YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #18: Maharal (III)**

In this *shiur* we will see how certain elements we have already seen in the Maharal’s thought are applied, we will encounter additional elements, and we will explore how prayer relates to the Maharal's broader philosophy.

**Cause and Effect**

The Maharal relates to the concepts of "cause" and "effect" in passages we have discussed in previous *shiurim* as well as in a passage that will be cited below. These concepts are taken from the world of philosophy, where they are used as an ontological description, existential definitions of reality. Man, being an effect, is dependent, in need of another. He has needs and deficiencies; each may be a localized temporary need, but all reflect his existential dependence. In general, the dependence described by philosophy is found in the natural system of the world, which is built on causes and consequences, and is also profoundly connected to philosophical causality, which tends to identify the world as following necessarily from the first cause – the Creator – and not from a deliberate act of His will.

We encountered dependence in the context of prayer even before the Maharal. This principle appeared already in the writings of Chasdai Crescas, Rabbi Yosef Albo, and the Mabit. In fact, this is a fundamental dimension of prayer: Man needs God's help, and therefore he turns to Him in prayer. However, when the Maharal speaks of the relationship between cause and effect, he means more: According to him, it is not specific needs that turn man into an effect, but rather every minute – even when a person feels completely stable – he is dependent. The Maharal utilizes philosophical concepts that are generally used to describe reality as a causal system, and describes thereby the state of man in relation to God, namely, that he relies at all times on the Divine cause. He notices his dependence only in situations of distress, but even when he feels secure, it is only because there is somebody who holds him tight. Were He who holds him to loosen His grip, the person would fall in an instant.

This principle appears in many of the Maharal's writings, and it occupies a central place in his discussions of prayer.

Part of the perfection of this service is that one should know and recognize that God is his cause, and that the effect receives from the cause, to the point that his soul depends on the cause, namely, on God, and from Him comes his vitality and everything that he needs. Therefore they said in the first chapter of *Berakhot*: "Rabbi Yose bar Chanina said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov: A man should not stand on a high place when he prays, but he should pray in a lowly place, as it is stated: 'Out of the depths have I called You' (*Tehillim* 130:1), and it is written: 'A prayer of the afflicted, when he faints' (*Tehillim* 102:1)" (*Berakhot* 10b). Even though this verse refers to depth of the heart, that is to say, that a person should lower his mind and thoughts before God, and not to depth of place, nevertheless, it is absolutely impossible that a person in an elevated place should not also have arrogance of mind. When a person sits on a chair, he has a small amount of elevation, and even if it is a small amount, nevertheless, there is elevation. And even if he does not have arrogance, nevertheless, a person must have humility before God, and therefore one must not stand in a high place when he prays. (*Netiv ha-Avoda* 6)

When the Maharal approaches a statement of *Chazal* like the one regarding the prohibition against praying in a high place, he does not nullify the plain meaning of the statement but he does explain its deeper level. *Chazal* were primarily concerned with elevation on the inner plane, though it also finds expression on the geographical plane. A person should pray from an inner consciousness of "depths," and this finds concrete expression when he is located in a low place.

The Maharal has more to say on the relationship between cause and effect:

"Rabbi Shimon Chasida said: The worshiper should see himself as if the *Shekhina* were before him, as it is stated: 'I have set the Lord always before me' (*Tehillim* 16:8)" (*Sanhedrin* 22a). This is because prayer involves joining the effect to the cause, and therefore one should see himself as if the *Shekhina* were before him. This is alluded to by the *keruvim*, whose faces were one toward the other. For they said in tractate *Yoma* (54a) that when Israel came up to Jerusalem [for the Festival], the curtain would be removed for them and they said: Look, you are beloved before God as the love between man and woman. This is absolute love. And we know that the male turns to the female to give to her, and the female turns to the male to receive from him. Therefore, the matter of prayer is as if God is before him and man asks of Him to give him that for which he is praying. For prayer is nothing but the joining of a person, who is the effect, to God, who is his cause. The joining of the effect to the cause involves the one facing the other, and therefore prayer must also be in this manner. (Ibid.)

The Maharal speaks of a "joining of the effect to the cause" and describes the affection that exists between God and Israel. The relationship of dependence does not trap a person in existential distress; rather, it creates love and affection. There is a gap between the perfect and the needy, but it is precisely this gap between the two parties that creates a connection between them. This relationship may be likened to the relationship between an infant and his parents – the infant is totally dependent on his parents and cannot survive without them, and this dependence strengthens the bond between them.

