YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #07: The Rambam (II) – The Mishneh Torah**

**What is the Intention of the Heart?**

We saw in the previous *shiur* how the Rambam defines the commandment of prayer in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* and in his *Mishneh Torah*. We noted various aspects of the issue of prayer in the Rambam's writings: The relationship between prayer and service of God; the centrality of petition among the different parts of prayer; the importance attached to the intention of the heart (*kavanat ha-lev*); and the tension between the limitations of human speech and the desire to offer copious praise and thanksgiving. This tension is also connected to the issue of intention, as it would not be so terrible to express exaggerated praise if we are not contemplating its content anyway.

This week we will try to better understand the intention of the heart that is required in prayer. What is "the heart" in question? Are we referring to a person's emotions? To his mental state?

**The Intention of the Heart and of the Mind**

The Rambam mentions the concept of *da'at*, "mind," many times in *Hilkhot Tefilla*: "when his mind is directed," "until his mind is settled," "to direct his mind," and many others. Let us examine the *halakha* in which the Rambam explains how one is to direct his heart to the proper intention:

What is meant by [proper] intention? One should clear his mind from all thoughts and envision himself as standing before the *Shekhina*. Therefore, one must sit a short while before praying in order to focus his attention and then pray in a pleasant and supplicatory fashion. (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 4:16)

Intention requires two mental actions, in the sense of both avoiding bad and actively doing good. The first is to remove all thoughts that are liable to disturb one's prayer, and the second is to see oneself as standing before the *Shekhina*. This *halakha* is connected to the requirement to stand facing the site of the *Mikdash*, which, from its location in *Hilkhot Tefilla*, appears to be a Torah requirement. The previous *shiur* raised the question of how this could be a Torah duty yet not an indispensable component of prayer, and now we can explain: Standing facing the site of the Temple itself is not an indispensable requirement, but the consciousness of standing before the *Shekhina* is indispensable. It is a Torah obligation, and facing the proper direction while standing in prayer is a fulfillment of that obligation.

As mentioned in the previous *shiur*, Rav Chaim Brisker proposes a distinction between two types of *kavana*: the intention of standing before God in prayer, and the intention regarding the meaning of the words in one's prayer. The first and fundamental intention is the intention to fulfill the commandment of prayer, or, put differently, the consciousness of standing before God throughout one's prayer. On the one hand, it seems it would be sufficient to maintain a background awareness that one is engaged in prayer and not just reading texts; on the other hand, the formulation, "and he should envision himself as standing before the *Shekhina*," implies a higher demand. This is one of the places in *Hilkhot Tefilla* where the Rambam seems to be establishing conflicting requirements – mentioning the minimal requirements on the one hand, while on the other hand, setting much higher aspirations.

**To Remember at all Times**

Let us examine the concept of the intention of the heart in light of another source in the Rambam – *Hilkhot Berakhot.* Whether blessings and prayer constitute one domain, or whether we are dealing with two distinct domains, is open to discussion, but there is certainly a connection between prayer and blessings, and we will see below that this is a close connection.

The Rambam writes in *Hilkhot Berakhot*:

Just as we recite blessings for benefit which we derive from the world, we also recite blessings for each *mitzva* before we fulfill it. Similarly, the Sages instituted many blessings as expressions of praise and thanks to God and as a means of petition, so that we will always remember the Creator, even though we have not received any benefit or performed a *mitzva*. (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:3)

The Rambam establishes that the overall purpose of blessings is to remember the Creator at all times. The Sages did not only consider different situations on a point-by-point basis and establish a blessing for each situation, but in general their goal was to establish many blessings so that God should always be in our memory. This goal is comprised of two components, memory and perpetuity, which are strongly connected to the issue of consciousness: God is supposed to be in our consciousness, and the aspiration is that this should occur at all times. Another component, mentioned in *Hilkhot Tefilla* but not in *Hilkhot Berakhot*, is presence. Prayer involves an encounter; the petitioner stands before the *Shekhina*. When reciting a blessing, a person remembers the *Shekhina*, but it is not present before him. This may be the difference between prayer and blessings: Prayer is standing before God, whereas blessings help us to remember God even when we are not standing before Him.

Is it possible to say that the goal of blessings is also the goal of prayer, i.e., that the purpose of prayer is that we should remember God at all times? In *Hilkhot Berakhot* we saw that the Sages added more and more blessings so that the memory of God would be constant. In *Hilkhot Tefilla* it is not explicitly stated that the Sages did this, but there is a hint: According to the Rambam, the Torah obligation is to pray once a day but the Sages instituted three prayers a day, corresponding to the daily offerings in the Temple. It is possible that the goal of the Sages with respect to prayer as well was that we should remember God at all times. To this we may add a source from *Chazal* that the Rambam surely had in mind: "He who prays should regard himself as if the *Shekhina* was before him, as it is stated: 'I have set God always before me' (*Tehillim* 16:8)" (*Sanhedrin* 22a). The *Shekhina* must be before us at all times. The Rambam’s words at the end of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* can also be understood in this manner. There, he explains which *mitzvot* were included in each part of the *Mishneh Torah*, and regarding the book which includes *Hilkhot Tefilla*, *Sefer Ahava* (the Book of Love), the Rambam writes:

I will include in it the *mitzvot* that we encounter frequently, that we were commanded about so that we should love God and remember Him always, e.g., the recitation of *Shema*, prayer, *tefillin*, and the blessings.

