YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #43: The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* (2)**

We saw in the previous *shiur* how Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, in his book *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, explains the concept of blessing as denoting an increase in abundance. To sharpen the matter further and continue our study of his view of the meaning of prayer, we will now examine one of the central elements in the book*.*

*Nefesh Ha-Chaim* frequently mentions certain verses in the Bible, and statements of *Chazal*, whose messages are difficult to grasp*.* For example, the verse "Give strength to the Lord" (*Tehillim* 68:35), and a similar statement of *Chazal*: "When Israel performs the will of God, they add strength to the might above" (*Eikha Rabba* 1). The people of Israel, as it were, increase God’s strength through their actions, e.g., by fulfilling the *mitzvot*.

On the face of it, this is an impossible statement, particularly for Jewish thinkers who approach Torah and the Jewish faith from a rational perspective. These thinkers therefore interpreted such verses and statements in a way that changes their plain meaning. For example, "Give strength" was understood to mean praise Him for His strength, or give expression to His strength. Alternatively, there were those who ignored such verses or minimized engagement with them. The kabbalists, however, often mentioned such verses and statements. This is another case where, as noted in the previous *shiur*, it is precisely the kabbalists who interpreted the verses according to their plain meaning.

This principle is the heart of the first two sections of *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin explains that these verses and statements do not refer to God's essence, but to His manifestations. It is indeed impossible to influence the Divine essence, and it is certainly impossible to add strength to it. But to God's manifestations, it is possible to add strength.

**Prayer as a Divine Need**

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* opens his book with an explanation of the concept of the image of God, and in chapters 5-8 in the second section of the book, he relates the process of adding strength to divine manifestations to this principle. Man is built with a Divine structure, and the upper worlds are built on the model of man's structure (there is a significant difference between these two formulations, but this is not the forum for a full discussion). The ancients likened man to a "small world" and the world to a "big man"; the kabbalists interpreted this to mean that there is a correspondence between man and the upper worlds. Man is thus the master of all powers in this world, and, being built on the model of the upper worlds, can influence them through his actions.

According to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim,* human actions are similar to the food that joins the soul to the body; the soul exists on its own even without food, but food is needed to link the soul to the body. Rabbi Yehuda Halevi says this about sacrifices. He emphasizes that God does not depend on sacrifices, but sacrifices are the link between Divine illumination and reality, and enable the presence of the Divine in the world. According to the same model, says the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, the *mitzvot* that a person observes connect the Divine abundance to the world. This is how man, through his actions, adds abundance to the world.

Based on this foundation, let us return to the main points that we saw in the previous *shiur*: A blessing is an addition of abundance toward God. The plain meaning of the verse, "And you shall bless the Lord your God," is that abundance enters the Divine world through your power. This concept of blessing is based precisely on the principle that we have just explained: man has the ability to add to the Divine manifestation, or, using a formulation that we have encountered in the past: prayer is a Divine need.

The concept of prayer as a Divine need appears already among the early kabbalists. The Ramban alludes to it, and Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai explains it in detail in his book, *Avodat Ha-Kodesh*. One might understand that the service of God is not really a Divine need, but is intended for man; when a person serves God, he himself moves forward. The service of God is similar to a task that a parent gives a child in order to help him, as it were, but in fact the parent does not need this help at all and only wants to educate his son. However, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* implies otherwise: the service is actually a Divine need. While it is true that man is built from it, that is not the main purpose of the Divine service. According to this possibility, the service of God is similar not to an educational task given to a child, but to military service. It is true that a soldier can shape his personality in the army, but that is not what the army is meant for; it is merely a side benefit. The soldier serves the army, not the other way around. In the service of God, man does not act for the purpose of his personal betterment, but for a higher purpose.

