YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #58: Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi – Manitou (1)**

Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, better known as Manitou,[[1]](#footnote-1) was born in 1922 to Rabbi David Ashkenazi, the last Chief Rabbi of Algiers. His life can be divided into three periods: living in his father's house, he received a broad Torah education; later, he studied and lived in France; and after the Six Day War, he moved to Jerusalem. These were three spiritual stations: in the first stage, he absorbed spirituality and Kabbala; in the second stage, he was involved with Western culture, philosophy, and the crisis of French Jewish communities after World War II; and in the third stage, after immigrating to Israel, he connected his life to the renewed Hebrew nationalism.

While in France, Manitou headed a Jewish institution that worked with students who were deeply immersed in French university life and exposed to modern philosophy, and introduced them to Jewish thought. For many, he was the ray of light that reconnected them to their Jewish identity. He reminded them that Judaism has its own ideology, which can serve as a touchstone for the values and morals of other cultures, and should not only adapt itself to foreign cultures and get along with them. He did this based on his deep familiarity with the currents of his time, while maintaining an independent identity.

Prayer is one of the most significant topics in Manitou's teachings. The discussion of prayer is mainly concentrated in his work, "*Sha'arei Dim'a*," which was published only in recent years. Manitou's presentation of the topic exemplifies his character, as well as his systematic and unique approach.

**The Boundaries of Prayer: “Something That One Needs That is Not in His Possession”**

At the beginning of his remarks about prayer, Manitou cites the *Mabit's* definition of prayer:

The *Mabit* defined the essence of prayer in his book *Beit Elokim* in precise fashion as “man's petitioning God for something he needs that is not in his possession." (*Sha'arei Dim'a*, I, p. 22)

This would seem to be the basic definition of prayer, assuming that the essence of prayer is petition. What did the *Mabit* innovate, and why was Manitou happy to have found this remark, as if he had found a great treasure?

In fact, the words of the *Mabit* are not a literal statement of something self-evident, but a contemplative and value-based statement, on whose basis it is possible to judge which prayer is a proper prayer and which is not. It determines the norms of prayer.

We will consider each of the elements included in this definition.

The first element is "something that one needs." Before a person prays, he must contemplate whether or not the object of his prayer is something that he needs. He must ask himself: Why am I praying for this? If the answer is that he wants it, that may not mean it is something he needs. This is a new idea: One should not pray for something that he does not need.

The second element is "not in his possession." The object of the prayer must be beyond the reach of the person, that is, beyond what he can attain on his own. This is another question a person should ask himself before praying: Even if it is a matter of need, can I not achieve it myself? To determine whether the prayer is appropriate, one must first examine whether the need can be achieved without prayer. This does not mean just making a basic effort; a person must make every effort to attain what he needs by his own effort.

The usual assumption is that if it is possible to pray, then a person can pray for anything he wants. Manitou disagrees with this and says that prayer is not self-evident. God is not a charitable organization that is open to everyone, to which one can turn with any request and without conditions. There is a theoretical meaning here that needs to be clarified; why is it not possible to turn to God with *any* request? There is also practical significance, as one must examine each prayer to see if it meets the conditions.

This assertion is reminiscent of the *matir*, "the action that permits," that we saw in the writings of Rabbi Soloveitchik, but it is different from it. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the foundation was that there is a gap between man and God, and therefore prayer is not self-evident. From this it follows that there are certain actions that must be performed before reciting prayer, in order to make it possible. Later we will see that for Manitou as well, his assertion is based on a contemplative foundation, but it is a different foundation, one that is connected to Manitou's entire worldview. It is a worldview that is systematically built, layer upon layer, one conclusion drawn from another, until the subject of prayer is reached. Prayer is a sub-chapter within a broader issue.

**Prayer As a Last Resort**

Rabbi Soloveitchik's difficulty with prayer stemmed from the nothingness of man; how can man in his smallness stand before God? Manitou's difficulty is related to the element of providence. When a person stands before God and makes a request, he essentially disputes the way in which God manages the world. If a person believes that God watches over the world and manages it, he should ostensibly accept the Divine management and not try to change it. To delve deeper into this statement, we must clarify how God manages the world, according to Manitou.

