YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #59: Rabbi Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi – Manitou (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we started to examine Manitou's position regarding prayer, and the broader worldview on which it is based. According to Manitou, God deliberately created the world deficient, in order to give man the opportunity to complete it and bring it closer to the original idea of creation. In principle, everything that man needs to complete reality already exists in the world, both the physical resources and the mental faculties, and therefore, a person should search within the world for what he needs to complete his mission. Prayer, and more precisely, optional prayer, is intended for situations in which a person sees a need for special help, beyond what is available to him in the world, so that he can fulfill his mission.

The people of Israel received a unique mission, which requires going beyond reality in order to move all of reality forward. This is why we have the right to pray and ask for help that goes beyond ordinary reality, in order to fulfill our mission. This is the prayer that "corresponds to the patriarchs" – the patriarchs began this task, and we as their children can pray for additional blessing, to complete the task.

**Obligatory Prayer**

In addition to optional prayer, there is also obligatory prayer. Optional prayer belongs more to the world of the individual, and obligatory prayer belongs primarily to the community. A person can recite optional prayer at any time and in any form, whereas obligatory prayer has a defined time and a defined form. Optional prayer preceded obligatory prayer; the patriarchs recited optional prayer, as individuals, and even in the Temple, individuals would pray on their own. The obligatory service of the Temple consisted of the sacrifices. The statement that prayer "corresponds to the sacrifices" does not mean that as long as there were sacrifices, there was no prayer, but that there was prayer of a different type. Prayer is not merely a substitute for sacrifices; the sacrifices were not a pagan custom that was replaced by a more refined and noble service in the form of prayer, but from the beginning, there were two different channels of service – optional prayer and obligatory sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple, prayer also began to fill the place of the sacrificial service, and the two systems merged into one.

There is certainly a connection between these two systems, or it would have been impossible to merge them. It was not by chance that the Temple service was transferred to an existing system of prayer; atonement is an essential element of prayer. As we saw in the previous *shiur*, one of the conditions for prayer to be accepted is that the worshiper be righteous, that is, a person who works to complete his mission. When such a person asks for an additional blessing to complete his mission, he receives it – but if one is not at all engaged in fulfilling his duty, there is no justification for his prayer to be accepted. Therefore, while the Temple stood, the sacrificial service was necessary for optional prayer: in order to qualify as righteous, a person was first required to atone for his wrongdoings, which was accomplished through sacrifices. The obligatory service is a condition for the optional service. After the Temple was destroyed, when optional prayer was united with the obligatory service, the dimension of atonement also entered prayer.

Several components of atonement can be identified in prayer; for instance, the *Amida* prayer opens with the verse "O Lord, open my lips" (*Tehillim* 51:17), which serves as a prayer to renew one’s connection to God. The blessings of petition in the *Amida* prayer begin with requests for knowledge, repentance, and forgiveness – three blessings that serve the function of atonement – and only afterwards do we move on to requests for resources, such as healing and livelihood. Then come the requests for all of Israel, which are also a condition for prayer.

The same issue comes up with regard to prayer in a *minyan*, i.e.,a quorum of ten. The degree of obligation involved in prayer with such a quorum is not clear in halakhic sources, and few have explained its significance from a conceptual perspective. (The *Kuzari*, for example, points out some of the benefits of prayer with a *minyan*.)According to Manitou, joining the community is one of the conditions that makes prayer possible: a person's right to pray depends on his participation in the community's prayer, so that he can be considered righteous. On his own, as mentioned, it may be questioned whether one is worthy of his prayer being accepted – but together with the community, he is seen as righteous; "Your people are all righteous" (*Yeshayahu* 60:21).

**The Atonement Service**

To expand further on the issue of atonement: We saw that according to Manitou's worldview, man is supposed to complete creation so that it corresponds to its ideal state, to the original idea of creation. This does not mean only external repair of the world, but also the repair of its inner identity, including the repair of the person himself as a part of the world. Man should build his identity on his own. This element already appears in the writings of the Ramchal, who speaks in *Mesilat Yesharim* about the need for man to repair himself by himself, but the Ramchal’s emphasis seems to be on the toil and the merit; man must work to repair himself. With Manitou, the emphasis is more on the construction of the person's identity; toil is necessary so that the person can build his identity on his own. The building of identity is done on three axes – through the *mitzvot* between man and God, through the *mitzvot* between man and his fellow, and through the *mitzvot* between man and himself. (Manitou arrives at this distinction in the wake of the Maharal – *Derekh ha-Chayim* 1, 2 and elsewhere.) The prohibitions that are included in the Rambam's *Sefer ha-Kedusha*, e.g., forbidden foods and forbidden sexual relationships, on the simple level, do not express rejection of God, nor do they harm others, and so they are not included in the *mitzvot* between man and God or those between man and his fellow. They are included in the plane where man builds himself.

Atonement relates to the building of the self. Every sin that a person commits creates a crack in his inner identity; he has lost a part of himself. In the sacrificial service, the rebuilding of that missing part is manifested in a tangible way, in the body of the sacrifice; when there are no sacrifices, it is done through prayer. The prayer service also comes to change man – to bring man with his shortcoming before God, to ask for atonement and complete it.

**Before Whom You Stand**

Another condition for prayer, in this context, is knowing before whom you stand. Ostensibly, this is a simple matter – we stand before God – but Manitou sees it as an exceedingly profound question. We cannot comprehend the One before whom we stand. This is because we are not in the ideal situation; we are praying without the Temple. When the Temple stood, everyone knew to whom they were praying. They did not reach the full depth of understanding the Divine, but they knew that they were praying to the One before whom the priest served. There is a being before whom the priest stands, to whom he offers sacrifices, whose explicit name he knows – and to Him we, too, pray. Prayer is directed toward the One who rested His name in the Temple. When there is no priest and there is no *Shekhina*, we do not really know to whom to turn.

What do we do in such a situation? In other religions and cultures, there are ways to pray without the *Shekhina*. Manitou divides them into two approaches, religious prayer and philosophical prayer, both of which have drawbacks. The members of the Great Assembly, those who enacted our prayers, did not choose either of these options – but rather the historical option. We pray to the One who brought our ancestors out of Egypt. We address Him directly; we call Him by name; we have a prior acquaintance with Him. That is why we are careful about two things: joining redemption to prayer, and opening prayer with the phrase, "Blessed are you, O Lord, our God and the God of our ancestors." This is a unique formulation; in other blessings, we say, "our God, king of the universe." In the *Amida* prayer, we turn to God as He revealed Himself to our ancestors. These are our ancestors; the relationship between us is, as it were, familial. God revealed His name to the patriarchs, then revealed additional layers of His name to Moshe and the Israelites, and this is how we know Him. To him we turn in prayer.

All these are components of simple prayer – they are found in the prayer with which we are all familiar – but Manitou illuminates them in a new light.

(Translated by David Strauss)