

Daily Prayer: Seeking Clarity and a Call for Action*

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Rambam in *Hilkhhot Tefillah* 1:1 rules:¹

It is a *Mitzvat Aseh* to pray daily because it says (*Shemot* 23:25) “you should worship Hashem, your God.” We are taught by tradition that this worship consists of prayer. It also says (*Devarim* 10:13) “and to worship Him with all your hearts.” The Rabbis taught that “worship of the heart” is prayer.

The basis for this Mitzvah is *Mitzvat Aseh* 5 in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*², which defines prayer as the practical enactment of the commandment to worship God. It is a daily obligation to worship God through prayer, independent of whether good or bad things are happening.

There is, however, another *Mitzvat Aseh* that requires us to pray at times of need. In *Sefer Hamitzvot*, *Mitzvat Aseh* 59, based on *Be-Midbar* 10:9-10, we read:

We are commanded to blow trumpets at times of disaster and when bad things happen to us, as we supplicate Him. As it says

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¹ מצות עשה להתפלל בכל יום, שנאמר "ועבדתם את ה' אלוהיכם". מפי השמועה למדו שעבודה זו—היא תפילה, ונאמר "ולעבדו בכל לבבכם" אמרו חכמים, איזו היא עבודה שבלב, זו היא תפילה.

² המצווה החמישית: היא הציווי שנצטוונו לעבדו יתעלה. ונכפל הציווי הזה כמה פעמים ואמר "ועבדתם את ה' אלקיכם" (שמות כג, כה); ואמר "ואתו תעבדו" (דברים יג, ה); ואמר "ואתו תעבד" (שם ו, יג); ואמר "ולעבדו" (שם יא, יג). ואף על פי שגם הציווי הזה הוא מן הציוויים הכוללים—כמו שביארנו בכלל הרביעי—הרי יש בו ייחוד, כי הוא ציווי על התפילה. ולשון ספרי: "ולעבדו—זו תפלה". ואמרו עוד: "ולעבדו—זה תלמוד". ובמשנתו של ר' אליעזר בנו של ר' יוסי הגלילי אמרו: "מנין לעיקר תפילה בתוך המצוות? מהכא: את ה' אלקיך תירא ואתו תעבד" (שם ו, יג). ואמרו: "עבדהו בתורתו, עבדהו במקדשו"—הכוונה לשאוף להתפלל בו ונכחו כמו שביאר שלמה.

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“and when you come in battle in your land [against the foe who assails you, you will blow the trumpets you will be remembered before Hashem your God and you will be rescued from your enemies.]”³

That Mitzvah is found in *Hilkhot Ta’anuyot* 1:1-3.

It is a scriptural *Mitzvat Aseh* to supplicate and blow horns for any disaster that befalls the community, as it says “... against the foe that assails you, you will blow the trumpets.” Meaning,⁴ that any matter that assails you, for example should a famine, a pestilence, locust and other such things [befall you], supplicate about them and blow [trumpets]. This [action] belongs to the category of *teshuvah* because as they supplicate and blow [trumpets] when a disaster occurs, all will realize that the bad thing that happened to them is a consequence of their bad actions, as it says, “your sins brought these upon you.” That will cause for the disaster to be removed from them. But should they not supplicate and not blow [trumpets], saying that this thing is natural, that the disaster is happenstance, this is cruel behavior, for this will cause them to remain attached to their bad ways. This will bring about a recurrence and other disasters upon them. That is what is written in the Torah, “should you walk with Me in happenstance, I too will walk with you in happenstance.” Meaning that, when I bring upon you a disaster so that you should repent, if you will attribute it to happenstance, I will bring upon you more of this happenstance wrath.⁵

³ המצווה הנ"ט: הציווי שנצטוונו לתקוע בחצוצרות במקדש בעת הקרבת כל קורבן מקורבנות הפרקים. והוא אמרו יתעלה: "וביום שמחתכם ובמועדיכם ובראשי חדשכם ותקעתם בחצוצרות" (שם י, י). ובפרוש אמרו, שמצוות היום בחצוצרות. וכבר נתבארנו דיני מצווה זו בספרי וראש השנה ותעניות, כי אנו מצווים לתקוע בחצוצרות בזמן הצרות והרעות כשנזעק אליו יתעלה [כמו ש]אמר: "וכי תבואו מלחמה בארצכם וגו'" (שם שם, ט)

⁴ Rambam is explaining that the statement “against the foe that assails you” represents all bad things that may occur.

