YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #09 The Rambam (IV) – Guide of the Perplexed (II)**

The previous *shiur* dealt with conceptual questions relating to prayer that emerge from the Rambam's *Guide of the Perplexed.* The chapters that we saw allowed for the possibility that, according to the Rambam, prayer influences man and society but has no effect on God's decision-making. It significantly impacts upon reality, but only through the shaping of the consciousness of man and society, not through heavenly intervention.

Such an understanding of the Rambam's position sees prayer as significant and influential, but removes from it the element of connection to God. We will now examine different ways to understand the Rambam.

**Prayer Based on Justice**

In the first part of the *Guide*, the Rambam tries to clarify the meaning of certain words in Scripture, especially those that can be assigned theological significance. For example, words that seem to corporealize God are explained by the Rambam in an abstract and spiritual sense. Among other terms, the Rambam explains the word *nefesh*, "soul":

In all cases in which the term "soul" is applied to Him, may He be exalted, it has the meaning of will, as has already been set forth by us with regard to the dictum of Scripture: "That shall do according to that which is in My heart and in My soul" (I *Shmuel* 2:35) – the meaning of which is: in My will and purpose. One should interpret according to this sense the verse: "And His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel" (*Shoftim* 10:16), which means that His will refrained from rendering Israel miserable. This verse was not translated at all by Yehonatan ben Uziel, for he took it as using the term [soul] in its first sense, thought that he had met with a case of affection being ascribed to God, and accordingly refrained from translating it. However, if the term is taken in its latter sense, the interpretation of the verse is very clear. For it is preceded by the statement that the providence of God, may He be exalted, had abandoned them so that they were perishing; they implored God for help, but He did not help them. However, when they had repented further and their wretchedness had increased and the enemy had dominated them, He took pity on them; and His will refrained from letting their misery and wretchedness continue. Know this accordingly, for it is wondrous. (*Guide of the Perplexed* I, 41)[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Rambam is addressing the verse in the book of *Shoftim*, "And His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel." The simple understanding is that God was influenced by the actions of the people of Israel, and therefore He pitied them and stopped punishing them. This understanding contains two elements that the Rambam vehemently rejects: the assumption that God is influenced and changes, and the assumption that He has emotional inclinations. The Rambam explains that the reference is to the soul in the sense of will, and that the meaning of the verse is that the will of God stopped subjugating Israel.

In this chapter as well, the Rambam asserts that it is impossible for prayer to affect God, but which prayer is it that does not affect Him? Prayer in which man presents himself as suffering and asks God to save him. But if a person's prayer is accompanied by a process of repentance, it is a prayer that contains a dimension of justice (*tzedek*). The people of Israel have repented, and now they deserve to be saved, and therefore their prayer is justified – and it has an impact.

Divine providence based on justice is an important principle for the Rambam. The Rambam addresses the issue of providence in Part III, 17, and contends with deterministic philosophical approaches that argue that everything is determined from the outset. In contrast to them, he maintains that providence operates in the world based on justice. According to this, we can understand that prayer works when it is based on a demand for justice, and not on a request for mercy.

**Divine Intervention Through the Intellect**

In the same chapter in which the Rambam enumerates the different views on the matter of providence, he brings the view he defines as that of the Torah. According to this view, justice and judgment (*tzedek u-mishpat*)define the nature of Divine providence. Man is judged and subject to providence with justice, in accordance with his deeds. After that, the Rambam brings another approach, which is presented as his personal opinion. Can his personal opinion be different from that of the Torah? It seems that, like elsewhere in the *Guide*, the Rambam first brings that which is reflected in the revealed dimension of the Torah, and afterwards the hidden dimension. The Torah's view is that providence operates justly in accordance with a person's actions, and the Rambam's view is that the level of providence depends on a person's knowledge of God. A person who does not truly know God is not watched over even if he observes other *mitzvot*.

The Rambam explains that when a person is on a level of total devotion to God and achieves knowledge of God, he is subject to Divine providence, and hence his prayer can have an effect. In order to explain how this works, the Rambam brings the following example:

If the foundering of a ship and the drowning of those who were in it, and the falling-down of a roof upon those who were in the house, are due to pure chance, the fact that the people in the ship went on board and that the people in the house were sitting in it is, according to our opinion, not due to chance, but to Divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people as determined in His judgments, the rule of which cannot be attained by our intellects. (*Guide* III, 17)

If a storm is expected at sea, Divine intervention will not come via a rescue of the ship so that it not capsize, contrary to the laws of nature. But there can be intervention that involves the prevention of a particular passenger from boarding the ship. In such a case there is Divine intervention – not in the surrounding reality, but in the human mind. Divine providence can bring a person to decide in his mind not to board the ship. This does not mean that He will cause an apple to fall on his head or a traffic light to break down so that he will be late for the voyage. If this is the type of Divine intervention, it still affects the surrounding reality, though in a minor and less conspicuous manner. It is possible that this type of intervention is possible in the eyes of the Rambam, but it seems more likely that the intervention takes place solely within the person's consciousness.

