YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #10: The Ramban (I)**

The Ramban lived in Girona, which is today part of Spain, after the generation of the Rambam. To characterize his enterprise in comparison to that of the Rambam: While the Rambam encompassed all the topics of the Torah in his *Mishneh Torah*, the Ramban’s writings encompassed all the different aspects and layers of the Torah. He was a Talmudic scholar and halakhic authority in the realm of the revealed, a kabbalist in the realm of the occult, a Biblical commentator, and a thinker. Unlike many others, who occupied themselves with particular areas – halakhic jurists with Halakha and Talmud, and kabbalists with Kabbala – he applied himself to all areas. The multiple layers with which he dealt is particularly evident in his commentary on the Torah, in which he consistently divides his remarks between the layers of plain meaning, midrashic exposition, and secrets of the Torah.

Even though he was a kabbalist, the Ramban's thought is written primarily in the language of the revealed; he makes use of the wording of Scripture and of *Chazal*, not just the world of Kabbalistic concepts. This characteristic is related to the Ramban's unique quality of living in many realms, which allowed him to express kabbalistic ideas in philosophical terms.

Another significant aspect of the Ramban's world relates to the broad perspective of his teachings. A great controversy arose around the writings of the Rambam during the Ramban’s time, and the Ramban vigorously supported keeping the Rambam in the Torah camp. Even though he opposed some of his philosophical positions, he related to them with respect and rejected treating them as beyond the pale.

The Ramban was a sage of immense stature, who drew on his predecessors and related to his contemporaries while maintaining independence to pave a path of his own.

**Defining the Commandment of Prayer: A Rabbinic Enactment**

The Ramban deals with the issue of prayer in his strictures to the Rambam's *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, one of his most prominent works in the field of Halakha. He disagrees with the Rambam's position that prayer is a Torah mitzva and argues instead that the commandment of prayer is Rabbinic in origin. It is important to note that the Gemara does in fact give the impression that prayer is a Rabbinic decree. The Rambam cites sources from halakhic *midrashim*, and explains based on them that prayer is a positive Torah commandment; the Ramban emphasizes the Talmudic passages, and explains the halakhic *midrashim* in their light – in accordance with the understanding that prayer is by Rabbinic decree.

After citing the sources from the Talmud, the Ramban states:

But certainly, the entire matter of prayer is not obligatory at all. Rather it is part of the lovingkindness of the Creator, blessed be He, toward us, that He hears and answers whenever we cry out to Him… (Positive Commandments, no. 5)

It should be noted that the Ramban here relates to prayer as supplication – for that is the aspect of prayer regarding which we await an answer. The Ramban's formulation, "rather it is part of the lovingkindness of the Creator," gives rise to a question: Does the Ramban mean to say that prayer is not a mitzva, but rather belongs to a different category, or that it is also of lesser value than the *mitzvot*?

Later, the Ramban discusses prayer in times of distress, and includes such prayer in the service of God that is obligatory according to Torah law:

That which they expounded in the *Sifrei* (*Eikev*): "'And to serve Him' – this is [Torah] study. Another explanation: This is prayer," is an *asmakhta* [the use of a Biblical text merely as a "support"]. Or else it comes to say that included in the [Divine] service is that we should study Torah and pray to Him in times of distress, and that our hearts and eyes should be turned to Him alone, like the eyes of servants to the hands of their masters. This is like what is written: "And when you go to war in your land against the adversary that oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets; and you shall be remembered before the Lord your God" (*Bamidbar* 10:9). This is a *mitzva* for every trouble that befalls the community, to cry out before Him in prayer and trumpet blasting. This is the matter explained by Shlomo, as it is written: "When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain," and it is written: "If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, if there be blasting or mildew, locust or caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there be; whatever prayer and supplication be made by any man of all Your people Israel, who shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house" (*Melakhim* I 8:35-38; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 6:26-29)…

And if perhaps their Midrash regarding prayer indicates an obligation from the Torah, we will count it in the master's [Rambam’s] count, and say that there is a mitzvain times of trouble that we must believe that He, may He be blessed and exalted, hears prayer and saves [us] from troubles through prayer and crying out. Understand this.