⁵ מצות עשה מן התורה, לזעוק ולהריע בחצוצרות על כל צרה שתבוא על הציבור, שנאמר "על הצר הצורר אתכם והרעותם בחצוצרות" (במדבר י, ט) כלומר כל דבר שיצר לכם כגון בצורת ודבר וארבה וכיוצא בהן, זעקו עליהן והריעו. ודבר זה, דרך מדרכי התשובה הוא: שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו לה ויריעו, יידעו הכול שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הרע להן--ככתוב "עוונותיכם הטו אלה" (ירמיהו ה, כה) לכם, וזה הוא שיגרום להם להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

We clearly have here two separate commandments⁶ which belong to two different categories of Mitzvot, worship and repentance, both of which have the same practical enactment, prayer. One requires contemplative prayer while the other requires petitionary prayer, the difference between the two modalities being the content, the words and the attitude, that the person has when performing each. They have different purposes; petition brings about repentance, while contemplative prayer is a form of worship. However, when Chazal instituted exactly how daily *tefillah* should be performed, they merged these two modalities.

One should pray and petition every day, each according to their ability and [first] recite the praises of HKBH, thereafter seek all one's needs by petitioning and supplicating, followed by praising and thanking God for all the good He bestowed upon the person. (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:2)⁷

אבל אם לא יזעקו, ולא יריעו, אלא יאמרו דבר זה ממנהג העולם אירע לנו, וצרה זו נקרוה נקרית—הרי זו דרך אכזרייות, וגורמת להם להידבק במעשיהם הרעים, ותוסיף הצרה וצרות אחרות: הוא שכתוב בתורה, "והלכתם עימי בקרי". והלכתי עימכם בחמת קרי" (ויקרא כו, כז-כח), כלומר כשאביא עליכם צרה, כדי שתשובו—אם תאמרו שהוא קרי, אוסיף עליכם חמת אותו קרי.

⁶ It is important to note that Ramban, in his comments on *Sefer Hamitzvot* and elsewhere in his writings, disagrees with Rambam. Ramban argues that Halakhah regards *tefillah* as rabbinic and not as scriptural law. He therefore reads the *Sifrei* cited above in note 2 as an *asmakhta*, and holds that all prayer is petitionary. The only prayer Ramban counts as scriptural is petitioning during hard times; he bases this on the verse in *Be-Midbar*, which is petitionary prayer. The rabbinic Mitzvah of *tefillah* is, according to him, an extension of that Mitzvah. Theologically, Ramban has a different understanding of providence, and sees *tefillah* as an important component of that theory: we declaim our belief that all existence is a hidden miracle, thus a constant crisis. See his *Perush Al haTorah* on *Shemot* 13:16. The difference between these two great *Rishonim* is consistent throughout their thinking about providence and theology in general, and begins already with the first *Mitzvat Aseh*. This discussion, however, is not within the scope of this article. Regarding Providence and Ramban, see Professor David Berger's article, available on line at <<http://www.zootorah.com/books/MiraclesNahmanides.pdf>>.

⁷ אלא חיוב מצוה זו, כך הוא—שיהא אדם מתפלל ומתחנן בכל יום, ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להן בבקשה ובתחינה, ואחר כך נותן שבה והודיה לה' על הטובה שהשפיע לו: כל אחד כפי כוחו.

In this article, I would like to explore why Chazal introduced petition and supplication into the daily prayer. From the presentation in *Hilkhot Ta'anuyot*, it would seem that one petitions only when bad things happen; i.e., it is occurrence dependent. How then did it become a daily requirement? We will attempt to define worship, prayer as worship of the heart, prayer as petition and supplication,⁸ and what they accomplish and mean according to Rambam.

