YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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Dedicated in honor of the marriage of our son,   
Aharon (YHE '19) to Ariella Berman   
by Rav Yitzchak and Stefanie Etshalom

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**In Summary (2)**

As mentioned in the previous *shiur*, I wish to conclude this series with a summary of our study this past year, and the main perspectives that emerged from it. In the previous *shiur*, we reviewed the teachings about prayer of the Ari and the thinkers who followed him – the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezeritch, the author of the *Tanya*, and the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*. In this *shiur*, we will complete that review.

**Prayer according to Rabbi Nachman of Breslav – Prayer in its plain sense**

For Rabbi Nachman, prayer is first and foremost man's speaking truthfully to God. True speech comes from the heart, from where the person is. Truth is also what has the power to open the gates of prayer. When a person turns to God and says he cannot speak to Him – that he is immersed in sins, that he feels so far from God's presence that he barely even feels the longing for Him – these very words break the glass ceiling that blocks prayers. Such talk can light up any darkness.

Prayer is the answer to every situation of deficiency. When a person has a problem, he should pray about it; if he is unable to pray about it, he should pray about this difficulty itself. He should petition God that he be able to pray; he should pray about praying. The phrase, "Make an opening for the ark," which the Baal Shem Tov took to lofty heights, Rabbi Nachman lowers to the simplest, most authentic and sincere prayer.

In this sense, Rabbi Nachman returns to the simplest meaning of prayer: not a process of mental contemplation, nor a departure into spiritual worlds beyond words as we saw in the previous understandings, but simply speaking to God, in the manner of an honest conversation between two people who share a deep connection.

According to this understanding, prayer itself is redemption. A person who is unable to turn to God with speech is in a state of exile; it is a state of distress and insufficiency. When a person manages to extract himself from this state and have a conversation with God, that is redemption.

Rabbi Nachman instructs a person to turn to God with every problem he has, even the most mundane. The instruction to pray about one's problems in life does not mean that these problems are important; on the contrary, what is important is prayer. He explains that there is a difference between receiving God's abundance through prayer, and receiving it without prayer. When a person asks for a living and receives it, his living becomes a part of his dialogue with God. Prayer is not a means to achieve other goals, but rather the wants and needs of life lead to prayer. The prayer to merit closeness to God is essentially answered by the prayer itself; the fact that the person prays about the matter achieves the purpose of the prayer.

For this reason, personal, individualized prayer is seen as superior to general prayer. The greatest book of prayers, the book of *Tehillim*, is rooted in the personal prayers of David – and hence its power. Rabbi Nachman's famous instruction to practice seclusion on a daily basis stems from the same perspective; seclusion brings the personal dimension of prayer to its peak expression. The detailed instructions he gives for seclusion perfect the personal dimension of prayer; the goal in seclusion is to spill one's heart out before God, and to do so precisely in one's mother tongue and as one would speak to a friend. Prayer should include words of appeasement and reconciliation, using "claims and excuses." In true prayer, a person should address God in the most direct, honest, and simple manner, just as one speaks to a fellow human being.

Before concluding, let us note: Rabbi Nachman’s teachings about prayer give expression to two different strong feelings at the same time: unmediated closeness, alongside great distance and concealment. They express both Rabbi Nachman's teachings on revelation and concealment, which culminate in his words about the concealment that is due to empty space, and also Rabbi Nachman's personal experience, which included moments of great enlightenment and moments of concealment. Distance is also an inextricable aspect of the world’s existence, and in that distance itself, there is presence within the concealment.

**Prayer in the teachings of Rav Kook[[1]](#footnote-1) – Rational prayer, mystical prayer and prayer of the soul**

Rav Kook approaches prayer from its many and varied sides. This reflects his primary goal, to stimulate the *beit midrash* to bring together, even in spiritual issues, the various dimensions that emerged from the studies of the sages of Israel throughout the generations.