Many have struggled with these words of the Ramban and understood them in different ways. According to one understanding, prayer in a time of trouble is in fact a Torah obligation, whereas according to another understanding, the Ramban raises this as a possibility, but does not stand behind it as his conclusion. His formulation is indeed qualified: "And if perhaps their Midrash regarding prayer indicates an obligation from the Torah, we will count it in the master's count, and say that there is a mitzvain times of trouble"; that is to say, if we wish to reconcile the source from the *Sifrei*, which implies that prayer is a Torah obligation, we can perhaps say that the Torah obligation is limited to prayer in a time of trouble. It is not at clear to what extent the Ramban accepts this position.

Another question that arises from the Ramban's words is how to define "in times of trouble." Does this refer to a person's ongoing and changing needs, as opposed to routine prayer with fixed wording that does not stem from the particular needs of the worshipper, or is it referring to actual distress? If the reference is to actual distress, we must understand why this in particular obligates prayer by Torah law. The *Kin'at Soferim*, a commentator to the Ramban's strictures, asks what the fundamental difference is between times of trouble and ordinary supplications. Is a person not dependent on God with respect to his regular needs? We must also clarify whether only communal troubles obligate prayer, or even those of the individual.

On a more fundamental level, the entire dispute between the Rambam and the Ramban raises a question. The Rambam maintains that the world is run on a regular basis in accordance with nature, without God's direct interference (see *Guide for the Perplexed* II, 29), whereas the Ramban views all of reality as a series of hidden miracles (see his commentary to *Shemot* 13:16). It is surprising, then, that the Rambam sees prayer as a Torah obligation, whereas according to the Ramban, it is only a Rabbinic enactment.

**The Difference Between Regular Prayer (Rabbinic Enactment) and Prayer in a Time of Need (Torah Law)**

Why, according to the Ramban, is prayer not a Torah obligation but only a Rabbinic enactment?

One possibility is that the Ramban attaches great importance to prayer, and precisely for that reason, does not count it as a mitzva. Prayer must be spontaneous; it must come in truly and sincerely from within the person, and defining it as an obligation that is forced upon him from the outside impairs its unique function. It is not meant to belong to the obligating world of *mitzvot*. If so, however, why is there an obligation to pray in a time of trouble? It is possible that there is no fundamental difference between prayer in a time of trouble and ordinary prayer, only that in a time of trouble, a person must be reminded to pray, and then he will pray on his own for what he truly needs. The obligation of prayer merely opens the door for him to spill out his heart in a time of trouble. Though this possibility is highly reasonable, there is no hint to it whatsoever in the words of the Ramban himself. Nowhere does the Ramban speak of prayer as a spontaneous outpouring of the petitioner's soul.

A possibility that seems to have a stronger foundation is that prayer is not part of the service of God, but rather one of the actions a person does to achieve his needs. This is the meaning of the statement that prayer is "part of the lovingkindness of the Creator": The *mitzvot* are actions undertaken for the sake of heaven, while God performs His acts of lovingkindness for the benefit of man. When a person wants his personal needs to be met, he turns to God and seeks out His help. This appeal is not connected to the obligation "to serve Him with all your heart," which is directed toward God. Once again, we can ask: Why then is prayer in a time of trouble a Torah obligation (according to the understanding that this, indeed, is the Ramban's position)? After all, it too is meant for the benefit of man!

One way to answer this question stems from the wording of the Ramban: "And that our hearts and eyes should be turned to Him alone, like the eyes of servants to the hands of their masters." It is precisely in a time of trouble that a man turns to the One who can truly help him, so such a situation provides a measure by way of which we can examine whom a person leans on. If a person turns to God in his time of trouble, this attests to the fact that he is a servant of God.

Another direction, which will be discussed at length in the next *shiur*, emerges from another source, one of the most important sources in the Ramban, namely, the Ramban's commentary to the Torah at the end of *Parashat Bo*, where he sets faith in God as the purpose of the exodus from Egypt and the purpose of all the commandments. This purpose also appears in the words of the Ramban cited above: "That **we must believe** that He, may He be blessed and exalted, hears prayer and saves [us] from troubles through prayer and crying out."

We must now try to understand how prayer in a time of need achieves the central goal of the *mitzvot* – faith in God. This question will be addressed in the next *shiur.*

(Translated by David Strauss)