YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #16: Maharal (I)**

In this *shiur*,we will begin to examine the reason for prayer according to the Maharal. The Maharal of Prague was one of the greatest Jewish thinkers throughout the generations. He was also a respected arbiter of Halakha, though he dedicated most of his writings to the realm of Jewish thought. He served in several rabbinical positions in what is now the Czech Republic and Poland, until he was ultimately appointed as Rabbi of Prague. Unlike other great luminaries, who published their writings at early ages, the Maharal published most of his books during the last thirty of his nearly one hundred years.

The Sages of the period of the *Rishonim* whom we have seen thus far developed Jewish thought in significant ways, but they did not engage similarly with the *aggadot* of *Chazal.* The prevailing view was that *Chazal* provided us mainly with educative statements, while religious thought is a separate field. Therefore, apart from Rashi's commentary on the entire Gemara and a thin volume of novellae on the *aggadot* authored by the Rashba, we find few commentaries from this period on the *aggadot* of *Chazal.* The book *Ein Yaakov*, which collected all the *aggadot* in the Gemara, was printed just before the time of the Maharal. The Maharal was in fact the first who saw the *aggadot* as a source that is entirely conceptual-ideological, and explained them systematically and with depth.

Our study of the Maharal will begin with the book *Netivot Olam*, a unique work among the Maharal's volumes. When he published *Gevurot Hashem*, the Maharal wrote an introduction detailing a plan for his books on Jewish thought. *Netivot Olam* does not appear in this plan. In parallel with his books on Jewish thought, he published various commentaries – *Chiddushei Aggadot* on the *aggadot* of the Talmud, *Derekh Chayyim* on *Pirkei Avot*, and *Gur Aryeh* on Rashi's commentary to the Torah. Afterwards, he published a book that deals systematically with morality and virtues – *Netivot Olam.* This is one of the last books that he published. Most of his other books cross-reference each other, which reflects the fact that the books were the implementation of a plan outlined in advance. *Netivot Olam* is different in that there are almost no references to it; only in *Derekh Chayyim* is there a single reference to *Netivot Olam*. Thus, it would seem that it is one of the last books the Maharal wrote, and that he decided to write it at a later stage of his life.

The book *Netivot Olam* consists of thirty-two "*netivim*," or"paths," all dealing with different virtues – except the first path, which is dedicated to Torah study. Each path opens by analyzing a verse from *Mishlei* (except one, which opens with a verse from *Kohelet*), and from there it moves on to examine statements of *Chazal* that relate to the virtue under discussion. Opening the discussion with verses from *Mishlei*, the biblical work devoted to ethics, demonstrates that Scripture is the foundation of Jewish ethics. In addition, the book of *Mishlei* is characterized by definitions of virtues, and this characterization accords with the nature of Maharal's writing – writing that is built on distinctions and definitions.

**Defining Prayer Within the Framework of “The Path of Service”**

The opening of "the path of service" (the second path in the book, immediately following the path of Torah) differs slightly from the openings of the other paths. While most paths open with a verse from *Mishlei*, the path of service opens with two verses from *Mishlei* –at the beginning of chapter 1 and at the beginning of chapter 2. This point seems marginal, but when it comes to the Maharal, every choice is deliberate and precise. Attention should also be paid to the formulation of the opening, which begins immediately with the verse and not with the words "In the book of *Mishlei*." These words, with which all the other paths open, appear only at the beginning of chapter 2 of the path of service. Another interesting point is that in several places in the book, especially in its second half, the Maharal refers to a section that does not exist in the book as we have it – "the path of prayer."

These facts lead to the conclusion that the Maharal probably wrote “the path of prayer” to which he refers. It stands to reason that initially, the path in our books was called "the path of prayer," and then at some later stage, the Maharal added an introductory chapter and changed the name of the path to "the path of service." The first chapter deals with the general concept of service, which includes both sacrificial service and prayer. Only afterwards does the Maharal begin to focus on prayer specifically; there is a more general service, which includes service of the heart. Thus, the Maharal creates a series of three paths – Torah, service, and the practice of kindliness (the third path in the book) – which open *Netivot Olam.* This trio corresponds, of course, to the *mishna* at the beginning of the first chapter of *Avot*: "The world stands on three things: on Torah, on Divine service, and on the practice of kindliness" (*Avot* 1:2). At the end of the first volume are chapters on justice, truth and peace, in accordance with the *mishna* at the end of the first chapter of *Avot*:"The world exists on three things: on justice, on truth, and on peace" (*Avot* 1:18). Attached to the path of acts of kindliness is the path of charity that is connected to it, and the path of truth is connected to the path of faith. These are the foundations of the entire book of *Netivot Olam.* What is important for our purposes is the Maharal’s entry point to reach the subject of prayer – as a specific component within a broader phenomenon, Divine service.