Here the Rambam opens a new axis for understanding prayer – prayer that is one-sixtieth part of prophecy, in the sense of God's word or wisdom penetrating man's thoughts.

If so, there are two possible ways to understand the effect of prayer, besides the radical possibility that the effect is solely in man's consciousness: One possibility is that prayer works when it is based on justice (that is, the effect stems from repentance, and not from supplication for mercy); a second possibility is that the knowledge of God opens a unique channel of connection in which prayer is answered and has an effect. The effect is not through a change in reality, but through a change in a person's thoughts, in a way that will help and protect him.

**Providence Over the People of Israel**

Another chapter with significance for our topic deals with the possibility of change in creation (II, 29). The Rambam opposes the view that the world will change in the future. He explains that verses such as "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make" (*Yeshayahu* 66:22) do not refer to a change in physical reality. Miracles can indeed take place, as there is no denying the miracles that were performed for our forefathers and are recorded in Scripture, but these are short-term changes, not an upheaval of the entire natural order. This approach gives rise to a question that we have already asked, this time from the direction of nature and miracles: Is it possible for prayer to cause changes in reality?

Let us examine how the Rambam interprets the verses that seem to indicate reality will change in the future. According to the Rambam, the changes will take place in the world of man. Other nations will collapse, and the people of Israel will renew their rule. How will this change take place? It would appear that once again, God's intervention affects man, and not the natural world.

There is room to examine another possibility, according to which there is a difference between the people of Israel as a whole and its individual members. Regarding the issue of providence, the Rambam maintains that there is no providence over specific animals, but there is providence over the animal species, because the species are part of the structure of creation and providence maintains their existence. There may also be a difference between providence over the individual members of Israel and providence over the collective of Israel: the people of Israel are an essential part of the structure of the world, and therefore providence makes sure that they continue to exist.

It is possible that providence over the people of Israel is based on the principle of justice and judgment: when the people of Israel or at least some of them know God, God watches over them. This is how we can understand the Rambam’s wording in the chapter cited at the beginning of this *shiur* (I, 41) concerning the repentance of Israel, by virtue of which their prayer was accepted: "when they had repented further." Apparently, the Rambam means to emphasize that this was full repentance, a return to the knowledge of God, and that any lesser repair would not have caused their repentance and prayer to be accepted.

There is an important passage that may be a foundation for the idea that there is special providence over the people of Israel, on the assumption that another cause of providence is combined with it; namely, preserving God's purpose for the world. This factor appears in the Rambam's explanation concerning the special providence over the Patriarchs (III, 51). In addition to their high rank, the Rambam also notes their uniqueness in that all of their actions were directed at establishing a nation that knows God and serves Him. If so, it is possible that one who works for the realization of God's purpose, even if he has not yet reached a sufficient level of knowledge of God, will merit providence so that the purpose will be realized. It may be that this is the way to understand the constant watching over the people of Israel.

**At the Highest Level, Prayer Has a Real Effect**

Towards the end of the *Guide*, the Rambam returns to the issue of providence, and there his discussion of the topic reaches its climax. It is precisely there that we find an explicit reference to prayer:

Know that all the practices of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the goal of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world; as if you were occupied with Him, may He be exalted, and not with that which is other than He. If, however, you pray merely by moving your lips while facing a wall, and at the same time think about buying and selling; or if you read the Torah with your tongue while your heart is set upon the building of your house and does not consider what you read; and similarly in all cases in which you perform a commandment merely with your limbs – as if you were digging a hole in the ground or hewing wood in the forest – without reflecting either upon the meaning of that action or upon Him from whom the commandment proceeds or upon the purpose of the action, you should not think that you have achieved the purpose. Rather, you will then be similar to those of whom it is said: "You are near in their mouth, and far from their thoughts" (*Yirmeyahu* 12:2).

From here on, I will begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast to is that, while reciting the *Shema* or prayer, you should empty your mind of everything. You should not content yourself with being intent while reciting the first verse of *Shema* or while saying the first blessing [of *shemoneh esrei*]. When this has been carried out correctly, and has been practiced consistently for years, try next to cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading. When this too has been practiced consistently for a certain time, try to cause your thoughts to be always quite free of distraction and give heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets, and even when you recite all the blessings, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning.

