YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #08 The Rambam (III) – Guide of the Perplexed**

We turn now to the issue of prayer as it is found in the Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed.* The main part of this *shiur* will deal with the Rambam's approach to prayers of petition – but first, a word about prayers of praise: Prayers of praise should be desirable according to the Rambam, as he generally directs a person to shift from involvement with his own needs to involvement with the knowledge of God; however, in fact, he advocates keeping such prayers to a minimum. This is because, while turning to God in order to praise Him is in itself a positive activity, our ability to express God's praise is limited. Talking about God requires caution, and therefore excessive praise is liable to be problematic. The Rambam expands on the issue in the first part of the *Guide*, chapter 59, and it is worthwhile to read carefully what he says there.

The question now before us relates to the requests in our prayer: Are they effective? Does prayer have the power to cause God to act as we want Him to act?

**In What Sense Does God “Hear Prayer”?**

A fundamental chapter in the *Guide for the Perplexed* speaks of the various kinds of knowledge that the Torah teaches us. There are truths that the Torah conveys without spelling out the entire path that one must follow in order to arrive at them; it does not offer the necessary prefaces or explain the intellectual processes, but merely gives us the conclusions. In addition, there are ideas that are important for us to acquire for the welfare of society:

Among the things to which your attention ought to be directed is that you should know that in regard to the correct opinions through which the ultimate perfection may be obtained, the Law has communicated only their end and made a call to believe in them in a summary way – that is, to believe in the existence of God, may He be exalted, His unity, His knowledge, His power, His will, and His eternity. All these points are ultimate ends, which can be made clear in detail and through definitions only after one knows many opinions. In the same way, the Law also makes a call to adopt certain beliefs which are necessary for the sake of political welfare. Such, for instance, is our belief that He, may He be exalted, will be violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to disobey. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III, 28)

The second type of idea can be understood in two very different ways. It can be understood that the reference is to correct, exacting opinions that are important both because they are true and because they are beneficial to society. A second possibility is that these opinions are not the absolute truth, but must be instilled in us in order for society to exist.

I will tell you my explanation for all of them and my exposition of the correct and demonstrated causes for them all, except for a few details and isolated commandments, as I have mentioned to you. I shall explain that all these and others of the same kind are indubitably related to one of the three notions referred to – either to the welfare of a belief or to the welfare of the conditions of the city, which is achieved through two things: abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing and acquisition of excellent characters. Sum up what we have said concerning beliefs as follows: In some cases, a commandment’s only aim is to communicate a correct belief – as, for instance, the belief in the unity and eternity of God and in His not being a body. In other cases, the belief is necessary for the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing or for the acquisition of noble moral quality – as, for instance, the belief that He, may He be exalted, will have great anger against those who do injustice, as it is said: "And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill…" (*Shemot* 22:23), and as the belief that He, may He be exalted, responds instantaneously to prayer of someone wronged or deceived: "And it shall come to pass, when he cries to Me, that I will hear; for I am gracious" (*Shemot* 22:26). (ibid.)

The Rambam says that some of the *mitzvot* are meant to instill certain beliefs, and among them are beliefs that are important for the welfare of society. An example of such a belief is the belief that God responds to the prayer of a person who was wronged. In order to prevent such wrongdoing, it is important that society believe that God becomes violently angry with the oppressor, and that he hears the cries of the oppressed. It is possible to draw a far-reaching conclusion from his words: that God does not truly hear prayer, but that it is important that we believe He does. The Torah said that He hears prayer only to further its goal of improving society.

When the Rambam addresses the reasons for the *mitzvot* associated with sacrifices, he presents the novel idea that it would have been better if there were no sacrificial service, but that the people of Israel were familiar with idolatrous practices and would have been unable to accept a different form of service. Therefore, the Torah turned the sacrificial service from service directed toward some idol to service directed at God. His remarks on this topic include ideas that are also important indications of his attitude toward prayer:

For it is impossible to transition suddenly from one opposite to another. And therefore man, in his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed. Therefore, when God sent Moshe Rabbeinu to make out of us "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (*Shemot* 19:6) – through the knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, as He explained, saying: "To you it was shown that you might know" (*Devarim* 4:35); "Know this day, and lay it to your heart" (*Devarim* 4:39) – so that we should devote ourselves to His worship according to what He said: "And to serve Him with all your heart" (*Devarim* 11:13), and: "And you shall serve the Lord your God" (*Shemot* 23:25), and: "And Him shall you serve" (*Devarim* 13:5); **as at that time, the way of life generally accepted and customary in the whole world, and the universal service upon which we were brought up, consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples** in which images were set up, in worshipping the latter, and in burning incense before them – the pious ones and the ascetics being at that time, as we have explained, the people who were devoted to the service of the temples consecrated to the stars; His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious plan, which is manifest in regard to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times, who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say: "God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist only in meditation without any deeds at all."