**The Purpose of Prayer: Devotion and Self-Effacement**

Defining prayer as a component in the realm of Divine service raises the question: Why does God need prayer? As long as prayer is defined as a human need, one can understand how it fulfills that purpose. But if prayer is needed by God, it is not at all clear what the need might be.

A similar question can be asked about sacrifices, which are also defined as service. In the pagan world, sacrifices are offered to provide the gods with their needs, but the God of Israel lacks nothing that must be supplied to Him, so on His part, there is no need for sacrifices. Indeed, the Maharal opens the path with the verse: "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination" (*Mishlei* 15:8):

"The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord; but the prayer of the upright is His delight." King Shlomo, peace be upon him, comes to say about service that is directed to God, that one should not say that He desires this service because He receives some benefit from it. For were He to receive benefit from the service, it would make no difference to Him from whom He receives the benefit, from an evil man or from a good man. But for God, this is not the case, for the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. If so, the service is not for the benefit of God. (*Netiv ha-Avoda* 1)

This verse distinguishes between idolatry and the true service of God: From a paganistic approach, since the god benefits from a sacrifice, the identity and morality of the person who brings the sacrifice are irrelevant; what matters is that the god receives what he wants. In the world of true faith, however, what is most important is the inner state of the person bringing the sacrifice. We see this already with the first sacrifice in history: Hevel's sacrifice was preferred over that of Kayin, even though outwardly they both could have been considered sacrifices.

Based on this, the Maharal asks why God commanded sacrifices. The question needs some clarification, as it may seem the Maharal has already implied an answer: If the sacrifices do not come to benefit God, does this not mean that they come to benefit man? Not according to the Maharal. He does not accept the possibility that the service of God is intended to benefit man. In *Tiferet Yisrael* (Chapter 6), the Maharal deals at length with the purpose of the commandments and opposes the Rambam’s view that they were intended for the benefit of man. He agrees that, among other things, the commandments provide benefit – because God loves Israel and desires their welfare and not their misfortune. But Israel's good is not the main purpose of the commandments.

The Maharal goes on to explain the purpose of the sacrificial service:

Perhaps you will ask: If it is so, that the [Divine] service is not for the benefit of God, why then did He command this service that one must bring a sacrifice to God? This is not a question, because even though this matter does not benefit God, nevertheless the man devotes himself to God, and even if he does not devote his life to Him, this too is called devotion to God, when he sacrifices his money to Him. This is called service [*avoda*], because a slave [*eved*] belongs to his master; he and his money, everything belongs to his master. Therefore, when he brings Him a sacrifice, he shows Him that he belongs to Him like a slave who is owned by his master.

The essence of Divine service is devotion; man surrenders himself to God. Not only does man not try to please an idol with his sacrifice, but he is not even a being with independent existence standing before God. It might have been argued that though one cannot make a deal with God, man and God still face each other as separate parties. The Divine service reveals that man has no independent existence at all; he is null and void before God. It may be suggested that these words of the Maharal constitute an initial formulation of the principle that would later develop into the Chassidic idea of self-effacement. Divine service does not create this situation but reveals it, bringing to man's consciousness the fact that he is a servant of God in his very existential status.

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination because the wicked do not submit themselves to God, and therefore their sacrifice will never be for the sake of the true purpose of a sacrifice. A person must reflect the essence of the sacrifice and offer the sacrifice with the consciousness of a servant of God. If in his consciousness he is detached from God, his service becomes an abomination.

**Prayer as a Request: An Expression of Dependence on God**

Among the various aspects of prayer, the Maharal mentions here the aspect of request. That is the prayer the verse refers to as "the prayer of the upright." At first glance, this is surprising: Why, after asserting that prayer comes to reflect man's effacement before God, does he focus on prayer that addresses man and his needs? Why do we ultimately go back to simple prayer, which seems to express the idea that prayer is intended to solve man's problems and not to serve God?

It is precisely when a person petitions God for his needs that he expresses his dependence upon Him. He understands that he is God's servant, and therefore it is only to Him that he can present his requests:

The fact that regarding the wicked he mentions "sacrifice" and regarding the righteous he mentions "prayer" comes to say that the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination, that even though he does not ask for anything, but merely offers a sacrifice to God without any requests, nevertheless it is an abomination to God. On the other hand, the prayer of the upright is God's delight; even though the prayer that he asks of God is for his own benefit, as is all prayer, nevertheless this service of the upright, namely, prayer, is His delight.

"The prayer of the upright is His delight" – why is God delighted by it? Not because He needs it, and not because man derives benefit from it, but because it is the simple truth. The truth is that man is but the servant of God, and the revelation of this truth, through the expression of man's total dependence on God for all his needs, is a fulfillment of God's desire.

(Translated by David Strauss)