…A most extraordinary speculation has occurred to me just now through which doubts may be dispelled and Divine secrets revealed. We have already explained, in the chapters concerning providence, that providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect in proportion to the measure of his intellect. Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God. On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. However, its withdrawal then is not like its withdrawal from those who have never had intellectual cognition. Rather, in his case, providence merely decreases, because that man of perfect apprehension has, while being occupied, no intellect in actuality; but that perfect man is at such times only apprehending potentially, though close to actuality. At such times he is like a skillful scribe at the time when he is not writing. On the other hand, he who has no intellectual cognition at all of God is like one who is in darkness and has never seen light, just as we have explained with regard to the dictum: "The wicked shall be put to silence in darkness" (I *Shmuel* 2:9). He who apprehends and advances with his whole being toward the object of his apprehension, is like one who is in the pure light of the sun. He who has had apprehension, but is occupied, is while he is thus occupied like one who has a cloudy day in which the sun does not shine because of the clouds that separate it and him. Hence, it seems to me that anyone from among the prophets, or excellent and perfect men, to whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction, the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the duration of the period of distraction or to the lowliness of the matter with which he was occupied. If this is so, the great doubt that induced the philosophers to deny that Divine providence watches over all human individuals and to assert equality between them and the individuals of the other kinds of animals is dispelled. For their proof for this opinion was the fact that excellent and good men experience great misfortune. Behold, the secret with regard to this has been explained even according to the requirements of their opinions: The providence of God, may He be exalted, is constantly watching over those who have obtained this overflow, which is available to everyone who makes efforts with a view to obtaining it. If a man's thought is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, may He be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind. For he is with God and God is with him. When, however, he abandons Him, may He be exalted, and is thus separated from God and God separated from him, he becomes in consequence of this a target for every evil that may happen to befall him. For the thing that necessarily brings about providence and deliverance from the sea of chance consists in that intellectual overflow. Yet an impediment may prevent for some time its reaching the excellent and good man in question, or again it was not obtained at all by such and such imperfect and wicked men, and therefore the chance occurrences that befell them happened. (ibid. III, 51)

It is clear from this chapter that when a person cleaves to God in his consciousness, he is certainly watched over by God's providence, and prayer is the central way to establish that devotion, once the person has already learned and arrived at the knowledge of God. When prayer is recited in a profound manner out of absolute connection, providence is at its full state and the person is saved from the troubles that befall him. Even if it is possible to understand in different ways the effect of prayer on the lower levels, at the highest level, prayer is certainly effective! The significance of connection is that the person is found in the shadow of the wings of God, and this state includes answer to his prayers and protection from all evil.

According to this, the Rambam's position is more complex. Prayer does not work automatically, but rather depends on the level of the worshipper and his connection. Those places in the *Guide* that imply God's response to prayer is a necessary belief, required for the welfare of society, are dealing with one who lacks intellectual knowledge of God and does not cleave to Him in his consciousness. Those places that imply prayer is effective relate to a worshipper with high levels of knowledge and connection.

We have, then, raised several possibilities for understanding the Rambam's attitude toward the effect of prayer:

One possibility is that God does not intervene at all in the created world, but prayer influences the consciousness of the worshipper himself and contributes to the welfare of society.

A second possibility is that prayer works if the worshipper is deserving – based on the principle of justice and judgment or upon the level of his knowledge of God.

If, indeed, prayer is effective, we have suggested two ways of understanding how it works: The simple understanding is that providence operates on the world in the wake of prayer; the deeper understanding is that providence has an influence only on a person's thoughts, and it guides him to a path that will protect him.

We have also raised the possibility that there is special providence over the people of Israel, even if they have not achieved a high level of knowledge of God. This is because they bear the mission of proclaiming the name of God in the world, and providence makes sure that the goal of the world will be realized.

Of course, any such possibility requires further in-depth study of all of the chapters of the Rambam's *Guide.* Even though the various possibilities seem different and even contradictory, it is fitting to mention here the Rambam's words concerning the contradiction between Divine knowledge and human free will. According to the Rambam, the contradiction stems from the limits of our intellect; Divine knowledge as we understand it contradicts man's free will as we perceive it. The Rambam does not make very much use of this model, but it may be used also with regard to the matter of prayer: We know that God does not change the natural order, but, nevertheless, it happens that people pray and see results. This perspective on the issue shifts our attention to the limitations of our cognition, and thus leaves prayer in our world.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Translations of the *Guide* in this *shiur* are by Shlomo Pines, with occasional changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)