YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #24: The Reason for Prayer According to the *Rishonim*   
Summary (2) – From the Ramban to the Maharal**

**Ramban – Rabbinic Enactment, or a Derivative of the Reason for Creation**

The Ramban's position, in contrast to that of the Rambam, is that prayer is obligatory only by way of a Rabbinic enactment. In his strictures to the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* of the Rambam, who argues that prayer is a *mitzva* from the Torah, the Ramban asserts that on the Torah level, prayer is not a *mitzva* but is "part of the lovingkindness of the Creator, blessed be He, toward us, that He hears and answers whenever we cry out to Him…” (Raman's strictures to the *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*,positive commandment no. 5). Performing a *mitzva* means one is serving God, but when one engages in prayer, he is turning to God with his needs. This appeal is not connected to the obligation of service which is directed toward God; therefore, prayer is not part of "serving Him with all your heart."

The Ramban goes on to raise the possibility that communal prayer in a time of distress is indeed obligatory by Torah law. What does this mean; surely prayer in a time of distress is also uttered for the benefit of man? The words of the Ramban – "and that our hearts and eyes should be turned to Him alone, like the eyes of servants to the hands of their masters" – suggest that it is precisely in a time of distress that a person turns to one who can truly help him. Such a situation provides a measure by which we can examine whom a person leans on. If a person turns to God in his time of trouble, this attests to the fact that he is His servant.

Another element emerges from the Ramban's words there: "That we must believe that He, may He be blessed and exalted, hears prayer and saves [us] from troubles through prayer and crying out." The purpose of prayer is to strengthen faith.

This aspect is reinforced by the Ramban’s commentary to the Torah at the end of *Parashat* *Bo,* where he sets faith in God as the purpose of the exodus from Egypt and the purpose of all the commandments. When we examine his words there, we see that recognition of God's providence has a twofold purpose: A person must recognize God's providence and **thank** Him for His acts of lovingkindness ("that man should know and be thankful to God" – commentary to *Shemot* 13:16), and he must also disseminate this knowledge – therefore, the Ramban speaks there several times about **making one's faith known**. The ultimate goal is that all of humanity should recognize God.

After mankind began to disengage from faith in God, Avraham came and engaged in calling out in the name of God. The Ramban explains that Avraham proclaimed the name of God to all who could hear. This emphasis helps us see why the Ramban refers specifically to prayer in times of communal distress: Not only does such prayer strengthen the faith of the individual, but it also realizes the goal of publicizing faith in God.

The Ramban also discusses communal prayer in his commentary to *Shemot* 13:16: "And the purpose of all the commandments is that we believe in our God and be thankful to Him for having created us, **for we know of no other reason for the first creation, and God the Most High has no demand on the lower creatures, except that man should know and be thankful to God for having created him.** The purpose of raising our voices in prayer and of the service in synagogues, as well as the merit of public prayer, is precisely this: that people should have a place wherein they assemble and express their thankfulness to God for having created them and bringing them into existence, and thus proclaim and say before Him: 'We are your creatures.'"

Here the Ramban attaches great importance to prayer and sees it as a realization of the reason for the creation – to reveal the name of God. If communal prayer proclaims the name of God in the world, then it advances the Divine purpose of creation. It is true that it does so in the patriarchal format used by Avraham (who “called out in the name of God”), which is not obligatory for the people of Israel since they represent Him through their very existence, but the Sages established the publicizing of God's name as a Rabbinic obligation by way of communal prayer . Though the Torah does not command us to call out in the name of God as did Avraham, there is still value in maintaining this format. It falls into the category of "beyond the letter of the law," and the Sages went further and established it as a *mitzva*. Thus, alongside service via *mitzvot*, which reveals the name of God in the world, the people of Israel also engage in the publicizing of His name through prayer: by offering thanksgiving for His lovingkindness, in the synagogue – corresponding to the altars of Avraham, in a loud voice, and with a multitude of people.

To summarize: According to the Ramban, on the simple level, prayer is a Rabbinic obligation. However, when prayer stems from communal distress, not only might it be required by Torah law, but it realizes the very reason for creation – which, according to the Ramban, is to know God and thank Him, and to make this known in the world.

