YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Thoughts about Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l,

by Debbie and David Sable

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Dedicated in memory of my recently departed father,

Dr. Lloyd Bayme - ד״ר אליעזר ביים

- Michael Bayme

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**Shiur #01: Introduction: What Is Prayer?**

**The Position of Rav Saadya Gaon**

**What is Prayer?**

Prayer is perhaps the clearest expression of faith in God. If we believe in a personal God – not just in something, but in somebody – it follows that there must be a connection with Him. A person who believes in God who created the world and watches over it, when he feels in need or in distress, will turn to Him and seek His help, based on his belief in God's ability to help him. If that person is moral, he will also turn to Him in gratitude for the kindnesses that He has performed for him. He might further attribute to Him the impressive phenomena that he sees in nature, and praise Him in their wake. This is basic prayer that stems from a consciousness of faith.

When we trace the phenomenon of prayer in the Torah, we see that it is strongly connected to another concept – prophecy. The first prayer we encounter in the Torah is Avraham's: God instructs Avimelekh that Avraham will pray on his behalf "because he is a prophet" (*Bereishit* 20:7). A prophet can create a connection to God, and just as he brings the word of God to the people, so can he bring the word of the people to God through his prayer. It often happens that a prophet is in charge of prayer. However, it is not only prophets who pray in Scripture; in many instances, the entire nation is commanded to pray. Many such examples are found in the book of *Tehilim*, where calls for appeals to the Creator – e.g., "Praise," "Sing" – are directed to the community as a whole.

Another layer of prayer is that which is mandated by Torah law – that is to say, prayer as an obligatory commandment. Many great Torah authorities have dealt with the question of whether prayer is in fact a Torah commandment or is only a Rabbinic enactment. The prevalent position among those who list the 613 Torah commandments is that prayer is indeed a Torah obligation. We will have to clarify the relationship between prayer as a commandment and prayer as a reflection of fundamental faith: are they essentially the same prayer, only that the Torah assigned fixed parameters to faith-based prayer, or does obligatory prayer bear a different nature? There are certainly differences between natural faith-based prayer and obligatory prayer, such as that natural prayer can be offered at any time while obligatory prayer has well-defined times.

These two characterizations of prayer emerge from the Talmudic passages dealing with prayer at the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Berakhot* (26b). The Gemara there discusses whether the three daily prayers are based on enactments of the Patriarchs or on the sacrifices. It identifies the first alternative with the understanding that prayer is supplication for mercy, and the second alternative with the understanding of prayer as service. One of the practical differences between these two approaches is whether it is possible to offer a compensatory prayer (*tashlumim*) if one missed a required prayer: If an appeal for mercy can be made at any time, it makes sense that one can fill in a missed prayer; prayer as service, on the other hand, has a fixed time and can no longer be offered if that time has passed. This is one example that reflects a fundamental difference between natural-faith-based prayer and commanded prayer.

It is possible that certain elements of prayer belong to one category and other parts to the other category. The focus of natural prayer may be supplication, whereas prayer that is part of the Divine service might focus on the praise of God and the expression of gratitude toward him.

Over the course of this series, we will discuss different aspects of prayer, its function, its objective, and what is supposed to happen while one is engaged in it.

**Prayer According to Rav Saadya Gaon: The Primary Service of God**

Rav Saadya Gaon was the first to address Jewish thought in an organized and systematic manner. He was the first to compose a fundamental book with the goal of presenting the perspective of the Jewish faith. His words can serve as a starting point for a discussion about prayer, and as a basis from which to examine the development of the issue over the generations.

Rav Saadya Gaon includes prayer in his count of the Torah's 613 *mitzvot*, and in fact begins his count with the commandment to pray. Already in his opening statement, he says:

"You shall fear the Lord your God, and Him You shall serve" (*Devarim* 6:13, 10:20) – through prayer.

This is a very important statement – the definition of the service of God is prayer. How does Rav Saadya know that the verse is referring to prayer? There are several sources in *Chazal* which indicate that the basic expression of God's service is prayer. Many of us are familiar with the statement of *Chazal*: "What is service of the heart? This is prayer" (*Ta'anit* 2a and elsewhere). This statement, however, implies that there is service that is not of the heart, which is not prayer – but there are also sources that are more explicit than this one.