This has a significant impact on the appropriate intention while engaged in God's service. According to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, the whole purpose of man's service of God should be to add strength to the supernal Divine chariot. In prayer, for example, he should not make requests about his personal matters. So far, we have seen this idea only with regard to blessings, but the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* clarifies that blessings serve as a prototype for all service of God:

And it is fitting for each person of the holy nation, whose heart is anxious that his actions be acceptable before Him (blessed be He), to combine this thought and the purity of the desired intention in involvement with Torah and performance of all the commandments, to draw forth and to increase, by way of that nourishment, a holiness and new light in the worlds. (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 3, chap. 8)

Not only are blessings a Divine need – to add abundance in the upper worlds – but so too are the *mitzvot* and prayer. All Divine service is built on the foundation expressed in the blessing formula. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* presents this as a *kal va-chomer* argument: if all the *mitzvot* are a Divine need, as are the blessings, this is all the more true about prayer, which is similar in its essence to blessings.

However, this argument is not at all self-evident, for although the plain meaning of the wording of a blessing is that we are adding abundance to heaven ("And you shall bless the Lord your God"), the plain meaning of the wording of prayer is that we are submitting requests for ourselves.

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* overcomes this difficulty by arguing that the wording of the prayer should not be understood in its simple sense, because the Men of the Great Assembly planted deep secrets in it:

And the wise one will understand on his own that it wasn't for no reason that one-hundred-and-twenty elders (and among them a few prophets) were needed to establish a brief supplication and a short prayer such as this. Rather, because they discerned with their Holy Spirit and with the discernment of their supernal prophecy, and all the paths of the designs of the Creation and the parts of the Chariot shone brightly for them, and because of this they set the foundation of and fixed the form of the blessings and the prayer service using these specific words, because of how they saw and discerned on which path the light of each specific word would rest, how [that word] is extremely necessary to rectify the multitude of worlds and the supernal powers and the assembly of the Chariot. And as they stated: "The service is a Divine need." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 10)

At the same time, the principle of service as a Divine need is sometimes also reflected in the plain meaning of prayer. The main proof that the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* brings for this comes from the Rosh Ha-shana liturgy:

And we see when we examine the wording of the Rosh Ha-shana prayer service that it is organized from its start to its end so as to honor His sovereignty (blessed be His name), that it should be as exalted as it was in the beginning prior to the sin of the first man. And also the wording of the daily prayer service, even though it superficially appears to mostly be organized relative to the matters of our personal needs, with certainty, it is clear to all who understand, as can be determined from its context, that the Men of the Great Assembly did not intend the plain meaning of the words alone, and it is as I wrote above in chapter 10. "And the prayer services were designed to correspond to the daily offerings" (*Berakhot* 26b) – that the sacrifices were wholly consumed by the fire. They departed completely to the supernal heights, and no part of them remained here in the mundane. (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 11)

Indeed, the Rosh Ha-shana prayer is clearly focused on the kingdom of God – but that is the uniqueness of the Rosh Ha-shana prayer; during the rest of the year, prayer seems to be devoted primarily to personal requests. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* explains that the Rosh Ha-shana prayer is a prototype for all prayers, and not an exceptional prayer. But while it could be understood that the first prayer of the year marks the direction for the whole year, the text of the regular prayers seems to indicate otherwise, as it is filled with requests for the petitioner's personal needs.

To counter this difficulty, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* brings the words of *Chazal* that the prayers were designed to correspond to the daily offerings. On the simple level, one might ask how prayer can be in place of sacrifices; after all, sacrifices are about giving over and raising up from us to God, whereas in prayer, we ask God to give to us. (The Maharal dealt with this question in *Netiv Ha-Avoda.*)The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* resolves this difficulty in a simple way: Prayer, too, is an activity that is directed toward God. Like a sacrifice, its goal is not personal requests, but an action toward God. In light of this, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* arrives at a far-reaching conclusion: prayer should not be aimed at our personal needs at all.

**Concentrating Only on the Words**

According to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, though prayer is worded in a way that makes it look like a collection of personal requests, the Men of the Great Assembly directed every word toward the needs of God. Why, then, did they formulate prayer as if it were for our own needs? It could be argued that had prayer been formulated as an action for the needs of God, we would not have been motivated to pray. The Sages wanted to inspire us to pray, and therefore they formulated it like personal requests. However, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* himself, in his remarks about intention in payer, points us in a different direction.

