YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #21: Rabbeinu Bachya Ben Asher (1)**

Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher (not to be confused with Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pekuda, author of *Chovot ha-Levavot,* "Duties of the Heart") hails from the school of the Ramban. As noted earlier in this series (*shiur* #10), the Ramban was a Torah authority of the highest and broadest caliber, who authored works in the realms of Talmud, Halakha, Kabbala, and Biblical exegesis. His disciples and those who followed in his footsteps included Talmudic scholars and halakhists, such as the Rashba and the Ritva (whose works, even if they also engaged in additional realms of study, focused on Talmudic interpretation), as well as kabbalists, such as the *Me’irat Einayim* (Rabbi Yitzchak of Akko). Rabbeinu Bachya followed in the Ramban’s footsteps with his Biblical exegesis, and like the Ramban, he incorporated the kabbalistic plane in his commentary to the Torah.

The mark of the Ramban is clearly evident in the structure of Rabbeinu Bachya's commentary. Ramban’s own commentary is written on three levels: "in accordance with the plain meaning of the text," "in accordance with the view of our Rabbis" (or "in accordance with midrashic exposition"), and "in accordance with the truth." That is to say, plain meaning (*peshat*), midrashic exposition (*derash*), and Kabbala. Rabbeinu Bachya also interprets the Torah on these three levels, and adds "in accordance with reason" – philosophical explanations, thoughts, and ideas. The third level, which the Ramban describes as "the way of the truth," is explicitly referred to by Rabbeinu Bachya as "Kabbala." (It may be added that he is one of the earliest authorities to mention the *Zohar* and cite from it, in the framework of his kabbalistic interpretations. He refers to it as "the Midrash of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai.")

This approach to commentary, multi-layered and offering several interpretations of the same verse, is not at all self-evident and was not widely accepted before that time. It was introduced by the Ramban, and Rabbeinu Bachya was the first to follow in his footsteps, as he writes in the introduction to his commentary to the Torah:

I have, therefore, seen fit to split my commentary to include all of these paths, in order that all the pieces should be made whole, with the four rungs of the ladder, ascending from the manifest [meaning] to the hidden [meaning].

The first path is the plain meaning [of the text]. I will mention and guard it like the pupil [of my eye]. There I will record the choice views of the earlier authorities, the mighty Rabbis: the great luminary, Rabbeinu Shlomo, and the mighty hammer, Rabbeinu Chananel, each of them Sinai and a mover of mountains. I will illuminate my eyes with their words, and wear them as crowns. I will report each saying in the name of its originator, and I will not wrap myself in a cloak that is not mine.

The second path is the midrashic exposition. There I will expand my words and there I will pitch my tent, in accordance with the good hand of my God that is upon me. The generation that is weary of suffering expound [the Torah] on Shabbat, and through it they rest their hearts from their unease and sadness. All who seek it rejoice and are happy.

The third path is the path of reason. There I will send out my hand to write in [certain] places, to show that our Torah includes all the sciences. All the other sciences are maidservants, presented through study and examination, whereas our Torah is from the Holy One, blessed be He, and it is the main thing.

The fourth path is the path of God, the path upon which the light rests, a path and road for the soul. In this path I will sprinkle of the allusions of the man Moshe, the wonder of his time, the sweetness of whose words is more sublime than the sweetness of manna, he being the grand rabbi, the Ramban. He showed us the way by which we must go up, and guided us along the path of truth. It is he who made us righteous and meritorious, and gave us life. From him my ear took a whisper, and my ideas were enkindled. Sometimes I will explain, sometimes I will allude, and it will go out like lightning from before me. For it was hewn from the heavenly quarry of wisdom. It will not stand before those in the dark, but it will stand before kings, the kings of the Torah, who have entered into it, into its innermost sanctum, where the heavenly secrets are kept, and apprehended noble mysteries.

**The Problem is Merely the Means, Whereas Prayer is the Main Thing**

Let us open with Rabbeinu Bachya's comments regarding Yitzchak's prayer concerning Rivka's barrenness:

"And Yitzchak entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren" (*Bereishit* 25:2). Scripture should have first said: "And Rivka was barren," and then said: "And Yitzchak entreated the Lord for his wife, because she was barren." As for the reason for mentioning the prayer first, it may be proposed that the main thing is mentioned first. This teaches us that the verse does not mean to say that the barrenness was the reason for the prayer, for if so the reason would be the main thing and the prayer would be secondary to it. But the meaning of the wording of the text is that the prayer is the reason for the barrenness, that is to say, that she was barren only so that the two of them should pray about it. Therefore, the prayer is mentioned first, it being the main thing and the primary reason because of which our matriarch Rivka was afflicted with barrenness. This is what *Chazal* expounded: "Why were the matriarchs barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the righteous" (*Bereishit Rabba* 45, 4). From here we also learn that the power of prayer is exceedingly great, even to change nature. (Rabbeinu Bachya, Commentary to the Torah, *Bereishit* 25:21)

