YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #12: Rabbi Chasdai Crescas**

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas is a landmark figure in Jewish thought. Thus far, we have traced the development of Jewish thought based on Greek philosophy, a process that reached its climax in the writings of the Rambam. The Rambam explicitly states that he relies on the fundamentals of Aristotelian philosophy, although he certainly does not follow it blindly but rather chooses what to accept and what not to accept. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas is the first Jewish thinker to thoroughly challenge Aristotle. The Rambam discusses twenty-five "prefaces" in his *Guide* – fundamental assumptions of philosophy on which he bases his teachings – and Rabbi Chasdei Crescas systematically challenges each one, including the proofs given for them. He thus liberates Jewish thought from its subjugation to Aristotelian assumptions and conclusions. This does not mean that he detaches himself from intellectual reason; on the contrary, many of his alternative principles may make more sense to us.

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas challenges not only the philosophical discourse, but also its implications for the religious world. His conclusions lead to a scale of values different from that of Jewish philosophers who based themselves primarily on the Aristotelian approach. From his position as a philosopher, he brings us back to the basic, simple principles that emerge clearly from the Torah and the words of *Chazal.* For example, he rejects the notion that intellectual attainment leads to the world-to-come and eternal life, and that the *mitzvot* are but a means to that attainment. According to him, the *mitzvot* themselves lead to the world-to-come; they have inherent value, and not only because of the conceptual viewpoints that can be constructed with their help. The peak of his scale of values is not intellectual attainment, but love of God, and he sees the *mitzvot* as practical expressions of that love. (This issue will bear significance over the course of our study.) Rabbi Chasdai Crescas restores familiar Jewish values to the center, but unlike others who sought to do so by fighting philosophy (such as Rabbeinu Yona, and to a large extent the author of the *Kuzari*), he does so with the tools of philosophy itself.

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas was a student of the Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim) in Barcelona, and he taught Rabbi Yosef Albo, author of *Sefer ha-Ikarim*. The next *shiur* will discuss *Sefer ha-Ikarim* itself, and we will see the similarities and differences between student and teacher.

Crescas's main work, "*The Light of the Lord*," is difficult in its wording but systematic and well-ordered in its content.

**Ascription of Prayer – Not to the Intellectual Realm**

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas hardly addresses prayer, devoting only one chapter to it – at the beginning of his discussion of commandments that reflect beliefs:

The belief that depends on this mitzva is that we must believe that He answers the prayer of the worshipper who truly puts his trust in Him in his heart… Indeed, there is an allusion to this principle in the prayer recited by Shlomo: "Moreover, concerning the stranger [that is not of Your people Israel]" (I *Melakhim* 8:41), which teaches that even though a person is unworthy in himself, by way of prayer, he may possibly obtain his request. (Book III, part 2, no. 1)

The first principle in Rabbi Chasdai Crescas's teaching is that the petitioner can obtain, by way of his prayer, even that which he does not deserve based on his deeds. This principle seems clear, and even self-evident; if a person can achieve through prayer only that which he deserves, why should he pray at all? What would be the point of asking for what one is supposed to receive? However, we could perhaps understand that a person must nevertheless ask for what he deserves: just as an employee who deserves a raise in his salary must still go to his employer and ask for it, so too a person must turn to God and ask for what he deserves. Indeed, this approach to prayer, according to which a petitioner's request is received only if he deserves it according to the standards of justice, can be found elsewhere as well. Among others, Rabbi Moshe ibn Tibbon puts forward such an understanding when he connects the word *tefilla*, "prayer,"to the word *pelilim*, which bears a sense of justice and judgment. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, in any case, does not accept this viewpoint, but states instead that a person can obtain through prayer even that which he does not deserve to receive.