Worship and Divine Providence

In MN 3:51, Rambam defines the idea of worship and its place in a person's development:

It [this chapter] is only a kind of conclusion, at the same time explaining the worship as practiced by one who has apprehended the true realities peculiar only to Him after he has obtained an apprehension of what He is. It also guides him toward achieving this worship, which is the end of man, and makes known to him how providence watches over him in this habitation until he is brought over to the bundle of life.⁹

In this short paragraph, Rambam links worship to apprehension of God, the “end [goal] of man” and to providence. A person, having through contemplation apprehended God and “the true realities peculiar to Him,” can now practice the ultimate mode of worship, the one that is “the end of man.” That person also knows how providence watches over him while he is alive in this world. What exactly is this ultimate and ideal worship?¹⁰

The Torah has made it clear that this last worship to which we have drawn attention in this chapter can only be engaged in af-

⁸ In this article, I use *supplication* and *petition* interchangeably. When the word בקשה is used, I translate as *petition* and when תחינה or זעקה is used, I translate as *supplication*.

⁹ All *Moreh Ha-Nevukhim* (MN) quotes are from the Pines edition with some minor changes for clarity.

¹⁰ I am reading the above quote from MN as a sequential personal development. It could also be read as three separate teachings that Rambam is planning to share in the upcoming chapter. From the context in the chapter, however, these teachings are clearly sequential.

ter apprehension has been achieved. It says, “To love Hashem your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul.” Now we have made it clear several times that love is proportionate to apprehension. After love, comes this worship to which attention has also been drawn by the sages who said, “This is the worship of the heart.” In my opinion it consists in setting thought to work on the first intelligible and in devoting oneself exclusively to this as far as this is within one’s capacity. (MN 3:51)

Rambam sees *tefillab*—prayer, “worship of the heart” as the ultimate worship. Prayer consists of thinking about HKBH, attaining an apprehension of Him and devoting one’s mind to that endeavor. It is a contemplative process that is expressed through the act of praying. However,

As for someone who thinks and frequently mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of his reliance on the authority of somebody else, he is to my mind outside the habitation and far away from it and does not in true reality mention or think about God. (MN 3:51)

This worship can therefore only come when one attains correct apprehension. A person that has not yet reached the levels of knowledge and devotion to seeking intellectual perfection “does not in true reality mention or think about God.”

For that thing which is in his imagination and which he mentions in his speech does not correspond to any being at all and has merely been invented by his imagination.... (Ibid)

How then can prayer be required of all? How can it be a *Mitzvat Aseh* to pray daily, even for the beginner who has not yet even begun the process of apprehension? Rambam continues explaining,

Know that all the practices of the worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, rather than with matters pertaining to this world. (MN 3:51)

All *Mitzvot Aseh* have as a goal to focus our minds on HKBH, who commanded them. As we focus our minds, we start contemplating and apprehend HKBH, each according to his capacity. Prayer is the *Mitzvah* that is particular to “the heart,” the training of the mind to concentrate on this contemplation. It starts out as a training process, even for the beginner, which slowly metamorphoses into the ultimate worship.

From here on I will begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast onto is that, while reciting the *Shema* and praying,¹¹ you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus. You should not content yourself with being intent while reciting the first verse of *Shema* and saying the first *berakhab*.... When this has been carried out correctly for years, cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed—the whole of you and your thought—toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading. When this too has been practiced ... (MN 3:51)

There is a process of self-discipline, of slowly becoming focused on the words and contemplating them carefully. Prayer starts as a training for concentrated meditation and contemplation about God—“what you are listening to or reading,” until it becomes a part of the person to the point that it occupies all his time. When a person reaches this advanced level of immersion in the apprehension of God, prayer becomes the kind of worship that is the “end of man.” At this point, this perfected person knows how providence watches over him. What is the connection and what does knowing how providence works mean?

