YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #56: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we saw that Rabbi Soloveitchik applied the Brisker method of Torah study to tractates with a clear connection to the world of Jewish thought – tractate *Berakhot* and the tractates in the order of *Moed* –and we discussed the ramifications of that approach for his teachings about prayer. We will now examine another issue related to the subject of prayer that Rabbi Soloveitchik discusses.

**The *Matirim* (“Factors that Permit”) of Prayer**

First, we must understand the halakhic concept of a "*matir*." Certain things in Halakha require a particular action in order to be permitted, and until that action is performed, they are forbidden. Ritual slaughter, for example, is an action that permits eating the meat of a kosher animal.

Regarding the issue of "*semikhat ge'ula li-tefilla*," juxtaposing [mention of] redemption to prayer, Rabbi Soloveitchik asserts that a *matir* is required for prayer. Rabbi Soloveitchik deals with this principle on the halakhic plane in his book, *Shiurim le-Zekher Abba Mari*. In an essay entitled *Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefilla*, translated by Rabbi Shalom Carmy in *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*,he approaches the subject on the conceptual plane.

On one hand, Rabbi Soloveitchik speaks from an underlying assumption that the possibility of prayer is not self-evident. In view of the infinite gap between man and the King of kings, it is not at all clear that it is permissible to turn to the King with prayers and requests. However, we know that the patriarchs prayed, and that the Rabbis enacted prayers to correspond to the daily offerings – the clear implication being that prayer is possible. Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that indeed, prayer requires a *matir*, an action that makes prayer possible.

Relating to God through speech and supplication appears to our sages as a brazen and adventurous activity. How can mortal man, who is today here and tomorrow in the grave, approach the supreme King, the Holy One blessed be He? Does an ordinary subject have the license to speak to a great and exalted King and petition him for his needs?

… If this is the case, what is the character of prayer? The whole substance of prayer as petition and supplication for man's petty needs, as we have indicated, is puzzling and beyond our ken. Can man attain a foothold within Divine transcendence? Can he shower Him with a plethora of insignificant matters? (Rabbi Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, pp. 149-150)

On the other hand, Rabbi Soloveitchik puts forward an argument that seems to contradict this assumption:

According to the Rambam, it is impossible to conceive of Divine worship without including prayer in it. What then is prayer? It is the expression of the soul that yearns for God via the medium of the word, through which the human being gives expression to the storminess of his soul and spirit.

The Torah commands love and fear of God, total commitment to Him and cleaving unto Him. Antithetical, dynamic experiences which seek to erupt and reveal themselves must be integrated into the external, concrete realm through the forms of language and expression, by means of song, weeping and supplication.

Had the Torah not commanded prayer as the exclusive medium for expressing inward worship – we do not know what the God-seeking human being, whose soul thirsts for the living God, would do. Could one entertain the thought that Judaism would want man to suppress his experience? On the contrary! The Halakhah was always interested in expressions of the inner life, in the uncovering of the subjective and opaque, and in the conversion of emotion and thought into action. How could one assume that the Halakhah was totally oblivious to the supreme attainment – that is, to prayer? Did Halakhah demand that worship be mute, that experiences be concealed, that they not be allowed expression? (Ibid., pp. 146-147)

According to what is stated here, in the religious world there must be prayer. If so, on the one hand, prayer is impossible, but on the other hand, it is impossible not to have prayer. How are we to understand the relationship between these two ideas? One might have argued that a religious world without prayer is impossible, and therefore there is a place for prayer. The answer to the question, "How is it possible to pray?" would be: “It is impossible *not* to pray, and therefore it is possible to pray.” But Rabbi Soloveitchik describes it differently, reflecting the generally dialectical nature of his writing. He describes movement between two poles that are essentially irreconcilable. Ultimately, they can be resolved – but not as an initial thought that has been completely rejected; instead, he takes an approach that leaves both sides intact. The halakhic meaning is that even now, it is impossible to pray “just like that”; a "*matir*" is needed in order to enable prayer.

In *Ra'ayonot al ha-Tefilla*,the *matir* that permits prayer is the very commandment to pray, without which it would be inappropriate for a person to do so. This casts far-reaching significance on the Rambam's determination that there is a positive mitzvafrom the Torah to pray. In *Shiurim le-Zekher Abba Mari*, however, it becomes clear that additional *matirim* are required. The Gemara in *Berakhot* requires that *Pesukei de-Zimra*, the *Shema*, and the blessings of the *Shema* be recited before the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer; it also says that one may stand to pray only from a state of “joy connected to a mitzva” (*Berakhot* 31a). The second statement, at least, could have been seen as an aggadic remark rather than a technical halakhic requirement, but Rabbi Soloveitchik sees in both statements as pointing to halakhic *matirim*.