As he continues, the Maharal describes the relationship of dependence in sharp terms:

Part of the perfection of intention in prayer is total debasement, to the point that one thinks that he is not at all a creature. This is what they said in the first chapter of *Sota*: "Rabbi Chizkiya said: A man's prayer is not heard unless he makes himself [soft] like flesh, as it is stated: 'And it shall come to pass that from one new moon to another shall all flesh come to worship' (*Yeshayahu* 66:23)" (*Sota* 5a). This is because the essence of prayer to God is that man is an effect and is dependent upon the cause that completes him, as we have explained. Therefore, whoever does not make himself soft like flesh, that is to say, that his form already left him and he is like flesh whose form has been completely removed, for it is through his form that a person is who he is, and so when a person makes himself soft like flesh the form of which is gone, he is considered as if he does not exist at all – and then his prayer is heard. If, however, he attaches importance to himself, even if he considers himself like grass, ultimately he has a form, and because of the form, every being is a separate thing, and he is not totally an effect when he is a separate being. (Ibid.)

The principle of self-effacement, which we will see later in Chassidic thought, is perhaps based (among other things) on these ideas. A person is required to consider himself as nothing. The Maharal may be alluding to what the Kabbalists say about the *sefira* of *Malkhut* (Kingdom): "It has nothing of itself." The Maharal also uses the concept of form – a person sees himself as raw material, as it were, which he gives to God to fashion into whatever He wishes. This position raises weighty questions about the self – according to the Maharal, should a person nullify his self? Should he give up his selfhood? Is the encounter with God achieved precisely through the loss of self?

It is important to note in this regard that as a general principle, the Maharal’s thought should be studied based on broad, comprehensive knowledge of his writings. The Maharal often approaches a particular issue from different angles. In the case of prayer, for instance, it must be clarified whether man's ability to stand before God is reached only through self-effacement or whether other aspects of standing before God are discussed in other places. A broader question, that goes beyond the specific issue of prayer, is whether the axis of cause and effect is the only relationship between man and God or whether other relationships exist between them as well. Regarding this broader question, the Maharal does in fact outline different axes between man and God. (See, for example, his commentary to the Mishna in tractate *Avot* (3:14), "Precious is man who was created in the image [of God]," where he presents three fundamental relationships with God, to which he returns in other places in his writings.) As for prayer itself, the main axis in the Maharal's discussion of the issue is indeed that of cause and effect. Nevertheless, we will see below that the axis of cause and effect finds expression not only in nullification of the self.

**The Relationship of Dependence and the Transition to the World-to-Come**

Later, the Maharal addresses the significance of reciting the chapter of *Tehilla Le-David*:

Before this, they instituted *Ashrei*, because we said in the first chapter of *Berakhot*: "Rabbi Elazar ben Avina said: Whoever recites [the psalm] *Tehilla Le-David* (*Tehillim* 145:1) three times daily is sure to inherit the World-to-Come. Shall I say it is because it contains the verse: 'You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing with favor' (ibid. v.16)? Then let him recite the great Hallel, where it is written: 'Who gives food to all flesh' (*Tehillim* 136:25). Shall I say it is because it has an alphabetical arrangement? Then let him recite: 'Happy are they that are upright in the way' (*Tehillim* 119:1), which has an eightfold alphabetical arrangement" (*Berakhot* 4b). The meaning is that one's livelihood is called life, for livelihood ensures people's lives, and there is no difference at all between life and livelihood. In the work *Gevurat HaShem* we explained the matter by the great Hallel. Therefore, he praises the Holy One, blessed be He, for this: "You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing with favor," and then he cleaves to the World-to-Come where the true life is. For this world has a connection and cleaving to the World-to-Come because of life, because the World-to-Come is a place of complete life, where there is no death at all. (Ibid.)

The Maharal explains why a person who recites "You open Your hand" is sure to inherit the World-to-Come. As is his way, he does not content himself with a general explanation that there is great merit in the recitation of this verse, by virtue of which the reciter earns his place in the World-to-Come. In his eyes, *Chazal* do not shower words of praise for no reason; they use precise concepts, and only an explanation of how the World-to-Come is connected to the recitation of "You open Your hand" and to prayer in general will allow us to understand why one who recites that verse is sure to inherit the next world.

