YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #51: Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1)**

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook was blessed with a uniquely prayerful soul. We will open this study with several stories that illustrate this point.

The Nazir, Rabbi David Cohen, journeyed to meet Rav Kook during the First World War. At the time, he was already a noted Torah scholar with broad philosophical knowledge, and he was looking for a figure to serve as his teacher and mentor. He came to Rav Kook and discussed with him certain philosophical issues, but felt that he had still not found what he was looking for. He retired for the night with the feeling that his "life was hanging in the balance," as he put it. Early the next morning, the Nazir woke up and heard Rav Kook chanting the verses dealing with the *Akeida*, as part of the order of the sacrifices before the *Shacharit* service. Rav Kook's prayer left a huge impression on the Nazir, and at that moment he decided to become Rav Kook's disciple. This weighty decision, which led to the Nazir’s further decision to edit Rav Kook's writings and postpone his own writings (heedited Rav Kook's *Orot ha-Kodesh* but never finished working on his own book, *Kol ha-Nevu'a*), stemmed from the experience of Rav Kook's melodious prayer.

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap related a similar story. He met Rav Kook in Jaffa one Shavuot, and heard his talks and *shiurim* over the course of the night, but what truly captivated him was his encounter with Rav Kook's recitation of "*Akdamot*" in the *Shacharit* service.

Rav Charlap also related that once, when Rav Kook went to the Carmel in the summer as was his custom, he saw him in the morning and spoke to him about trees and plants. Rav Charlap questioned him in amazement about his sudden interest in botany, and Rav Kook replied that he had such an elevated prayer that morning, that he had to talk about earthly issues in order to return his soul to this world.

Another famous story: Rav Kook asked some of his close associates to pray for certain members of his family who were seriously ill. When he was asked why he did not pray for them himself, he explained that he cannot limit his prayer to a particular person. He prays for the entire nation of Israel, and for all of reality, and finds it difficult to focus his prayer on a single person. Therefore, he asked others.

Rav Kook wrote a commentary on parts of the prayer service that was published in his *siddur*, *Olat Ra'aya*, which we will discuss. In addition to his explanations of the liturgy, Rav Kook's writings address some of the questions we have dealt with in earlier *shiurim* – what is the purpose of prayer, what is supposed to happen during prayer, and how it works. These questions appear in Rav Kook's writings in several places, including the introduction to *Olat Ra'aya*, a series of chapters in *Orot ha-Kodesh*, vol. 3, many passages of his commentary to *Berakhot* in the book *Ein Aya*, and other places. Since the publication of Rav Kook's original notebooks, many more passages dealing with prayer have been uncovered (in the book *Shemona Kevatzim* and several additional volumes). Following the overall approach of this series, we will explore certain key passages that contain the main ideas in Rav Kook's teachings about prayer.

**The Role of Prayer in Building Personality**

Rav Kook's commentary to the Talmudic *Aggada* in his book *Ein Aya* covers tractates *Berakhot* and *Shabbat*. His commentary to *Berakhot* includes many passages dealing with prayer, some of which were later included in the compilations section of *Olat Ra'aya*. We shall open with the following passage from *Ein Aya*:

"It has been taught: Abba Binyamin says: A man's prayer is heard [by God] only in the synagogue. For it is stated: 'To hearken to the song and to the prayer' (I *Melakhim* 8:28)" (*Berakhot* 6a). The explanation of this is: The essence of prayer involves two things, corresponding to which the [*Amida*]prayer is divided into two parts, namely, song and prayer, that is to say, praise and petition. The first is that God established a law in His world that if a person prays, his needs will be fulfilled. "The prayer of the upright is His delight" (*Mishlei* 15:8); "He also will hear their cry, and will save them" (*Tehillim* 145:19). And the second is that a person should actualize his potential perfection, by arranging his thoughts to recount the greatness of God and to accustom his thoughts and all the faculties of his soul to behold the graciousness of God, which is the fruit of life and the ultimate perfection. Included in this type is the principle of proclaiming God's glory in His world and His closeness to man, especially to those who cleave to His ways. It is appropriate that it be engraved in the heart that even the petition part of prayer is in the world so that through this the person will reach more of his true perfection, which follows from his recognition of the glory of God. For the more elevated a person's prayer, and the closer he is to God's perfection, through his good deeds and his knowledge and traits, the more likely it is that his prayer will be effective and his words will make an impression, to “say a decree and it will be fulfilled for him” [cf. *Iyov* 22:28). This brings the human race closer to God, and therefore God established this law in His world in order to prime a person for his perfection. And the enlightened will understand with this the root of the reality of prayer, without need for the many considerations of philosophers. Therefore, among the conditions of the petition part of prayer is that it always be subordinated to the higher part of prayer, i.e., proclaiming His glory. …

