YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #17: Maharal (II)**

We saw in the previous *shiur* that the Maharal defines prayer as service. Divine service gives expression to man's dependence on God: when man hands his soul over to God in prayer, he does not generate a new reality, but rather reveals his existential dependence on Him, and in this way he testifies to God's unity and perfection. This approach is somewhat similar to the approachesof Rabbi Chasdai Crescas, Rabbi Yosef Albo, and the Mabit (though it is doubtful that the Maharal ever saw the work of the Mabit, which was only published in Europe close to the time of the publication of *Netivot Olam*), all of whom saw the role of prayer as a revelation of the foundations of faith (as discussed in previous *shiurim*).

**Prayer and Torah**

Turning to prayer itself, the Maharal opens with the connection between prayer and the Torah:

In the book of *Mishlei* [it is written]: "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (*Mishlei* 28:9). King Shlomo wished to say with this that two things were given to man by God – the Torah and the soul. If one turns his ear away from hearing the law, pushing aside the Torah that is from God to man and not wanting it, so too his prayer, by way of which he pours out his soul before God, is an abomination. For these two things, namely, the Torah and the soul, are interdependent. It was already explained in "the path of the Torah" how these two depend upon each other, as the Midrash states: "David said before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Keep me as the apple of the eye' (*Tehillim* 17:8). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: ‘Keep My commandments and live' (*Mishlei* 7:2)" (*Tanchuma* *Eikev* 4)…

And about this it is said: "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination." For since he pushes aside the Torah, which is for the mind, for prayer, which is for the vitality of his body – if so, such prayer is for the sake of the body alone. For if his prayer were that God should give him what he needs for his vitality so that he will be able to serve God and to learn Torah, which is a matter that is not physical – if so, why turn his ear away from hearing the law? Since he turns his ear away from hearing the Torah, if so, his prayer is for the needs of his body alone, and something that is for the needs of the body alone is an abomination. Therefore, when a person prays to God for his needs, his intention should not be that He should give him wealth and honor and all the things that he needs for the pleasure of his body, but that God should give him what he asks for to serve God. If he asks for his life, his intention should only be that he is asking that God should give him life so that he can serve God through Torah and the commandments. (*Netiv ha-Avoda* 2)

The Maharal sees prayer as part of a full system that also includes the Torah. The Torah is God's movement toward us, and prayer is our movement toward God. God gave us the Torah, and He gave us the soul that we are supposed to elevate in return. We received both from above, but the Torah was given in order to remain with us, whereas the soul is supposed to undergo a process of ascent. The two movements are interconnected, and therefore without Torah, prayer loses its meaning.

The Maharal's interpretation of the verse is not self-evident. The verse could have been understood as a deal of sorts: There is no relationship between the Torah and prayer, but God conditions His acceptance of our prayers on our acceptance of His Torah. The Maharal, however, explains that we are not talking about an external condition, but an essential connection. There is an internal relationship between the Torah and prayer, and therefore the one cannot exist without the other. If a person has nothing but his physical existence, God has no reason to fulfill his needs and strengthen him. If a person accepts the Torah, sets spiritual goals for himself, and asks God for the ability to attain them, then God will fulfill his needs for the sake of reaching his higher goal.

It should be noted that the Maharal mentions pouring out one's soul before God. This definition does not seem to refer to the dimension of praise in prayer, and it also goes beyond the simple definition of a request. Pouring out one's soul is not only an attempt to attain what one wants, but an expression of intimacy. The petitioner does not simply fill out forms in order to receive what he needs; rather, he lays out his innermost feelings before God.

**Prayer By Way of Speech – and Expression of One’s Personality**

From here the Maharal moves on to the question with which *Sefer Ha-Ikarim* opened and which has continued to occupy scholars of subsequent generations. Throughout his writings, the Maharal does not explicitly mention *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*, and in general does not often mention the names of earlier authorities – apparently as part of his tendency to focus on *Chazal*. But traces of *Sefer Ha-Ikaraim* are evident within the Maharal's writings, and it is clear that he was familiar with the book. Here too, the Maharal raises the question posed in *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*:

There are those who ask about prayer: If a person deserves that God should give him the thing for which he prays, why does He give it to him only with prayer? And if he does not deserve it, then even if he prays and asks for it, should He give it to him on account of his prayer? They further asked: Why must one pray by way of speech; surely God knows the thoughts of man, and it should have been enough [to pray] in thought. And [they also express] similar distorted words, to the point that it appears as if a bit of external spirit was cast into the folly of their minds.

The Maharal characterizes the question as having been influenced by the world outside of Judaism, and there are various possibilities as to why he sees it as so problematic. In any event, he brings up the question of why one must pray by way of speech, and he replies:

But the thing is that prayer comes to complete that which is lacking in a person, and then God hears his prayer and request, when a person is lacking and needs completion. A person is considered a human being because of his speech, for without it he is not a human being. When a person does not pray and petition by way of speech, there is no recipient present, because every recipient petitions to receive that which he is lacking. Therefore, one must petition for what he is lacking by way of speech; in that way, the person qua person is prepared to receive completion, when he is a person who lacks. This is when he formulates his deficiency by way of speech, for it is because of speech that he is considered to be a human being. But when he prays exclusively in his heart, he is not considered as having formulated his deficiency, because he is a living being that speaks. Only if he is totally righteous, and intellectual – then God hears him even though he calls out to God in his heart alone.