In a key paragraph that we saw, Rav Kook returns to a question that had preoccupied some of the *Rishonim*: how does prayer work, and does God change as a result of prayer? He summarizes the two main approaches regarding the effect of prayer: the mystical one introduced by the kabbalists, and the rational one clearly formulated for the first time in Rabbi Albo's *Sefer Ha-Ikarim.*

The mystical approach is based on the direct influence man wields on the world by virtue of his being connected to all its parts. The rational approach is based on the fact that prayer affects a person morally. A person's moral elevation through prayer makes him worthy of having his prayer accepted, or closer to Divine illumination, and thus he will receive greater abundance.

Rav Kook did not only summarize the two main approaches; he also developed them. He developed the rational path in his book *Ein Aya.* According to his explanation, the entire prayer system described by the author of the *Ikarim* was intended from the outset to create a situation in which every human need would lead a person to improve his spiritual-moral level in order to draw closer to God. The needs and the prayer become a means of building a person's level of closeness to God. This approach is also related to what he writes in his book *Musar Avikha* about the role of prayer in shaping the spiritual personality of the worshipper.

Rav Kook develops the mystical approach to prayer in *Orot Ha-Kodesh,* vol. III, and connects it in a unique way to human will. He explains that the human will is a spark of the Divine will, and the more a person's will is connected to its source, the greater its Divine power to influence the world. Prayer is the main channel for connecting human will to its Divine source and thereby influencing reality.

According to a third approach that Rav Kook adds to the rational and mystical approaches, prayer does not have to give an intellectual reckoning of its mode of operation; the believing heart finds the answer in it itself.

In Rav Kook's words, we encounter another dimension of prayer – prayer as a natural expression of the soul. Apart from the passages in which he writes about this, his commentary to the *siddur*, *Olat Ra'aya*, brings us together with his own prayer in a unique way, allowing us to experience the words of prayer as the faithful expression of his soul. We also encounter references in his writings to exceptional levels of piety that do not reflect the rule. On the one hand, he describes righteous people who do not need to pray regularly, and on the other hand, he speaks of righteous people who pray all day long.

**Prayer in the writings of Rabbi Soloveitchik – Halakhic thought and existential thought**

Rabbi Soloveitchik enriched our study of the subject of prayer in two unique ways, both of which reflect dimensions that characterize his thought in general. One is the halakhic dimension: Rabbi Soloveitchik carves out profound conceptual insights from the halakhic concepts and definitions of prayer. The second is the philosophical-existential dimension. This dimension, drawn from general philosophy, occupies a significant place in Rabbi Soloveitchik's thought. (This dimension relates to his dialectical approach, which emphasizes the contradictions and contrasts that cannot be reconciled – at least, not easily – and his typological mode of description, which presents ideas through idealized “types.”)

The halakhic dimension reflects a movement inward – a return to the most distinct Jewish sources of the actual phenomenon of prayer. The turn to general philosophy is of course an outward movement, which expands the conceptual borrowing to non-Jewish sources. In the writings of Rabbi Soloveitchik, these two opposing movements co-exist.

In the halakhic dimension, we dealt with two central ideas: Regarding the first, Rabbi Soloveitchik proposes a distinction between the act of prayer and the fulfillment of prayer (an approach reflected in other *mitzvot* as well, where Rabbi Soloveitchik perceives a distinct conceptual dimension). In his view, even though the basic duty of prayer is defined as saying words using a specific formula and at specific times, the essence of prayer is the consciousness of standing before God. There is no fulfillment of prayer in the mere recitation of the words without such consciousness.

Another halakhic concept, which also occupies a key place in Rabbi Soloveitchik's conceptual analyses, is the concept of a *matir*, "permitting factor." In order to explain this, I will preface by saying that Rabbi Soloveitchik sees the blessings of petition as the central element of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer (even though the petitions deal with the needs of the person, as opposed to the elements of praise and thanksgiving, which relate to the loftiness of God). This is connected to the awareness of man's essential limitation and finiteness in relation to God, which Rabbi Soloveitchik emphasizes. Against this background, he presents prayer as being found in an almost impossible tension, between the awareness that a person has no right to speak before God and the opposing awareness that it cannot be that a person has no possibility of turning and praying to God. He resolves this tension with the halakhic concept of a *matir*, a halakhic action that alone permits a prohibition and, in this case, enables prayer. The words of *Chazal*, "a person should always praise the Holy One, blessed be He, and afterwards pray," are should be understood in this way – that it is the praise of God that allows a person to then pray and petition for his needs.

