YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #28: The Ramchal (1)**

Although there is much more that could be said about prayer in the writings of the Ari, even at the level of basic principles, we will nevertheless move on to Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, known as the Ramchal. In later *shiurim*, we will see additional elements of the Ari's position as they were interpreted by those who came after him.

The Ramchal was born in Italy about 150 years after the death of the Ari. He lived a very short life, but authored a great number of books that have come down to us as well as others that did not survive. The Ramchal’s early books were written in the wake of revelations of the divine spirit (*ruach ha-kodesh*)and encounters with *maggidim*. He revealed this only to the students who had gathered around him, but the information leaked out and became widely known among European Jewry, which still bore the scar of Sabbateanism. Many suspected that the Ramchal was a new type of Shabbetai Tzvi, though there were also those who supported him. In the second stage of his life, following the controversy that had erupted around him, he had to stop writing books based on revelations and dealt only with interpretation of the Ari's Kabbala. However, opposition to him continued, and in the next stage he was forbidden entirely to publish kabbalistic works. He declared before his teacher that he did not view himself bound by the second decree that had been issued against him; nevertheless, he acted in accordance with it and only wrote books dealing with the revealed aspects of the Torah, such as *Mesilat Yesharim* ("The Path of the Just") and *Derekh Hashem* ("The Way of God").

The book *Mesilat Yesharim* removes the veil from the personality of the Ramchal. One might have thought the Ramchal had reached the level of *ruach ha-kodesh* directly, but it follows from the book that he proceeded along an orderly path of personal dedication that culminated with his meriting that level. *Mesilat Yesharim* is a fundamental work that sheds light on the concept of *ruach ha-kodesh* and presents it as a consequence of systematic service. *Mesilat Yesharim* and *Derekh Hashem* are both written in the language of books dealing with the revealed aspects of the Torah, but behind them stands a whole world of esoteric lore. In *Mesilat Yesharim*, echoes of that lore are found only by way of allusions, especially at the level of holiness; in *Derekh Hashem,* the hidden aspects of Torah are more evident.

The Ramchal died before he reached the age of forty, and was later accepted as a fundamental element in *batei midrash* of all shades.

**Prayer – Part of God’s Will**

*Derekh Hashem* is a concise and concentrated book, a kind of summary of the world of faith. We might compare it to another of his books, *Da'at Tevunot* ("Knowing the Reasons"), and say that while *Da'at Tevunot* addresses certain issues and delves deeply into them, *Derekh Hashem* presents an overview of all the issues, providing more information than explanation. This may create an impression that one can go through it quickly without any problem, but this is only an illusion, as it requires deep study and examination. Regarding prayer, the Ramchal writes there:

The matter of prayer is surely of the arrangements that were set up by the Supreme Wisdom for this reason: Since creatures receive bounty from Him, may He be blessed, there is a need for them to arouse themselves toward Him and come close to Him and seek His presence. The bounty comes down to them in accordance with their arousal towards Him; if they do not arouse themselves, it does not come down to them. And behold, the Master, blessed be He, desires and wants the good of His creatures to be increased at all times, so He prepared this worship for them on a daily basis. For through it, bounty, success, and blessing will come down to them according to their needs [and] according to their situation in this world. (*Derekh Hashem*, IV, Chapter 5, 1)

This seems simple, as the Ramchal seems to be following in the footsteps of the Rambam, who maintained that prayer is a positive Torah precept. As we have said, however, the concise words of the Ramchal in *Derekh Hashem* require careful study.

In this passage, the Ramchal touches upon a question that we have already seen – how prayer can change, as it were, the will of God. The Ramchal states that prayer does not begin with man's need to pray, but with God who implanted prayer in the world. Therefore, prayer does not bring about a change in God's will; rather, this is how God built His world, that a person can receive what he needs through his prayer. What is not said here, of course, is *why* God arranged the world in this manner. Surely, He would have no problem bestowing abundance upon man even without prayer. The first section does not provide an answer to this question. However, as we have already seen in earlier *shiurim* in this series, if we wish to understand the position of a certain authority on a particular issue, we must understand his general position, or at least his opinions on certain fundamental issues. Here too, we must try to understand the foundations of the Ramchal's position.