Now, the truth is that these two general aspects of prayer include three parts. That is to say, the goal of fulfilling requests for the needs of man is the lower part of prayer. The part that is higher than that is to prepare a person to delight in God. The part that is the highest and most sublime is to proclaim His greatness in the world. And the three parts of [the *Amida*] prayer – the first three [blessings], the last three [blessings], and the middle [blessings] – were established for this: The first three are to prime the person’s level, and with this, the person will be prepared for petition without distraction. And the goal of the last three is for recognition of His greatness by way of prayer and its effect in the world. Therefore these two spiritual matters are not subject to division, because their foundation is a mental idea that is not composed of matter at all with respect to their goal. Therefore they are all important, the first three and the last three. This is not the case with the middle blessings, which are for a material purpose, regarding which there are different levels according to the need. (*Ein Ayah*, *Berakhot* 1, 48)

Rav Kook distinguishes between the two parts of prayer – praise and petition – and explains the purpose of each part. The purpose of the petitions is attaining one's needs; "God established a law in His world that if a person prays, his needs will be fulfilled." Ostensibly, this could have been formulated in a simpler and more concise manner: A person prays so that God will fulfill his needs. However, such a statement would have raised questions, similar to those we dealt with in the past. Does God not know what disturbs a person? Will a person's prayers change God's mind and cause Him to change His decision? What is the relationship between belief in God's knowledge and providence, and prayer? Therefore, Rav Kook deliberately uses the phrase "God established a law in His world." God created the world from the outset with this pattern. We still have to understand why, but in any case, it is a trait that was ingrained in the world from the very beginning – that man would be granted his needs through prayer.

The praise part of prayer has a different purpose: "That a person should actualize his potential perfection, by arranging his thoughts to recount the greatness of God and to accustom his thoughts and all the faculties of his soul to behold the graciousness of God." Here too, the formulation is surprising. Ostensibly, singing God's praises has value of its own, but here it is described as a means for self-actualization, realizing a person's potential perfection.

Thus, Rav Kook describes both of the main purposes of prayer in a manner that requires explanation: petition is within the framework of a law that was ingrained in the world, and praise is not for God, but for man – so that man can actualize his potential perfection.

How does prayer actualize man's potential perfection? Rav Kook explains that a person realizes his destiny by knowing God; this is what brings him to his perfect state. We find similar statements in earlier sources, such as *Chovot ha-Levavot*, but with a different tone – man must know God, and therefore he must negate himself before Him. Rav Kook is saying something else: Man is not supposed to negate himself, but rather to actualize his perfection through knowledge of God.

The purpose of petition and the purpose of praise (and with it, thanksgiving, which has a role similar to that of praise but with an effect on the person's surroundings) join together. The law that is implanted in reality, according to which man obtains his needs specifically through prayer, is designed so that man will encounter in his prayer the proper perspectives, and from this he will draw closer to God and his prayer will be more beneficial. In this way, his prayer will affect himself and humanity.

The role of prayer, then. is to deepen faith. It deepens the person's knowledge of God. In addition to this, prayer is intended to bring about the realization of the person's inner perfection.

**Prayer as Internalization**

We will now see another role of prayer, in another passage from *Ein Aya*:

The beginning of the action of prayer is that all of the fundamentals of fear and morality that a person has acquired in his soul, which may be forgotten from the heart due to the stormy passions of the human heart and the desires of the moment – prayer will root all of these holy matters and lofty images well in the heart, in such a way that they will stand strong and not be swayed by the onslaught of storms of corruption of morals and perfect service. This action is most necessary in the morning, so that a person should prepare himself before he turns to the affairs of life and the necessary feelings of physical desire, to acquire for himself a strong moral standing in such a way that he will stand firm and not be swept away by the multitude of waves of time, and be able to stand the tests of the opposing forces. This is why the prayer for this purpose is called *Amida*, (standing), because of its effect. Most qualified for this was our patriarch, Avraham, may he rest in peace, who was the first of the believers and passed ten wondrous trials, who fought against all opponents to the path leading up to see the light of God; they stormed to disperse and cause him to go astray, but he stood firm and everlasting .

Prayer is called *sicha* (conversation), a term used also for plants and trees, which are called *sichim*, because of the flowering of the soul with new faculties, which naturally branch out by way of the emotions of the soul during the service of the heart. This position is most appropriate toward evening, when a person is about to remove from himself his temporal concerns. Then his soul is able to rise naturally, and the natural sacred emotions which are stored within it to adhere to the living God and grow stronger in His pure love and fear will bear fruit and send forth branches, to be like a great tree and one of the *sichim*. And this natural blossoming from the uprightness of the soul is the root of the administration of justice to one who veers from the way of uprightness in the paths of life, because the attribute of justice is especially meticulous about anything that has a natural law, for one who changes the path and veers from its way will receive a natural punishment. This is the trait of Yitzchak, as it is written: "And the Fear of Yitzchak had been on my side" (*Bereishit* 31:42), and as the Sages explained extensively. Therefore, the term *sicha* is appropriate for the *Mincha* prayer. (*Ein Ayah*, *Berakhot* 4, 2)

The role of prayer described in this passage is what we would call internalization. There are insights that we may have heard and learned, but knowing them does not suffice to assimilate them into our souls. The encounter itself with correct insights does not necessarily bring a person to identify with them, especially if he goes out afterwards to other places, and the winds blowing in the world undermine him. Prayer causes the knowledge we have acquired to take root within us in a firm and stable way.

