YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #22: Rabbeinu Bachya Ben Asher (2)**

We saw in the previous *shiur* how Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher, like his customary manner throughout his commentary on the Torah, deals with the subject of prayer on several levels, especially the esoteric level and the level of plain and simple meanings. However, with regard to the midrashic principle introduced at the beginning of the discussion, that God desires the prayer of the righteous, we are still in need of an adequate explanation of his position. In this *shiur*,we will see that this midrashic statement conceals within it the central kabbalistic idea of prayer according to Rabbeinu Bachya – prayer as a Divine need – and that it is woven into a larger set of statements and sources.

Rabbeinu Bachya addresses the issue of prayer further in the context of the concept of blessing expressed in the verse: "And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you" (*Devarim* 8:10):

"And you shall bless the Lord your God" – On the level of the plain meaning, when you remember the evil days which passed over you in the exile of Egypt, and your being there in great servitude, and you remember also the suffering in the wilderness now, then when you come to the land, and eat, and become satisfied from its fruit and its goodness, you shall recite a blessing about this to the name of God.

And in the opinion of *Chazal* (*Berakhot* 21a), "And you shall bless the Lord your God" is a positive commandment to recite the Grace after Meals, and it is like: "You shall make a parapet for your roof" (*Devarim* 22:8), "And you shall keep the Passover to the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 16:1); and the meaning of "for the [good] land" is "and for the [good] land." (Rabbeinu Bachya, commentary to the Torah, *Devarim* 8:10)

This is the simple understanding of the concept of blessing: by remembering the state of deprivation we once experienced, we will come to offer gratitude for the good that we enjoy now. According to the simple level of understanding, the blessing is supposed to rise on its own from a person's experience, and according to *Chazal*, the blessing is a commandment, but there is no contradiction between these two aspects; *mitzvot* often provide an anchor for what we are supposed to do naturally.

Then Rabbeinu Bachya moves on to another explanation of this blessing:

And you should bestir yourself here, for this verse provides an opening to understand the mystery of blessings. You will not find anywhere in the Torah other than here that the Holy One, blessed be He, commands us to bless His name. Based on this David said: "And I will bless Your name" (*Tehillim* 145:1), and he said: "Give thanks to Him and bless His name" (*Tehillim* 100:4), and many like this.

On the simple level, I will first say that the blessings are not a Divine need, but rather a human need. For since He is the source of blessing and all blessings emanate from Him, even when all beings bless Him, all their blessings do not suffice for Him. For He is the primal Being who brought all that exists into being, and their existence is only because of His existence, and His existence by itself suffices, He not needing anyone else – so even if they bless Him all day and all night, what will be added by this, or what will they give Him, or what will He take from their hands? The benefit and increase is only for us. For anyone who recites a blessing over that which he enjoys testifies to God's providence that He provides food for earthly beings, so that they may live, and by virtue of them the grain and the fruit are blessed and multiply. But one who enjoys something and does not recite a blessing steals providence from Him, and hands over the governance of the earthly beings to the stars and planets. This is what they said: "Anyone who enjoys anything of this world without a blessing is considered as if he stole from the Holy One, blessed be He" (*Berakhot* 35a), and from the people of Israel, as it is stated: "Whoever robs his father or his mother" (*Mishlei* 28:24). That is to say, he steals providence from God and the fruit from the people of Israel, for because of this sin, they [the fruit] decrease for Israel on his account. For the entire world is judged in accordance with the majority, and every individual is judged in accordance with the majority. Therefore, one must show himself as if the entire world depended on him. (Ibid.)

Rabbeinu Bachya draws our attention to the fact that this is the only place in the Torah where we are commanded to bless God. In most places in the Torah, it is God who blesses man, for it is in His power to give a blessing to man, who is deficient. God blesses man at the beginning of *Bereishit*, and over the course of the book, he blesses Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, when they are childless and wandering, with a blessing of seed and a blessing of land. God, who is the source of everything, assures them that by His power they will be able to fill in what they are missing. The exceptional case in our verse raises a difficult question: How can deficient man bless God who is perfect?

Rabbeinu Bachya opens with an explanation of the blessing on the simple level, and surprisingly, he first explains what the blessing is not. "The blessings are not a Divine need." After stating what a blessing is not, Rabbeinu Bachya explains that on the simple level, blessings are a human need. God is in no way lacking, and therefore He does not need to be blessed. The meaning of the blessing is for us; the knowledge that all abundance comes from God causes that bounty to reach us, and failure to recognize the Divine source prevents us from receiving it. It should be noted that in the course of his explanation, Rabbeinu Bachya uses a formulation that could be understood to imply otherwise: "He is considered as if he stole from the Holy One, blessed be He, and from the people of Israel." In any case, according to this explanation, one who does not recite a blessing causes a loss to himself. According to this, blessings are not meant to create reality, but rather to testify about reality. They teach that God is the source of blessing.