**The Reason for Creation, and Prayer as Human Endeavor**

The Ramchal opens several of his books with a discussion of the purpose of creation. So too in *Derekh Hashem,* this issue is discussed in the second chapter of the book:

The purpose of creation was to give from His goodness, may He be blessed, to another besides Him… However, His wisdom decreed that in that this good is perfect, it is fitting that the one who benefits from that good will own it – [meaning] one that acquires the good himself and not one that has the good joined to him in a contingent way…. (*Derekh Hashem* I, Chapter 2, 1-2)

The Ramchal maintains that the world was created in order to bestow good. However, the principle of benefit does not suffice to explain the way the world was created; therefore, as he also explains in other books, the Ramchal says further that one who benefits from the good should own it. In other places, he brings in this context the words of the *Yerushalmi* (*Orla* 1:3) that one who receives food from another person for free is ashamed to look him in the face. For the benefit to be complete, the person must obtain it himself.

We can apply this idea to what the Ramchal says here: "…of the arrangements that were set up by the Supreme Wisdom for this reason: Since creatures receive bounty from Him, may He be blessed, there is a need for them to arouse themselves toward Him." This statement comes not only to explain how prayer changes God's will, but also to address the general purpose of creation.

Here we touch upon a delicate question regarding prayer. We generally divide the actions that take place in this world into two sets: our own actions, which are referred to as *hishtadlut*, "[human] effort", and God's actions, which fall under the category of *bitachon*, "faith." Where does prayer fit? Ostensibly, it involves an appeal to God to act. But the Ramchal associates prayer with "human effort." The human mind usually sees a connection between effort and the actual practical result; however, according to the Ramchal, arousal from below is itself an effort, and therefore prayer too falls into this category. Since a person must exert himself in order to receive God's goodness, he must take a practical step, i.e., he must pray.

It is not clear from the above what the Ramchal thinks about the spiritual state of the person – i.e., whether a person must be deserving in order to receive what he wants. It seems that, according to the Ramchal, a prayer is measured in itself; the petitioner's merits are not the decisive factor. It is possible to say that prayer depends on the general condition of the person, but that even if the person deserves to receive God's abundance, there is a certain way to receive it; God determined that abundance will only arrive through the channel of prayer. However, it is also possible that even if a person is not worthy of receiving, God nonetheless opens a door for him to receive His abundance, by way of efforts in prayer. In any case, we see that prayer is an autonomous system, which does not depend on the general state of the worshiper.

**Prayer as Standing Before God**

Let us move on to the next section in *Derekh Hashem*:

However, there is greater depth to the matter. And that is that the Master, blessed be He, surely gave man the intellect to manage himself in this world with his intelligence and his understanding. So He placed the task upon him to oversee all of his [own] needs. And this matter is based on two foundations: The first is that because of man's preciousness and importance, he was given this intelligence and intellect to administer himself properly. The second is that he should have an occupation in the world and be bound to his affairs. And this is what sustains him in the human condition, which we mentioned above – that it is the worldly approach and not the holy approach, but it is what he needs at this time, according to the arrangements of [God's] direction. Of course, from one angle, this diminishes him and his status. But it is a necessary diminution for him, that brings about an elevation for him afterwards, as was explained in Part I (“On Human Responsibility” 4). However even as this diminution is necessary according to his situation in this world, from another angle, he must not go beyond what is appropriate. For note that the more he gets embroiled in the matters of the world, the more he will distance himself from the Supreme light and become more darkened. But see that the Creator, may He be blessed, prepared a rectification for this. And that is that a man first come close and stand in front of Him, may He be blessed, and request all of his needs and cast his burden upon Him. And this is a central and essential beginning for all of his efforts, such that when he is later pulled into the other paths of effort – which are the ways of human effort – it will not happen that he will get embroiled and stuck in physicality and materialism. For he will already have begun with, and made everything dependent upon, Him, may He be blessed. Thus, his diminution will not be a major diminution, but will rather be held up by this rectification that precedes it. (*Derekh Hashem* IV, Chapter 5, 2)

Here, Ramchal takes us to another meaning of prayer. This meaning is also related to human effort, that is to say, to the fact that man oversees his own needs. He lives his life independently. Elsewhere, the Ramchal emphasizes the fact that man was given the ability to make choices so that he would be able to administer his life on his own; here, he addresses the *reason* that was given to him.