What emerges from these two passages is that prayer is not only meant to satisfy our needs, but also plays a significant role in shaping our personalities.

A similar idea emerges from Rav Kook's introduction to the book *Mussar Avikha*:

As long as a person does not train himself to clarify the nature of the human soul and the nature of Israel and the nature of the holy land and the appropriate yearning on the part of every member of Israel for the rebuilding of the Temple and the greatness of Israel and their elevation in the world – it is almost impossible to taste the flavor of [Divine] service. For since *Chazal* said about the verse: "and to serve Him with all your heart" that service of the heart is prayer – if so, prayer is a form of service, and a person is not fit for service unless he is in a state of knowledge of the fear of God, to a great enough extent that the matters of prayer are close to his heart. If he does not know the nature of his soul, how can he pray, with a complete will and feeling of deficiency, that God should grant him knowledge, insight, and understanding? For he does not recognize, since he has riches, honor, and all good things, what he lacks if, God forbid, he does not become wise and understand. If so, he must study in depth until he clearly and fully understands the magnitude of his lack of insight and understanding, and he will thirst for it, and he will pray with love from the walls of his heart that God should grant him this, and God who is good will not withhold His goodness from those who walk in innocence. And if he does not know the nature of Israel, how can he pray wholeheartedly for their redemption? For certainly the desired intention in the blessing "Redeemer of Israel" is not just for the pains of his soul that he himself feels because of the burden of the exile; the idea of the blessing testifies that its intention is based on the nature of Israel and their sanctity. And if he does not understand the nature of the holy land and its holiness, how can he pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem? Prayer is from the walls of the heart only when a person feels that he is lacking something.

Prayer is a great check for a person – whether he is truly purifying his soul in accordance with the will of his Creator, and whether his will is close to the will of his Creator. Therefore, a person must be very careful not to follow his own will in the pleasures of the body from food and drink, etc., because the nature of the physical will become so embedded in him that he does not feel that he lacks the true holy things, and thus he will lose his prayer, which is an essential element in service. For because he takes comfort in what he has, to eat and to become sated and other such vanities, he will not imagine while he recites the praise of "*Aleinu le-shabeach*" and "*Al ken nekaveh*"that the world will be repaired under the kingdom of God, and the idols will be destroyed and the wicked will turn to Him, for what damage do the idols do to one whose ideas and heart are directed toward filling his belly with delicacies, and when the images of desire are in his heart, he will not have insight or understand. Therefore, a person must strengthen himself and become wise and see counsel for his soul. And from the God of grace and mercy, who desires our perfection, which is His honor and glory, we will ask and pray that He will guide us in His path and illuminate us with His great light, that we may know and be wise about what He requires of us and what is the right and good thing to follow in His ways.

If we pay careful attention to Rav Kook's words in this passage, we will recognize that they covertly touch on the issue of the relationship between Torah and prayer. It is not enough to study supernal principles, for we must also bring them closer to our hearts. It is not enough to know that the redemption of Israel is an important matter; this must become a part of our inner desire. Here Rav Kook contends with the fact that our prayer with its fixed wording puts requests in our mouths. We must make sure that these petitions accord with our own desires. We must aspire to the rebuilding of Jerusalem in order to pray for it from the walls of our hearts.

There is also a deeper point here. *Chazal* included petitions in prayer that, while they concern us and our world, God as well desires them. He wants us to have knowledge, He wants us to be healed, and He wants to restore our judges and cause the scion of David to flourish. We need to connect to this desire; afterwards, it is possible to add our personal requests. Prayer serves as a tool to measure the relationship between us and the will of God, to check where we are spiritually. If I was unable to concentrate on my prayer and identify with its content, this is a sign that I must undergo an internal process, in order to reach a state where my own will coincides with the petitions that appear in the text of the prayer.

We have learned from Rav Kook's words in these passages that prayer has a much more central role than just addressing a person's troubles. It plays a significant part in the building of his personality, in its spiritual design and internalization, and it serves as a kind of internal examination that indicates where he stands on the scale of identification with the divine will.

These passages were all written in the early stages of Rav Kook's life, before he immigrated to the land of Israel. Later in his life, after immigrating to Israel, he added layers to his teachings about prayer. This is what we will be examining in the upcoming *shiurim*.

(Translated by David Strauss)