And the advice offered about this is as the Maggid said to the Beit Yosef in the second warning at the beginning of the book *Maggid Meisharim*: "To be careful of thinking any thought during prayer, even related to Torah and *mitzvot*, other than the words of the prayer themselves." Pay close attention to his words, that he didn't say to attend to the intention of the words, for in truth, none of us understand the slightest about the depths of the inner meaning of the prayer, for even what has been revealed to us about a few of the intentions of the prayer from our earliest Sages, the supernal holy ones, until the recent holy rabbi, man of God, the awe-inspiring Ari *z”l*, who achieved wonders and greatness authoring incredible intentional-meditations, are not, in comparison, more than a drop in the ocean relative to the inner depths of the intentions of the Men of the Great Assembly, codifiers of the prayer, who were one-hundred and-twenty elders, among them a few prophets. And those who are capable of understanding will understand that there is no one currently in the world who is capable of codifying such a wondrous and awesome rectification, to incorporate into and to hide in the formula of the prayer, permanently fixed and configured in a single formula, the rectifications for all the worlds, upper and lower, and the configurations of the components of the Chariot. And each occasion of praying causes new rectifications in the configuration of the worlds and the powers, and the drawing down of other new *mochin*. From the moment that it was codified until the coming of the redeemer (quickly, in our day), there never was and never will be another prayer that, in its details, resembles others that came before and after in any way. "The garments worn in the morning are not worn in the evening, and those worn in the evening…", as is written in the *Tikkunim* (*Tikkun* 22), and so too each day relative to the ones that preceded and follow. And for that reason, the Sages stated (*[Chagiga](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Chagigah.9b)* [9b](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Chagigah.9b), and in *Bamidbar Rabba*, chapter 9): "'What is distorted cannot be corrected' ([*Kohelet* 1:15](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Ecclesiastes.1.15)) – one who missed the recitation of *Shema*… or prayer"; and as is written at length in the *Pri Etz Chaim*, chapter 7 of *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla*, refer there [for more details]. And it would have been impossible if not via the supernal level of prophecy and His holy spirit that manifested over them in an enormous manifestation during the codification of the wording of the formula of the prayer and the blessings. He (blessed be His name) placed in their mouths these numbered words, and hidden within them are all the rectifications. For that reason, who can understand God's hidden secrets to the depths of His (blessed be His name) intention, on which path will the light of each specific word settle? (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 13)

According to what Rabbi Yosef Karo heard from the "Maggid" who revealed himself to him, one should concentrate only on the words of prayer themselves. One should not think about the meaning of the words, because there is a huge gap between the apparent meaning of the words and their true intention! According to the same principle, there is no reason to ask why the wording of the prayer appears to be personal requests, since in general, we have no understanding of the intentions behind the words determined by the Men of the Great Assembly.

**Personal Requests in Prayer**

If the value of the words established by the Sages, which are formulated as requests, is in the much deeper meaning they conceal, we must then ask about the words that we ourselves add to prayer. How can it be that it is possible to make personal requests in prayer? The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* concedes that this is a valid question, but the whole matter of personal requests actually raises an even greater difficulty: Does God not know what is good for us? How, then, can we present new requests on our own? If a doctor has decided that the best thing for his patient is surgery, can the patient ask the doctor not to operate on him?