Regarding the existential dimension, we dealt with Rabbi Soloveitchik's work, "The Lonely Man of Faith," which expresses the challenges faced by the man of faith in the modern world. This world emphasizes man's power and splendor, his abilities, technological developments, and control over the world. Such an identity makes prayer almost unnecessary. The man of faith is not focused on his greatness and abilities, but on his questions vis-a-vis the universe. He is not looking for a functional partnership, which actually increases his power and conquests, but rather the covenant that will relieve his loneliness and create dialogue. The man of faith's dialogue with God begins with the phenomenon of prophecy; prayer serves as a continuation of prophecy, which has departed from us, and thus it continues the dialogue between man and God. This dialogue also enables the true dialogue on earth, that between a man and his wife (as becomes clear in the story of the Garden of Eden) and that between man and his fellow in general.

**Prayer in the teachings of Manitou – "Zionist" prayer**

At the beginning of his remarks about prayer, Manitou cites the *Mabit*'s definition of the essence of prayer: "Man's petitioning God for something that he needs that is not in his possession."

This definition fits in well with Manitou's fundamental understanding that God deliberately created the world in a deficient manner, in order for man to complete creation so that it conforms to the idea of creation. Fundamentally, everything that is required for a person to perfect reality is already in the world, both the physical resources and the mental capabilities, and therefore a person should search within reality for what he needs to fulfill his mission.

According to this understanding, anything a person really needs to realize his destiny is, for the most part, in his possession or at least within his reach. A person's fundamental responsibility is to make the maximum effort, so that he can attain on his own whatever he needs. This outlook fits in well with Manitou's identification with the Zionist movement, which strove to redeem the people of Israel through worldly efforts and not be content with praying for redemption. Prayer, and more precisely optional prayer, is intended for situations in which a person sees a need for special help, beyond what is found in the current reality of the world, in order to be able to fulfill his mission.

The people of Israel were assigned a unique mission – to lead the world in its intended direction, to actualize the thought of creation. Therefore, they have the right to pray and ask for help that goes beyond normal reality, in order to fulfill their mission. This is the prayer that "corresponds to the patriarchs" – the patriarchs began this task, and their descendants can pray for additional blessing, in order to complete the task. This is optional prayer, which belongs more to the world of the individual, who can offer it at any time and in any form.

Optional prayer preceded in time the obligatory prayer that "corresponds to the sacrifices." The patriarchs offered optional prayers, as individuals, and even in the Temple, individuals would pray on their own. Alongside this, obligatory service was performed in the Temple through sacrifices. From the beginning, then, there were two different channels of service – optional prayer and obligatory sacrifices. After the destruction of the Temple, obligatory prayer was added, which, like the sacrifices, belongs mainly to the community, and has set formulas and times.

Replacing sacrifices with prayer is not by chance. The atonement of the sacrificial service also belongs to prayer in an essential way. When a righteous person asks for an additional blessing to complete his mission, he receives it. But if a person is not occupied with fulfilling his role, there is no justification for his prayer to be accepted. Therefore, while the Temple stood, the atonement achieved through the sacrificial service was necessary for optional prayer: in order to be righteous and merit an additional blessing, a person was first required to atone for his sins, and this he achieved through the sacrifices. The obligatory service is a condition for the optional service. When the Temple was destroyed, and optional prayer was united with the obligatory service, the dimension of atonement entered into prayer as well. (This is expressed, for example, in the request "O Lord, open my lips" at the beginning of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer, and in the petition regarding repentance that appears at the beginning of the series of specific requests for resources.)

This is how optional prayer and obligatory prayer express the role of prayer that is addressed to God, in a world where the primary responsibility and mission rest on man himself.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: Rav Eitam addressed Rav Kook’s teachings on prayer over the course of several Hebrew *shiurim* beginning [here](https://etzion.org.il/he/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/rabbi-avraham-yitzchak-kook-1). The first of these *shiurim* is available in English [here](https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/rabbi-avraham-yitzchak-kook-1); however, as noted there, the rest of the *shiurim* on Rav Kook have not yet been translated. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)