**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Topics in Hashkafa**

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**Shiur #11: Prayer (2)**

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In the [previous *shiur*](https://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-10-prayer-1), we asked the classic philosophical question about the effectiveness of prayer: if God already knows everything and will always act in the best possible way in every circumstance, then how can prayer have an effect? If God has already decided to grant me my desire, then I needn’t pray for it; and if God had decided not to grant that particular desire, then He will not change His mind in response to anything I have to say, since He already knows everything that I could possibly say.

We saw two approaches to answering this question. The Rambam holds that Divine Providence is not universal, but it is proportional to the cognization of God in the mind of each individual. Prayer causes one to focus his thoughts on God instead of worldly distractions, and it thus brings down the blessings of Divine Providence on the praying individual, which may very well include the answer to his prayer. *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* explains that God’s decrees are dependent on the righteousness or wickedness of the individual, and therefore one who becomes more righteous receives more bounty from God. Prayer is a means of becoming more righteous and enhancing one’s spirituality, and therefore one who prays deserves a better fate than he did before engaging in prayer. The praying individual does not change God’s mind, but rather changes himself.

**The Radical Approach: Prayer Changes God’s Mind**

Rav Shimshon Pincus, in his philosophical work about prayer, S*he’arim Ba-tefilla,[[1]](#footnote-1)* suggests a more radical approach, which seems to flow from the simple *peshat* of the biblical and Midrashic texts. He posits that although God knows everything, He acts as if He does not know what we do not inform him of and does not think of that which we do not point out to Him. Of course, this is only an act, as God is omniscient and perfectly wise, but Rav Pincus suggests that in order to leave room for humans to realize their spiritual potential in this world, God puts on an act, as it were, relating to us not as a perfect being, but as a relatable persona, who has emotions like ours and may be informed or convinced to change His mind by our words.

This theory fits well with the examples of prayer we find in the Torah. For example, Moshe convinces God not to destroy the Jewish people after the Sin of the Golden Calf by reminding God of the merit of our forefathers and by convincing Him with the argument that the Egyptians will mistakenly conclude that God wiped out His people because He was not powerful enough to vanquish the Canaanites. Does God really forget about the forefathers, and does He not realize the implications of His actions? According to Rav Pincus, God Himself knows all, but the persona which He presents to us needs occasional reminders and is not necessarily aware of all the facts unless we bring them to His attention.

According to this approach, as opposed to the preceding ones, the effect of prayer is direct and intuitive. Prayer works not because it raises our spiritual stature, but because God literally hears our words and changes His mind in response. This fits well with the language of *Tanakh* and *Chazal*, which speaks of God’s hearing prayer. While this radical idea may seem to detract from the perfection and transcendence of God, it is exactly this which makes Him relatable, and allows us to build a relationship with God and partner with Him to implement His will in this world.

**The Explanation of the Maharal**

The Maharal of Prague, in *Gur Aryeh,[[2]](#footnote-2)* suggests a more straightforward explanation for why prayer may cause God to grant our requests. He comments on Rashi’s statement that God did not cause rain to fall until after the creation of man, who can recognize the benefit of rainfall, and until man then prayed for rain. The Maharal comments that it is wrong to do good for someone who will not appreciate it, and therefore God had to wait to bestow good on the world until man was prepared to appreciate it. The Maharal adds that God also waited for man to pray, because one who does not pray is an ingrate, and it is certainly wrong to give anything to an ingrate who appreciates what he receives but refuses to express his appreciation to his benefactor.

If we extrapolate from this primordial prayer to all prayer, we may conclude that even if God has decided to grace us with some good or save us from evil, His decree is conditional. If we acknowledge and appreciate the good He does for us, i.e., if we pray, then He will give us what he wants to give us. However, if we refuse to acknowledge Him as our benefactor, then even if He might have planned to benefit us in some way, because it is wrong to give to an ingrate, God will withhold His bounty.[[3]](#footnote-3)

If we were to use a parable of the child who asks his father for a treat, *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* would compare prayer to the child’s reporting to his father that he has cleaned his room and washed the dishes, and then receiving a treat as a reward for his good deeds. Rav Pincus would compare it to a child informing his father that he wants a treat, and the father acting on the basis of that new information. The Maharal, as we have elucidated his position, would compare it to a child who wants a treat that his father has already decided to give him but needs to say “please” and “thank you” in order to receive the treat.