The second principle is that a person can praise God even if he is not worthy of doing so:

One of the conditions of prayer is that the praises of God be recounted at the beginning. As it is stated in the first chapter of *Avoda Zara* (7b): "One should always recount the praises of the Holy One, blessed be He, and then offer supplications." And since one might have thought that the recounting of God's praises should be withheld from the masses, and permitted only to select individuals, [David] began by countering with: "For You silence is praise, O God, in Zion, and to You the vow is performed" (*Tehillim* 65:2). That is to say, that in Zion, which is the city chosen by God as His resting place and His dwelling place; that in Zion, on the one hand silence is for Him praise, this reflecting the fear of the important people among them of praising Him, for a reason that we will mention later; whereas on the other hand, the vow is performed, that is to say, through the sacrifices that come by way of vows and oaths, as if they were arranging a table for Him just as they would arrange a table for human beings. This is because everything is from Him, and everyone needs Him and puts their trust in Him. For this reason, he continued: "Oh You that hears prayer, to You does all flesh come" (*Tehillim* 65:3); that is to say, the perfect and the imperfect. This is like the conclusion of the psalm "A psalm of praise, of David" (*Tehillim* 145), which is built on the praise of God: "My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord; and let all flesh bless His holy name [forever and ever]" (*Tehillim* 145:21). "My mouth shall speak," in the first person, for [David] was at the level of perfection. And he said further: "And let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever"; that is to say, also the imperfect. And for this reason, those who arranged the liturgy juxtaposed to this psalm: "But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forever" (*Tehillim* 115:18); that is to say, this being what His wisdom dictated in the statement of David, it is fitting for us to bless God from this time forth and forever. (ibid.)

On this point, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas disagrees with the Rambam, who objects to voicing positive descriptions of God. The Rambam cites the Gemara's criticism of one who is excessive in his praise of God: "Have you concluded all the praise of your Master?" (*Berakhot* 33b) as proof that one should not praise God with positive descriptions. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas understands the Gemara differently: in his view, the problem is not the very use of positive descriptions, but the *excessive* use of such descriptions – because that expresses a pretension to encompass the infinite praises of God.

Later, in a chapter discussing the priestly blessing, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas addresses the acceptance of prayer:

It has been explicitly clarified by way of tradition that the acceptance of prayer corresponds in particular to the devotion of the worshipper. [Even] if he is not on a high rank with respect to Torah knowledge, it will be greater than that of one who is great in knowledge, but is not on that same rank of worship. The Gemara in *Berakhot* brings an incident that proves the truth of what we have said. It says (*Berakhot* 34b): "When [the son of] Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill… his wife said to him: Is Chanina greater than you are? He replied to her: No; but he is like a servant before the king, and I am like an officer before the king." It should be understood that [Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai's] authority with respect to the level of his knowledge was greater than that of Rabbi Chanina. But Rabbi Chanina was saintly and he worshipped with diligence, and for this reason his prayer was more favorably received. (ibid., no. 2)

This remark addresses the question of whether the ability to pray is related to a person's rank. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas says that there are people whose prayer is more worthy of being accepted, but he is not referring to people who are greater in Torah knowledge. Here he continues his opposition to the Rambam, according to whom a person who cleaves to God cognitively merits providence, so that his prayers are answered. In contrast, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas argues that prayer depends not on knowledge, and not even on Torah knowledge, but on devotion to God in the framework of worship.

Does this statement contradict the principle we saw earlier, regarding the possibility of praying even for that which a person does not deserve? First, as noted at the beginning of this series, it is no simple matter to say that every person's prayer is answered. Most of the petitioners that we encounter in Scripture are great people – fathers of the nation and prophets – which may indicate that the right to pray is reserved for particular people who are worthy of doing so. On the other hand, Scripture also paints another picture, especially in the book of *Tehillim.* We get the impression from many passages that anyone can pray, and we see that prayers are offered by large crowds. As for Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, it can be argued that the contradiction is not so acute, because anyone who prays out of true trust in God is within the realm of "the devotion of the worshipper." In any case, we see here the goal of returning prayer to its simple, familiar place in Judaism. Prayer does not depend on intellectual attainment, and it belongs especially to one who worships God with devotion.