We saw in the previous *shiur* that prayer breaches the limitations of this world and connects man to higher dimensions. This requires a breach in the person himself as well, because he is usually very conscious of subordination to the natural framework. Even if a person believes in the World-to-Come, the simple perception is that it is a world separate from this world, and here in this world we are subject to the laws of nature. When a person states that God opens his hand and satisfies every living being with favor, he demonstrates that he believes that in the depths of this world itself stands the upper world, which is freed from the limitations of the natural laws of our world. In this way, he connects himself to the next world.

This point is intrinsically related to the relationship of cause and effect: Man is truly dependent upon God. Even if his natural perspective tells him his refrigerator is full, it is the supernal Divine world that takes care of his food. He stands on stable ground, but in fact someone is holding that ground from below, and only by virtue of that can he stand. This consciousness does not constrain or suffocate the person; if someone holds the ground for him from below, it means he is enveloped from all directions. He does not turn him into a cripple, but rather surrounds him with love, like a father does to his child.

"What is meant by that which is written: 'So will I bless You as long as I live; in Your name will I lift up my hands' (*Tehillim* 63:5)? 'I will bless you' – this is the recitation of *Shema*; 'I will lift up my hands' – this is prayer. And if he does this, 'My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness' (ibid. v.6); and moreover, he inherits two worlds, as it is stated: 'And my mouth praises You with lips of joys' (ibid.) – two joys: one in this world and one in the World-to-Come" (*Berakhot* 16b). They explained with this that the recitation of *Shema* and prayer involve the joining of the effect to the cause with respect to the fact that God caused man, which is the idea of the recitation of *Shema* and prayer. When he, the effect, accepts upon himself the cause that caused him, this satisfies his deficiency, in that God is his cause, and the effect is made complete of his deficiency. This is what is stated: "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness," for man is deficient, and marrow and fatness completely satisfy the deficiency of his hungry soul, because the recitation of *Shema* and prayer completely satisfy a person of what the effect is lacking. (Ibid. 9)

The recitation of *Shema* is similar to prayer with respect to the relationship between cause and effect, for its essence is the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. Here too, the Maharal explains that it is not by chance that *Chazal* use the concept of "two worlds," since prayer opens the door to the World-to-Come while a person is still in this world. The Maharal says that the recitation of *Shema* and prayer are what satisfy the soul; on the outer plane, a person has a variety of practical needs, but on the deeper level lies the soul's self-thirst for God. This is the deficiency that prayer comes to express, and in this way it brings satisfaction.

**The Beginning and the End**

The axis of cause and effect appears several times in the Maharal's “path of service” (*Netiv ha-Avoda*); for example, in the context of the question of whether the three daily prayers correspond to the patriarchs or to the daily sacrificial offerings:

We have already explained that prayer is directed toward God. A person who is the effect must turn to the cause upon whom he is dependent and therefore he must pray to the cause. This is clear, and this is what Rabbi Chanina said: “The prayers were instituted by the patriarchs” (*Berakhot* 26b). For the patriarchs were the beginning of the entire world, and for this reason they are called the patriarchs and not the righteous men of old, for the entire world was created for the sake of Israel, and the patriarchs were the fathers and beginning of Israel. It is as if the patriarchs were the first effect of God, where the effect needs the cause and is dependent upon God, as was explained above. For this reason, the patriarchs, who are the beginning, instituted the prayers, for prayer is what joins the effect to the cause, and the patriarchs are the first effect who became joined to God, each one instituting [a prayer] in accordance with his special quality. Avraham instituted the morning prayer at the beginning of the day because Avraham was the beginning of the patriarchs, and Avraham was similar to the morning prayer which is at the beginning of the day, and God is the beginning of the world. Yitzchak instituted the afternoon prayer which is recited after midday, and it completes the world, as is known to the sages of the truth. Yaakov who came afterwards instituted the evening prayer, which corresponds to the fact that this world is in the hands of God, and therefore the evening prayer is said at night, for the night indicates that the world is in the hands of God, for just as man entrusts his soul and spirit to God at night…. (Ibid. 3)

Man's starting point is God, and He is also his end and purpose. Man comes from Him and He is his destination. These two points are connected to prayer both as corresponding to the patriarchs and as corresponding to the sacrificial offerings: The patriarchs are the starting point, the source from which we come. The fact that man is an effect finds expression in the knowledge of where he comes from – not just chronologically, but essentially; knowing the root of his existence. The sacrificial offerings represent movement toward the purpose, the soul's return to God. These two movements also find expression in the morning and afternoon prayers in contrast to the evening prayer – the beginning of the day as opposed to the end of the day. The relationship of cause and effect creates man's two-way movement, from God and toward Him, existence from Him and effacement toward Him. A complete harmonious movement, like inhalation and exhalation.

