

Prayer Part III : Changing Ourselves, Changing The World (Edited Transcript)

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This is part three in a series of discussions on prayer.

A significant portion of our prayers is about asking Hashem for what we need. As we discussed last week, prayer has three components: praising G-d, requesting our needs from Him, and thanking Him. In fact, this is the structure of our Amidah: in the first part we praise G-d, in the second part we request everything we need, and in the final part we thank G-d. Quantitatively, requesting what we need comprises the bulk of the Amidah: thirteen out of nineteen blessings are requests, while the first and last three are about praise and thanksgiving, respectively. Thus we see that asking G-d for our needs is a crucial part of prayer.

But how does prayer really work? Is it simply about submitting our requests to G-d and having them fulfilled?

Divine decrees are calibrated according to our efforts

Many misunderstand the nature of prayer, thinking that our davening to Hashem is like a child nagging a parent - for example, when a child asks for a sweet and the parent knows it's in the child's best interest not to have it, but after the child cries and screams for long enough, the parent gives in, against his or her better judgment.

This superficial understanding does not cohere in the context of prayer to G-d. G-d does not change His mind, so to speak, on a whim; He is never mistaken nor does he simply "give in" because He is tired of our "nagging." What, then, is the point of asking G-d for what we want if He has already decided if and what He is going to give us? It's not as though He is going to change His mind and give us what we want just because we asked for it.

To sharpen this question, think about the Ma'ariv we say immediately after Yom Kippur. We have just concluded Yom Kippur with the Ne'ila service, the whole theme of which is how the gates of heaven are closed as everything has been decreed for the year; it is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur. And yet, in Ma'ariv immediately afterward, we ask G-d for health and sustenance.

If everything is written on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, what is the point of praying throughout the year? This question is especially poignant when we think about the Amidah that takes place immediately after Ne'ila. Why are we asking for things if they have already been decreed? If everything has already been decided, what is the point of praying and trying to change it?

Rav Yosef Albo, one of our great philosophers of the Middle Ages, gives an enlightening perspective on this in his book Sefer Ha'ikarim, in which he discusses three cardinal principles which form the philosophical foundations of Judaism: belief in G-d, belief that G-d gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai, and belief in the principle of reward and punishment. One of the topics he discusses is prayer, and he answers the question raised above using the following example: Does a farmer, for whom everything has been decreed on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, not have to plant anything? Can he just sit back and relax since anyhow it has already been decreed whether or not he will have a successful harvest? Certainly not. While it may have been decreed that he will have a bountiful harvest, his success is dependent on his efforts. This, says Rav Albo, is the model for understanding prayer.

Before discussing this further in the context of prayer, let us first understand what this means in the context of other areas of life - for example, earning a living.

As we know, our parnassa - what we are going to earn - during the year is determined on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Rav Albo explains that our livelihood is calibrated. G-d's decrees are not black and white, either one gets a million rand or one gets nothing, regardless of what one does. Rather, the decree is calibrated according to one's actions. In other words, to use the example of the farmer, if one puts in the effort and ploughs his field and does whatever is necessary - reaping, employing workers, finding buyers - then one will have a successful harvest and earn a decent living; and if not, he won't. (Of course, it could be that for some people, their particular decree is that their crops will fail even if they put in the effort; and for others there may be a special decree that they become wealthy without lifting a finger - for example, by winning the lottery. That is certainly possible. However, the decrees in heaven take our efforts and actions into account and can be calibrated accordingly.)

Having faith and doing our share

There is an interesting responsum of Rav Moshe Feinstein, one of our great halachic authorities of the twentieth century, which explains this point a bit further. Rav Moshe was asked whether one can take out insurance policies. If it is decreed in heaven that one's house is going to burn down, is one allowed to go against the decree and take out insurance?