**Prayer, Love, and the Reason for Creation**

In another passage, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas discusses *Chazal*’s statementthat God longs to hear the prayer of the righteous:

Regarding that which has been clarified and there is no doubt about its truth, namely, His being the true cause with intent and desire of all that exists, and His maintaining their existence through His constant bounty of good. This is why they enacted: "He renews the creation every day constantly"… The fact that He bestows good and perfection with desire and intent indicates of necessity that He loves benefaction and the bestowal of good, and this is love… And this is true joy, as it is stated: "Let the Lord rejoice in His works" (*Tehillim* 104:31). This means that the joy is in His works, through the bestowal of His good upon them, maintaining their existence. This is what they said in several places (*Yevamot* 64a) that the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous. They meant to say that since His joy lies in the bestowal of good, and the most perfect good that a man can receive is that he cleave to God, this being the secret of prayer, when this good is drawn from Him, it is pleasant for Him, and it is as if He longs for it. (Book I, no, 3, chap. 5)

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas explains the statement of *Chazal* based on a chain of claims: God rejoices in bestowing good; the supreme good for a person is cleaving to God; this cleaving is "the secret of prayer." Here it is revealed that prayer also has an inner meaning, related to the concept of devotion. We saw a similar idea in the Rambam, who explains that it is precisely out of intellectual devotion to God that prayer is answered, but Rabbi Chasdai Crescas seems to be referring to devotion of a different kind.

This is the way that Rabbi Chasdai Crescas explains the statement that God longs to hear the prayer of the righteous: He is happy that they are devoted to him, because that is the best possible state that they can reach. His joy in the fact that they have reached their best possible state stems from a more fundamental point: God wants to bestow good, and His goodness is realized at the highest level by way of the devotion of the righteous.

These ideas connect to a broader principle in the writings of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, namely, his position on the reason for creation. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas disagrees with the Rambam on this fundamental point as well. The Rambam, after a long and complicated process (*Guide for the Perplexed* III, 13), opposes searching for a reason for creation. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas presents a fundamental claim, and is perhaps the first to formulate it with clarity: God is perfect (*shalem*) in all ways of perfection, and for this reason He is also good and wishes to bestow good, and therefore He created the world in order to bestow His goodness. The Rambam negated the possibility of saying that God is perfect, because that is a positive description; Rabbi Chasdai Crescas argues that it is possible, precisely because “perfect” is a description that includes all positive descriptions.

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas also infers the destiny of man from this principle, but in the opposite direction. God loves us and benefits us, and we are supposed to return love to Him. God's purpose in creation was to benefit us, and our purpose is to serve Him with love. Love of God is thus set at the apex of worship of God. As we have seen, the Rambam also dealt extensively with love of God, but he gave it an intellectual nature, whereas for Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, love is spiritual.

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas assigns this purpose to prayer as well:

Among the blessings of *Shema*, the first one relates to the creation, and it was established in connection with the lights, since they rule over the day and the night, and they are the most important of all the tangible creations for the sake of man. The second relates to the kindness and love that He showed us in excess when He gave us the Torah. All of this should stir up a person so that the One who loves should be loved by him with true love. For this reason, they were set before the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, the purpose of which is this love, as it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God." The third [blessing] is about the redemption from Egypt, which is the kindness that we feel ourselves to this very day. As they said: "Had the Holy One, blessed be He, not taken our forefathers [out of Egypt], we, and our children, and our children's children would still be subjugated to Pharaoh in Egypt." All this should stir up a man's heart to thank and praise God, and to recount God's praises before he prays, as they said: "A man should always first recount the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, and then pray" (*Berakhot* 32a). Because of this, they admonished us (*Berakhot* 4b) to join [the blessing of] redemption to prayer. (Book II, no. 6, chap. 2)

Prayer is an expression of our love of God. The recitation of *Shema* and its blessings evoke love, and in its wake comes prayer. Such prayer, out of the love of God, deserves to be answered.

We have thus seen that Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, based on deep analysis, restores the plain and simple concepts of Judaism, including that of prayer, to their central place. Prayer is open to every person, and it stands at the core of man's worship – worship that does not depend on intellectual attainment, but that is directed toward the love of God. This approach explains the structure of the liturgy, a structure that evokes love through the recitation of Shema and leads to prayer out of spiritual devotion.

(Translated by David Strauss)