This is also expressed within the parts of the prayer. Every prayer includes both kneeling and standing erect:

A man does not kneel before the king when he is not before him, but rather when he approaches the king he kneels before him. Therefore, before he mentions God's name, which is when he is near Him, he should kneel before Him, and submit himself to Him, for nothing exists together with God, everything other than Him being nil. This is the idea of kneeling before Him, that he submits himself to Him and nullifies his existence before Him. When he mentions God's name itself, he should stand erect, for it is because of God that all beings exist, and it is He who causes those who are bent over to stand erect. With this kneeling before a person mentions God, and with this standing erect when he mentions Him, he alludes that all beings exist because of Him, and their existence comes from Him, and next to God they are nothing. (Ibid. 10)

Kneeling expresses the position of "nothing other than him," effacement, the recognition that there is no true reality other than God. Standing erect expresses the re-acceptance of existence from God. During those short moments of kneeling and standing erect, a whole process takes place, which consists of two complementary movements, nullification and renewed existence.

**Connecting to the Great Story of Creation**

The Maharal’s perspective on the connection between the prayers and the patriarchs relates to the issue of Israel’s selection. "For the entire world was created for the sake of Israel, and the patriarchs were the fathers and beginning of Israel. It is as if the patriarchs were the first effect of God." In one of the central passages of his teachings, *Netzach Yisrael* chapter 11, the Maharal explains the selection of the people of Israel in three different ways – and the axis of cause and effect is one of them. The people of Israel are the first effect of God, not chronologically but essentially. There are two other explanations related to wholly other worlds, but with respect to prayer, the axis of cause and effect is the main one. On this axis, the people of Israel are especially dependent upon God, more so than all other created beings. One might have thought that whoever is more dependent is weaker and more unfortunate, but the Maharal argues just the opposite: he who is closest to God is also the most connected to Him, and therefore he is dependent on Him and has no existence without Him.

We find another dimension of this idea later in the *Netiv ha-Avoda*. In chapter 12, the Maharal speaks of the relationship between praise and prayer:

And they said (*Berakhot* 32a): "One should always first recount the praise of God, and then pray," because the essence of prayer is that the world has a cause and man is the effect of that cause. And therefore he recounts the praises of God, who is his cause, and the cause is his beginning and his purpose. Therefore, they instituted the first three blessings, which are praise of God, at the beginning, and the last three blessings, which are praise of God, at the end – to say that God, who is the cause, is his beginning, and He is the purpose of man. Therefore, the fact that God gives him what he needs, this is not because man is considered to be something; it is only for his Creator, who is his beginning and his end, and all is for His sake, and for this reason it is right that God should give him what he needs. Therefore he recounts the praise of his beginning at the beginning, and at the end he also recounts His praise, because God is also his end, and the effect is in the middle. Understand these things, and it will be clear to you why the first three and the last three blessings are praise of God, and in the middle are the needs of the effect. Nothing more can be explained. (Ibid. 12)

The Maharal touches here on the issue of the reason and purpose of creation, which is too broad and deep to expand upon in this forum. What is important for our purposes is that the world was created for the sake of God. The purpose of the world is not for the sake of man. This approach, which at first glance diminishes the importance of man, in fact enhances his significance: The statement that man has no existence is valid when we look at man in himself, but when we see him as part of the grand story of creation, he receives enormous significance – a life with Divine value, which realizes a world whose purpose is Divine. This point finds expression in the structure of prayer: The *Amida* prayer opens with blessings of praise and ends with blessings of thanksgiving to God, which are also defined here as praise. Within this framework of the praise of God, when the Divine purpose is the beginning and end of everything, man's personal and lowly requests receive infinite significance.

Thus, even though the expression "effect" seems outwardly to diminish and lower man, we have seen that it is precisely what enables man to breach the limitations of the world, reaching toward extremely high dimensions. Prayer is what removes man's needs from their temporal and narrow context and bestows upon them eternal meaning.

(Translated by David Strauss)