YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #06: The Rambam (I) – General Introduction**

The Rambam deals with the subject of prayer in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, in the *Mishneh Torah*, and in the *Guide for the Perplexed.* We will first examine his views in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* and in the *Mishneh Torah*, and then we will move on to his position in the *Guide.*

**The Definition of the Commandment of Prayer**

When the Rambam lists the commandment of prayer in his count of the *mitzvot*, he writes: "To pray to Him." This is also his formulation in the *Mishneh Torah* in the body of the text, but in the heading of *Hilkhot Tefilla*, he writes: "To serve God through prayer." There is a subtle difference between prayer and serving God through prayer, and this difference is sharpened by what the Rambam writes in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*:

And the fifth commandment is that He commanded us to serve Him. This commandment is repeated several times. It says: "And you shall serve the Lord your God" (*Shemot* 23:25); and it says: "And Him you shall serve" (*Devarim* 13:5); and it says: "And Him you shall serve" (*Devarim* 6:13); and it says: "And to serve Him" (*Devarim* 11:13). Even though this command as well is one of the general commands, as we explained in the fourth principle, it contains a unique element in that it commands prayer. As the *Sifrei* states: "'And to serve Him' – this is prayer." They also said: "'And to serve Him' – this is [Torah] study." And in the teachings of Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Yose Ha-Gelili, they said: "From where [do we know] that prayer is [included] among the *mitzvot*? From here: 'You shall fear the Lord your God, and you shall serve Him'" (*parasha* 12, p. 228). And they said: "Serve Him with His Torah, serve Him in His Temple" (*Midrash Tanna'im* from *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, *Parashat Re'eh*). That is to say, one should go there to pray there and facing toward it, as was explained by Shlomo. (Positive Commandment 5)

The Rambam defines the mitzvaof prayer as fulfillment of a more general and fundamental mitzva: There is a general mitzvato serve and worship God, and this service is fulfilled through prayer. In principle, the service of God includes the observance of the entire Torah, but according to *Chazal*, there is a special concrete expression of God's service, namely, prayer.

In his opening words in *Hilkhot Tefilla*, the formulation is clearer:

It is a positive Torah commandment to pray every day, as it is stated: "You shall serve God, your Lord" (*Shemot* 23:25). Tradition teaches us that this service is prayer, as it is stated: "And serve Him with all your heart" (*Devarim* 11:13), and our Sages said: Which is the service of the heart? This is prayer. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:1)

Here the Rambam cites the Midrash concerning "service of the heart," from which it is possible to understand the relationship between the service of God in general and prayer: There is a general duty to serve God, which includes service that is performed **in the heart**, and that is prayer. In *Sefer Ha-mitzvot,* the Rambam does not use the formulation "service of the heart," and it would appear there that service and prayer are identical.

The Rambam’s next lines in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* are surprising: "They also said: '"And to serve Him" – this is [Torah] study'… 'Serve Him with His Torah, serve Him in His Temple.'" Why does the Rambam bring this opinion, according to which service involves Torah study? Further, if it is critical to note that Torah study is also an important element in the service of God, and so too service in the Temple, does this detract from prayer's standing as a concrete expression of service? What is the idea of prayer in particular, if there are also other modes of service?

A question also arises regarding the Midrash itself: Is it only prayer, Torah study, and the Temple service that are included in the service of God? What about observance of the rest of the *mitzvot*? Why does the Midrash not state: "Serve Him with His commandments"?

Another important point in the Rambam, apart from the definition of the mitzva, is the very assertion that prayer is a mitzva. Let us go back to the first *halakha* that we cited above, and examine it in full:

It is a positive Torah commandment to pray every day, as it is stated: "You shall serve God, your Lord" (*Shemot* 23:25). Tradition teaches us that this service is prayer, as it is stated: "And serve Him with all your heart" (*Devarim* 11:13), and our Sages said: Which is the service of the heart? This is prayer. The number of prayers is not prescribed in the Torah, nor does it prescribe a specific formula for prayer. Also, according to Torah law, there are no fixed times for prayers. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:1)

There are halakhic authorities who disagree with this assertion, but according to the Rambam, prayer is a positive Torah commandment. However, he qualifies this assertion and says that only prayer itself is a Torah law – not the number of prayers, their formulas, or their times. So what is the actual obligation? The Rambam continues in the next *halakha*:

Therefore, women and slaves are obligated to pray, since it is not a time-bound commandment. Rather, this commandment obligates each person to offer supplication and prayer every day, and utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to God for the goodness that He has bestowed upon him – each one according to his own ability.