The recitation of the *Shema* and its blessings, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, has a clear connection to prayer. The contents surrounding the recitation of the *Shema* are worded as blessings, which are a kind of prayer, and the time for reciting the blessings is the same as the time for reciting the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer – after the time for reciting the *Shema* has passed. These characteristics join the requirement to juxtapose redemption to prayer, that is to say, to connect the recitation of *Shema* to the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer. This is the *matir* of prayer, without which it is impossible to pray.

Another important statement in the Talmudic passage is: "A person should always praise the Holy One, blessed be He, and afterwards pray." The Rif understands this statement in relation to *Pesukei de-Zimra*, which must be recited before praying; the recitation of *Pesukei de-Zimra* stems from the obligation to praise God before reciting the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer. This statement is formulated in positive terms, "A person should always…," but it can also be understood as a required *matir*:it is impossible to pray without prefacing the prayer with words of praise, as indeed is suggested by Rabbi Soloveitchik.

In this context, Rabbi Soloveitchik also mentions prayer in a time of danger. The Sages established a special formula for prayer in emergency situations. Why is it even necessary to establish a prayer for such situations? If it is impossible to recite the *Shemoneh Esrei* in its regular format, why shouldn't the person say what comes to his heart? Rabbi Soloveitchik sees this *halakha* as well as evidence that it is impossible to pray however one wants; only the prescribed formulations of prayer are permitted.

Among the different parts of prayer, Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasizes the requests. In light of the difficulty of how it is at all possible to pray, one might have expected that the recitation of praise would be simpler, and that requests would receive less space. Nevertheless, petitions for one's needs are the heart of prayer, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik. These two emphases, the need for a *matir* and the emphasis on requests, are related to the foundations of Rabbi Soloveitchik's conceptual world – man's standing before God, and the role of prayer in relation to man. To understand this, let's put aside the halakhic statements and turn to more conceptual sources.

***Avot*, *Gevurot*, and *Kedushat Ha-Shem* – From *Chesed* to Deficiency and Surrender**

Rabbi Soloveitchik explains the first three benedictions in the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer: *Avot* (Patriarchs), *Gevurot* (God’s might),and *Kedushat Ha-Shem* (Sanctification of God’s Name).

The three opening benedictions thus place in relief three fundamental motifs pertaining to the structure of prayer and its essence. First, man yearns for God and discovers Him via that which surrounds him. God is the God of *hesed* who permeates all, and makes the creature a partner in his Being. In Him we find a refuge and stronghold, a protective fortress. We approach Him calmly and confidently. The motto is "Divine *hesed* everlasting" (*Tehillim* 103:17) from the beginning to the end of the generations. The God of Abraham participates in the sorrow of the miserable, impoverished human being. He responds to his entreaty and hears his cry. Unto Him do we pray.

Studies in the psychology of religion that report on the benefit of prayer as a source of consolation and relief for the weary, reflect the belief that the God of *hesed* receives our prayer with love and favor.

The situation is altered when we move from *Avot* to *Gevurot*. Here prayer changes direction. At the outset, in the benediction of *Avot*, the praying individual did not feel confusion, need or inadequacy. At this first stage he lacked nothing; he had more than enough. He was close to God and was nourished by a perfect existence, devoid of deficiency or flaw.

In the second benediction, a new motif wells up. The human being discovers his emptiness, and begins to understand that he has no standing at all. He can be rescued only through God's *hesed*, to which he has no right. Here is an introduction to the prayer of supplication and vigorous entreaty. God is mighty and omnipotent, whereas man is weak and miserable, incapable of earning his bread and fulfilling his needs. Man flees toward God, seeks protection beneath His wings, and presents before Him his supplication, like a slave or maidservant before a master. Man is ready to entreat and plead for undeserved *hesed* from the All-powerful. "You are mighty, forever, O God." The "You" excludes everything. Only *You* are high; not *I.* "Who is like You, Master of mightiness." In the first benediction man is aware of his greatness and singularity – he was created in the Divine image, and therefore can approach God; the second benediction expresses man's self-abnegation, his feeling of weakness and his recognition of his own nothingness.

The third benediction commands both the person who believes in his worth and importance and the one who negates his own self to offer up their entire being to God. When man appears before the great God, the God of *hesed*, he is joyful and happy. When he encounters the mighty God, he is filled with dread. When he praises the awesomeness of God, he is prepared to surrender everything to him. (*Worship of the Heart*, pp. 163-164)

The first blessing speaks of God's great love, of God's *chesed* in which man can take refuge. The second blessing speaks of Divine might in contrast to human weakness: man depends on God's actions; on his own, he is null and not entitled to receive God's *chesed*. In the third blessing, the person surrenders his entire existence and being into the hands of God, offering himself as a sacrifice. While he is not permitted to sacrifice himself in practice, he is required to do so mentally and consciously. "Our Torah bans human sacrifice as practiced by the people of the ancient Near East. But, as we noted, this prohibition applies only to physical sacrifice; when it comes to experiential sacrifice – this God demands of us… Animal sacrifice is not practiced in our day; human sacrifice endures!" (Ibid., pp. 161-162).

