YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #14: *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* (II)**

**First Reconciliation of the Sources: An Upheaval Without Any Action in Reality**

In the previous *shiur*, we saw the two main chapters in which Rabbi Yosef Albo discusses prayer, and we noted the contradiction between them. From Chapter 18, it would appear that prayer effects a change not in God's governance of the world, but in the petitioner; the petitioner’s status therefore changes so that he is no longer subject to the general decree. Chapter 16, on the other hand, seems to say prayer has a real effect, to the point that through prayer a person can receive God's bounty that he would not otherwise deserve based on his actions.

We also explored one possible way of reconciling this contradiction, namely, by interpreting Chapter 16 in light of Chapter 18. Even the prayer of Chapter 16 can be understood as "educational" prayer – i.e., prayer that operates within man, rather than on the world. When Rabbi Yosef Albo states in Chapter 16 that prayer enables a person to receive that which he does not deserve, he does not mean to say that the person receives this from heaven, but rather that he can undergo a radical upheaval by way of prayer. Prayer is still defined as a grace of God, as emphasized in Chapter 16, because such upheavals do not usually occur. An inner upheaval like that which King Menashe experienced, which is brought as an example in Chapter 16, is a rare phenomenon. In most cases, people do not undergo such a radical change by way of one act. The ability to undergo an inner change by way of prayer is therefore regarded as a Divine gift, but it occurs within the natural framework. It does not require Divine intervention within the world of man on earth.

**Second Reconciliation of the Sources: Internal Change Leads to Actual Emanation From God**

Another possibility is to explain Chapter 18 in light of Chapter 16. In Chapter 16, Rabbi Yosef Albo states that prayer prepares a person to receive the Divine flow; now we need to understand what this preparation involves. It may be that this preparation is an appeal to the Divine will, to Divine grace; through prayer, man directs himself to the goodness of God. In Chapter 18, we understood that the petitioner educated himself by way of his prayer, bringing himself to the right place to receive the good through natural reality; according to Chapter 16, however, the place to which a person arrives through his prayer is a position to receive God's grace. He will not receive that grace mechanically, just because he placed himself in a place where God's grace arrives automatically, but rather the Divine grace will truly influence him by Divine will. God at all times wants to bestow abundance upon a person, but cannot do so unless the person directs himself to receive it. Thus, the self-change described in Chapter 18 is clarified as drawing near to God's willing abundance.

**Third Reconciliation of the Sources: Prayer and the Issue of Divine Decree**

As noted in the previous *shiur*, studying *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* in general presents some difficulty because of occasional contradictions between its chapters. Unlike Rambam, for example, the author makes no reference to the existence of these contradictions, and he makes no explicit attempt to reconcile them. Some Jewish scholars (the Maharal, for example) write in a manner that appears to contain contradictions, but go on to reconcile the difficulties; in *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*,on the other hand, the task is more difficult. It seems as if the author writes each chapter independently, separately from other chapters related to the same subject. It is possible to find ways to reconcile the contradictions, such as those suggested above, and argue that Rabbi Yosef Albo himself had this reconciliation in mind – or that he did not have it in mind, but that this reconciliation of the contradiction underlies his thought. That is to say, perhaps while writing one chapter, he did not think about how it fits with another chapter, but had we asked him, this is how he would have explained the relationship between them.

Following this approach, I will propose another explanation – one that does not reconcile Chapter 16 and Chapter 18, but rather associates Chapter 18 with another discussion. It can be demonstrated that Rabbi Yosef Albo discusses an issue in Chapter 18 that is different from the issue dealt with in Chapter 16, and in light of this, it is possible to explain the entire chapter in such a way that there is no contradiction with what is stated in the other chapter.

It seems that Rabbi Yosef Albo's intention in Chapter 18 is to make a fundamental statement on a broader issue, the significance of which goes far beyond explaining the issue of prayer. He opens Chapter 18 with reference to the question:

The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same as that which leads them to deny God’s knowledge. Their argument is as follows: Either God has determined that a given person shall receive a given benefit, or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need of prayer; and if He has not determined, how can prayer avail to change God’s will, that He should now determine to benefit the person when He had not so determined before? For God does not change from a state of willing to a state of not willing, or vice versa. For this reason, they say that rightness of conduct is of no avail, such that one would receiving a good from God because of it. And similarly, they say that prayer does not avail to achieve a good or to be saved from an evil which has been decreed against him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The central topic here is the concept of "decree." There are different approaches regarding God's knowledge and His absolute decrees, and in the time of Rabbi Yosef Albo, the prevalent position was that everything in existence is predetermined. This position seems to preclude the possibility of prayer; thus, Rabbi Yosef Albo comes to clarify that this is not the case. Chapter 18 comes to explain not the meaning of prayer, but rather how to deal with the existence of Divine decrees in the world. In this particular context, Rabbi Yosef Albo says that a person can change the decree by way of prayer that transfers him to another level, upon which the decree was not issued. This is not a general explanation of the principle of prayer, but an answer to a specific question about Divine decrees.

However, here we must clarify the following matter: Has a decree been issued regarding every individual in the world? Is there no neutral space between what is predestined and what is not predestined? According to the deterministic school that claims that everything is predestined, for whom the problem dealt with in Chapter 18 arises, indeed every individual is subject to decree. But one who believes in the Torah of Israel does not have to accept this. In situations where an absolute decree has not been issued, a person can pray and receive what he has prayed for. Only in situations where an absolute decree has been issued, does prayer operate through self-change. This is the way to deal with the issue of determination, but it is only required in special cases; in most situations, there is no Divine decree.

One might object and say that Rabbi Yosef Albo should have clarified this explicitly. However, it is his way throughout the book to write different chapters separately, without explaining the relationship between them. In any event, in our case, support can be found elsewhere in *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* that strengthens this explanation.

In Chapter 21, Rabbi Yosef Albo discusses unanswered prayers, and cites as an example Moshe's prayer to enter the land of Israel – a prayer which is known to have not been answered. Regarding this matter, Rabbi Yosef Albo establishes a principle:

Prayer does avail, at any rate before the matter in question has been finally decreed, and it avails even after the decision if the latter was not accompanied by an oath.

Rabbi Yosef Albo draws a distinction, for which he then brings support from the words of *Chazal*, between the time before the decree is issued and the time after it is issued. Even after the decree has been issued, prayer can still be effective, provided that the decree was not accompanied by an oath; if it was accompanied by an oath, the decree cannot be cancelled. Moshe asked to enter the land of Israel after his punishment was already decreed, and after God even swore that he would not enter. Because of that oath, his prayer was not accepted.

If we consider the concepts appearing here – before the decree and after the decree – we see that they are precisely what we have been discussing. After a Divine decree, it is not a simple matter that prayer will be accepted; it can be accepted only through self-change. But before the decree has been issued, there is no problem with prayer. Everything is still open.

According to this explanation, there is a whole expanse that is open to human choice and the development of reality, and in this expanse, prayer can be effective – not just through internal repair, but also through connection to the Divine grace that enables real change in reality.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Translations of *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* are from the JPS 1929 edition available at Sefaria.org, with occasional changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)