Rabbeinu Bachya asks: Why does Scripture first mention Yitzchak's prayer, and only afterwards indicate that Rivka was barren? It would seem that the problem of Rivka's barrenness came first, both chronologically and logically; Rivka's barrenness led to Yitzchak's prayer. If that is the case, however, it seems that it would have been more appropriate to mention the barrenness first, and the prayer afterwards. Rabbeinu Bachya learns from the verse that the conceptual order is just the opposite: The need for Yitzchak and Rivka to pray gave rise to Rivka's state of barrenness. This understanding is based on *Chazal*’s statement that God longed for the prayers of the patriarchs, and therefore the matriarchs were barren. The idea that God longs for the prayers of the patriarchs and matriarchs is difficult to accept, and for now we will leave it unexplained.

**Prayer Reverses the Order of Reality**

Rabbeinu Bachya continues:

This is the reason that it uses the term *va-ye'etar*, and it does not say *va-yitpalel*, "he prayed,"or *va-yitz'ak*, "he cried out," or other such terms [of prayer]. For it is derived from the word *eter*, "pitchfork," and this is how *Chazal* understood it. This is what they said in the first chapter of *Sukka*: "Why are the prayers of the righteous likened to a pitchfork? [To teach you that] just as the pitchfork turns the corn from place to place [in the barn], so the prayers of the righteous turn the mind of the Holy One, blessed be He, from the attribute of cruelty to the attribute of mercy" (*Sukka* 14a). What this means is that just as a pitchfork turns the corn over from the bottom to the top, and then causes it to fall down from the top to the bottom, so too the righteous man, when he prays, his thoughts wander and ascend from below upwards, and then he continues and causes the [Divine] bounty to descend from above downwards. And so too they explained the term in the sense of an abundance of prayer, as in: "And a thick [*va'atar*] of incense went up" (*Yechezkel* 8:11), and also in the sense of *machteret*, "breach," as the term is understood with respect to Menashe (*Sanhedrin* 103a). (Ibid.)

Rabbeinu Bachya cites a *midrash* that likens prayer to a pitchfork, a tool that is used to turn grain over, and asserts that the prayer of the righteous reverses the mode of God's governance of the world. One must understand why this principle is described as a novel idea; is it not the goal of prayer to change what was supposed to happen? Is this not what is supposed to happen in the wake of prayer even according to the simplest understanding of the meaning of prayer?

First, we must clarify whether, when we come to the story of Yitzchak and Rivka, we already know about the effect of prayer. Do we find prayer in the Torah before the verse regarding Yitzchak? We do, in fact, find several prayers before Yitzchak’s, but they are different from Yitzchak's prayer. Avraham prayed on behalf of the people of Sedom and on behalf of Avimelekh. His prayer did not come to change the natural order; rather it was intended to keep reality on its normal course. Cities do not naturally become overturned, and Avraham merely tried to prevent a deviation from natural reality and to continue the status quo. In the case of the prayer for Avimelekh as well, in natural circumstances, the women would conceive and give birth; Avraham tried to cancel the decree issued against the women in the house of Avimelekh, so that they could give birth as usual. Yitzchak's prayer is similar to Avraham's prayer on behalf of Avimelekh, since both cases involve barrenness, but the simple understanding is that Rivka had already been infertile for many years. It was not a special decree, but rather, according to the natural order of reality, she was not expected to conceive. This was her natural state. Thus, until the prayer offered by Yitzchak, we do not encounter a prayer that comes to overturn reality.

Seemingly, this point is distinct from the above issue regarding God's desire for the prayers of the patriarchs and matriarchs, but they do share a common denominator – we are dealing with the prayer of righteous people.

**Movement From Below Upwards**

Let us now consider a little more deeply the comparison of prayer to a pitchfork. What does Rabbeinu Bachya take from the analogy to a pitchfork? "Just as a pitchfork turns the corn over from the bottom to the top, and then causes it to fall down from the top to the bottom." Substantively, the second half of the analogy would have sufficed: the novel idea regarding prayer is its ability to change the decree from above downwards; that is to say, prayer is directed toward God, and He may answer it even at the "cost" of a change in nature. However, Rabbeinu Bachya's formulation indicates that the movement goes two ways: From below upward, and from above downward. This is the special power of the righteous man. The righteous man climbs in his mind, reaches the top, and causes abundance to descend from there. According to this, prayer is conceived, to a large extent, as the act of the righteous man himself. It is he who climbs upward in his mind, and it is he who draws God’s abundance downward. Is God not involved in the process; is this the act of the righteous man alone? If we saw above that prayer reverses the mind of God, this implies that it is He who bestows, in the wake of prayer, that which had been sought – but this is only possible by means of the prayer of the righteous man.

