YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #11: The Ramban (II)**

We saw in the previous *shiur* that the Ramban disagrees with the Rambam and says that prayer in general is not a positive Torah commandment, but rather a Rabbinic enactment. We also saw the various possible nuances that emerge from his words with regard to whether prayer in a time of distress is in fact mandated by Torah law. We tried to understand why the Ramban does not count prayer as a Torah mitzva and raised the possibility that, according to the Ramban, prayer must be sincere and natural, and therefore it cannot be commanded – but it is difficult to find support for this explanation in the words of the Ramban himself.

I then suggested a different direction: The commandments, according to the Ramban, constitute Divine service, while prayer is offered to satisfy human needs. Why, then, would prayer in a time of distress be considered service of God? In light of the Ramban's wording, it can be explained that specifically when a person is in distress, and from that distress turns to God, that appeal reflects the fact that he is God's servant; therefore, such prayer can be included in the count of the *mitzvot.*

We saw further that at the end of his discussion, the Ramban notes another purpose for prayer in a time of distress: building a person's faith. This purpose is linked to a broad principle in the Ramban’s teachings.

**The Purpose of the *Mitzvot* Is to Build Faith**

In a most fundamental passage (at the end of his commentary to *Parashat Bo*), the Ramban discusses the *mitzvot* that are designed to commemorate the exodus from Egypt, and connects them to the broader historical narrative – from the creation of the world to its future repair:

And now I shall declare to you a general principle in the reason of many commandments. Beginning with the days of Enosh, when idol-worship came into existence, opinions in the matter of faith fell into error. Some people denied the root of faith by saying that the world is eternal; "they denied God, and said: It is not He" (*Yirmeyahu* 5:12). Others denied His knowledge of individual matters; "and they say: How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High" (*Tehilim* 73:11). Some would admit His knowledge but deny the principle of providence "and make men as fishes of the sea" (*Chabakuk* 1:14), [believing] that God does not watch over them and that there is no punishment or reward for their deeds, for they say "the Lord has forsaken the land" (*Yechezkel* 8:12). Now, when God is pleased by a community or an individual and brings about a change in the customary and natural order of the world, then the voidance of all these [false beliefs] becomes clear to all people, since a wondrous miracle shows that the world has a God who created it, and who knows and supervises it, and who has the power [to change it]. And when that wonder is previously prophesied by a prophet, another principle is further established, namely, that of the truth of prophecy, "that God speaks with man" (*Devarim* 5:28) and that "He reveals His counsel to His servants the prophets" (*Amos* 3:7) – and thereby the whole Torah is confirmed.

This is why Scripture says, in connection with the wonders [in Egypt]: "That you [Pharaoh] may know that I am theLord in the midst of the earth" (*Shemot* 8:18), which teaches us the principle of providence, i.e., that God has not abandoned the world to chance, as they [the heretics] would have it; "That you may know that the earth is the Lord's (*Shemot* 9:29), which informs us of the principle of creation, for everything is His since He created all out of nothing; "That you may know that there is none like Me in all the earth (*Shemot* 9:14), which indicates His might, i.e., that He rules over everything and that there is nothing to withhold Him. The Egyptians either denied or doubted all of these [three] principles [and the miracles confirmed their truth]. Accordingly, the great signs and wonders constitute faithful witnessesto the truth of the belief in the existence of the Creator and the truth of the whole Torah.

And because the Holy One, blessed be He, will not make signs and wonders in every generation for the eyes of some wicked man or heretic, He therefore commanded us that we should always make a memorial or sign of that which we have seen with our eyes, and that we should transmit the matter to our children, and their children to their children, to the generations to come, and He placed great emphasis on it, as is indicated by the fact that one is liable to excision for eating leavened bread on Passover (*Shemot* 12:15) or for abandoning the Passover-offering (*Bamidbar* 9:13). He has further required of us that we inscribe upon our arms and between our eyes all that we have seen in the way of signs and wonders, and to inscribe it yet upon the doorposts of the houses, and that we mention it in the morning and evening. As the Rabbis have said: The recital of the benediction "*Emet ve-yatziv*"[which follows the *Shema* in the morning and which concludes with a blessing to God for the redemption from Egypt] is obligatory as a matter of Torah law, because it is written, "That you may remember the day when you came forth out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life" (*Devarim* 16:3). [He further required] that we make a booth every year (*Vayikra* 23:42), and many other commandments like them that are a memorial to the exodus from Egypt. All these commandments are designed for the purpose that in all generations we should have testimonies to the wonders so that they should not be forgotten and so that the heretic should not be able to open his lips to deny the belief in [the existence of] God. He who buys a *mezuza* for one *zuz* and affixes it to his doorpost, and has the proper intent of heart on its content, has already admitted the creation of the world, the Creator’s knowledge and His providence, and also his belief in prophecy as well as in all fundamental principles of the Torah, besides admitting that the mercy of the Creator is very great upon those who do His will, since He brought us forth from that bondage to freedom and to great honor on account of the merit of our fathers who delighted in the fear of His name.

