**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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Dedicated by the Etshalom and Wise families in memory of

Mrs. Miriam Wise z"l, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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**Shiur #10: Prayer (1)**

Adapted by Leora Bednarsh

In this chapter, we will discuss the age-old philosophical problem of how prayer works. The question of the efficacy of prayer has plagued philosophers throughout the ages. The philosophical question is often posed as such: if God is perfectly wise and omnipotent, then He knows, in His divine wisdom, what is best. If so, then how can we, when we pray, ask God to change His mind and do something else?

If we are asking Him to do something He was planning to do anyway, then the prayer is in vain. And if we are asking Him to do something which is the opposite of His will, then why would He change His mind?[[1]](#footnote-2) If He has already, with His perfect divine wisdom, willed to do what is most perfect, wise and just, why would He do something less wise or less perfect or less just, simply because we have asked Him to? And if everything God does is for the good,[[2]](#footnote-3) why would we want Him to change His mind?[[3]](#footnote-4)

Petition makes sense if we are petitioning a human being. It is logical to ask a person to do something for us, because maybe that person doesn’t know what we need. We must tell him of our needs so that he can supply them. Maybe he knows what we need but is not wise enough to figure out what to do under the circumstances to help us. Perhaps he doesn't want to help us, but we can beg and play with his emotions and get him to concede by tugging at his heartstrings with a heartfelt plea; we can make him feel bad for us. However, none of this applies to God, because He is all-knowing and He knows exactly what is best under the circumstances. We can't tug at God's heartstrings. We can't change His emotions. He is infinitely perfect.

**The Purpose of Prayer: Self-Discovery**

One approach to addressing this issue is to point out that the main point of prayer is not to have God answer our prayers. Rather, prayer is a spiritual good in and of itself.

This is true in several senses. In one sense, prayer is self-judgment. As Rav Hirsch explains,[[4]](#footnote-5) the word for prayer is להתפלל, the reflexive form of the root word פלל, judge. Prayer is an opportunity for meditation about one's self. When we pray, we think about the following: What are our priorities, what are our goals, what do we want in life? What are our responsibilities? What is our place? What is our role in the world? What do we need in life, and how do we plan to utilize the blessings that God grants us? Prayer forces us to think about these questions, and, more importantly, our answer to these questions might very well be different if we are speaking to God than if we were just talking to ourselves. When we pray, we look at ourselves from God’s perspective and judge our lives by spiritual standards. Therefore, regardless of whether our prayers are answered, prayer is a worthwhile spiritual activity in and of itself.

This approach makes it very easy to understand why we have a fixed text for our daily prayer. If prayer is a process of judging ourselves against idealistic objective standards, then the text of prayer should reflect not only our ephemeral concerns of the moment, but those eternal values which should be our concerns and goals in life.

**The Purpose of Prayer: Connection**

Many Jewish philosophers emphasize another central advantage of and purpose of prayer, which is that it brings us closer and enhances our connection to God.  Rambam explains in *Moreh Nevukhim*[[5]](#footnote-6) that the purpose of prayer (as well as many other *mitzvot*) is to free us from worldly distractions and focus our thoughts on God.

Many Jewish philosophers assume that the purpose of prayer is to focus not only on the objective existence and nature of God, but on the relevance of God’s providence to each individual’s life. *Chovot Ha-levavot*[[6]](#footnote-7) explains that prayer, which consists primarily of requesting that God fulfill our needs, is intended to remind us of our dependence on God. He reports the statement of a certain righteous individual, who after completing his prayers, would state to God: I have not told You my needs in order to inform You of them, but rather so that I should realize how much I depend on You and trust in You to fulfill my needs.

Similarly, the *Sefer Ha-chinnukh*[[7]](#footnote-8) says the second reason we pray, in addition to wanting our prayers to be answered, is that it reminds us three times a day that everything comes from God, Who is constantly observing our actions and listening to our words. Prayer reinforces our belief in God’s omnipotence and providence.

The Ramchal (R. Moshe Chayim Luzzatto),[[8]](#footnote-9) in explaining the main reason for prayer, points out that we all have physical needs, and we must work to fulfill those needs through *hishtadlut*, human effort, as discussed in previous *shiurim*. We work within that natural order to fulfill our needs. We get a job so we can earn money and buy food and pay our rent. If we are under some sort of military threat, we organize our tanks and missiles and airplanes and go out with an army.