Man's mind is his unique virtue. Man is the only creature endowed with reason, and through his reason, he is able to engage in matters immeasurably greater than himself. With the help of his intellect, he can utilize mighty forces far greater than his personal physical powers, and build planes and even spaceships. This is an example from the material plane, but on the spiritual plane as well, man can ascend to immeasurably higher dimensions than his own physical world.

The Ramchal says this is a great asset for man, but also a great liability. In order to manage life, man must engage extensively with this world. Therefore, the Torah directs man in how to preserve a connection to the heavenly world even while immersed in this world. This finds expression in the world of the *mitzvot.* Almost all the commandments relate to earthly life, and offer guidance on how to live that life in holiness. We often look at things from a different perspective: we see ourselves as citizens of the world, with the Torah coming to lift us from the world to a higher place. In contrast, the Ramchal's perspective is just the opposite: we are citizens of the soul; our natural state is heavenly life, but we have been forced to descend into this world, and therefore we need a way to maintain our connection to the upper world.

Prayer is spiritual service that comes to preserve our heavenly side. It is not only meant to satisfy our needs through our efforts, but also to prevent us from drowning in the “mud” of this world. One aspect of the material world, in this context, is how it distracts us from God. Against this aspect, prayer enables us to stand before God. Man opens his day with nearness to God, and then he can descend into and walk about the world. Beyond the distraction, man is liable even to forget God. Precisely because of the intellect granted to him to act on his own, he may think that he alone is in charge. He is indeed supposed to live an independent life, but in order not to forget that there is another factor involved in his activity, he must occasionally stop everything – and remember that everything is from God.

This principle as well stems from the general position of the Ramchal: God wanted to do good, and so He commanded man to strive to achieve his own good to perfection. This striving causes man to act on his own in this world, and therefore there is a fear that he will forget his Divine source. This problem is corrected by prayer.

This dimension is different from the one we saw in the previous section. Here the goal is not man's striving, but rather his standing before the King. The laws of prayer are also derived from this goal:

And behold this is [the reason for] the stringency of prayer, according to which it is forbidden to interrupt it at all – due to man's being in great proximity to Him, may He be blessed. And likewise is the leave-taking set up at its end, such that a man takes three steps back and returns to his regular state, which is necessary for him the rest of the time. (*Derekh Hashem* IV, Chapter 5, 3)

The prohibition to interrupt in the middle of one's prayer, and the obligation to take three steps backwards at the end of one's prayer, are not related to man's striving on his own behalf, but to his standing before God. During prayer he stands before the King, and at the end of the prayer, he returns to his place in the world.

**Prayer – A Combination of Human Effort and Faith in God**

The Ramchal himself notes that we are dealing with two dimensions of prayer:

And in truth, [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, informed us of the necessary conditions accompanying prayer in order to fulfill its function – *whether regarding this coming close that we mentioned, or whether regarding the bringing down of the influence*. And they set up prayer and its blessings for us accordingly, and prescribed all of its laws and guidelines. (*Derekh Hashem* IV, Chapter 5, 4)

These are the two sides of the coin: human striving and faith in God. The role of prayer as an action on our part directed at attaining abundance, and its role as causing us to place our trust in Him, complement each other in a most amazing way.

In the last section of the chapter, the Ramchal notes an additional role of prayer – to fill the place of the sacrificial service, which has been lacking since the time of the destruction of the Temple. This role is clarified in the next chapter of *Derekh Hashem*, which will be discussed in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)