**Rabbi Chasdai Crescas – Prayer as an Expression of God’s Desire to Bestow Good**

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, in his book *Or HaShem* ("*The Light of the Lord*"), explains *Chazal*’s statementthat “God desires the prayer of the righteous” through a string of arguments: God desires to bestow good; the supreme good for a person is cleaving to God; this cleaving is "the secret of prayer." Prayer has an inner meaning that is connected to the concept of *deveikut* (cleaving and devotion).

Thus, God longs to hear the prayer of the righteous; He is happy that they are devoted to him, because that is the best possible state they can reach. His joy in the fact that they have reached their best possible state stems from a more fundamental point: God wants to bestow good, and His goodness is realized at the highest level by way of the devotion of the righteous.

As with the Ramban, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas's position is connected to his view of the reason for creation. The Rambam, after a long and complicated process (*Guide for the Perplexed* III, 13), opposes searching for a reason for creation. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas is the first to formulate with clarity an opposing position: God is perfect in all ways of perfection, and for this reason He is also good and wishes to bestow good; therefore, He created the world in order to bestow His goodness. The Rambam negated the possibility of saying that God is perfect, because that is a positive description. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas argues that this is possible precisely because it is a description that includes all positive descriptions.

From this principle, Rabbi Chasdai Crescas also infers the destiny of man, but in the opposite direction. God loves us and benefits us, and we are supposed to return love to Him. God's purpose in creation was to benefit us, and our purpose is to serve Him with love. Love of God is thus set at the apex of the worship of God. The Rambam also dealt extensively with the love of God, but he gave it an intellectual nature; for Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, love is spiritual. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas assigns this purpose to prayer as well: He explains (Book II, no. 6, chap. 2) that the *Amida* prayer is an expression of our love of God, and it is therefore preceded by the recitation of *Shema* and its blessings, which come to evoke love. Such prayer out of the love of God deserves to be answered.

To summarize: Rabbi Chasdai Crescas explains prayer as stemming directly from the reason for creation: creation stems from the goodness of God and is intended to bestow good upon God's creatures. God longs for the prayer of the righteous because it causes them to merit God's love and cleaving to Him, which is the greatest good.

**Rabbi Yosef Albo – Educational Prayer**

In *Sefer ha-Ikarim* (4:18), Rabbi Yosef Albo deals with the question of how it is possible for prayer to change a Divine decree. He explains that prayer creates a change, not in God, but in man. He explains his position with 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 own place with respect to the decree. He changes his fate and saves himself without affecting the king or his edict.

According to this explanation, during prayer a person must undergo an internal spiritual process. This process causes the petitioner to become worthy of receiving his request. It turns out then 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. Such prayer may be called "educational prayer."

In contrast, Rabbi Yosef Albo asserts in a different chapter that God answers man's prayer as an aspect of His lovingkindness. A person can receive through prayer even that which he does not deserve: "The proper belief, then, is that all benefits which come from God are due purely to His lovingkindness 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 a capacity upon a person who is not by nature fit to receive a given benefit" (*Sefer ha-Ikarim* 4:16).

I proposed three possible ways of understanding the relationship between these two statements, which create subtle differences in the position of the *Sefer ha-Ikarim.*

According to the first possibility (which explains the second source in light of the first), 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 is made by a process that transpires 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 through that to change what happens to him, is itself a gift given to us by the grace of God.

According to the second possibility (which explains the first source in light of the second), the preparation about which Rabbi Albo speaks in chapter 18 is an appeal to the Divine will, to Divine grace; man directs himself to the goodness of God. The process undergone through prayer brings man to a position to receive God's grace. He will not receive that grace mechanically, just because he placed himself in a place where God's grace arrives automatically, but rather the Divine grace will truly affect him. God always wants to bestow abundance, but this is possible only if the person first directs himself to receive it.

According to the third possibility, the two chapters are not dealing with the same situation. Chapter 18 deals with prayer in a situation where a decree has already been issued, whereas chapter 16 deals with prayer in a situation where a decreed has not yet been issued (in light of the Gemara that distinguishes between prayer "before a decree" and prayer "after a decree"). In the time of Rabbi Yosef Albo, the prevalent position was that everything in the world is predestined. This idea of predestination seems to preclude the possibility of prayer. Thus, Rabbi Yosef Albo comes to clarify that this is not the case. Chapter 18 does not offer a general explanation of the foundation of prayer, but rather it answers a specific question regarding Divine decrees. According to Rabbi Yosef Albo, there is no need to say that everything is predetermined, and in situations where an absolute decree has not been issued, a person can pray and receive what he has prayed for. Only in situations where an absolute decree has been issued does prayer operate through self-change. This is the way to deal with the concept of decrees, but it is only required in special cases; in most situations, there is no Divine decree.

