YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #15: The Mabit (Rabbi Moshe Ben Yosef Di Trani)**

The Mabit, Rabbi Moshe ben Yosef di Trani, was one of the sages of Tzefat in the years 5260-5340 (1500-1580). He and Rabbi Yosef Albo, whose teachings we examined in the previous *shiur*, are separated by fifty years. The Mabit lived in a very significant period, in the days of Rabbi Yosef Karo, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the Rema), Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (the Ari), and Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (the Ramak). All of these sages, except for the Rema, also lived in Tzefat. The Mabit was among the leading sages of Tzefat, and the book *Beit ha-Elokim* ("The House of God"), which we shall study in this *shiur*, is his book of faith. The first part of the book is devoted to the subject of prayer.

The Mabit's teachings are not particularly well-known, and relatively few have dealt with him (among them Rav Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, also known as Manitou, who dealt thoroughly with the topic of prayer), but he had important things to say about prayer. The structure of the chapters of his book is in one way reminiscent of *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*: Each book opens with the formulation of a principle, and the clarification of that principle develops into a sermon. For most authors, philosophical texts and books of sermons are two different genres, but the Mabit follows Rabbi Yosef Albo and combines philosophy with sermons.

**Petitioning for One’s Needs**

The Mabit opens with a principle consisting of several components:

It is appropriate to propose a definition for prayer, on which several important things depend, as will be explained with the help of God. We have found a correct and complete definition, namely, **man's request from God of something necessary that is not in his possession.** (*Beit ha-Elokim*, Gate of Prayer, Chapter 1)

The first component is the request:

**The intent in the word "request"** is to indicate that it is inappropriate for a person to ask God for his needs in a manner of obligation or necessity, like one who asks his fellow to repay a debt that he owes him. Rather, he must ask in a manner of petition and supplication, like a pauper who asks of someone who owes him nothing. For what did the person give his Creator beforehand that he should ask in a manner of obligation? As the verse states: "Who has given Me anything beforehand, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is Mine" (*Iyov* 41:3). (Ibid.)

The Mabit opens with the dimension of petition that is found in prayer, arguing that it should be based on an assumption that we do not deserve for our requests to be answered. We do not claim something that is owed to us, but rather we beg to receive that which we do not deserve. A request can be presented in one of two ways: as a claim and demand, or as supplication. We do not always pay attention to the music of prayer, to the way in which we ask for things, but every type of request has its own music. In this matter, the Mabit continues in the path of Rabbi Chasdai Crescas and Rabbi Yosef Albo: Rabbi Chasdai Crescas emphasized that we pray even for that which we do not deserve, and Rabbi Yosef Albo added that this is an expression of an essential element of faith – faith in Divine grace that does not only operate according to strict justice. This direction of thought continues in the teachings of the Mabit as well.

The second component is man:

**The significance of the word "man"** is to indicate that prayer is appropriate only for man, who is prone to harm and accidents in this world; not for angels, who are above the spheres and are not subject to deficiency, accident, or harm, and who adore their Creator in accordance with their rank and comprehension; and not for animals in this lowly world, who lack the intellect to ask for their needs, and He who created them provides their needs and prepares their foods from grasses and plants that grow by themselves without toil and effort, just as they need not exert themselves to achieve the purpose of their creation, for the intention of their creation is that they should exist for the sake of man. Man, however, who must exert himself and toil in this world in Torah and good deeds, is not sustained by that which grows by itself, but by that which needs toil and effort until it is transformed into human food. This indicates the purpose of the creation of man, just as Rabbi Akiva showed the emperor (*Tanchuma*, *Parashat Tazri'a*) stalks of grain and loaves of bread, when he asked him what is better, the work of God or the work of man, and he answered him: The work of man. For he understood from him that it was his intention to object to circumcision: seeing that God created man uncircumcised, why should we nullify the form in which he was fashioned? He then wisely showed him stalks of grain and loaves of bread, the stalks being the work of God and the loaves the work of man. This indicates that just as the loaves are more attractive and tastier than the stalks because of man’s work and effort in the necessary labors from plowing until baking, so too the ultimate end of man is achieved only through man's toil and effort in Torah and good deeds in this world. For everything is in the hand of heaven except for the fear of heaven (*Berakhot* 33b). (Ibid.)

The Mabit notes that man alone must pray. The angels do not pray, nor do the animals pray. The world can get along without prayer, so why does man specifically need to pray? The Mabit explains that prayer reflects man's existential situation, a state of deficiency that requires completion. He cites the famous *aggada* that relates the conversation between Turnusrufus and Rabbi Akiva, in which Rabbi Akiva proves that the work of man is greater than the work of God. Just as God created stalks of grain and man turns them into various kinds of baked goods, so too God created man's body as is, and we complete it through circumcision. This *aggada* relates the completion of material deficiency to the completion of spiritual deficiency: in both cases, the task of completion falls upon man. This very same principle is used to explain prayer: It is specifically man who must pray, prayer being one of his actions directed at completing that which is lacking and deficient in him.

The third component is the subject of the request – what we do and do not pray for:

**The words "something necessary"** indicate that it is inappropriate for man to pray to God for something that is not essential, for he bothers God, as it were, unnecessarily (*Ta'anit* 24a). For the acceptance of prayer is a miraculous, unnatural matter, for if a person is destined for evil, he can be saved through prayer (*Shabbat* 156b), and "the righteous rules in the fear of God" (II *Shmuel* 23:3), and God does not want to cancel the world that He created and its nature unnecessarily…. (Ibid.)