These kinds of activities, however, can easily lead us to get mired in the physicality of this world and forget that everything comes from God. The Ramchal therefore says that whenever we have a physical need, we first pray to remind ourselves that God runs the world and He is the source of all blessing. Then, when we go about working via the natural order in order to achieve what we want, we don't forget that everything ultimately comes from God, because we have preceded that effort with prayer and have reminded ourselves that He is the ultimate source of everything. Thus, we are able to engage the physical world without losing sight of the spiritual.

The Kuzari[[9]](#footnote-10) similarly emphasizes the need for prayer to counteract the distractions inherent in our worldly routine. He even goes so far as to compare prayer to food. We always need nutrition, although we don't eat all the time. We eat, and the calories and nutrients that we take into our bodies give us energy that lasts us until the next meal. So too, each time we pray, we get some spiritual sustenance which infuses our lives with spirituality and lasts us until the next time we pray.

**Summary**

We have seen many Jewish philosophers point out that the main reason we pray is not so that God will give us what we want. Prayer is valuable because it improves us spiritually. It enhances the closeness of our relationship with God. One who has a conversation with someone, especially a conversation about what he needs in his life, is very connected to that person. If couples never talk about their needs and desires and dreams and problems and challenges, then they will not have a very close relationship with each other. If we do not talk about our needs and challenges with God, we will not be very connected to Him psychologically. If we pour out our hearts to God, then that creates a sense of connection.

In this context, prayer is an ideal context for self-discovery and understanding our responsibilities towards God. In addition, prayer reminds us that we are dependent on God and that everything comes from Him. When we go out into the physical world and work through non-spiritual means to accomplish what we need to, we never forget that everything at its core is spiritual and that everything really comes from God, because we always pray to God specifically for our physical needs before we also work at achieving them through physical effort.

**Prayers Are Effective**

However, while it is true that the depth of prayer is not limited by the fact that we want our prayers to be answered, it is abundantly clear, in every page of *Tanakh* and every chapter of the literature of *Chazal*, that prayer is answered. Of course, we don't believe that every prayer is answered with a "yes" — that would be childish. Clearly, sometimes our requests are answered with a "no”.[[10]](#footnote-11) Nevertheless, in addition to prayer being good for us and helping us grow spiritually, we believe that our prayers may be answered positively. The odds of getting what we want are greater if we pray for it than if we do not.

This brings us back to the philosophical question: Why would a prayer be answered? If God knows perfectly what to do and has perfect power of implementation, why would He change His mind just because we ask Him? Doesn't He know what to do without our help? We will explore several answers to this philosophical problem.

**The Position of the Rambam**

One answer, given by the Rambam in *Moreh Nevukhim*,[[11]](#footnote-12) goes back to our discussion about the nature of Divine Providence in previous *shiurim*. Our question assumes that God is constantly exercising Divine Providence. This may lead us to ask: why pray, if God knows what He is going to do anyway?

The Rambam, however denies this assumption, claiming that Divine Providence is not universal. Divine Providence is proportional to our spiritual state. God is involved in our lives in exact proportion to how much we invite Him in, i.e., in how much we focus on God in our mind and in our thoughts. One is only under full Divine Providence at a time when one is meditating on the truth of the existence of God, and the greater role that God has in one's mind, the greater Divine Providence he will merit. The reason we pray, according to the Rambam, is to think about God and not about anything else, and once we are thinking about God, then we create that connection, and, as it were, God is thinking about us and we are worthy of Divine Providence. This does not mean that God will grant the specific request that we have made, but when we engage in the meditational aspect of prayer, we fill our mind with thoughts of God, and therefore He exercises Divine Providence upon us. Once He exercises Divine Providence, He will work within the natural order to change things a bit and get us closer to what we want.

Here we have our first explanation of the efficacy of prayer. According to the Rambam, we cannot change God’s mind, but we can change the way God interacts with the world. Divine Providence is limited by the amount that we choose to cling to that Providence. By bringing ourselves closer through prayer, we open this connection and bring upon ourselves Divine Providence.

