YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #13: *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* (I)**

Rabbi Yosef Albo, a disciple of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, lived in Spain after the Christian conquest. In the first part of his book, *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* (*Book of Principles*), he presents a systematic discussion, the first of its kind, of the principles of faith, and even before that, of the criteria for determining what should be considered a principle. He reaches the conclusion that there are three principles: the existence of God, Torah from heaven, and reward and punishment; it is to these that he dedicates the next three parts of his book.

It may be said that Rabbi Yosef Albo stands between the Rambam and Rabbi Chasdai Crescas. On the one hand, he returns to the concepts of knowledge that the Ramban had discussed, but on the other hand, he deals not with intellectual-philosophical knowledge of God, but rather with knowledge of His will. Without getting into the details, it should be noted that while Rabbi Yosef Albo was a disciple of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, he also incorporated a lot from the approach of the Rambam, with whom his teacher had strongly disagreed.

In comparison to his teacher's work, *The Light of the Lord*, Rabbi Yosef Albo's book is simpler and clearer. In addition to being easier to understand, it quotes many verses and statements of *Chazal*, and thus it returns to the style of the *beit midrash*. The problem in studying *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* is that it deals with each subject in several chapters that sometimes contain significant differences, without explaining the reason for these differences or how they may be reconciled; it is not always clear how the different chapters are consistent with each other.

**The Act of Prayer – An Internal Process**

We will begin with a fundamental source from the words of Rabbi Yosef Albo in which he discusses the question of how prayer works, since ostensibly it is impossible for man to change a Divine decree. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas addressed this question only briefly, as an aside. Rabbi Yosef Albo deals with it at length and claims that prayer does create a change – not in God, but in man:

We will say, therefore, that when a benefit is decreed upon a person, it is conditional upon a certain degree of right conduct. This must be taken to be a general principle as regards the promises in the Bible. In the same way, when a certain evil is decreed upon someone, it is also conditional upon his being wicked to a certain degree or of being predisposed to it. And if the degree of wickedness or predisposition thereto changes, the pre-determined event or fate necessarily changes also, for the better or the worse.

The matter is similar to the hypothetical case of a king who issued a decree that all the uncircumcised persons in a given country should be killed, or that each would receive a talent of gold. Now if one of the people has himself circumcised, there is no doubt that the decree is of no effect so far as he is concerned, whether for good or for evil, by reason of the new state into which the person has been brought. The effort, therefore, to do good is essential everywhere, for it serves as a preparation for the reception of the divine influence or for the annulment of a divine decree.

This is in agreement with the statement of our Rabbis: “Rava came to Mamla, and saw that all the people had black hair. He inquired for the reason and was told that they were descendants of Eli, concerning whom it is said: 'And all the increase of your house shall die young men’ (I *Shmuel* 2:33). Then he said to them: Go and study the Torah, concerning which it is written: ‘For it is your life and the length of your days’ (*Devarim* 30:20)." From this it is clear that Divine decrees are conditional upon the recipient being in a certain state and degree of preparation. And if that changes, the decree also changes. This is the reason why the Rabbis say that a change of name may avail to nullify a decree, as also change of conduct may have the same effect. (*Sefer Ha-Ikarim* IV, 18)

To illustrate this idea, Rabbi Yosef Albo uses a parable about a king who ordered that a reward be given to all who are circumcised and a punishment be meted out against all who are uncircumcised. A person who undergoes circumcision does not alter in any way the king's decision, but merely changes his place with respect to the decree. He changes his fate and saves himself, without effecting the king or his edict. According to this, the act of prayer depends upon a process that takes place in the person while he is engaged in it.

Rabbi Yosef Albo's approach includes several important principles: First, during prayer, a person must undergo an internal spiritual process. Second, because of the process that passes over the petitioner during prayer, he becomes worthy of receiving what he requested. Third, and this is perhaps the most significant principle, it turns out that prayer is not answered in the plain sense of the term. Rabbi Yosef Albo changes the face of prayer, from a dialogue with God to an inner process within the petitioner. To a certain degree, his position is similar to a possible understanding that we suggested with regard to the Rambam, according to which prayer changes nothing outside the inner world of the petitioner. According to this, it is possible that Rabbi Yosef's approach can shed light on the question of how prayer works according to the Rambam.

**The Act of Prayer – The Lovingkindness of God**

Two chapters earlier, Rabbi Yosef Albo sets prayer as belonging to the principles. Prayer itself is not one of the principles of faith, but it is bound up with faith in the providence of God, and therefore non-recognition of the effect of prayer is considered a problem of faith:

It is proper to follow up the topic of providence with a discussion of prayer. For though prayer is not a fundamental principle of the Torah, nevertheless it is a branch growing out of providence. The acceptance of prayer necessarily indicates providence, as we said before. Everyone who believes in providence must believe that prayer will help him and save him from misfortune. If one does not pray in a time of trouble, it is either because he does not believe in providence, or because, though he does believe in providence, he doubts God’s ability to save him – both of which are forms of unbelief – or because, though he believes in providence and doubts not God’s ability to save him, for God is all powerful, he doubts whether he is worthy of the privilege of having his prayer heard.