It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their go-

¹¹ The Pines edition translates “*Shema* prayer.” *Shema* is not a prayer. I therefore followed Rav Kafih and Schwartz who translate “and praying.”

vernance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, just as we have explained several times in this treatise. (MN 3:54)

In other words, a person that has reached the higher levels of apprehension, who therefore understands the ways of HKBH, acts in a way that conforms and emulates the ways of HKBH. To “know how providence watches over him” means to act according to this understanding. Acting in this manner cannot lead to a bad outcome.¹² That is the meaning of Divine Providence, the “providence that watches over a person.” A person of this caliber acts with specific goals in mind, goals that conform to his understanding of HKBH’s ways. If he is correct in his understanding, his actions are going to bring about the desired outcome, which is continued existence. Continued existence is good by definition; it is the ultimate good.

Rather all His acts are an absolute good; for He only produces being and all being is good... Accordingly, the true reality of the act of God in its entirety is the good, for the good is being... Even the existence of this inferior matter, whose manner of being it is to be a concomitant of privation entailing death and all evils, all this is good in view of the perpetuity of generation and the permanence of being through succession. (MN3:10)

If an act brings about continuity of existence, even if in the short-term it seems to be bad or evil, it is in reality good. Death and destruction of an individual is necessary for the survival of the whole through procreation [generation] and succession. An act that has as its long-term goal the survival of the whole is by definition “good”. The challenge is to know how to act with that goal of continued existence in mind and to know that it is the correct action that will bring about the desired result. This internal process of developing correct apprehension of God, understanding His ways and

¹² For a thorough discussion, see my “Divine Providence—Goals, Hopes and Fears” in *Hakirah* 5, p. 132 and onward.

emulating them by acting accordingly is dependent on the personal state of mind of the person. Personal biases and moral and ethical imperfections will easily result in wrong conclusions and at times harmful acts. Introspection and self-analysis, moral and ethical perfection are therefore prerequisites for proper apprehension and action.

Supplication and Repentance

In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:12 Rambam rules:

הרי הוא אומר "אני ה', לא שניתני" ואילו היה פעמים כועס ופעמים שמח,
היה משתנה.

It says, "I, God, have not changed", and if He would at times be angry at others happy, that would be change.

Clearly, God does not change His mind, so how are we to understand supplication when something bad happens to us? Are we asking God to do the impossible and change His mind? It is with this in mind that we must read the halakhah in *Hilkhot Ta'anuyot* about supplication, which was quoted earlier.

This [action] belongs to the category of *teshuvah* because as they supplicate and blow [trumpets] when a disaster occurs, all will realize that the bad thing that happened to them is a consequence of their bad actions as it says, "your sins brought these upon you." That will cause for the disaster to be removed from them.

In other words, our supplications do not change God's mind; it has an effect on us. It makes us pay attention to what caused this mishap and we repent by changing our ways. Once we realize it is our actions that have brought this upon us, we can start the process of repentance, trying to repair the evil we caused and working toward preventing a recurrence. The process of *teshuvah*—repentance—requires a deep acknowledgement and understanding of what we did wrong. It also requires self-awareness and a very thorough and genuine self-evaluation and self-analysis. It is only when we are able to achieve that insight that we can begin the

process of repenting.¹³ Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:3 describes the great difficulty one can encounter in acknowledging that a wrong was committed and what a corrective action should be. In a discussion about free will, he addresses the case of Pharaoh and his stubbornness in refusing to let the Jewish people out of Egypt in spite of the great destruction he suffered because of it.

It is possible for a person to have transgressed on a great sin or many sins to the point that the True Judge finds it that the punishment for this sin or sins that he committed willfully, is to prevent him from repenting. He is no longer allowed to abandon his wickedness so that he dies and is lost because of the sins that he transgressed...

