YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #05:**

**Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (II)**

Let us go back and clarify the fundamental differences between the approaches of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Rabbeinu Bachya, which express themselves in, among other things, the issue of prayer.

Both Rabbeinu Bachya and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi set *deveikut*, attachment to God, as the highest of human aspirations. There is, however, a difference between their understandings of *deveikut*. For Rabbeinu Bachya, *deveikut* involves thought and one's mental attitude toward God – an attitude of thanksgiving and submission – whereas for Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, *deveikut* involves the resting of Divine inspiration upon man. These perspectives are already manifest at the beginning of their respective books: Rabbeinu Bachya opens his book with an intellectual clarification, in the Gate of the Unity of God, whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi declares at the very outset that he aspires to the level that is above the intellect, which allows for a special level of connection. The highest level that can be reached through philosophy is intellectual, but the level of Israel goes beyond that. The people of Israel can cleave to the Divine Influence. The intellectual service of the pious individual is but a tool to reach Divine inspiration, which is the realization of *deveikut.* Rabbeinu Bachya focuses on "stirring from below [*it'aruta diletata*]," which is a human movement, whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi focuses on the stage that is above that movement, "stirring from above [*it'aruta dile'eila*]," the resting of the *Shekhina* from above.

The pinnacle of the path that Rabbeinu Bachya outlines throughout his book is the love of God; however, that love expresses itself not in connection and meeting, but in submission and the yearning of the soul. This is love of admiration. We saw that Rabbi Yehuda Halevi tries to restrict the role of submission and expand the role of love and joy. The love of which he speaks is not only the love of submission, but the love of connection and closeness to God. As stated, the difference between the two approaches stems from a difference in attitude toward philosophy and the intellect. The philosophical perspective leads to an attitude of gap and distance. Rabbeinu Bachya grapples with the philosophical position: he argues that God is not detached, but rather He benefits man; therefore, man must be grateful to Him, and it is on this foundation that spiritual life is built. Nevertheless, all of this spiritual life is conducted within the atmosphere of distance. In the *Kuzari*, the general atmosphere is aspiration for connection.

For Rabbeinu Bachya, *deveikut* is achieved through the heart’s deliberation during the performance of *mitzvot*, and not by way of the actions themselves. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, on the other hand, paves the way for *deveikut* that includes the practical *mitzvot*. Rabbeinu Bachya builds a deep religious world, with the realm of the *mitzvot* found along its margins, while Rabbi Yehuda Halevi introduces the topic of desirable actions already at the start of his book. This is the goal of the inquiry conducted by the king, who is told in a dream that his intentions are desirable but his actions are not. He therefore begins his search for proper actions. This aspect of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's approach, as well, stems from his liberation from philosophy: According to philosophy, there is no desirable action, whereas according to Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, it is precisely through specific actions that *deveikut* is achieved.

**The Role of the Collective in Prayer**

Another significant difference between the two approaches, which is directly connected to the issue of prayer, is the significance of the people of Israel as a whole. Rabbeinu Bachya provides a roadmap for the service of the individual, whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi expands on the concept of the resting of the *Shekhina* by way of the people of Israel. This resting of the *Shekhina* is not achieved by every individual personally, but rather it depends on the people of Israel living in their land. It finds expression in three central revelations: Prophecy, supernatural providence, and the resting of the *Shekhina*. Prophecy is a connection of dialogue between God and man; providence is Divine action in the world in a manner that is above nature; and the resting of the *Shekhina* is a Divine manifestation that finds expression primarily in the Temple.

The problem starts when the Temple is destroyed and the people of Israel go out into exile, and it is no longer possible to live this Divine connection. It would seem that in the exile, there is no resting of the *Shekhina* and that it is impossible to achieve *deveikut.* Nevertheless, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi argues that even in a time of exile, the connection can exist, and from there he arrives at prayer.

The third part of the *Kuzari* opens with the king's request to hear about the pious man's worship "in the present time." That is to say, that which remains of the worship of God when the people are in exile. It turns out that throughout the detailed responses of the Rabbi, we find the principles listed above that are directed toward *deveikut* by way of Divine inspiration*.* Connection to the people of Israel underlies the worship of the pious man even in exile. For example, at the very beginning of the third part of the *Kuzari*, the Rabbi describes how the pious man uses his imaginative faculty:

He directs the organs of thought and imagination, relieving them of all worldly ideas mentioned above, and charges his imagination to produce, with the assistance of memory, the most splendid pictures possible, in order to resemble the Divine things sought after. Such pictures are the scenes of Sinai, Avraham and Yitzchak on Moriya, the *Mishkan* of Moshe, the Temple service, the presence of God in the Temple, and the like. He then orders his memory to retain all these, and not to forget them; he warns his fancy and its sinful prompters not to confuse the truth or to trouble it by doubts. (*Kuzari* III, 5)

The pious man's worship of God passes through the national past. He must relive within himself the revelation at Mount Sinai and the service in the Temple. Later, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi describes prayer, and there too, the path to the *Amida* prayer includes connection to the people of Israel and its past:

In a similar manner, at the blessing beginning “with eternal love,” he 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 show His reign on earth as it is apparent in heaven… And all this indicates love [about which the blessing is recited]. And he juxtaposes to this his acceptance of the obligations of the Law, with the reading of the *Shema*. (*Kuzari* III, 17)

The pious man accepts upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven by virtue of God's connection to the people of Israel. We accept His kingdom upon us because He chose us. Were it not for His selection, we would not be obligated to worship Him. It may be argued that were a non-Jew to approach Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and ask him how to serve God, he would tell him to go and study Rabbeinu Bachya’s *Duty of the Hearts.* Acceptance of God's kingdom through actions belongs exclusively to Israel. For this reason, the pious man accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven in the reading of the *Shema*, which is considered like the acceptance of the Torah.

At the end of the progression of the blessings of *Shema*, the pious man reaches a state that allows him to meet the *Shekhina*:

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. (ibid.)

Only those who are at the level of a "true Israelite" can rise above the ordinary human level and meet the Divine Influence in prayer. Anyone else in the world can praise and thank God, but cannot encounter Him. The capacity to encounter God was given to the people of Israel, and each individual member of Israel can realize that meeting by connecting himself to the people as a whole.

The worship of the individual in the present time is a restricted version of the collective service of God in its perfect state. The novelty is that this restricted version is at all possible, that some element of *deveikut* remains even in the exile. Even though the revelation at Mount Sinai has long since passed, and even though the Temple has already been destroyed, the impressions that they left still exist and are present. Therefore, the individual can still connect himself to these national impressions, and through them reach something like Divine inspiration.

This principle can also explain the fixed wording of the liturgy (III, 19). Rabbi Yehuda Halevi opens his explanation with a seemingly technical point, that it was necessary to institute a uniform text so that individuals not pray for something that is to the disadvantage of other individuals, but it quickly becomes clear that this is a fundamental point: The fixed text of the liturgy reflects the fact that we are a collective, that we all pray for us all. Only by virtue of the individual's belonging to the people can that individual encounter the *Shekhina.* The fathers of the nation were individuals who merited the Divine Influence, but since the appearance of the people of Israel, it is the collective that merits Divine inspiration. Only very few individuals are fit for Divine inspiration on their own, while all the others rely on their belonging to the people. Therefore, it is only through the people that they can pray.

**Summary**

Let us summarize what we have seen thus far. Rav Saadya Gaon spoke about prayer as a duty imposed on a slave to turn to his master in prayer. Rabbeinu Bachya kept this attitude of a slave submitting to his master, but shifted the focus of prayer from speech to thought and intention. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi changed the attitude toward God in prayer, adding the dimension of connection and closeness.

Along with this dimension, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi added two other significant dimensions: The first is the internal service of the petitioner within his soul. It is Rabbi Yehuda Halevi who developed the connection and dialogue with God in the *Amida* prayer, and who added in the other sections of prayer man's contemplation of himself. This contemplation is necessary to enable the connection that is at the heart of prayer. The second dimension is the personal renewal that takes place by way of prayer. Prayer is the seed of time and its fruit, and man's soul needs prayer just as his body needs food. Even when a person petitions in his prayer for his bodily needs, he attains thereby satisfaction of his spiritual needs. Prayer is not only an appeal to God, but also a daily process of inner purification.

Hence, three processes take place during prayer: encounter, contemplation, and purification. Contemplation leads to encounter, and purification is the product of that encounter.

It should be noted that immediately after presenting prayer as a purification of the soul, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi states that this is also what takes place on Shabbat. Prayer is a daily occurrence, and once a week the purification takes place at a higher level. Over and beyond this level are the festivals, which also purify the soul, and the highest level of purification is reached once a year, on Yom Kippur. Like prayer, so too Yom Kippur includes both inner purification and an encounter with the *Shekhina*. On this day, the two dimensions unite: "You shall purify yourselves before the Lord" (*Vayikra* 16:30).

These significant internal processes, which direct a person toward encounter with the *Shekhina*, are bound up with the individual's connection to the collective of Israel.

To conclude our study of the thought of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, let us contemplate a prayer that he himself wrote – *Tziyon Halo Tish'ali* ("Zion, will you not ask"):

My heart is to Bet-El, and for Peniel it greatly yearns,

And for Machanayim and all of the rendezvous of your pure ones,

There the *Shekhina* resides for you,

And your Creator opened your gates opposite the gates of Heaven,

And the glory of God alone was your luminary,

And the sun, moon, and stars were not your luminaries.

I would choose for my soul to be poured out

In the place where the spirit of God was poured out upon your chosen ones.

You, house of royalty, and you, throne of God,

How could slaves now sit upon the thrones of your masters?

If only I could wander

Upon the places where God was revealed to your seers and messengers!

This is what takes place when Rabbi Yehuda Halevi prays. He sees before his eyes the Temple, the resting of the *Shekhina*, and the impressions left by the nation's past, and then he utters his prayer to return to Zion.

(Translated by David Strauss)