YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

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**Shiur #11: *Ahava Rabba***

The second *berakha* of *kriat shema* is *Ahava Rabba*.

This blessing has an even closer connection to the *shema* than *Yotzer Or*, and not only because it is actually physically closer. Some *Rishonim* objected to any interruption between this blessing and the *shema* – neither the recitation of “*kel melekh ne'eman*,” nor even answering *amen* after the blessing recited by the *chazzan* – because they viewed this blessing as the *birkat ha-mitzva* of the *mitzva* of *kriat shema*. This is supported by the possibility raised in the Talmud Yerushalmi that *Ahava Rabba* can serve as a *birkat ha-Torah*, followed immediately by the *shema* as the actual Torahlearning afterwards. As we shall soon see, this is strongly reflected in the content of the blessing as well.

First, let us compare this blessing to the previous one, *Yotzer Or*. In that blessing, we noticed the duality of the official theme, which is **creation**, with the theme of the text, which is **light**.The explanation I proposed was that the light, the sun and moon, transfers the theme of creation from a historical context – God created the world six thousand years ago – to a living dynamic context – God is present in our lives through His running of nature, raising and setting the sun, shining it on us daily: "Who renews in His goodness every day always the act of creation."

A similar situation exists in the second blessing, with, I believe, a similar explanation. The duality here is between the official theme, expressed in the opening and the conclusion, which is love and selection, and the literary theme of most of the text, which is Torah. On the one hand, the opening is, "A great love do You love us, *Hashem* our God," and the conclusion is "Who chooses His people Israel with love." Yet, most of the blessing is about Torah:

Our father, merciful father, the merciful, have mercy on us, and place in our hearts the ability to understand and know, to listen, to learn and to teach, to keep, to do, and to perform, all the words of the teaching of Your Torah with love. Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, and cleave our hearts to Your commandments, and dedicate our hearts to love and fear Your name, and let us not be disappointed forever.

In the previous blessing, light was a particular example of creation. In this blessing, it is clear that Torah should be understood as an expression of God's love. God has chosen the Jewish people and therefore gave them the Torah as an expression and fulfillment of His love. (Remember the text of *birkat ha-Torah* – “*asher bachar banu*,” “who has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah”). I think in this case, the relationship of the pair in the duality is the reverse of the previous example. The blessing is actually about Torah – God is king over nature, as expressed in natural law, and God is king over Israel, as expressed in Torah law. Once again, however, this is not referring to some historical fact – the giving of the Torah at Sinai four thousand years ago – nor to the *mitzvah* to learn Torah, but to the ongoing dynamic experience of God's presence and relationship with us in the Torah. In other words, it refers to the relationship of chosenness and love with God, a relationship that we experience "every day always" through the experience of Torah. The relationship with Torah **is** the love of God, experienced daily.

This explains the fact that the blessing does not dwell on the giving of the Torah, but on our obligation and willingness to learn Torah. After a short statement that "You taught them – our forefathers – the rules of life," we turn to a prayer that our hearts will be engaged in Torah on every level. In *Arvit*, this is even more explicit (and concise):

An eternal love You loved Your people the house of Israel

Torah and *mitzvot*, laws and precepts, You taught us.

**Therefore**, *Hashem* our God, we shall speak in Your laws

And rejoicein the words of Your Torah and Your commandments forever.

For they are our lives and the length of our days

And we shall think about them day and night.

The Torah is the love of God, and so the blessing leads naturally to our commitment/desire to experience it, to dwell in it, to embrace it.

(There is an interesting difference between *Shacharit* and *Arvit* concerning this point. In *Shacharit*, we ask for God's aid to be engrossed in Torah; in *Arvit* we promise to do so. I am not sure why this difference exists, but I suspect that in the morning we are facing a day of experience and effort, so we ask for help; in the evening, we have completed the day and do not need any immediate help, so we reaffirm our commitment to continue in the future. Both though are first and foremost expressing our commitment.)

This blessing, like the previous one, also reflects reciprocity. In the previous blessing, we saw that God's creativeness was reflected in our praise. Here, God's giving the Torah and His love is reflected in our learning Torah.

There is, however, one seemingly dissonant note in the blessing, one line that seems to be out of place: "Bring us to peace from the four corners of the earth, and lead us upright to our land." What is a prayer for the ingathering of the exiles to the Land of Israel doing in the blessing about Torah?

