YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #31: The Meaning of Prayer – A Summary, from Rav Saadya Gaon to the Maharal**

We have been on an extended journey over the course of this series of *shiurim*, exploring the concept of prayer in the world of the *Rishonim*. We have encountered the views of a number of *Rishonim*,from Rav Saadya Gaon to the Maharal (who lived in the generation of the *Shulchan Arukh* and the Rema – the seam line between the *Rishonim* and the *Acharonim*).

This journey through the words of the *Rishonim* introduced several issues and dimensions that arise in the context of prayer: the nature of prayer; the type of relationship to God that is reflected in it; prayer of the individual and communal prayer; fixed prayer and optional prayer; prayer as privilege or as obligation (and whether that obligation is a Torah law or a Rabbinic enactment); the fixed and varying parts of the text; the foci of praise, petition, and thanksgiving; and the question of how prayer works.

At this point, we will review some of the key positions that were raised regarding these matters. This time, however, the organizing axis will be the issues, rather than the thinkers.

**The Relationship Between Man and God in Prayer**

In the simplest understanding of prayer, man turns to an omnipotent God so that He will fulfill his requests. In this view, prayer is not a simple expression of the service of God, but an expression of turning to God, who will then "work" for the benefit of man. However, in the perspective of the sages of Israel, this appeal cannot be made in a void; it is based on a relationship and connection between man and God.

We have encountered varying descriptions of the nature of that relationship, which have implications for additional questions. Rav Saadya Gaon speaks of the relationship between a slave and his king, and in that context, he addresses the relationship between praise (which is the duty of a slave) and petition (which is the essence of prayer). Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pekuda speaks in similar terms, and bases prayer on man's submission to God. From that basis, he focuses on the dimension of praise, setting it above the dimension of petition. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, who builds the connection between God and Israel on the covenant and on closeness, adds to the service of God the element of joy. Thus, several channels of prayer are opened before us – prayer of awe and submission, prayer of love and joy, prayer centered on the praise of God, and prayer that is centered on man's quest to fulfill his needs.

With a certain resemblance to Rabbeinu Bachya, the Marahal emphasizes man's absolute dependence upon God, which prayer comes to express. But with the Maharal, the picture is more complex; alongside nullification, there is also a dimension of recognition, that is to say, a dimension that emphasizes the virtue of man and his unique powers.

**Obligation and Privilege, Community and Individual**

Prayer grants a person the privilege of directing his requests to God. It seems that anyone who wishes can make use of this privilege when needed, and it will be characterized as a human initiative. There is, however, a dimension of prayer that is not a privilege bestowed upon man, but rather an obligation cast upon him. These two dimensions are reflected already in the words of the Gemara, in the discussion about whether the three daily prayers were instituted by the Patriarchs (privilege) or correspond to the daily offerings in the Temple (obligation). They are also found in the discussions of the *Rishonim* about whether there is an obligation by Torah law to pray, and how this obligation characterizes prayer. Rav Saadya Gaon spoke about the commandment of prayer (which fits in well with his perception of prayer as a slave's appeal to his master), and the Rambam states clearly in his rulings that prayer is an obligation of Torah law. The Ramban, on the other hand, argues that prayer is a mitzvaof Rabbinic origin, and sees it primarily as God's grace to man (rather than as man's obligation toward God).

The positions of Rabbeinu Bachya and Rabbi Yehuda Halevi stand at the center of several other discussions and emphases in the world of prayer. Rabbeinu Bachya strongly emphasizes the dimension of individual prayer, whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi emphasizes communal prayer, both for its benefits for the aggregate of the community's individuals (who recite prayers for their own benefit that can contradict each other), and for its being the prayer of the people of Israel. The Ramban as well, in his commentary on the Torah, emphasizes the dimension of communal prayer in synagogues. Regarding the question of optional prayer versus obligatory prayer, Rabbeinu Bachya emphasizes optional prayers (and even composed such a prayer in his book, though he sees in personal prayer itself a rational obligation), whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and most other authorities emphasize obligatory prayer. Similarly, on the issue of fixed text versus personal wording, Rabbeinu Bachya emphasizes the prayer of the individual, and even formulated a prayer of his own, whereas Rabbi Yehuda Halevi emphasizes the fixed text that characterizes communal prayer and the value and benefits of that text.