**The Prevalent Position — Making Ourselves More Deserving**

A second, more prevalent explanation is offered by many Jewish philosophers, including in *Sefer Ha-ikkarim*.[[12]](#footnote-13) Although Divine Providence is universal and unconditional, there is a basic rule that underlies the way in which God exercises His Providence, and that is the principle of reward and punishment. If we are good, God rewards us; if we are, unfortunately, not good, then He will not reward us. By praying, we make ourselves better people. If we have improved ourselves, then we deserve a reward.

In this way, prayer is very similar to other *mitzvot*. If we perform *mitzvot* and become a better person, God will reward us. Praying is one of the best ways to become a more deserving person. Therefore, the way prayers are answered is somewhat indirect. It is not that we ask for item X and God decides to give us X because we asked. Rather, we improve ourselves spiritually by praying and bringing ourselves closer to God. Now that we are better people, God's Divine Will is that now we deserve whatever it was that we prayed for. Prayer does not have the power to change God’s mind and cause Him to grant us something which He did not plan to grant. It does have the power, however, to change us, and since God may very well have intended all along to grant us a certain benefit if only we were to improve our spiritual state, we can change God’s treatment of us without changing His mind.

**Explaining the Effectiveness of Prayer for Others**

Although these two explanations are based on different understandings of the workings of Divine Providence, they are similar in that they assume that the effectiveness of prayer stems from an improvement in the spiritual state of the petitioner, which in some fashion earns him Divine beneficence.

This makes it very difficult to understand how prayer for others can be effective. *Tanakh* and the works of *Chazal* are replete with examples of successful prayer on behalf of others, but why would God reward the one on whose behalf the prayer is being offered, if it is the one praying who has grown spiritually and not the one being prayed for? In fact, the Gemara[[13]](#footnote-14) tells us that God primarily rewards the one who prays on behalf of his fellow, and only afterwards answers the prayer with regard to the one who has been prayed for. This fits well with the approach we have elucidated, as the one who prayed is the one deserving of reward. Nonetheless, the Gemara acknowledges that the one who has been prayed for also receives divine beneficence because of the prayer. Why would this be so?

One answer to this question is given by Rav Eliyahu Dessler in *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu.[[14]](#footnote-15)* Rav Dessler explains that the one who causes the petitioner to pray on his behalf is responsible for the spiritual achievement of the petitioner, which leads to a greater revelation of God’s glory in this world. He (the one on whose behalf the prayer has been offered) therefore deserves reward for bringing this revelation and spiritual elevation into the world, even though he has done so unintentionally.

The Chatam Sofer[[15]](#footnote-16) explains differently, based on the Gemara,[[16]](#footnote-17) which states that one who prays on behalf of his fellow must sicken himself on his fellow’s behalf. The Chatam Sofer interprets this directive as requiring that the petitioner himself feel the pain of his suffering fellow as a prerequisite to praying for him. Thus, explains the Chatam Sofer, one cannot pray purely on behalf of another, but if the petitioner is pained by the suffering of his friend, then he can pray for the relief of his own pain, which can only be accomplished via the salvation of his friend, for whom he cares so deeply. According to this, we can explain that prayer is effective only as a reward for the spiritual improvement of the petitioner, but sometimes the greatest reward that one can receive is the salvation or success of a friend or loved one.

In the next *shiur*, we will explore other models of understanding the effectiveness of prayer based on alternative understandings of the relationship between human beings and their Creator.

1. See for example *Nefesh Ha-chayim* 2:11; *Sefer Ha-ikkarim*, Book 4, Chapter 18; Maharal, *Netivot Olam*, *Netiv Ha-avoda* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Berakhot* 60b: “כל דעביד רחמנא לטבא עביד.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See *Nefesh Ha-chayim* 2:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. *Horeb* 618. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. III:51. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Part 8 (*Cheshbon Ha-nefesh*), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Chapter 433, the mitzva of prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Derekh Hashem*, Part four, Chapter five. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Book 3, Paragraph 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. For example, Moshe’s request to enter the land of Israel is denied. See *Devarim* 3:23-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Book 3, Chapter 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Book 4, Chapter 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Bava Kama* 92a. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Volume 3, pp. 86-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Responsa* *Chatam Sofer,* Volume 1, Chapter 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. *Berakhot* 12b. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)