That is what is written in the Torah, “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart.” As he sinned on his own and treated badly the Jews living in his land as it says, “let us conspire about them,” justice required that he be prevented from repenting until he was punished. That is why HKBH hardened his heart.¹⁴

Pharaoh was so invested in the feudal system of slave and vassal under which his country operated that he could not see how wrong his ways were. He saw his actions as correct, and the Israelites who were yearning for freedom, as lazy and rebellious slaves who had to be subdued. Any other resolution to the crisis he faced would have

¹³ The first halakhah that introduces *Hilkhot Teshuvah* requires acknowledgement of the wrong done.

כל המצוות שבתורה, בין עשה בין לא תעשה—אם עבר אדם על אחת מהן, בין בזדון בין בשגגה—כשיעשה תשובה וישוב מחטאו, חייב להתוודות לפני האל ברוך הוא: שנאמר "איש או אישה כי יעשו מכל חטאת האדם... והתוודו, את חטאתם אשר עשו" זה וידוי דברים. וידוי זה מצות עשה.

Viduy is the beginning of the process of self-evaluation, acknowledging that it is our actions that had these consequences. Self-analysis can only begin once we stop blaming external reasons for our misfortune.

¹⁴ ואפשר שיחטא האדם חטא גדול או חטאים הרבה, עד שייתן הדין לפני דיין האמת שיהיה הפירעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו, שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו, כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאים שעשה... לפיכך כתוב בתורה "ואני אחזק את לב פרעה" לפי שחטא מעצמו תחילה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו, שנאמר "הבה נתחכמה לו" נתן הדין למנוע ממנו התשובה, עד שנפרעין ממנו; לפיכך חיזק הקדוש ברוך הוא את ליבו.

destroyed the way of life of the Egyptian monarchy.¹⁵ That is the meaning of God hardening the heart of Pharaoh; he could not accept anything but the status quo. Rambam then explains that this idea is important in understanding the process of *teshuvah*.

Why then did He send him [messages] through Moshe telling him to repent and send [the people out] having predicted that he would not? To let all peoples know¹⁶ that when HKBH prevents the sinner from repenting, he cannot do so and ends up dying because of the evil he started doing while [he still had] his free will.¹⁷

We all have to be aware of this human tendency of being blinded by our own biases and cultural environment, which results in a distorted understanding of right and wrong. We can never be certain that the decision of how to act, even when one has decided to repent and repair the damage his actions have wrought, is the correct thing to do, without a genuine and in-depth personal analysis. The lesson the Torah teaches us by showing us the way Pharaoh acted is universal for all sinners who want to repent. They have to overcome that barrier that has been put up by their past wrongs. These past sins influence our personal biases and our state of mind, distorting our understanding of right and wrong, blinding us from seeing the correct action that will prevent the evil that we brought about from continuing and repeating itself. We find ourselves in the same state of uncertainty and insecurity that we face, when we achieve high levels of apprehension and want to emulate God's ways.

It is here that supplication enters into the process of repentance. As we saw with Pharaoh and the other examples Rambam presents

¹⁵ See Meiri *Hibur Ha-Teshuvah Ma'amar 1 Perek 6* (Kedem Edition Jerusalem 5736, fourth edition, p. 152, s.v. *Ve'annam*) for an elaboration on this with a slightly different slant.

¹⁶ Note how Rambam uses the term באי העולם—all peoples—not only Jews. It is a lesson to humanity that internal biases and ethical and moral imperfection prevent everyone from seeing the truth.

¹⁷ ולמה היה שולח לו ביד משה ואומר לו שלח ועשה תשובה, וכבר אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שאין אתה משלח... כדי להודיע לבאי העולם, שבזמן שמונע הקדוש ברוך הוא התשובה לחוטא, אינו יכול לשוב, אלא ימות ברשעו שעשה בתחילה ברצונו.

in these halakhot, changing one's outlook is an almost impossible task. That realization humbles the sinner and he is so overwhelmed by the enormity of the task he faces that he turns to HKBH and asks for His help.