Now we come to the kabbalistic understanding:

According to the kabbalistic understanding [of] "and you shall bless the Lord," the blessing is not exclusively a human need, and it is also not only an expression of gratitude. Rather, it is a formulation of addition and increase, as in: "And He will bless your bread and your water" (*Shemot* 23:25). You must understand the statement of *Chazal*, who said in *Bava Metzia*, chapter *Ha-mekabel*, at the end (*Bava Metzia* 114a), regarding a creditor: "'That he may sleep in his own garment, and bless you' (*Devarim* 24:13) – he who requires a blessing, i.e., an ordinary person, to the exclusion of *hekdesh* [the Temple treasury], which needs no blessing." And the Gemara there raises an objection: "Does it not? But it is written: 'And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God.' Rather, 'And it shall be accounted as righteousness [i.e., a charitable act] to you,' to the exclusion of *hekdesh*, which does not require [the merit of] righteousness." *Chazal* explicitly explained that *hekdesh* requires a blessing but does not require righteousness. And they explicitly said in *Berakhot*: "He said to him: Yishmael, My son, bless me" (*Berakhot* 7a). And similarly in tractate *Shabbat*: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: You should have assisted Me" (*Shabbat* 89a). This is the matter of a blessing. Now, when we bless the Holy One, blessed be He, there is an addition of the holy spirit, and our blessing is the reason that all of His creatures will be blessed by Him. And they further stated (*Yevamot* 64a) that the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the righteous. Now, if blessing and prayer were only an expression of gratitude, why should He desire the prayer of the righteous, who are few in number, more than that of the rest of the many nations? Surely, "in the multitude of the nation is the king's glory" (*Mishlei* 14:28). But the term, *u-veirakhta*, "and you shall bless," indicates addition and increase, and it is related to *bereikha*, "pond," which flows from a source. And therefore we mention in our prayers: "May you be blessed, and may you be exalted." And so too in the text of the *Kaddish*: "Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled… [be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He].” It is also related to *bereikha*, "kneeling" and bowing – He to whom every knee bows. Similarly we find in *Sefer Ha-bahir* (letter *dalet*): "From where do we know that *berakha* bears the sense of *bereikha*? As it is stated: 'For to Me, every knee shall bow' (*Yeshayahu* 45:23) – He to whom every knee bows." (Ibid.)

On the kabbalistic plane, blessing is not only a human need, but also a Divine need. Why is this the kabbalistic understanding, while the previous explanation is considered the simple understanding? To answer, we must first understand the concepts themselves – "human need" and "Divine need" – which reflect two contradictory understandings. According to the first, the worship of God is meant for us, whereas according to the second, it is for the benefit of God. Of these two understandings, the first one is more understandable and logical, whereas the second, according to which God, as it were, needs us and our service, is more profound and esoteric.

The Ramban raises the idea of "Divine need" in another context, in his commentary to the *parashot* dealing with the *Mishkan*. In reference to the verse which establishes the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt, "I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 29:46), he writes:

According to the simple understanding, the *Shekhina* resting in Israel is a human need and not a Divine need. But it is like what is stated: "You are My servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified" (*Yeshaya* 49:3). (Ramban, commentary to the Torah, *Shemot* 29:46)

The simple meaning of Scripture is that God brought us out of Egypt so that He could dwell among us in the *Mishkan* and we could worship Him there. Nevertheless, the Ramban writes that according to the simple understanding, the *Shekhina's* resting in Israel is a human need. The Ramban is referring not to the literal meaning of the verse, but to plain and simple logic. He does not explicitly explain the literal meaning from which it follows that the resting of the *Shekhina* is a Divine need, but merely refers us to additional verses which give rise to a similar idea – that God is glorified through Israel.

In the wake of this, Rabbeinu Bachya writes there as well: "The resting of the *Shekhina* in Israel is also a Divine need, not a human need." Rabbeinu Bachya writes in explicit fashion that which the Ramban merely alluded to: Even though content-wise, this is not the plain meaning of the verse, nevertheless this is the precise linguistic meaning of the text. In this case, the plain meaning of the verse is found precisely on the kabbalistic plane.

We have not yet encountered in our study this idea of "service as a Divine need." It becomes very central in the generations to come, in two books that this series will not study – *Avodat Ha-kodesh* and *Shenei Luchot Ha-berit* (*Shelah*). We will meet up with it again after we get past the works of the Chassidic masters and come to *Nefesh Ha-chayim.*

In his commentary to the verse, "And you shall eat, and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God," that was cited above, Rabbeinu Bachya explains how in fact it is possible to say that God depends on the worship of those who serve Him, and that it adds something for Him. God, in His perfection and goodness, wants to bestow abundance in the world, and the realization of this desire depends on the righteous, who know how to draw abundance from the spring by way of a blessing.

Rabbeinu Bachya bases this idea on the halakhic discussion in tractate *Bava Metzia,* which indicates that "*hekdesh* requires a blessing, but does not require righteousness." What is the difference between blessing and righteousness? Simply stated, righteousness, or an act of charity, comes to fill in what is lacking, whereas blessing involves an addition even where there is no deficiency or need. This subtle distinction teaches that there can be increased blessing even without previous lacking.

The idea that God can be the object of blessing even though He lacks nothing does not sit well on the exoteric plane, but it is the truth on the esoteric level. Blessing involves increase and abundance. There is an enormous spring of abundance awaiting the righteous who are worthy of that abundance, righteous people who will know what to do with it. The inner will of the righteous is what enables the spring to bestow its abundance and be blessed.

This idea explains the statement with which we began our discussion. This is the reason that "the Holy One, blessed be He, desires the prayer of the righteous."

Rabbeinu Bachya ends his commentary by noting the fact that one of our most central prayers, the *Kaddish*, according to its plain meaning, reflects the idea of prayer as a Divine need; it is based on the same kabbalistic principle and involves magnifying God's name, as follows explicitly from its words: "Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He."

(Translated by David Strauss)