "intelligence" move in the path of the Law and worship in the words: "Restore us, O our Father, to Your Law." Since mortal man cannot help sinning, a prayer is required for forgiveness of transgressions in thought and deed. This is done in the formula ending: "the Merciful who forgives much." To this paragraph he adds the result and sign of forgiveness, viz. the redemption from our present condition. He begins: "Behold our misery," and concludes: "Redeemer of Israel." After this, he prays for the health of body and soul, and for the bestowal of food to keep up strength in the blessing of the "years." Then he prays for the reunion of the scattered, in the paragraph ending: "He who gathers together the scattered of His people of the house of Israel." With this is connected the reappearance of justice and restoration of the former condition [of the people] in the words: "Rule over us You alone." He then prays against evil and the destruction of the thorns in the paragraph of the "heretics." This is followed by the prayer for the preservation of the pure essence in: "the just." He then prays for the return to Jerusalem which again is to form the seat of the Divine Influence, and with this is connected the prayer concerning the Messiah, the son of David. This concludes all worldly wants. He now prays for the acceptance of his prayer. (*Kuzari* III, 19)

The moment of encounter takes place following the blessing of "He who restores His *Shekhina* to Zion." At that moment, since the prayer relates to the return of the Divine Presence, the worshipper can stand in his internal world before the *Shekhina*. This is the moment of encounter. The *Kuzari's* explanation sheds light on the bowing that is done immediately after the blessing of "He who restores His *Shekhina* to Zion." This is bowing that stems directly from the fact that the worshipper finally gets to stand before the *Shekhina* and meet it.

Then he prays for the visible revelation of the *Shekhina*, just as appeared to the prophets, pious, and those who were delivered from Egypt, in the paragraph ending: "O You who hears prayer." Then he prays: "Let mine eye behold," and concludes: "He who restores His *Shekhina* to Zion." He imagines the *Shekhina* standing opposite to him and bows down with the words: "We give thanks," which contain the acknowledgment and gratitude for God's mercy. The whole concludes with the paragraph: "He makes peace," in order to take leave from the *Shekhina* in peace. (ibid.)

.

At the end of the prayer, the worshipper stands before the *Shekhina* and bows before it. After all of the petitions, he imagines the *Shekhina* before him, offers gratitude, and bows. This is also how the encounter with the *Shekhina* was conducted in the Temple: One would go up to God, draw near, stand before the *Shekhina*, bow, and take leave.

This is the path that the worshipper takes until he encounters God – He meets the world, he meets the people of Israel and their special connection to God, he accepts the yoke of the kingdom of God, and finally he merits to stand before the *Shekhina*. This is the realization of the Divine Presence in the world, and every individual can achieve it.

(Translated by David Strauss)