It is in this vein that the prophets and righteous ask in their prayers, that God help [to find] the true path, as David said, "God teach me Thy ways", namely let not my sins keep me from the true path, from which I will learn the uniqueness of Your name and Your ways. So too when he said "[give me back the gladness of your rescue] and with a noble spirit sustain me,"¹⁸ namely, let my spirit accomplish its wish and let not my sins stand in the way of repentance; give me the freedom to again understand and know the true path.¹⁹

There is a surprising shift in Rambam's presentation. Until now the halakhot were discussing repentance and how sinners have to be aware of the difficulties they face. However, when describing the natural and recommended reaction to their dilemma, Rambam tells us what "the prophets and the righteous" do. All of them, the prophets and the righteous who are looking for the "true path," and the sinner who is repenting and trying to understand the corrective action he must take, face the same dilemma; overcoming their personal biases and interests. This challenge for both is so overwhelming that they turn to God in supplication to help them. The genuine realization of the human condition and the strong yearning to overcome it which is manifested by turning to God for help lets the person clear his mind to find the right action—the "true path."

¹⁸ Radak in his *perush* on *Tehillim* understands Rambam as focusing on the word תסמכני—sustain me. To ask God to sustain us means to ask Him to remove the things that blind us.

רד"ק תהלים פרק נא והרב הגדול והחכם הרמב"ם ז"ל (הל' תשובה פ"ו ה"ד) פירש: תסמכני, תניח רוחי הנדיבה לעשות חפצה ואל יגרמו לי חטאי למנוע לי התשובה, אלא תהא הרשות בידי עד שאחזור ואבין דרך האמת.

¹⁹ ובעניין זה שואלין הנביאים והצדיקים בתפילותיהם מה' לעזורם על דרך האמת, כמו שאמר דוד "הורני ה', דרכך" כלומר אל ימנעוני חטאי דרך האמת, שממנה אדע דרכך וייחוד שמך. וכן זה שאמר "ורוח נדיבה, תסמכני" כלומר תניח רוחי לעשות חפצה ואל יגרמו לי חטאי למנועני התשובה, אלא תהיה הרשות בידי, עד שאחזור ואבין ואדע דרך האמת.

The next halakhah, which explains this process, again presents the sinner and the seeker side by side.

What is the meaning of what David said, “Good and upright is Hashem; therefore He guides offenders on the way. He leads the lowly in justice and teaches the lowly His ways”? He sent them prophets who taught them the ways of God and brought about their repentance. Furthermore, He gave them [the lowly] the ability to learn and think. For it is human nature that whenever a man is attracted by the ways of knowledge and righteousness, he yearns for them and pursues them. That is what the rabbis meant with their saying, “One who wants to purify himself is helped”. Namely, he will find that he is naturally inclined [literally: helped] to it.²⁰

The prophet comes to aid the sinner and both, the sinner and the righteous [the lowly] who yearn for the truth and pursue it, can overcome their internal barriers if they put their mind to it and find the true path. Supplication is the expression of that great yearning.

Daily Prayer as Meditation and Petition

The first three [*berakhot* of the *Shemona Esreh*] praise God and the last three [are *berakhot*] of acknowledgement. The middle ones contain requests [that cover] all matters that are a kind of headings [literally: fathers] for all the wishes of each individual as well as of the whole community.²¹

The daily prayer is the practical expression of worship of HKBH. It is a form of meditation with the goal of apprehending, each according to his ability, God and His ways. One begins by praising God, focusing on how we see Him in relation to the world and its people and on His actions. This meditation leads us to yearn

²⁰ ומה הוא זה שאמר דויד "טוב וישר ה'; על כן יורה חטאים בדרך. ידרך ענווים במשפט; וילמד ענווים דרכו" זה ששלח להם נביאים מודיעים להם דרכי ה', ומחזירין אותן בתשובה. ועוד שנתן בהם כוח ללמוד ולהבין, שמידה זו בכל אדם, שכל זמן שהוא נמשך בדרכי החכמה והצדק, מתאוה להן ורודף אותן. והוא שאמרו חכמים בא ליטהר, מסייעין אותו—כלומר ימצא עצמו נעזר על הדבר.