God created the world so that it would function by itself. If we understand how it is built and we behave in it correctly, then there is no need for outside help for it to exist. The Creator already placed in the world everything necessary for the existence of mankind. According to this, there should be no prayer; after all, everything we need in the world is obtainable. Indeed, Manitou says, there are schools of thought that perceive the world in this way, as a materialistic world in which everything that is needed exists within it. But Manitou adds that after the six days of creation, God brought another thing into the world –blessing. The world received blessing on the seventh day. The blessing is beyond the material dimension of the world, and includes the emotional dimension. When man was placed in the Garden of Eden, the commandment given to him was to work it and preserve it. What does he have to do to acquire the blessing in the world? He must toil and cause the world to grow. The Divine blessing is also found in the world itself; man can extract from reality not only what is necessary for his physical existence, but also what is necessary for his psyche and his personality. For example, man works and develops the world, and it seems to him that he is busy with physical development, but his occupation also provides him with mental satisfaction. "To work it and to preserve it" is the way to receive the Divine blessing.

It happens, however, that a person encounters a deficiency, and despite all his actions, he is not blessed. This is where prayer comes in.

Prayer, in light of this, is a subsection of Manitou's entire worldview. It is not the main path of action in the world, but a last resort in case a person's action is not enough. The main path is to work in the world and do everything possible. Only if the person has tried his best, and yet discovered that he has been unable to obtain the blessing on his own (and not even with the help of those around him), is he allowed to pray. The prayer is an appeal to God to reopen His treasure of blessing, and provide the person with help beyond reality.

In light of this, the first condition for prayer becomes clear: "something that he needs." Prayer is utilized for man's existential needs. Not necessarily for his physical existence, but his mental existence, the fulfillment of his mission in the world. According to the ordinary perception of prayer, when a person, for example, recites the blessing of *chonen ha-da'at* ("grantor of wisdom"), he is saying to God: I would be happy to be granted more wisdom. I have wisdom, but I would like more. According to Manitou, when a person prays for wisdom, he does so to fulfill his role. He has studied and invested his time and energy, but realizes that this was not enough to fulfill his role. He turns to God and says: Master of the universe, in order to fulfill the mission You gave me, I need additional wisdom.

This is a completely different kind of prayer. When prayer comes to realize the Divine mission imposed on man, it has a special power.

Manitou cites Chana's prayer, from which the Sages learned many laws of prayer, as an example. Chana was barren, a childless woman. She felt that she was unable to realize her mission, to be who she was supposed to be – a mother. She was ready to do anything to give birth to a child, but she saw that it was beyond her capabilities. At this point, she turned to God, appealing to Him so that she could realize her destiny in the world.

**Man’s Destiny – To Complete Himself by Himself**

In order to better understand these matters of mission and destiny, we will go one step deeper into Manitou's worldview. (I expanded on this in my ["Reason for Creation" series of *shiurim*](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/rabbinic-thought/mishnat-harav-ashkenazi-manitou-1).[[2]](#footnote-2))

The purpose of creation, according to Manitou, is to give space to others. God constricted Himself, as it were, in order to make room for created beings, and each of those created beings is also required to make room for others. This is how, for example, Manitou explains the sin of Kayin and Hevel – as the founding story of humanity: Kayin, as the eldest son, was unable to give space to another, whereas Hevel was unable to fight for his place alongside another. In order to give man the right to exist, God gave him the ability to acquire his own right to exist. For this, He created a built-in gap between the ideal world and actual reality as it was created, between the thought of creation and the deficient reality, and man is called upon to fill in this gap. Existence must fill in this gap from the forces within it; every individual is born with such a gap, between his deficient state and what he can be, and he must fill in this gap on his own. This is how he acquires his right to exist.

In a situation where a person is unable to complete himself by himself, he must pray. There is room to discuss why this happens – why situations arise in which it is impossible to fill in the gap alone – but we will not go into this question at the moment. The principle is that the person should act on his own, and prayer is intended for situations where his action is insufficient.