In the previous *shiur*, we saw the *Sha'arei Ora*’s perspective, according to which the process of prayer comes to open the heavenly gates – not in the sense of a technical act, but through an inner process. There too, the process was from down below upward. A similar process is also found in the words of the Maharal, who noted that we exist in the world of nature and must escape its frameworks when we pray. For Rabbeinu Bachya, as well, prayer involves personal ascent, in the wake of which it is possible to change God's governance.

**The Freedom of the Act of Prayer**

Now Rabbeinu Bachya moves on to explain on the level of the plain meaning of the text:

Know that of the three matriarchs, three of them were barren: Sara, about whom it is written: "And Sara was barren" (*Bereishit* 11:30); Rivka, about whom it is written: "Because she was barren" (*Bereishit* 28:21); Rachel, as it is stated: "And Rachel was barren" (*Bereishit* 29:31). On the level of the plain meaning of the text, we must give a reason for the matriarchs' barrenness. Sara was barren for two reasons: one, so that Yishmael would issue from Avraham, as it is stated: "Behold now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing; go in, I pray you, to my maidservant" (*Bereishit* 16:2); and the second, in order to change her name. And why was it necessary to change her name? In order to indicate the true faith, that just as the world was created with the letter *heh*, so the power of the stars was cancelled with the letter *heh*. Thus, we learn that the Master who arranges the stellar system is He who vanquishes and cancels it when He so desires, and that there is none other than Him. (Ibid.)

Rabbeinu Bachya returns to the question of why most of the four matriarchs were barren. He had already answered this question earlier, saying that the matriarchs were barren because God longs for the prayers of the righteous. Here he offers a different answer, "in accordance with the plain meaning of the text," and explains the purpose of each instance of barrenness. The purpose of Sara's barrenness was to bring about the birth of Yishmael (which apparently had a role in the Divine plan), and to teach that God has the power to change nature and the influence of the stars.

When Rabbeinu Bachya emphasizes that this explanation is in accordance with the plain meaning of the text, he implies that the previous explanation, which described the prayer of a righteous man as a pitchfork and noted God's desire for the prayer of the righteous, was not in accordance with the plain meaning of the text, but rather accords with its esoteric meaning. It is true that the statement of God's desire for the prayer of the patriarchs and matriarchs is written in plain and simple language, is brought in a *midrash* of *Chazal*, and appears to belong to the revealed level of the Torah; however, in truth, it is in accordance with Kabbala. He does not make the connection explicitly here, but below we will see his commentary to the book of *Devarim*, where he brings this statement in a Kabbalistic context.

In the passage in his commentary to *Bereishit*, Rabbeinu Bachya does not explain the esoteric layer. However, regarding the verse, "and to serve Him with all your heart" (*Devarim* 11:13), he offers another point concerning the virtue of prayer:

You should know that prayer is powerful enough even to change nature, to save from danger, and to cancel a decree. To change nature, from Yitzchak, as it is stated: "And Yitzchak entreated the Lord for his wife" (*Bereishit* 25:21), and *Chazal* expounded: "Why were the matriarchs barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the righteous" (*Bereishit Rabba* 45, 4)… And even that which God decreed against a person can be cancelled through the power of prayer, as Chizkiyahu said to Yeshaya the son of Amotz: Finish your prophecy and go. This tradition I have from the house of my ancestor: Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck, he should not desist from prayer, as it is stated: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (*Iyov* 13:15). He teaches us here that prayer is above prophecy, that is to say, it is above the place from which prophecy is issued to the prophets. (Rabbeinu Bachya on the Torah, *Devarim* 11:13)

Rabbeinu Bachya puts forward the novel idea that "prayer is above prophecy." Prophecy itself is already a break from nature; it reveals what is not currently manifest to the eye and will happen only in the future. It turns out, however, that there is an even higher level – namely, prayer. In a certain sense, prophecy still belongs to a system of laws, as it informs what should happen. If a person sins, he will be punished. Moral law determines what will happen. Just as it is possible to predict that someone who puts his hand into a fire will receive a burn, it is possible to predict that someone who has committed a transgression will receive a spiritual burn and be punished. Prayer, on the other hand, breaches even the system of moral law. In this sense, it is similar to repentance, which according to the Kabbalists is called *alma de-chiru*, "the world of freedom." Prayer can work against all decrees and laws.

Thus far, we have seen in the words of Rabbeinu Bachya the special power of prayer for man, but we have not yet received a full account of the significance of the more radical point from *Chazal* – God's desire for the prayer of the righteous. This issue will be addressed in the next *shiur.*

(Translated by David Strauss)