**Summary**

We have, then, four philosophical explanations of the efficacy of prayer.

The first, that of the Rambam, holds that prayer connects us to God, and the way that God relates to us is reciprocal to how we relate to Him. We must build that bridge, and then God will exercise Divine Providence upon us through that bridge.

The second, represented by the *Sefer Ha-ikkarim* but reflecting the thought of most Jewish philosophers, understands that we improve ourselves through prayer, and the reward is that we deserve more Divine grace.

The third, more radical, approach explains that we can actually change God’s mind because He does not act omnisciently when interacting with human beings.

Finally, the fourth approach explains that prayer expresses our appreciation of God’s beneficence, and just as a human father should not give his children anything if they do not express appreciation and thanks, so too God makes his bounty conditional on our acknowledgement of the source of that bounty and our appreciation of His kindness.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The Kabbalistic Approach to Prayer**

Our entire discussion until now has assumed that the effectiveness of prayer is defined in terms of benefit to the one praying. It is God who helps man in response to prayer, and the intention of one who prays is to request that God bless him and alleviate his suffering.

However, many Kabbalistic sources, such as *Nefesh Ha-chayim,*[[5]](#footnote-5) turn this scheme on its head and assume a more radical model in which it is God who is needy, as it were, and man who grants success to God and alleviates His suffering, as it were, via prayer. We tend to think that we can't change God, who is unchanging, perfect, and eternal. However, one of the mysteries of the Kabbalistic tradition is that in some mysterious sense, we can change God.

*Nefesh Ha-chayim[[6]](#footnote-6)* explains that ideally, one’s intention during prayer should be to pray not for one’s own needs, but for the needs of God — “*rak tzorekh gavoah.*” When a Jew suffers, the deepest pain is not felt by the sufferer himself, who in any case needs the suffering to atone for his sins, but by God. When the Jewish people suffer, God’s name is profaned and suffers degradation. Even when an individual Jew suffers, God is pained by the suffering of His child just as human parents suffers when their children are afflicted. This idea is found in many Midrashic sources and is even mentioned in the Mishna,[[7]](#footnote-7) which states that when a person is in distress, the Divine Presence feels pain, as it were, in its head and arm. Ideally, one should be distressed not over one’s own suffering, but over God’s suffering, and the goal of prayer should be the relief of God’s suffering.

*Nefesh Ha-chayim*[[8]](#footnote-8) explains the concept of blessing in a similar fashion. Rav Chayim explains that the word "*Barukh,*" usually translated “Blessed,” does not refer to praise, as is commonly thought. When we utter a blessing, we are not merely proclaiming the greatness of God. Kabbalistically, *Barukh* means actually blessing God, wishing some improvement, increase, and growth upon Him. Just as when the *kohanim* bless us, or when God blesses us, this is not praising us but improving our lives and increasing our power, so too when we bless God, He benefits from our words.

This is parallel to the Kabbalistic understanding of *yichud Hashem,* unification of God. We generally understand the task of *yichud Hashem* as proclaiming God’s unity to the world. However, in the Lurianic tradition, this awesome task is understood as the actual unification of the different aspects of God that are split and exiled from one another, awaiting the salvation brought by humans who perform *mitzvot* with the intention to re-unify the shattered whole of God. Those who are Kabbalistically inclined say a prayer before they perform a mitzva: “*Le-shem yichud Kudesha Berikh Hu U-shkhintieh,”* “To unify the Holy One, blessed be He, with His Presence.” According to this formula, when one does a mitzva, one is not merely performing a good deed and becoming a better person, or even improving the moral and spiritual state of the cosmos, but unifying the Holy One, blessed be He, with His *Shekhina*, which He had become separated from. We are fixing the world not merely by fixing ourselves, but by, as it were, fixing God.