²¹ שלוש ראשונות, שבה לה'; ושלוש אחרונות, הודיה; ואמצעייות, יש בהן שאילת כל הדברים שהן כמו אבות לכל חפצי איש ואיש, ולצורכי הציבור, כולם.

to emulate God and His ways by acting in a constructive way that perpetuates existence. Unfortunately, as human beings with a relatively short lifespan and outlook, we are full of doubts about how to act. We question the effectiveness and consequences of our planned actions, whether they are the result of an objective or subjective assessment of our situation. That realization, and the yearning to act in spite of these doubts, triggers petition and supplication where we ask God to help us see things objectively so that our subjective urges and emotions, the result of our human imperfection, do not cloud our vision. This is not necessarily the supplication of the sinner who is looking for ways to repair the damage he has done, but also the supplication of the seeker who wants to truly emulate God in his daily activities and sublimate his narcissistic human nature to the task at hand. As the person is confronted with each task and with the enormity of the decisions he faces, he introspects deeply within himself to find and overcome his own preferences and biases, looking for the “true path” that will bring about “good.” This form of supplication belongs to the category of worship—*avodah she-ba-lev*—and is an integral part of meditative prayer. It is the result of an apprehension of God that triggers a yearning to emulate Him, a yearning that is tinged with doubt and insecurity.

Originally, though prayer had an overall formula, it was left to each person to express these feelings in his own words. As the common person lost the ability to express himself correctly,²² the Rabbis, in their wish to help these people to express their yearning to emulate God, listed and highlighted the main daily activities and their goals in a preset template. The Rabbis, in the petitionary section of *tefillah*, established the first *berakhah*, *Ata Honen*, in which

²² כיון שגלו ישראל בימי נבוכדנאצר הרשע, נתערבו בפרס ויוון ושאר האומות, ונולדו להם בנים בארצות הגויים; ואותן הבנים נתבלבלה שפתם, והייתה שפת כל אחד ואחד מעורבת מלשונות הרבה. וכיון שהיה מדבר, אינו יכול לדבר כל צרכיו בלשון אחת אלא בשיבוש, שנאמר "ובניהם, חצי מדבר אשדודית, ואינם מכירים לדבר יהודית—וכלשון עם ועם" (נחמיה יג, כד).

ומפני זה, כשהיה אחד מהן מתפלל, תקצר לשונו לשאול חפציו או להגיד שבח הקדוש ברוך הוא בלשון הקודש, עד שיערב עימה לשונות אחרות. וכיון שראה עזרא ובית דינו כך, עמדו ותיקנו להם שמונה עשרה ברכות על הסדר.

(*Hil. Tefillah* 1:4-5).

the person asks for help in establishing the supremacy of the rational faculty over all the others. This overall clarity of thought is indispensable for what follows. That *berakhab* is followed by a request for help in making the right decision on how to repent. It is not only the sinner that must repent; we all are constantly fighting our internal inclination for short-term solutions and immediate satisfaction. The challenge to overcome this human tendency²³ and know how to act correctly in the future is great and requires divine inspiration. It is followed by a request to help us find our way to forgiveness. In other words, we ask for clarity to know what actions to take, if any, to repair the wrong that came about from our past misdeeds. It is only after such introspection that we can start acting, though still apprehensively and with great trepidation. We have to keep focused and not get distracted by the vagaries of life and in the fourth *berakhab*, we request divine help in keeping the goal in our minds.²⁴ We then turn to our daily actions both as individuals and as a community requesting help in making the right decision about specific acts without letting our personal bias interfere. We ask for help to make the right decisions in maintaining and repairing our health and in our daily work for sustenance. As a community we need to act correctly in reestablishing our independence by first bringing back our Sanhedrin, eradicating incorrect theology from our midst, establishing the supremacy of intellect and intellectuals, namely the righteous, rebuild the Beit Ha-Mikdash and Jerusalem, and finally act decisively to reestablish David's descendant as king ushering in the messianic times. These *berakhot* are followed by the

²³ See MN 1:2 and Rambam's description of Adam Ha-Rishon and *Hil. Teshuvah* 5:1:

רשות כל אדם נתונה לו: אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק, הרשות בידו; ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע, הרשות בידו. הוא שכתוב בתורה "הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו, לדעת, טוב ורע"—כלומר הן מין זה של אדם היה אחד בעולם, ואין לו מין שני דומה לו בזה העניין, שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ, ואין לו מי שיעכב על ידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע. וכיון שכן הוא, "פן ישלח ידו" I thank Rabbi Buchman for calling this point to my attention.