Now it is true that a man must never be righteous in his own eyes; nevertheless, this should not prevent him from praying to God to satisfy his needs. For to refrain from prayer on this account indicates a belief that the good which comes to man from God is a reward for his good deeds and not due to God’s mercy and kindness. But this opinion is incorrect, as we read in the Bible: “We do not present our supplications before You because of our righteousness, but because of Your great compassions” (*Daniel* 9:18). The kindness of God and the mercy He bestows upon all His creatures are based upon pure loving kindness, and are not in the nature of compensation, as God said to Iyov: “Who has given Me anything beforehand, that I should repay him?” (*Iyov* 41:3). The Rabbis say: If a man makes a *mezuza*, have I not given him the house? And if he attaches *tzitzit* to his garment, have I not given him the garment?

The proper belief, then, is that all benefits which come from God are due purely to His loving kindness, and are not compensation for one’s good deeds. This being so, benefits may come from God whether the recipient deserves to receive them or not. For prayer confers capacity upon a person who is not by nature fit to receive a particular benefit. No one except God can do anything like this unless the recipient has a capacity, natural or artificial. (*Sefer Ha-Ikarim* 4:16)

With these words, Rabbi Yosef Albo continues the words of his teacher, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, who argued that prayer is at times answered not in accordance with the standards of justice and compensation. A person can receive through prayer even that which he does not deserve. We explained in the previous *shiur* that this idea is not self-evident, and that there are those who maintain that a person receives what he desires only if he is worthy to receive it. Contrary to this position, Rabbi Yosef Albo emphasizes that the Divine good does not depend on human actions and can come even not by right.

The prayer described in this chapter is different in nature from the prayer in Chapter 18. Here we are dealing with prayer that brings about real change, whereas in Chapter 18, it is man who changes and not the Divine decision. Here there is a Divine occurrence and act, whereas Chapter 18 describes a seemingly mechanical mechanism, in which the person has to move up to the right place in order for his desire to be fulfilled. The description of the Divine decrees is also different: here the decree is specific to the person, whereas in Chapter 18, the decrees are described as generalities.

The statement that: "The proper belief, then, is that all benefits which come from God are due purely to His loving kindness, and are not compensation for one’s good deeds. This being so, benefits may come from God whether the recipient deserves to receive them or not. For prayer confers capacity upon a person who is not by nature fit to receive a particular benefit," contradicts Chapter 18, according to which a person receives what is appropriate for him at his level.

The comparison between the two chapters presents us with a contradiction. There are certain books in which contradictions are legitimate, such as collections or compilations. There are also books of midrashic expositions on the Torah, in which the author stresses one point in one place and a different point in a different place. It seems, however, that *Sefer ha-Ikarim* is intended to be a thorough and systematic book on the principles of faith, and we would expect it to present a unified approach. Therefore, we will try to suggest ideas for resolving the contradiction and finding a consistent approach.

**First Attempt to Resolve the Contradiction: Significant – Internal Impact**

To reconcile the contradiction, it is possible to draw Chapter 16 in the direction of Chapter 18, or to draw Chapter 18 in the direction of Chapter 16. We will first consider the possibility of slightly changing our understanding in Chapter 16 and explaining it in light of Chapter 18.

It was important to Rabbi Yosef Albo to emphasize the internal process that takes place within a person. We understood this as a mechanical process that does not really have an impact, but it can also be formulated differently: God deliberately created a mechanism that advances man in a significant manner. Chapter 16 is a kind of introduction, and it teaches that prayer has an impact even if the person is unworthy; Chapter 18 then explains the actual mode of influence. At the end of Chapter 16, Rabbi Yosef Albo cites the prayer of King Menashe as an example, and shows how even the condition of a wicked person can be reversed by his prayer. How did the prayer have an impact? By way of repentance and internal repair. This example is consistent with what is stated in Chapter 18, that prayer is effective because of the change that takes place in the person.

According to this approach, prayer is a revelation of God's lovingkindness even though it operates in the form of a "mechanism." It is by God's grace that man can change his condition, but the change occurs through a process that takes place within him. It is not self-evident that such a change should be accepted. The ability to pray out of repentance and change one's condition and place, and hence what happens to him, is itself a gift given to us by the grace of God.

In the next *shiur,* we will consider other directions to explain the relationship between the different chapters in *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*.

(Translated by David Strauss)