Rav Moshe's answer to this question sheds light on our discussion as to what prayer really is. He says there is a basic principle in the Talmud, *ain somchin al ha'nes*, 'one does not rely on a miracle.' In fact, one cannot even ask G-d to perform a miracle. He quotes the Gemara which says that since the gender of the child is determined by the fortieth day of gestation, one is not allowed to pray for the gender of the child past the forty-day mark because this constitutes asking G-d to perform a miracle and change the laws of nature. G-d runs the world in accordance with the laws of nature, and we cannot ask Him to break His own laws and perform miracles. (Of course, there have been times in Jewish history when G-d changed the laws of nature and performed tremendous miracles - for example, at the Exodus, with the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea. But those are the exception to the rule; in general, G-d does not run the world through miraculous means but through the laws of nature and we may not rely on miracles.)

Rav Moshe adds that to earn a living without working hard is akin to relying on a miracle, because the decree, given after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, was *b'zei'at apecha tochal lechem*, 'by the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread.' This decree was for all future generations, which means that the normal, natural way of earning a living is through hard work - 'by the sweat of your brow.' Rav Moshe says that one who expects to earn a living without putting in any hard work is actually relying on a miracle. This is wrong, because G-d requires us to put in all reasonable efforts in order to earn a living. Thus, although there is a decree at Rosh Hashanah time regarding *parnassa*, says Rav Moshe, we still have to do our part, according to which G-d's decree is calibrated.

True, there are some people who earn money even though they do not put in any effort; that may have been decreed at Rosh Hashanah. And there are some people who do not earn enough money, even though they put in a lot of effort; that, too, may have been decreed at Rosh Hashanah. There is a variety of decrees which we can never fully understand, but our responsibility is to work in accordance with the natural laws of the universe and put in our effort, according to which there is a calibrated response in heaven. We do not know what the decree holds but we have to do our share.

Regarding the question of insurance, Rav Moshe ruled that it is simply part of responsible financial planning - whether it is life insurance, fire insurance, or a retirement policy. G-d granted financial planners the wisdom to develop the concept of insurance. Structuring our financial affairs in a responsible way is simply part of putting in the requisite effort. One cannot argue that if the house is meant to burn down, it will, and therefore no action should be taken. One must be responsible, take the right precautions and take out the right policies to be able to recoup the loss of a possible fire. Though the fire was decreed from heaven, the financial loss is not necessarily inevitable because G-d requires us to do the responsible thing and take out insurance.

Thus we see that although there are decrees which are issued on Rosh Hashanah and sealed on Yom Kippur, they are linked to our actions. Coming back to the discussion regarding prayer, Rav Albo says that prayer is the same: decrees are linked to our prayers. Meaning, a certain decree may have been issued, but G-d built into the original decree that it is dependent on our praying. G-d does not change his mind because we nag him. Rather, He issues the decree in such a way that our prayers can change its outcome.

For example, suppose G-d forbid there was a decree of ill health for a particular person. It could be, based on what Rav Albo says, that although the decree has been given, the person will be healed by praying. Or, it could be that, unfortunately, even with prayer, the person won't be healed. That, too, could have been part of the original decree. But we are required to pray, because it can affect the outcome of the decree - not because it's causes G-d to change His mind, so to speak, but because prayer was part of the original decree.

Changing ourselves through prayer

Furthermore, Rav Albo says, through the process of prayer we actually change who we are, and that in itself has the ability to change the decree. When we pray to G-d, we are transformed and uplifted. In fact, Rav Albo compares prayer to the process of repentance. Prayer, like repentance, changes who we are. It could be that a certain decree was issued, but if a person repents the decree might be changed in the merit of his or her repentance. The purpose of prayer is not to change G-d's mind but to change **us**. G-d issued the decree based on who the person was at that particular time. If, through the process of prayer, one has changed, if one has become uplifted and closer to G-d, then it is as though he or she is a new person and consequently the decree may change - not because G-d changed His mind, rather because the person has undergone a process of spiritual transformation. Prayer is a golden opportunity which Hashem has given us to become new people, to change ourselves and become closer to Him and thereby affect heavenly decrees.

Prayer is about changing who we are. When we change ourselves, we have the ability to change the world. There is always hope and the possibility of changing G-d's decrees, not in the sense of making G-d change His mind, but because the very nature of a decree is that it can be changed. In other words, G-d may have put the challenge of the decree before us so that we change it through our prayers. G-d, in His kindness, has given us a framework which is responsive to our actions; and it is up to us to pray, transform ourselves, and thereby influence our fate.