**The Duty of Prayer**

The command "You shall fear the Lord your God, and Him you shall serve" appears twice, once in *Parashat Va’etchanan* (*Devarim* 6:13), and a second time in *Parashat Ekev* (*Devarim* 10:20). These are the *parashot* that bring together the major elements of the worship of God. There we encounter for the first time the commandments to love, fear, and cleave to God, and there we find prayer as well. To which verse was Rav Saadya referring as his source for the obligation to pray: the verse in *Parashat Va’etchanan* or the one in *Parashat Ekev*? It might not seem like an important question, since the wording of the two verses is identical. There is, however, a significant difference between them with respect to what follows. In *Parashat Ekev*, the next verse reads: "He is your glory, and He is your God" (*Devarim* 10:21). In his introduction to his *siddur*, Rav Saadya explains the expression "He is your glory" as follows:

The verse "He is your glory" refers to the duty of praying to Him, because "glory" (*tehila*) refers to three matters: Either gratitude for the past… or supplication regarding something in the future… or recognition of God's ability…

If so, the duty of expressing gratitude has been clarified by reason, and its being called "prayer" has been demonstrated from the Torah. For the essence of prayer is gratitude, supplication, and recognition. We can say now, since expressing gratitude is a duty dictated by reason and brought by Scripture, and the obligation of petition follows from what is necessitated by Scripture, petition is the broadest and most inclusive kind of prayer. This also follows from the many needs of people with respect to the future, but the past is the past. Therefore, the most well-known type of prayer in Scripture is petition… This teaches you that the main element of prayer is by way of supplication. This also became clear when the word *tefila* was rendered into Aramaic, for the word *tefila* is rendered with a term of supplication, as Daniel said: "But makes his petition [*ba'eh ba'uteh*] three times a day" (*Daniel* 6:14). If so, our forefathers set "*ba'ut*" in place of prayer, and without a doubt, "*ba'ut*" is a term of supplication and petition.

Rav Saadya Gaon understands the expression "He is your glory" as a command to glorify God, that He be the subject of our glorification. Rav Saadya clarifies that glorification does not only involve praising God, and not only expressing gratitude toward Him; it also includes petition. He adduces proof from Daniel's prayer, which the verse refers to with the phrase "*ba'eh ba'uteh*," which means "makes his petition." He asks why the *Amida* prayer consists primarily of requests, and he explains that man has many needs, and therefore there are many supplications. This, however, does not mean that requests are the most important part of prayer. The three parts of prayer that are familiar to us – praise, supplication, and gratitude – are all included in the duty to glorify God.

So, which exactly is the verse that commands prayer – "And Him you shall serve," or "He is your glory"? We cannot yet answer this question, but Rav Saadya’s conception of prayer has been sharpened for us: as glory that includes praise, thanksgiving, and supplication.

**The Parts of Prayer – Thanksgiving: A Rational Obligation**

Rav Saadya Gaon continues with his discussion of the idea of prayer:

That which we have prefaced, that prayer involves petition and supplication, has been confirmed by that which has been proven by reason and by Scripture. By reason, for the speech of a slave to his master must be different from the speech of a master to his slave, for the master commands his slave and forbids things to him… and also makes promises to him and threatens him… But a slave may not turn to his master with any of these modes of speech, because he would be denying him were he to command or forbid him, promise or threaten him. What a slave must say to his master is that he requests his kindness and mercy, patience and pardon for his sins, and forgiveness for his iniquities, and he thanks him for his kindnesses toward him in the past. For this reason, God commanded those praying to choose words that are appropriate for a slave to appear with them before his master, as it is stated: "Take with you words" (*Hoshea* 14:3).

In order to understand what Rav Saadya is saying, we first have to understand Rav Saadya's enterprise and its uniqueness. As stated above, Rav Saadya was the first to write a thorough and systematic book on the topic of beliefs and opinions, and it was he who effectively laid the foundations for Jewish philosophy. One of the weighty tasks with which he contended was proving that the concept of "Jewish philosophy" can indeed exist. Ostensibly, this concept requires dual loyalty; philosophy demands loyalty to human reason, while Judaism requires loyalty to God's command. Which is the determining factor? Reason or faith? Rav Saadya emphatically states that there is no contradiction between the two. Regarding every issue, he explains at length that the Torah's position is also the conclusion of the pure intellect. In fact, he believes it would have been possible to arrive at the truth without the Torah, solely by way of the mind; we were given the Torah only because not all people are equal in their intellectual faculties, because intellectual clarification requires a considerable amount of time, etc. In any case, the fundamental principle is that both Torah and reason come from the same Divine source, and therefore they can be reconciled with each other.