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* explains that adding requests is meaningful – *if* they are made for the sake of the people of Israel:

And even though it is clearly taught as a legal ruling in the Talmud ([*Sanhedrin* 8a](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Sanhedrin.8a)) that an individual is permitted to add statements in his prayers relating to his personal needs and suffering, in each blessing according to its topic, again the primary intention should not be his own personal suffering; this is not the correct approach for those who are righteous in their hearts. For in truth, we would wonder how it could be appropriate to plead in any way from Him (blessed be His name) to relieve him of his suffering and torments. As with the healing of the body, if the physician administers powerful drugs, or if the physician must completely amputate a limb so that the toxins of the illness do not spread further, would the patient plead to him that he shouldn't administer the drugs or amputate the limb? Lo, the patient himself has hired him for that reason; thusly, how can he pour out his heart before Him (blessed be His name) to remove from upon him the torments, for aren't they the bandage and the life-preserving drug to atone for his sins? And the Sages stated ([*Shabbat* 58a](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Shabbat.58a)): "There are no torments without sin," for if it weren't so, how, using what method, could the sinning soul achieve atonement?

However, the ultimate intention must only be the need of God, because in a place where there is a desecration of His name (blessed be His name), as when the community of Israel is suffering – "when it is said of them: 'they are God's nation'" ([*Yechezkel* 36:21](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Ezekiel.36.21)) – while they are stricken and tortured, it is incumbent upon them to supplicate and to pour out their hearts before Him (blessed be His name) regarding the desecration of His name (blessed be His name), and to do it only for the sake of His name. And so too the individual, regarding his own suffering, even if there is no desecration of the name in the matter, there is an opening too to supplicate Him regarding the large amount of supernal suffering that occurs when a person merits suffering in the lower world, as the Sages stated in the Mishna, chapter six of [*Sanhedrin* (46a)](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Sanhedrin.46): "Rabbi Meir said: When a person is in distress, what does the *Shekhina* say? 'I am disgraced by my head; I am disgraced by my arm.'" And they said in *Shemot Rabba* (*parasha* 2)…on the verse "I am sleeping, my twin…" (*Shir Ha-Shirim* [5:2](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Song_of_Songs.5.2)): "What happens with these twins, that when one's head hurts, the other senses it, so too states the Holy One (blessed be He) (*Tehillim* 91:15): 'I am with him in [times of] distress.'" And in the *Tanchuma* (at the end of *Parashat Acharei Mot*): "All salvation that comes to Israel is of the Holy One (blessed be He), for it states: 'I am with him in [times of] distress'"; that is to say, that it concludes with "I will show him My salvation" (*Tehillim* 91:16). It is Your salvation, for it is stated (ibid 80:3): "It is for You to save us." And in *Shokher Tov* (on *Tehillim* 13:6): "'My heart will exult in Your salvation.' Rabbi Eliezer said: This is one of the difficult texts, that the salvation of the Holy One (blessed be He) is the salvation of Israel. It doesn’t say 'in our salvation' but rather 'in Your salvation'… Your salvation is our salvation." And refer to *Zohar* *Emor* (90, top of second folio) in the matter of the verse "Salvation is God's." And this is "I am with him in [times of] distress." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 11)

The name of God is revealed in the world through the people of Israel, and therefore, every prayer for the sake of the people of Israel is ultimately for the name of God. The *Amida* prayer is full of requests for the people of Israel, and at their peak, the requests become for the sake of the name of God – "who restores His *Shekhina* to Zion," "Beneficent is Your name, and to You it is fitting to offer thanks." Requests of this type, which are aimed at honoring the *Shekhina*, have a place in prayer.

This brings the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* back to the literal meaning of the familiar prayer, to the point that it is not clear why the course that we saw earlier was necessary. If it is possible to understand in a simple way how the prayer is intended for the sake of God, why distance it from human understanding and perceive it in such an abstract way, as words that are not aimed at their simple meaning but at hidden secrets that are stored in its letters and words? Why not say that the entire prayer is for the sake of the people of Israel, and thus it is for the honor of the *Shekhina*?

It seems that prayer serves Divine needs on two levels. Prayer for the sake of God is directed from the outset as high as possible, but it also has meaning in earthly reality. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* does not waive the higher level, which is the essence of prayer. While it is true that prayers for the people of Israel are also for the sake of God, the essence of prayer is still to increase the honor of Heaven in a much higher and deeper sense.

(Translated by David Strauss)