²⁴ It is noteworthy that in the *tefillah*, when bad things happen, we are required to add specific *berakhot* and supplications that deal with the mishap. They are added in immediately following this *berakhab*. See *Hil. Ta'anivot* chapter 4.

berakhab of *Shome'a Tefillah*, a general non-specific request covering all our other actions including the just-concluded sequence of petitions. The request for help to achieve clarity itself may be clouded by our ingrained biases. The common thread in all these *berachot* is that we do not request that God change anything in the conduct of the world, but rather we ask that we be freed from our own compulsions and incorrect notions about right and wrong and how to act. We ask for the return of our ability to use our free will without being restricted by our past misdeeds.²⁵ The supplication section is followed by acknowledgement. We acknowledge that we are dependent and live in God's world, the world of our Creator. We also acknowledge that all "good" and wisdom come from Him. This is a reiteration of the goals we must set for ourselves in our actions to conform to God's ways. It is in this state of mind that a person leaves prayer and goes about his daily affairs.²⁶ Thus Rambam ends the halakhot that deal with the procedures and formulas of *tefillah* for the morning and *Minḥab* prayers (*Hilkhot Tefillah* 7:17-18) with וַיִּפְטֹר לְמַעֲשָׂיו—and he leaves [to take care of] his affairs.²⁷

As it is with all Mitzvot, we are commanded to act. These actions compel us to try to understand their meaning and objective. So too it is with *tefillah*. We are taught from childhood to pray three times daily, a formulaic prayer that forces us to question its meaning. It eventually leads us to, each according to his ability, start on the journey to apprehension and responsible action. The simplistic petition of the child who asks for material goods becomes the sophisticated petition of the "prophets and righteous" who are filled with self-doubt about the actions they are contemplating as a result of their apprehension.

²⁵ A more thorough analysis of the meaning of each *berakhab* and the order they are prescribed according to this understanding of *tefillah* will hopefully be the subject of a future article.

²⁶ On *Shabbat* and *Hag* where the affairs revolve around learning and meditation there is no petition for help to know how to act correctly but how to meditate properly.

²⁷ In *Hilkhot Tefillah* 9:13 Rambam uses a similar term at the end of the *Minḥab* prayer of the *tzibur*. It is surprising, however, that he does not do the same at the *Shaharit* prayer of the *tzibur*.

Conclusion

The idea behind petitionary prayer is the same for the repentant and the “prophets and righteous.” Both are filled with self-doubt when they are faced with the decision of how to act correctly. To know how to act correctly, one must look at things objectively without being misled by self-interest and narcissistic biases. Ultimately, both the “prophets and righteous” and the sinner who is confronted with the consequences of his actions have to go through the same process of introspection that is the Mitzvah of *teshuvah*—repentance.²⁸ Rambam was very careful about where he placed a halakhah. Understanding why he placed a halakhah in a certain place informs us what his thinking was and how he understood the underlying concept. By placing the meaning of petitionary prayer in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* and not in *Hilkhot Ta’anuyot* or *Tefillah*, he teaches us that it belongs to the category of repentance. Genuine introspection generates so much self-doubt that the person becomes paralyzed and cannot act. He turns to HKBH in prayer for His help to attain objectivity, and only then can he feel secure enough to act.

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²⁸ Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik in his *Worship of the Heart* explains petitionary prayer as prayer in times of crisis, the constant human crisis. We can look at his approach as an attempt at synthesis of the two approaches, Rambam and Ramban, in which he tries to combine meditation with petition. I am inclined to interpret the crisis he speaks of as referring to the internal angst and self-doubt that we should all have before deciding how to act.