It is for this reason that the Rabbis have said (*Avot* 2:1): "Be as heedful of a light commandmentas of a weighty one," for they are all exceedingly precious and beloved, for through them a person always expresses thankfulness to his God. And the purpose of all the commandments is that we believe in our God and be thankful to Him for having created us, for we know of no other reason for the first creation, and God the Most High has no demand on the lower creatures except that man should know and be thankful to God for having created him. The purpose of raising our voices in prayer and of the service in synagogues, as well as the merit of public prayer, is precisely this: that people should have a place wherein they assemble and express their thankfulness to God for having created and supported them, and thus proclaim and say before Him: "We are your creatures." This is the intent of what the Rabbis of blessed memory have said (*Yerushalmi Taanit* 2:1): "'And they cried mightily to God' (*Yona* 3:8); from here you learn that prayer must be accompanied by sound. The undaunted one wins over the abashed one."[[1]](#footnote-1)
Through the great open miracles, one comes to acknowledge the hidden miracles which constitute the foundation of the whole Torah, for no one can have a part in the Torah of Moshe our teacher unless he believes that all our words and our events [as dictated in the Torah] are miraculous in scope, there being no natural or customary way of the world in them, whether affecting the public or the individual. Instead, if a person observes the commandments, His reward will bring him success, and if he violates them, His punishment will cause his extinction. It is all by decree of the Most High, as I have already mentioned (*Bereishit* 17:1; *Shemot* 7:2). The hidden miracles done to the public come to be known, as is mentioned in the assurances of the Torah on the subject of the blessings and curses, as it is written: "And all the nations shall say: Why has the Lord done thus to this land… Then men shall say: Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers" (*Devarim* 29:23-24). Thus it will become known to all nations that their punishment came from God. And of the fulfillment of the commandments, it says: "And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon you" (*Devarim* 28:10). I will yet explain this, with the help of God [*Vayikra* 26:11]. (Ramban, commentary to *Shemot* 13:16)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Following the creation of the world, mankind began to move away from God, until Avraham came and began to move in the opposite direction. A significant part of this process was the exodus from Egypt: on the surface level, the exodus solved the distress of the people of Israel and released them from bondage, but really its primary purpose was to prove the foundations of faith – the existence of God, His being the Creator of the world, His knowledge, and His providence over the world. Like the Rambam, so too the Ramban sees all the *mitzvot* as leading to the establishment of the correct view – only the Ramban’s focus is on God's providence. One must recognize not only His existence, but also His constant providence over the world, and therefore the miracles – which are a marginal phenomenon for the Rambam – occupy a prominent place in the building of faith, according to the Ramban.

It is impossible to understand the Ramban's position about the commandment of prayer without being familiar with his general perception regarding *mitzvot* that stands in the background. Prayer can be considered a mitzvaonly if it serves the purpose of the *mitzvot*. When a person turns to God in a time of distress, and understands that He oversees reality and acts upon it, a significant consciousness of providence is built in him. As long as a person occupies himself with his own needs and can rely on himself, his appeal to God will not build a layer of meaningful faith. Only when man recognizes his inability to cope alone, and prays out of a sense of reliance solely on God's providence over the world, does his prayer contribute to faith to the extent that it can be seen as a mitzva*.* The Ramban mentions in his comments the recitation of *Shema* and the remembrance of the exodus from Egypt that is included in its last section; it seems that the recitation of *Shema* serves the purpose of building faith more than does prayer, and it indeed is a Torah mitzva.

**Public Prayer and its Meaning**

As stated, these words of the Ramban serve as a basis for understanding his position in many places. When one examines them carefully, one sees that recognizing God's providence has a twofold purpose: A person must recognize God's providence and thank Him for his acts of kindness; he also must spread this knowledge further, and therefore the Ramban speaks several times in the above-cited passage about the purpose of publicizing the faith. To use phrases found in the *parashot* dealing with the exodus from Egypt themselves, one must fulfill "and they believed in the Lord and in Moshe His servant" (*Shemot* 14:31) and one must also fulfill "and Egypt will know that I am the Lord" (*Shemot* 14:4). The purpose is that all of humanity should recognize God.

After mankind began to disengage from the faith, our ancestor Avraham came along and engaged in “calling out in the name of the Lord.” The Ramban explains that Avraham loudly proclaimed the name of God to all who could hear. Then Yitzchak went to different places and called out in the name of God, not out of an exact repetition of his father's deeds but in continuation of his goal. He went to places where Avraham had not yet called out in the name of God, and brought the enterprise to those places as well.