Of these three elements – *chesed*, might, and sacrifice – the latter two are very prominent in Rabbi Soloveitchik's writings. He also talks about *chesed*, but he emphasizes the feelings of partiality and lack, and the movement of sacrifice and renunciation.

The three elements can be divided between two types of God's servants – the great man who feels God's love, and the weak and deficient man who surrenders himself. These two types stand at the heart of Rabbi Soloveitchik's essay, *The* *Lonely Man of Faith.* We will not go into the relationship between the two types here, and the question of whether they are necessarily opposed to each other or if there is a way to reconcile them, but I will note that this question is discussed in detail in the essay *U-Vikashtem mi-Sham*, "And from There You Shall Seek."

**Requests Versus Praise – The Human World Versus Ecstasy**

The emphasis on the dimension of request in prayer, which we saw above, also has a conceptual basis:

When we examine the formulation of the benedictions we note that those who arranged the prayer extended the petitions while keeping the celebratory elements (*rinnah*) brief. Entreaty is the back bone of *avodah shebalev*. One who prays on a week-day and omits one of the nineteen blessings does not fulfill his obligation because he does not enumerate properly the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. One who mistakenly recited the weekday prayer on Shabbat has fulfilled the obligation of prayer *bedi'eved*, that is, after the fact, so long as he made some mention of Shabbat.

Even the prayers specified for Shabbat and Yom Tov are not devoid of expressions signifying petition and supplication. To be sure, "Shabbat and Yom Tov are not days to cry out," yet we plead to Him to purify our hearts, sanctify us through our performance of *mitzvot* and study of Torah, and bestow upon us true goodness, the joy of salvation and of a full respite undiluted by grief. The *musaf*, or "additional" prayer is an outpouring of the heart over Israel's exile from its land and an appeal to God for speedy redemption. A mute sadness suffuses the text of *mippenei hatta'enu* ("Because of our sins") in the Yom Tov *musaf.* There is no prayer without petition and supplication. Halakhah opposed all those outlooks which derive from pantheistic mysticism and which aim to excise entreaty from prayer and to establish worship exclusively on an aesthetic-ecstatic basis of the hymn.

Even though, as noted, prayer requires praise and thanksgiving, nonetheless the vigor and power of prayer derive from petition. Halakhah is interested in psychosomatic man, in his concrete corporeality. It is displeased by the ecstatic separation of soul from body during prayer. The aim of worship of the heart is the offering of sacrifice through the total surrender of body and soul to God. Moreover, Halakhah observes scrupulously the principle of exotericism. The community as a whole cannot escape the bonds of corporeality and its petty needs. Any attempt to require all members of the community to achieve such liberation entails greater loss than benefit. Halakhah is concerned with human beings who dwell in darkness and shadow, who struggle for their bread. Such people are enclosed within their four cubits of distasteful, ridiculous desire. It is such confounded stammerers that Halakhah taught to pray, and into whose mouths it inserted a clear formula. The common man is commanded to offer prayers for the sick in his household, the wine that has turned to vinegar, the crop that has failed. The hymn, embroidered with aesthetic experience is confined to the private domain of the elite. It is pleasing only to mystics, who are characteristically anti-social. Their mode of existence is esoteric; they are spiritually fastidious. Halakhah cannot be confined within the domain of the spiritual nobility. Only petition can bring prayer to the public domain. (*Worship of the Heart*, pp. 173-174)

There are impressive prayers that are based not on petition, but primarily on praise. There are songs of praise that bring a person to ecstasy and uplift and free a person from a low, gray existence. Rabbi Soloveitchik points out that there are religious and spiritual movements whose main ritual involves detaching a person from his material reality and introducing him to higher worlds. Even in our prayer, there are *piyyutim* and passages of praise that came from the world of virtuous and mysterious individuals, such as *Ha-Aderet ve-ha-Emuna* and *Shir ha-Kavod.* All these, argues Rabbi Soloveitchik, are not the core of prayer. Halakha greatly limited the ecstatic dimension of prayer. It also cast prayer on the general public, and the collective cannot escape from this world and elevate itself to higher levels. Letting prayer out into the public domain requires that petition be at its center.

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We saw how Rabbi Soloveitchik connects the halakhic world, the conceptual world, and the experiential world. All three merge in his teachings on prayer, creating a prayer that moves between several poles – *chesed*, dependence, and sacrifice. This movement, which began with the question of how it is even possible to pray, and passed through the *matirim* that make prayer possible, ends with the petition for a person's needs at its center. In the end, man meets God on the most concrete level of his life, in the context of his difficult and gray needs – but also through the comfort inherent in the right to stand before God in prayer.

(Translated by David Strauss)