**How Prayer Has an Effect – The Simple Explanation, Philosophy, and Kabbala**

Other, more conceptual issues also arise in the discussion of prayer. First, some of the sages shape their position on the meaning of prayer from a fundamental issue – the reason for creation. The Ramban mentions that the reason for creation is that we should know God and thank Him; he emphasizes that communal prayer in synagogues makes God's existence known in the world and realizes the purpose of creation. Rabbi Chasdai Crescas explains that the purpose of creation is to benefit man, and he sees prayer as playing a role in the bestowal of God's goodness on man. For the Rambam, who rejected the possibility of giving a positive answer to the matter of the purpose of creation, the question of prayer and understanding how it works arises in the context of the issue of God's providence.

In the simple understanding, man prays to the omnipotent God, and in the event that God accepts his prayer, He intervenes and changes reality for the sake of the petitioner. As philosophical thought developed, a deeper question rose to the surface: How can the eternal and perfect God change in response to man's prayer? This led to the question of who actually changes through prayer – God and His decrees, or man and his spiritual standing. In the writings of the Rambam, this question stands in the background, though it is not yet explicitly presented; he already presents prayer as an act of contemplating and internalizing truth within man. The main effect of prayer, according to him, is intellectual devotion. This intellectual devotion also constitutes Divine providence, as the other side of the coin. With Rabbi Yosef Albo, the author of the *Ikarim*, the question is already explicitly formulated, and his answer is that man changes by way of prayer; it is this change that removes him from the Divine decree, while the Divine decree in itself does not undergo any change.

The kabbalists open new gates for prayer. Unlike the philosophers mentioned above, they accept the possibility that prayer can bring about change. However, this change does not occur, God forbid, in the Divine *Ein Sof* (infinity), but in the world of God's manifestations, the world of the *sefirot.* Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, author of *Sha'arei Ora*, emphasizes the role of prayer as a conduit to bring God’s abundance to a person who is close to God. Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher emphasizes the role of prayer as a "Divine need" that allows for God's appearance in this world. Despite the fact that both of these thinkers belong to the world of the kabbalists, they maintain opposite positions on a central point: According to *Sha'arei Ora*, prayer is for the sake of man, so he will merit the abundance that flows through Divine conduits; according to Rabbeinu Bachya, the purpose of prayer is the integrity of God's revelation.

**Prayer – Active or Passive**

We can now note another fundamental distinction in the world of prayer. When we speak of prayer in its simple sense, man is in a passive position, and he asks God for His active intervention. The approach of the philosophers and kabbalists, however, usually puts man in a more active position: active in the sense of a change in the person himself – according to the view of the philosophers that God Himself does not change through prayer – and active in the sense of man's effect on reality or on the revelation of God in the world, as the kabbalists say.

The question of being active or passive arises from a completely different direction in the words of the Mabit. The Mabit asks when it is appropriate for a person to be active and *not* use prayer, and when it is right to utilize prayer and ask *God* to be active on behalf of man. He replies that prayer is intended only for those things that man really needs (not for more petty concerns), and only in a case where he cannot fulfill those needs on his own. Only if these two conditions are met should man turn to God in prayer.

**Summary of the Different Types of Prayer**

Now that we have reached the end of the journey, we can offer a concise summary of ten types of prayers that our rabbis have introduced to us:

Rav Saadya Gaon teaches us about the prayer of a king's slave.

Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pekuda teaches us about prayer that reflects submission of the heart.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevi teaches us about prayer as an encounter with God.

The Ramban teaches us about prayer of mental contemplation.

The Ramban teaches us about prayer that makes God's name known in the world.

Rabbi Chasdai Crescas teaches us about prayer that leads us to Divine goodness.

Rabbi Yosef Albo teaches us about prayer that educates.

Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla teaches us about prayer as the key to abundance.

Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher teaches us about prayer as a Divine need.

Finally, the Maharal of Prague teaches us about prayer of nullification and devotion.

In the generation of the Maharal, the Ari appears and teaches us a new dimension of prayer. This approach opened a new understanding of prayer, that took it out of its simple meaning and influenced many of those who came after him to this very day. We will explore these ideas and impacts further in *shiurim* to come.

(Translated by David Strauss)