From this we can understand why the Ramban attaches importance not only to prayer in a time of distress in general, but in particular to the prayer of the community in a time of distress. Such prayer not only strengthens the faith of the individual, but also realizes the goal of publicizing that faith.

Public prayer also appears in the Ramban’s words in *Parashat Bo*, although there he talks about it with more detail and force, in a way that raises difficulties with the assertion that the mitzvaof prayer is only of Rabbinic origin:

And the purpose of all the commandments is that we believe in our God and be thankful to Him for having created us, for we know of no other reason for the first creation, and God the Most High has no demand on the lower creatures except that man should know and be thankful to God for having created him. The purpose of raising our voices in prayer and of the service in synagogues, as well as the merit of public prayer, is precisely this: that people should have a place wherein they assemble and express their thankfulness to God for having created and supported them, and thus proclaim and say before Him: "We are your creatures." This is the intent of what the Rabbis of blessed memory have said (*Yerushalmi Taanit* 2:1): "'And they cried mightily to God' (Yona 3:8); from here you learn that prayer must be accompanied by sound. The undaunted one wins over the abashed one."

Here the Ramban speaks explicitly about prayer and says that prayer is a realization of the purpose of the creation, i.e., to reveal the name of God in the world. If that is the case, how is it possible that it is not a Torah mitzva?

There are several differences between the prayer described here and the prayer described in the Ramban's strictures to the Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*. First, here we are dealing with communal prayer. Another difference is that in the strictures to *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, the focus is on the dimension of petition in prayer, whereas here the focus is on the dimension of thanksgiving. And yet, if the thanksgiving offered by the community fulfills the purpose of creation, why is it not a Torah mitzva? We can understand why a prayer of supplication is only by Rabbinic enactment, and why the prayer of an individual is only by Rabbinic enactment, but why is the prayer described here – when not a time of trouble – not counted among the Torah's *mitzvot*?

I already mentioned the Ramban's remarks about Avraham and Yitzchak, and we will now examine them in full – including his reference to Yaakov, who ostensibly did not engage in calling out in the name of God:

The correct interpretation is that Avraham loudly proclaimed the name of the Lord there before the altar, informing people of Him and of His Divine essence. In Ur Kasdim, he taught people but they refused to listen. Now, however, that he had come to the land concerning which he had been promised "And I will bless them that bless you" (*Bereishit* 12:3), he became accustomed to teach and to proclaim the Deity. Scripture likewise tells of Yitzchak, that when he went to the valley of Gerar, where he was promised "Fear not, for I am with you" (*Bereishit* 26:24), he built an altar there and "called upon the name of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 26:25), since he had come to a new place where they had not heard of His fame or seen His glory, and he proclaimed His glory among these nations. Now, a similar statement is not made concerning Yaakov, for since he begot many children — all of whom were worshippers of God — and he had a great community, which was called the congregation of Israel, it was through them that the faith was proclaimed and became known to all people. Besides, the faith had been proclaimed throughout the entire land of Canaan since the days of his ancestors. (Ramban, commentary to *Bereishit* 12:8)

We do not read about our father Yaakov that he called upon the name of God. The Ramban explains that this is because Yaakov was busy building a house whose entire purpose was to give expression to the name of God. At this stage, calling out in the name of God shifted from publicizing His name to revealing it in reality. When the people live in accordance with the Torah and *mitzvot*, they reveal and represent the name of God through the reality of their lives. Since the establishment of the people of Israel, there was a change in focus. While individuals can still follow in the path of Avraham and publicize the name of God, the primary means of calling out in the name of God is through the community’s way of life.

If public prayer proclaims the name of God in the world, then it advances the Divine purpose of creation – in the earlier method of Avraham. The people of Israel are not obligated to engage in publicizing God’s name because they represent Him through their very existence, but the Sages came along and established the publicizing of God's name as an obligation. The mechanism of calling out in the name of God changed with the appearance of the people of Israel, so the Torah does not issue a command to call out in the name of God as Avraham did, but there is still value in maintaining this approach. It falls into the category of "beyond the letter of the law," and the Sages went further and established it as a mitzva. In this way, through prayer alongside the observance of *mitzvot*, which reveals the name of God in the world, the people of Israel also publicize His name: by offering thanksgiving for His lovingkindness, in one place – following the paradigm of the altars of Avraham, in a loud voice and with a multitude of people.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See *Aruch*, s.v. “*ch/tz/f*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translations of Ramban’s words in this *shiur* are taken, with occasional changes, from Commentary on the Torah by Ramban (Nachmanides). Translated and annotated by Charles B. Chavel. New York, Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976, available at sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)