Therefore, He, may He be exalted, allowed these kinds of services to remain, and transferred them from being directed towards creations and imagined things, which have no true essence, to be directed toward His own exalted name, and He commanded us to practice them with regard to Him, may He be exalted. Thus He commanded us to build a temple for Him: “And let them make Me a Sanctuary" (*Shemot* 25:8); to have an altar for His name: "An altar of earth you shall make to Me" (*Shemot* 20:21); to have the sacrifices offered up to Him: "When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord" (*Vayikra* 1:2); to bow down in worship before Him; and to burn incense before Him. And He forbade the performance of any of these actions with a view to someone else: "He that sacrifices to the gods shall be utterly destroyed" (*Shemot* 22:19); "For you shall bow down to no other god" (*Shemot* 34:14). And He singled out priests for the service of the Sanctuary, saying: "That they may minister to Me in the priest's office" (*Shemot* 28:41). And because of their employment in the temple and its sacrifices, it was necessary to fix for them dues that would be sufficient for them; namely, the dues of the Levites and the priests.

Through this Divine ploy it came about that the memory of idolatry was effaced and that the grandest and true foundation of our belief – namely, the existence and oneness of the deity – was firmly established, while at the same time, their souls had no feeling of repugnance and were not repelled because of the abolition of modes of worship to which they were accustomed and which alone were known at that time. (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III, 32)

To illustrate his position, the Rambam raises the theoretical possibility that God would abolish prayer. One can understand this in two different ways: Either this is just an example of how extreme it would have been to abolish the sacrificial service, or perhaps there really would be room to abolish prayer, except that serving God without prayer is inconceivable at this time. The Torah restricted the sacrificial service, but restricting prayer would be too difficult for us.

However, when the Rambam comes to the reasons for the *mitzvot* that include prayer, their purpose seems clear:

The ninth category comprises all the other practices of worship prescribed to everybody, such as prayer and the recitation of *Shema* and the other things we have enumerated in *Sefer Ahava*, with the exception of circumcision. The purpose of this category is manifest, for it is wholly composed of works that fortify opinions concerning the love of God and what ought to be believed about Him and ascribed to Him. (ibid., 35)

The commandments comprised in the ninth category are the commandments that we have enumerated in *Sefer Ahava*. All of them have manifest reasons and evident causes. I mean that the goal of these actions pertaining to Divine service is to remember God constantly, to love Him, and to fear Him; to accept the obligatory observance of the commandments in general, and to bring about such belief concerning Him, may He be exalted, as is necessary for every person of Torah. Those commandments are: prayer, the recital of *Shema*, the blessing of food, and what is connected with that, the priestly blessing, phylacteries, *mezuza*, acquiring a *Sefer* *Torah* and reading it periodically. All these are actions that bring about beneficial opinions. (ibid., 44)

This implies that prayer is meant to remind us at all times of God and to strengthen correct beliefs and opinions. But the clause, "and to bring about such belief concerning Him, may He be exalted, as is necessary for every person of Torah," raises uncertainty once again: It is still not clear whether the intention is to strengthen the belief because it is the truth, or just because it is necessary and beneficial.

The passages in the *Guide for the Perplexed* give rise, then, to two different approaches: either that belief in the influence of prayer is a simplistic belief necessary for a person's faith and the welfare of society, or that it is correct and true, since prayer has a real effect.

**The Conceptual Difficulties Concerning the Influence of Prayer**

Is there reason to think that prayers of supplication and petition have no actual effect in the Rambam’s view? There are at least three issues that can lead us in that direction.

First, the Rambam emphasizes in other places in the *Guide* that God does not change and cannot be influenced. The descriptions of emotions attributed to Him in Scripture are just metaphors; in truth, He is not influenced by what happens in the world. Thus, He should not be influenced by our prayers, either. The trait of being open to influence is an attribute of the material world, not of the eternal and absolute God.

Second, the Rambam advocates for the view that the world is governed in a natural way – which he sees as superior to miraculous governance, in that it reveals the eternal wisdom of God. The world is governed by the laws of creation, and apart from exceptional cases, God does not interfere and change the nature of the world. When we pray for something to happen that should not happen naturally, we are asking for God's miraculous intervention, and according to the Rambam, God does not intervene in that manner.

Third, the Rambam's conception of providence is that man is subject to providence in accordance with his rank. According to this, for a person who merits only a low level of Divine providence, there is nobody listening to and answering his prayers.

Without delving too much into the details of these three deep and broad topics in this space, we can address the place of prayer within them.

**Prayer According to the Possibility that God Does Not Answer It.**

I will first try to contend with the extreme possibility that prayer has no effect on Divine action. According to this possibility, prayer has two reasons: It is important for society to know that there is somebody who hears the prayer of the oppressed, so people will be deterred from oppressing the weak; it is also important religiously to worship God by turning to Him with petitions, because that builds a person's faith and his meaningful remembrance of God. It would then be incorrect to say that prayer has no effect at all: it influences society and it influences the believing person.

Even if we accept the narrowest position concerning the meaning of prayer, will are still left with immense meaning. A person who has prayed leaves prayer different from when he entered it. A person might pray for his livelihood, and at the end of the prayer, God will not upend the economic system and his stock shares will not rise in value, but nevertheless his prayer will have meaning. Having gained a broader perception of reality, the person will view his financial situation in an entirely different manner. He will have undergone a change of consciousness. It is possible that according to the Rambam, prayer may not change God's governance of the world, but it generates a much more significant change. Had God answered the request and granted a larger house or a fancier car, the request would have been fulfilled but the person and society would be left in the same place. Prayer that influences a person's consciousness has the capacity to carry him to a completely different place.

(Translated by David Strauss)