It seems, then, that prayer aims to raise God up in our memory at all times. In light of this, we can also understand the relationship between the various parts of prayer: petition is located in the middle, surrounded by praise and thanksgiving, so that we should rise up above all the necessities of life to the remembrance of God. This understanding shifts the focus of prayer from an encounter and conversation to an inner service that takes place in the consciousness of the person engaged in prayer.

***Kavanat Ha-lev* and Love**

The concept of intention of the heart can also be understood differently. The super-theme, the broad issue to which the Rambam assigns the topic of prayer, is love. Let us go back to the quotation from the end of *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* that we cited above: "So that we should love God and remember Him always." Above, we took prayer in the direction of the mind and memory, but it is possible that it is connected to the realm of emotions. It is interesting that the emotional focus in the words of the Rambam is love, while Rav Saadya Gaon defined prayer as an expression of fear and Rabbeinu Bachya went in that same direction and connected prayer to submission. Here, prayer is identified with love.

The question that needs to be asked at this point is: What is love? The Rambam seems to be referring to service through the emotions, but it is not so simple when we examine his words.

The Rambam discusses “service out of love” (*avoda mei-ahava*) in the last chapter of *Hilkhot Teshuva*:

One who serves [God] out of love occupies himself in the Torah and the *mitzvot* and walks in the paths of wisdom for no ulterior motive: not because of fear that evil will occur, nor in order to acquire benefit. Rather, he does what is true because it is true, and ultimately, good will come because of it. This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man. It is the level of our Patriarch, Avraham, whom God described as "he who loved Me" [*Yeshayahu* 41:8; see *Sota* 31], for his service was only motivated by love. God commanded us [to seek] this rung [of service] as conveyed by Moshe as it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord, your God" (*Devarim* 6:5). When a man will love God in the proper manner, he will immediately perform all of the *mitzvot* motivated by love. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:2)

The Rambam speaks of one who serves God out of love, and connects love to the concepts of truth and wisdom. This is a conceptual world of reason. The Rambam continues:

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick man's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her – when he sits down, when he gets up, and when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times, as we are commanded: "[And you shall love the Lord…] with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 6:5). This concept was implied by Shlomo when he stated as a metaphor (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:5): "I am lovesick." [Indeed,] the totality of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable describing [this love]. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3)

Here again we see a concept that we discussed above: *always*. All the components that have accompanied us in this *shiur* come together here: Mind, always, love. Study, which appeared in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* as a central realization of the mitzvato serve God, also connects to this point. If love is achieved through the mind, one must study in order to know God.

What does one need to know in order to love? The Rambam expands on this issue in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah,* where he discusses the *mitzvot* of loving God and fearing God:

It is a mitzva to love and fear this glorious and awesome God, as it is stated: "And you shall love God, your Lord" (*Devarim* 6:5) and as it is stated: "Fear God, your Lord" (*Devarim* 6:13).

What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" (*Tehillim* 42:3). When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited, wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... [I wonder] what is man that You should recall Him" (*Tehillim* 8:4-5). Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to [develop] love for God, as our Sages said regarding love: "In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and [thus] brought the world into being." (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:1-2)

When a person contemplates creation and exposes himself to the wondrous wisdom of God, he comes to love God, and the result is prayer: "He will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him]." Love leads to praise and thanksgiving. These are two of the three parts of prayer; petition has no place here, because the person is involved not with himself, but with the works of God. The focus shifts here from the petition that stood at the center of the definition of prayer, to the praise and thanksgiving that are more connected to contemplation of the works of God. If so, the gateway to prayer is the knowledge of God through contemplation of the act of creation.

Following this *halakha*, the Rambam offers a long and detailed account of the "work of creation" [*ma'aseh bereishit*] and the "work of the Divine chariot" [*ma'aseh merkava*]based on medieval science and Aristotelian metaphysics. Some of those details have been rejected since then, but there are also elements that remain valid to this very day, such as the rejection of anthropomorphism. In any event, the Rambam builds his ideas in a modular manner: *Sefer Ahava* teaches the basic level of serving God, and on top of this, *Sefer Ha-mada* (which begins with *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*)calls upon us to deepen our contemplation of the act of creation, in order to know God on a higher level. It is possible that today the Rambam would tell us not to accept what he says in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* as stated, but to rather delve deeper into modern science and through that reach the love of God.

In any case, prayer according to the Rambam is part of the service of God out of love – love that follows from deep knowledge of Him – and is also an expression of that love.

(Translated by David Strauss)