Rav Saadya discusses the issue of prayer from both of these two points of view. He argues that prayer is obligatory both because it is commanded by the Torah and because it is dictated by reason. This principle is found in the third section of his *Book of* *Beliefs and Opinions*, a fundamental section in which Rav Saadya addresses the purpose of creation. He maintains that the world was created for the benefit of God's creatures. The complete benefit will be realized in the world to come, but in order to get there, a person has to toil on his own, acquiring his spiritual rank by the power of his deeds. This is the conceptual foundation for man's obligation in *mitzvot*. Rav Saadya differentiates between the rational *mitzvot* and the revealed *mitzvot*, i.e., between those *mitzvot* that are understandable to us and those that are not. He opens his discussion of the rational *mitzvot* as follows:

Logic demands that whoever does something good be compensated either by means of a favor shown to him, if he is need of it, or by means of thanks, if he does not require any reward. Since, therefore, this is one of the general demands of reason, it would not have been seemly for the Creator to neglect it in His own case. It was, on the contrary, necessary for Him to command His creatures to serve Him and thank Him for having created them.

Rav Saadya does not mention prayer explicitly in this paragraph, but he mentions gratitude as one of the foundations of the *mitzvot.* With this sentence, Rav Saadya begins his discussion of the rational commandments, and we can understand that in his eyes, this is the first commandment dictated by reason – thanking God for His goodness. This does not mean that all the other *mitzvot* stem from this *mitzva*, but it is a basic commandment that precedes many rational commandments.

In light of this perspective, let us try to understand Rav Saadya’s words regarding the parts of prayer, and his emphasis on petition. Ostensibly, it is gratitude that is dictated by reason, and that should therefore stand at the heart of prayer. Why, then, is it petition that he emphasizes in his introduction to the *siddur*? What is the basic principle in a prayer of petition?

**The Parts of Prayer – Request: As A Slave Before His Master**

Let us return to Rav Saadya's explanation in his introduction to the *siddur*, where he explains how it is not only the Torah that obligates prayer, but reason as well. Man stands before God as a slave, and he must pray in a sound manner and carefully choose his words. The words are meant to express his recognition of God's lordship.

These words bring us back to Rav Saadya's basic position that prayer is service. The goal of prayer is to stand before God as a slave stands before his master. That standing includes gratitude, wonder, and excitement about His virtues, and supplications directed toward Him. The slave's petition attests to dependence on his master; with his very request, he declares that his master is the address to which he must appeal. This is a direct continuation of "You shall fear the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 10:20): The fear of God leads him to turn to Him in gratitude and with requests relating to his needs, because he recognizes the large gap between them.

One might understand prayer differently; later in this series of *shiurim*, we will encounter approaches according to which one must speak to God freely, as one would speak to another person. Rav Saadya Gaon makes an important statement that is not self-evident: When we choose our own words, as well as when we use the words that have been determined for us by *Chazal,* we must make sure that the words reflect the right attitude toward our master. When we turn to God with our requests, we express our relationship toward him as that of a slave before his master.

To summarize, Rav Saadya sees prayer as a central obligation in the worship of God, which arises both from the Torah's commandments and from reason. The obligation is to praise God and thank Him, as logic dictates we should do with anyone who performs a kindness for us, and also to lay out our requests before Him – thereby making it clear that we are His slaves and He is our master.

Let us end with another important point from Rav Saadya: In the last chapter of his *Beliefs and Opinions*, Rav Saadya addresses man's purpose and destiny, and contends with the opinion that the main thing in life is the service of God through Torah and prayer. He argues that the plethora of practical *mitzvot* prove that man is required to act in this world. Torah and prayer are important, but in the time allotted to them; they should not occupy all of a person's time. Man is supposed to combine Torah and prayer with his worldly pursuits and find a place for each. Prayer, then, has a central role in the worship of God, and is considered part of its summit, but it is not the only focus in man's spiritual world and is not meant to fill all of his life.

(Translated by David Strauss)