We will now close the circle: Man petitions for an existential need, which he is unable to attain on his own. The world was deliberately created in a deficient manner so that man could complete himself and the world around him, and bring reality to its ideal state, that is, to conform to the thought of creation. When a person feels that something is blocking him from doing so, he can ask God for additional blessing, to enable him to continue striving to fulfill his mission. In such a state, he says: Blessed are You, O Lord; it is You who are the source of blessing in nature; it is You who brought blessing into the world. I have done all that I can with the blessing that You gave me, and now I need an additional blessing, in order to complete the mission that You have given me.

In the background lies the concept that while there are times that God does in fact intervene in reality, these interventions are unusual. The starting point is that each person acts on his own, without God, and only after he fulfills his role do they meet again. Of course, this statement raises many questions, such as what the purpose is of resting the *Shekhina* on the people of Israel, but this is not the place to go into the full depth of the issue.

**Prayer as a Judgment**

To the two conditions that were set at the beginning, that prayer be for something that the person needs and that is not in his possession, Manitou adds another condition: righteousness. One must be a righteous person if his prayer is to be answered. Manitou shows that the word *tefilla* (prayer) is related to the idea of *pelilim* (trial, judgment). Whereas earlier Jewish thinkers associated prayer with lovingkindness (such as the author of the *Ikarim* and Rabbi Chasdai Crescas), Manitou emphasizes prayer as judgment. When a person prays and asks for something in order to fulfill his mission, he is examined to see whether he is indeed fit to receive that help. Has he so far done what is necessary for the sake of his mission, or is he only now remembering it because of problems that have arisen in his life? Manitou formulates this in an interesting manner: A person is given a job for a hundred and twenty years. His work will be examined only after it is finished and he ascends to heaven. If he wants to get a supplement in the middle of the job, however, his work will have to be examined already now.

**A Haircut Instead of a Blessing**

We will finish this part with two stories related by Manitou. The first story happened in his childhood: he had a test, and he asked his mother for a blessing. His mother took a candy out of the cupboard and gave it to him. He, of course, asked: Why a candy? I asked for a blessing! His mother answered him: In order to succeed on the test, you must study. If a doctor succeeds on his medical exams without studying for them because his mother gave him a blessing, that would be bad. If for some reason you feel tense or distracted during your exam, and you will have difficulty answering based on what you have learned, the candy will help you calm down; but the test itself is based solely on what you have learned. It is in your hands.

Another story: A student came to Manitou and asked for a blessing for marriage. Manitou opened his wallet, took out a twenty-shekel bill, and told him: Go to the barber.

These are two examples of situations that are in our control. We are supposed to deal with these situations ourselves; they are not supposed to be the subjects of our prayer.

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Before concluding, an important classification of Manitou should be noted: The people of Israel, as a whole, need prayers more than the individual. The mission of the people of Israel, by definition, is above and beyond normal natural reality. That is why we were given the ability to make requests so that we would be better able to fulfill our mission. Prayer includes two components, one corresponding to the patriarchs of Israel and the other corresponding to the daily sacrifices. The patriarchs received the privilege of optional prayer because they regularly needed additional blessings in order to succeed in realizing their mission that goes beyond ordinary reality. By virtue of the patriarchs, the people of Israel also received the privilege to ask for additional blessing. The one hundred and twenty sages of the Great Assembly, among whom some were prophets, knew what the people needed in order to complete their mission, and they set these needs in the formula of the *Amida* prayer.

In the next *shiur*,we will address obligatory prayer, which corresponds to the daily offerings, and see how it fits into the picture.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. “Manitou” is an Algonquian word that translates as something like “great spirit”; it became his nickname when he joined the Jewish Scouts of France after WWII. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Editor’s note: As of the posting of this *shiur*, that series has not been translated. For a parallel *shiur* in English, see <https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/great-thinkers/manitou/purpose-creation-%E2%80%94-earning-right-exist>, part of a series on The Thought of Manitou. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)