A person who was eloquent would offer many prayers and requests. [Conversely,] a person who was inarticulate would speak as well as he could and whenever he desired. Similarly, the number of prayers was dependent on each person's ability. Some would pray once daily; others, several times. Everyone would pray facing the Temple, wherever he might be. This was the ongoing practice from [the time of] Moshe Rabbeinu until Ezra. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 1:2-3)

In his definition of the mitzva, the Rambam enumerates the various parts of prayer – praise, petition, and thanksgiving, but before that he makes specific mention of the element of petition: "to offer supplication and prayer every day." This creates a certain redundancy and a lack of clarity. It seems that his words should be understood as follows: The heading which defines the mitzva is: "to offer supplication and prayer every day," and then he details the parts of the mitzva: "utter praises of the Holy One, blessed be He; then petition for all his needs with requests and supplications; and finally, give praise and thanks to God." Supplications constitute the heart of prayer, but they must be preceded by praise of God and followed by an expression of gratitude. This conclusion is confirmed by what is stated in the next *halakha*, which also focuses on the supplications: "A person who was eloquent would offer many prayers and requests."

Let us return to the basic definition of the mitzva. We have seen so far that prayer is "service" that is obligatory every day, and that it is comprised of praise, petition, and thanksgiving. It should be noted that the Rambam also mentions the direction of prayer ("facing the Temple") and that the location of this law in the *halakha* suggests that it too is a Torah obligation. The commentaries to the Rambam discuss this point, but it is beyond the scope of our current discussion.

**Intention in Prayer – What Intention is Required, and Why?**

Later in *Hilkhot Tefilla*, we come to the Rambam's fundamental words regarding intention (*kavana*):

Proper intention: What is implied? Any prayer that is not [recited] with proper intention is not prayer. If one prays without proper intention, he must repeat his prayers with proper intention. One who is in a confused or troubled state may not pray until he composes himself. Therefore, one who comes in from a journey and is tired or irritated is forbidden to pray until he composes himself. Our Sages taught that one should wait three days until he is rested and his mind is settled, and then he may pray. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:15)

The Rambam establishes that prayer without proper intention is not prayer. He does not say that it is defective or disqualified prayer, but rather that it is not considered prayer at all. A *sukka* without sufficient walls is a disqualified *sukka*, and a Torah scroll that is missing letters is a disqualified Torah scroll, but prayer that lacks the proper intention is not disqualified prayer. It is simply not prayer, like a *sukka* without thatch or parchment upon which there is not yet any writing.

Rabbi Chaim of Brisk discusses at length the Rambam's position regarding the requirement of intention, and concludes that there are actually two requirements: intention to pray, and intention regarding the words of the prayer. The basic intention required in prayer is the intention to pray, i.e., that the worshipper know what he is doing now – standing before God in prayer. An additional intention involves thinking about the meaning of every word, but this is not indispensable. In any case, the Rambam conditions the fulfillment of the mitzva of prayer on some kind of intention. Prayer depends on the mind.

In one of his responsa, the Rambam answers a question concerning the addition of *piyyutim* to the fixed prayer, and mentions the matter of intention:

The addition of the recitation of hymns or prayers, such as the prayers of Rav Saadya and others, or words of Midrashic exposition or ethical exhortation before the obligatory prayer – all this is very good and desirable to evoke intention. *Chazal* have already said that the pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying. However, this is desirable for an individual or individuals who can do this in their homes, but in the synagogues, in my opinion, it is a mistake, because synagogues are for the masses. If there is there one old or weak or recently circumcised man, and he is delayed even one minute from communal prayer, he would be hurt by this. And in all such matters, the community is defined by the weakest among them, and we try to make it easier for them in all ways, and not add difficulty to God's service. As for reciting the hundred [daily] blessings or the hymns in haste and a rushed manner, that is a total mistake. One who does not rebuke the prayer leaders for this sins, because all these types of divine service, that are in the form of speech, the point is to contemplate them when one recites them, and direct his heart to them, and know that he is speaking to the Master of the entire universe, whether he is making a request of Him, or thanking Him, or praising Him, or describing His actions and kindnesses, or describing His miracles and abilities. This includes all blessings, hymns, and verses of praise. If this is all speaking to Him, how is it permissible to rush and turn his attention away from what is being said, except for one who does not know what he is saying and does not understand. He is in his prayer like a parrot or a fool, who repeat the words that people have taught them. (*Responsa of the Rambam*, 261)

The Rambam supports adding *piyyutim* and also reciting words of moral exhortation and Midrashic exposition before praying, in order to arouse one's intention. Nevertheless, he rules that one should refrain from dragging out the prayer service, so as not to make it more difficult for the community. He rejects the possibility of shortening the time of prayer, because there is no point in uttering words without thought: "The point is to contemplate them when one recites them, and direct his heart to them." One must not utter words of prayer too quickly, because the obligation of prayer includes thinking about and understanding what one is saying. The reason is "that he is speaking to the Master of the entire universe." This may also be the reason for the obligation to pray facing the Temple: a person must know while he is praying that he is standing before the Master of the universe.

**Theological Difficulties Relating to the Concept of Prayer**

The Rambam addresses several prayer-related issues that raise difficulties. In the *Mishneh Torah* he merely alludes to them, whereas in the *Guide* he expands upon them at length.

A person should not be profuse in his mention of adjectives describing God, and say: "The great, mighty, awesome, powerful, courageous, and strong God," for it is impossible for man to express the totality of His praises. Instead, one should mention [only] the praises that were mentioned by Moshe, of blessed memory. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 9:7)

One should mention only the descriptions of God that are found in the Torah, and not add other descriptions. This *halakha* points to a problem that underlies prayer: Our capacity to praise God is limited. The earlier authorities we have studied in this series did not address this issue, but the Rambam appears to have been troubled by it. It is interesting to note that elsewhere, it does not seem to have posed a problem for him:

The general rule is: A person should always cry out [to God] over future possibilities, asking for mercy. He should thank [God] for what has transpired in the past, thanking Him and praising Him according to his capacity. Whoever praises and thanks God abundantly and continuously is worthy to be praised. (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 10:26)

Here, Rambam indicates there is no problem with heaping upon God abundant and unlimited praise. To resolve the difficulty, we can suggest a halakhic distinction between the first blessing of the *Amida* prayer, in which one should say only: "the great, mighty, and awesome God," and the rest of the blessings, in which one may add words of praise and thanksgiving. A more fundamental distinction can be proposed between praise and thanksgiving: praise professes to be an objective account, and our ability to do that is limited, but thanksgiving is offered from the perspective of the recipient, and that knows no limit.

Another difficulty relates to the fact that God's will is perfect and absolute, and not subject to change, as the Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

Since this is so, all such [descriptions] and the like which are related in the Torah and the words of the Prophets – all these are metaphors and imagery. [For example,] "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh" (*Tehillim* 2:4); "They angered Me with their emptiness" (*Devarim* 32:21); and "As God rejoiced" [ibid. 28:63]. With regard to all such statements, our Sages said: "The Torah speaks in the language of man." This is [borne out by the rhetorical question (*Yirmiyahu* 7:19): "Are they enraging Me?" Behold, it is stated: "I, God, have not changed" (*Malakhi* 3:6). Now, were He to at times be enraged and at times be happy, He would change. Rather, all these matters are found only with regard to the dark and low bodies, those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is dust. In contrast, He, blessed be He, is elevated and exalted above all this. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:12)

This principle raises a question: What point is there to prayer, if it is impossible to change God's will? Surely, prayer is nothing but an appeal to another party to change what he is doing or planning to do!

These difficulties will remain with us throughout the topic of prayer, and we will discuss them in the coming *shiurim.*

(Translated by David Strauss)

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