At first glance, this would appear to be a proof of the famous position of the Ramban that *mitzvot* are, properly speaking, only meant for the Land of Israel. The commandments are obligatory outside the Land only to "keep us in practice," so to speak. Accordingly, since this blessing celebrates God's love for Israel and His election of Israel through the giving of the Torah, it is appropriate that we immediately remember that it was actually given with the understanding that it would be practiced in the Land of Israel.

In context, however, I think this line in the blessing is appropriate even without agreeing with the admittedly radical position of the Ramban. In this context, we are not speaking of the **obligation**to follow the Torah, but rather of the Torah as a fulfillment of God's love, and of our inclusion in that love and our reciprocating that love by adhering to the Torah. The love of God – the marriage of God and Israel, to use the language of the Song of Songs – as well as the fulfillment of the kingdom of God over His people of Israel, is only truly fulfilled in the Land of Israel, God's realm and kingdom (according to all opinions, I believe). The election of Israel was to be God's **people**, His nation – and that is only fully true when we are both gathered together as a nation and together in the Land where God rests His presence. When we praise God for choosing Israel with love by giving them the Torah, and when we correspondingly express our desire and commitment to devote ourselves to Torah, to enter into that love, it is only natural that we would immediately be filled with a great longing to do so in the realm that God chose to be the seat of His kingdom and in the estate that He chose to be home of His loving union. One can surely learn Torah in exile, and one can surely fulfill the *mitzvot* in dispersion, but one cannot achieve the union of the beloved nor establish the kingdom of God outside the Land.

Understanding this, we should immediately be struck by how close this blessing is woven into the fabric of the *shema*. The *shema* opens with the declaration of the kingdom of God and follows directly with the command to "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." That is followed by the commands of learning Torah and placing the words of Torah as signs on our bodies and doors. The blessing is based exactly on these elements. God is king, and we are chosen to be His people. We are commanded to love Him, and He expresses His love for us eternally. The Torah is to be with us at all times, and we are given the Torah by God and yearn to learn and fulfill it. The blessing is the Divine parallel to the human commands of the *shema*.

This correspondence of our actions and those of God is most interesting. This is especially striking concerning love. Although the blessing is about God's love for Israel, it makes a point of referring to Israel's love of God. Nor is this merely an association. As we have mentioned previously, there is a halachic requirement to refer to the theme of the conclusion of a blessing right before the conclusion (*mei'ein ha-chatima* *samuch la-chatima*). The conclusion of this blessing is "Who chooses His people Israel with love." The love referenced here is God's love for Israel. The *samuch la-chatima* is "to praise You and unify You with love." The love here is Israel's love for God. The necessary conclusion is that the two loves are one and the same.

Now we know that this is not true of all kinds of love. The love of parents for children and the love of children for parents are not the same, nor are they, tragically, always tied together. Some loves are by nature unrequited. The love we normally assume to be by nature mutual is romantic love – not merely mutual, but at its best, two sides of the same thing. It is not merely fortunate that I am loved by the woman I love, but, at its finest, we think of there being only one love, one unity. Love which is unity is by definition two-sided. This blessing assumes that this is true for the "great love" which God loves Israel. God's choosing to be king over Israel engenders the command of *ve-ahavta*, which may seem strange to modern subjects in a democracy. God chooses to be king over Israel not because of His quest for power, but because of His love for Israel – “Who chooses His people with love.” That love is expressed by our reaction to it and in it; we unify and dedicate His name with love. He gives us the Torah with love, and we learn and fulfill it with love.

One last point. At the beginning of the blessing, we stated, "Our Father our King, for the sake of our fathers who trusted You, and You taught them the laws of life. So too, show us grace and teach us." Why do we mention the trust of the fathers? What exactly is the meaning of the reference of "our fathers who trusted you"?

The Avudraham claims this refers to the people of Israel, who followed God through the desert for forty years. In context, however, I think it refers to the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai: "We shall do and we shall listen." The Torah was accepted with trust and faith, and not through examination of its utility. It was accepted on blind faith. What greater expression of love is there than to commit to the future with no guarantees or examined assurances? Is that not exactly how one agrees to marriage, to share the future unknown? They accepted in trust, and God taught them the Torah that they had accepted. So too – although we cannot be said to be in the same state of ignorance – we ask that God grant us grace and teach us, in love and faith.

This blessing before the *shema* is precisely about the acceptance of the yoke of heaven in love and trust, because it is offered us in love. The Torah is not a sign of that mutual love, but the very content of the love, its fulfillment and fullest expression.