**The words "not in his possession"** indicate that it is inappropriate for a person to pray to God even for something essential if it is within his ability and power to acquire it. For even if he only has enough bread in his basket for a single meal, and he asks what will he eat tomorrow, he is considered a man of little faith (*Sota* 48b). All the more so if he prays to God that He should provide him with food when he can eat of what he has in his possession, or he can easily earn it, as David said: "Give us help against the adversary; for vain is the help of man" (*Tehillim* 60:13). That is to say, when we cannot save ourselves in a natural way, and our salvation is vain, *then* give us help against the adversary; for when we *can* save ourselves in a natural manner, we must not ask God to perform wonders and help us against the adversary…. (Ibid.)

The Mabit teaches that a request made of God must be about something that constitutes a real need, and not about just anything that comes to a person's mind. The petitioner must examine and clarify what he really needs, and only then should he pray. Just as a person buys in a store only those products that he needs, and a parent is even liable to get angry with his child if he bought unnecessary and nonsensical products, prayer too must be about "something necessary."

Another requirement for the object of prayer: "not in his possession." A person should pray for that which he cannot attain on his own, for that which he *can* attain depends on his own actions. This is an significant statement on the topic of faith and effort: Regarding that which a person can do on his own, he should do it himself and not depend on God to take care of him. Faith belongs to the realm that is beyond a person's capability.

These words of the Mabit highlight a principle regarding prayer that we have not seen before: Prayer requires an act of preparation and reckoning in which the person clarifies what he should pray for.

**Prayer for its Own Sake**

In chapter 2, the Mabit moves on to praise and thanksgiving, explaining why thanksgiving comes at the end of prayer, after the petition:

Just as one must arrange praise beforehand, so must one express thanksgiving at the end, for he is like a servant who received a gift from his master, who praises him and then takes his leave, as *Chazal* have expounded (*Berakhot* 34a). A reason must be offered as to why they said that he is like a servant who received a gift from his master, who praises him and then takes his leave, from which it seems that he hopes that his prayer will immediately be heard. Perhaps they teach us here one of the main principles of prayer, namely, that when a person prays, he should not set as his goal that his prayer be heard. As they said (*Berakhot* 32b): In the end he will have vexation of heart, as it is written: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (*Mishlei* 13:12). And Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said: If a man prays and is not answered, he should pray again, as it is stated: "Wait for the Lord, be strong and let your heart take courage; wait you for the Lord" (*Tehillim* 27:14). If so, that which they said that “he is like a servant who has received a gift from his master” means that he should consider himself as if he had been answered. The purpose of prayer is not that he should be answered, but to teach that there is no one in the world to whom it is appropriate to pray, except for God, and that he should recognize that he is totally lacking in this world, and there is no one to fill his wants other than God. He relates his deficiencies before Him, to indicate this matter, and in the end reward will come. But the purpose of prayer is not to attain that which he requested, which might imply that had he known that he would not be answered with that prayer, he would not have offered it. (Ibid. Chapter 2)

Offering gratitude at the beginning of one's prayer is problematic, because it would appear as if he were giving thanks in advance for the fulfillment of his request, and as if the whole purpose of prayer is to lead to the fulfillment of his request. One might have argued the opposite, that thanking God at the beginning expresses a great idea – faith that He will indeed help us. But according to the Mabit, this is not the main point of prayer; rather, it is to show the greatness of God and that it is appropriate to pray to Him alone. The request is not conditional, and therefore immediately after the request comes thanksgiving, to teach that it is offered independently from the request. A moment after the request, we cannot yet know whether it will be fulfilled, but we offer gratitude regardless of whether the prayer will be answered or not.

As he goes on, the Mabit cites the words of *Chazal* that one who prays on behalf of another person is answered first, and he explains that prayer on behalf of another person is prayer for its own sake. This is prayer in which a person does not focus only on acquiring that which he desires. What is the difference; does a person who prays for the recovery of another person not want him to recover? Certainly, the result is important to him, but it can go together with belief in and recognition of the Divine ability to help. When a person prays for himself, he is at the center, and prayer is only a means of achieving his personal desire; prayer for another person is an indication of a pure and non-egocentric motive.

**The Purpose of Prayer: To Be Worthy of Receiving**

In addressing the purpose of prayer, the Mabit considers a question similar to that which occupied Rabbi Yosef Albo: Why must a person pray, if everything is predetermined? However, the Mabit asks his question from a direction that is different in its very essence: Why did God create the world in such a manner that a person must pray? While Rabbi Yosef Albo raised an objection (coming not from the world of Judaism, but from outside of it), the Mabit asks a question. He does not object to prayer, for it is clear to him that one must pray, and thus he asks for what purpose does one pray. In asking about the goal and purpose of prayer, he is seeking the purpose of the deficiency in creation that necessitates man's prayer in order to bring it to completion.

We saw in previous *shiurim* that the *Sefer ha-Ikarim* (Chapter 18) says that God decided what He decided, and we can only change ourselves in a way that conforms to that decision. The decision has already been made, and man is given a tool to change things by changing himself. In contrast, the Mabit argues that prayer is not a tool of man, but rather a tool of God: He wants to act in the world, but we are not always worthy of His actions. As stated, God created man in a deficient state, and gave him the ability to attain what he is lacking. When a person is deserving, he attains what he lacks by virtue of his actions, and when he is undeserving, he attains what is missing by virtue of his prayer. He is given the ability to pray in order to receive what God truly wishes to give. By virtue of prayer, he becomes worthy of what he needs. In light of this, we can understand why one must clarify what he should pray for: the need that we identify is what God truly wishes to give us, and we can receive it by way of prayer.

All this is in accordance with the fundamental approach of the Mabit that man comes into the world in order to serve, in order to be worthy. Prayer has a dimension of grace, but ultimately its purpose is that man be worthy, and from that position he will merit completion of what he is lacking.

(Translated by David Strauss)