The bold claim of Lurianic Kabbala is that man plays a powerful role in the cosmic drama. The salvation of not only the earth, but also the heaven, lies in our hands, because God needs us to heal His rupture, to increase His power, and to rescue Him from suffering. This awesome power adds layers of depth and significance to every mitzva that we perform, and indeed every act that we do.

Of course, if understood simplistically, the ideas we have just elucidated are tantamount to heresy. No Jewish philosophy can deny the perfection and omnipotence of God, and it certainly denigrates God to speak of Him as helpless and dependent on others for His welfare.

The *Nefesh Ha-chayim* is sensitive to this concern and therefore takes pains to point out, in the passage quoted earlier,[[9]](#footnote-9) that nothing he says is true of God Himself, who is perfect and transcends all of our categories of thought. The Kabbalistic tradition never talks about God Himself, as He is beyond words. Rather, it refers to the presence of God in this world, the way in which He interacts with the world which He created. These Kabbalistic insights are true only of the *sefirot,* the emanations of God’s presence as projected onto our physical existence.

Thus, the *Le-shem Yichud* formula does not mean that God Himself is imperfect or ruptured, but that His presence in the world is fractured. Our blessings do not add to God Himself, but to His presence in this world. Similarly, our prayers are not expressions of concern for God Himself, but for his Divine Presence in this world.

Perhaps for this reason, we find that many great halakhic works, such as *Noda Bi-Yhuda,[[10]](#footnote-10)* object strenuously to the innovation and especially the popularization of the *Le-shem Yichud* formula. The authors may have feared that the masses would neglect the subtle distinction between God Himself and His *sefirot* or Divine Presence, and that they would end up practicing heresy instead of true Kabbala.

Classically, Kabbala was an esoteric tradition, limited to the spiritual and intellectual elite, who were sophisticated enough to walk this fine line between mysticism and heresy. However, when the Lurianic tradition, and particular the Chassidic movement, began popularizing these once-secret notions, Rav Landau*,* the Vilna Gaon, and others objected, fearing the damage that could be engendered by an unsophisticated understanding of these exceedingly subtle concepts.

**Summary**

In the Kabbalistic understanding of *Nefesh Ha-chayim*, the goal of prayer is not for God to relieve our suffering, but for our prayer to cause Him to relieve His own suffering, just as the goal of blessings is to help God by bringing upon Him the blessing of growth and increase. This idealistic and empowering notion of prayer must be understood within the context of a basic dichotomy. This bold conception is true only with regard to God’s Presence as revealed within this world, i.e., the aspect of God that we relate to; but not with regard to the transcendent, ineffable, God Himself, who is infinite and omnipotent, and is beyond the reach of our understanding, blessings or prayers.

1. Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bereishit* 2:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the Maharal’s comments in *Netivot Olam, Netiv Ha-avoda,* Chapter 2, where he explains that prayer is necessary in order to receive the good that we deserve because God completes only that which is incomplete, and we must express our incompleteness (via speech, which is the essence of our humanity) in order to define ourselves as incomplete humans, who can then receive what we are lacking.

   The Maharal does not explain why this is true, and it is possible that his intention there may be, in accordance with his comments in *Gur Aryeh,* that each person must deeply realize the extent of his own neediness in order to properly appreciate God’s beneficence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rav Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, in his *Derekh Hashem,* Part 4, Chapter 5, states simply that one of the ways in which God has arranged the world, in His infinite wisdom, is that in order for us to receive the bounty of God’s Providence, we need to approach Him and request our needs from Him. It is unclear whether his intention is similar to our third approach, our fourth approach, or a different explanation than any of the ones we have elucidated. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rav Chayim of Volozhin (1749-1821). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Book 2, Chapter 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Sanhedrin* 6:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Book 2 Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Book 2, Chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rav Yechezkel Landau of Prague (1713-1793), *Responsa* *Noda Bi-Yhuda Mahadura Kama*, *YD* 93*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)