In any case, Rabbi Albo's explanation that prayer works by creating a change in the person himself, and thereby changing what the person deserves to receive, shaped one of the fundamental directions for understanding prayer.

**The Maharal of Prague – Surrender, Self-Effacement, and Devotion**

The Maharal opens with an explanation of the concept of service of God. The essence of Divine service is devotion; man surrenders himself to God. In fact, this service reveals that man has no independent existence at all; he is null and void before God (an idea that will later be developed by the Chassidic movement). 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.

This notwithstanding, the Maharal focuses here on the aspect of request in prayer, which ostensibly deals with the meeting of man's needs and not with the service of God. The reason for this is that 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.

Why does God desire man's prayer? 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; 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. Man reveals his existential dependence on God, and thus attests to His unity and perfection.

The Maharal defines the relationship between man and God as the relationship between effect and cause, in the most essential sense. It is not specific needs that turn man into an effect, but rather every minute of his existence – even when a person feels completely stable – he is absolutely dependent, even if he notices his dependence only in situations of distress.

However, this relationship of dependence does not create existential distress that cannot be escaped, but rather 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.

Prayer is an expression of faith – "prayer involves the belief that God will fulfill his request." This assertion seems to be simple, but the Maharal delves to its deeper level: "And faith in Him involves cleaving to the supreme level that is hidden. This is the essence of faith, for if one believes in Him, his belief reaches the hidden level" (*Netivot Olam, Netiv ha-Avoda* 2).

Anyone with a mature view of the world knows that fixed and solid laws of nature were implanted in the world from the time of creation. One who truly prays, believing that his prayer has meaning, reflects a deeper perception of reality, a perception that believes that it is possible to break through the natural-realistic framework of the world.

Most of the time we are bound by the limits of this world, but during prayer we stand before God. We can touch what is beyond the boundaries of the world. Here our conception of the meaning of prayer expands – it completes not only the petitioner himself, but also the entire world. Not only is man deficient, but the entire world is deficient in its very essence, and prayer brings a person face to face with the level that is above and beyond the world's dimensions, with the level of the world-to-come. When we are engaged in prayer, we are not supposed to ignore the difficulty of how it operates or forget the limitations of this world, but rather we are supposed to reach *deveikut,* cleaving and devotion to a higher Divine level.

The Maharal is the first to mention the concept of *deveikut* with respect to prayer, without uprooting prayer from its simple sense of man petitioning God to provide him with his needs. The Maharal reaches *deveikut* through the request itself. Turning to God with a request breaches the boundaries of this world, and by way of that appeal, man cleaves to the hidden level of God.

**Prayer in Kabbala – The Keys of Abundance and Service as a Divine Need**

We also dealt a little with the reason for prayer according to the Kabbalists.

In the book *Sha'arei Ora* (*The Gates of Light*, by Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, who lived about 250 years before the Maharal), we encountered prayer as the keys to God’s abundance, with conditions for receiving that abundance. The book takes us from simple prayer, which appeals to God with His one uniform face, to the prayer of the Kabbalists, which turns to God with His many faces and names. The path to abundance involves knowing before Whom we stand – through the knowledge of the different names of God. The different names express different aspects of God's governance and are connected to different aspects of the desired abundance; knowing them allows a person to properly direct his prayer. We explained that using the names of God in this way is not a technical recitation of words, but rather an expression of an internal process required of the worshiper to allow a deeper and more accurate knowledge of God, which also leads to God's love of him.

In Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher’s commentary to the Torah, we encountered the (somewhat opposite) idea of "service as a Divine need," an idea that will be developed in Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai's *Avodat ha-Kodesh*, the *Shelah*, and the *Nefesh ha-Chayyim*. This idea is based on explicit verses in the Torah, e.g., the verse that commands us to "bless the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 11:1), and reveals the deep role that we play in realizing the will of God, who made His revelation dependent upon us.

(Translated by David Strauss)