Prayer is an expression of a person's existential condition. It grows out of the fact that man is deficient. Not that he is missing anything at any given moment, but that he is a deficient creature in his very essence. Even if all his needs are met, he will still be deficient, and he needs that link that will complete him. He must turn to Him who is whole, and express before Him what he lacks.

Expression of the deficiency must be via speech because speech is the expression of man himself, more so than mere contemplation. Reflections do not necessarily represent a person's true personality; they are a stream of thoughts and feelings that arise from his different sides, running to and fro between the various aspects of his soul. A person may have a thought of wanting to repent and correct a certain behavior, but as long as he has not expressed the thought with his mouth, it is still not decisive and complete. What I think is not "I," that is to say, there is no absolute "I" behind it. My speech, however, is me. Since prayer expresses a person's existential state, it should be expressed in a way that gives expression to his essential existence, namely, by way of speech.

This point does have an exception:

When one prays exclusively in his heart, he is not considered as having formulated his deficiency, because he is a living being that speaks. Only if he is totally righteous, and intellectual – then God hears him even though he calls out to God in his heart alone.

A righteous man need not express himself by way of speech, because his thought is already at one with his identity. He does not have to take another step to solidify his thoughts into a decisive position; he is already there.

Another remark can be made here that relates to the general character of the Maharal, in contrast to other sages. The authors of *Mesilat Yesharim*, the *Tanya*, and others speak of the gap between the world of thought and a person's identity, and offer guidance about how to internalize the truth and how to live in accordance with the proper virtues. Others, however, do not address the internalization of content, and one of them is the Maharal. He offers no advice or guidance, but only the truth. We can think for ourselves about the tools to apply his principles; the Maharal himself relates to the principles as they are, based on the notion that if a person penetrates to the depth of truth, he will be there. This perspective expresses the Maharal’s own personality, and it accords with the figure of the righteous man that the Maharal portrays for us here: He does not need tools to internalize the truth; it is already found within him, united with his thoughts.

**Devotion at the Highest Level**

From the importance of speech, the Maharal moves on to talk about the problem of speaking too loudly:

It was taught [in a *baraita*]: "One who sounds his voice in his prayer is of the small in faith; one who raises his voice in his prayer is of the false prophets" (*Berakhot* 24b). Rashi explains that one who sounds his voice in prayer demonstrates, as it were, that God does not hear his prayer when he prays silently. In truth, however, this means that prayer involves the belief that God will fulfill his request, and faith in Him involves cleaving to the supreme level that is hidden. This is the essence of faith [*emuna*], for if one believes in Him, his belief reaches the hidden level. As is demonstrated by the letter *alef*, which is the first letter in the word "*amen*," because it reaches the beginning. Also because [the letters in the word] *alef* are the letters [in the word] *pele*, which denotes hiding, as will be explained. The perfect faith is that one should cleave with his faith to the supreme level that is hidden. He who sounds his voice in prayer does not reach the supreme level that is hidden, because one who sounds his voice is heard and revealed, and anything that is revealed does not cleave to the supreme level, because the supreme level is hidden. This matter is known to those who understand.

We see here a connection between prayer and faith – not only specific principles of faith, but the essence of faith in God. Prayer expresses faith; "prayer involves belief that God will fulfill his request." In this sentence, the Maharal explains in simple fashion how a request reflects faith. But the Maharal continues his explanation: "And faith in Him involves cleaving to the supreme level that is hidden. This is the essence of faith, for if one believes in Him, his belief reaches the hidden level." Why does the Maharal need this explanation? Why does he not content himself with saying that when a person turns to God with a request, the fact of turning to God expresses his faith in Him?

It seems that the Maharal has at this point moved toward a deeper layer of prayer, beyond the request that God fulfill our needs. We have already mentioned the great question as to how prayer works. This perplexity stems not from a lack of faith in God's existence, but from perceiving the laws of nature as absolute. Even if we understand God as being omnipotent, nevertheless, He created fixed laws of nature by way of which the world operates, and therefore there is no reason to turn to Him in prayer. This is the simple view of the world. One who truly prays, believing that his prayer has meaning, reflects a deeper perception of reality, a perception that believes it is possible to break through the natural-realistic framework of the world.

Most of the time, we are bound by the limits of this world – but during prayer, we stand before God. We can touch what is beyond the boundaries of the world. Here our conception of the meaning of prayer expands: it completes not only the petitioner himself, but also the entire world. The truth is that not only is man deficient, but the entire world is deficient in its very essence; prayer brings a person face to face with a level that is above and beyond the world's dimensions, with the level of the world-to-come. When we are engaged in prayer, we are not supposed to ignore the difficulty of how it operates or put aside the limitations of this world, but rather we are supposed to reach *deveikut,* cleaving and devotion to a higher Divine level.

This concept of *deveikut*, "devotion," reappears throughout the rest of "the path of service." We have already encountered it in previous *shiurim*: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi speaks of *deveikut* in the sense of an encounter with God. The Rambam deals with *deveikut* even if he does not use that term, his intention being devotion by way of thought. *Deveikut* is also mentioned by Rabbi Chasdai Crescas and Rabbi Yosef Albo. But the first to mention the idea of *deveikut* without uprooting prayer from its simple sense is the Maharal. The Rambam, for example, instructs one to cleave to philosophical and theological principles. The Maharal reaches *deveikut* through the request itself. Turning to God with a request breaches the boundaries of this world, and by way of that appeal, man cleaves to the hidden level of God.

(Translated by David Strauss)