

To Serve Him With Your Whole Heart
The Reciprocal Relationship Between Tefillah and Avodat Hashem

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I.

To a certain degree, no mitzvah in the Torah exists in isolation. As David HaMelech wrote, “the laws of the Torah are true, together they are righteous (*tzadku yachdav*)”¹.

It is for this reason that the Talmud Yerushalmi² famously stated that “words of Torah may be terse in one place, but rich in another.” It is equally the fundamental truth that underlies basic exegetical principles such as *gezeirah shava*, which assume fundamental and normative connections between seemingly disparate areas of mikra.

And yet, not every Mitzvah is equal in this regard. To cite an obvious example, as Chazal note, “one who affirms idolatry has repudiated the entire Torah.” (Chullin 5a) This is as it must be: one who negates the notion of a commander has obliterated the meaning of a commandment.

The same can obviously not be said of neglecting the mitzvah of Arba Minim or even transgressing the prohibition of wearing shatnez, even as we are enjoined to be exceedingly careful in every mitzvah, *heve zahir bi-mitzvah kalah ki-va-chamurah*.

II.

Tefillah is a critical study in this regard. While Rambam and Ramban differed in their view as to whether daily, personal prayer was a Torah obligation, or Rabbinic in nature³, they agreed upon a very fundamental point regarding the nature of prayer, and the extent to which its value must be calibrated against a person’s total Divine service.

¹ Tehillim 19:10.

² Talmud Yerushalmi Rosh HaShanah 17a.

³ See R. Chaim of Brisk classical analysis of the role of intent in prayer, in which he argues, as others have as well, that Ramban considered daily prayer a *kiyum d’oraita*, if not an outright obligation, Chidushei R. Chaim Ha-Levi al ha-Rambam, Hilkhos Tefillah 4:1.

Rambam, on the basis of a passage in Ta'anit (2a), amongst others, rules that prayer is a Torah obligation, rooted in the general mandate to serve the Almighty "with all of one's heart."

Rambam, who explicitly ruled against including general commandments such as "you shall be holy", or "you shall guard my commandments", in his list of the six hundred and thirteen commandments⁴, poses the obvious question against himself: how can serving the Almighty with all of one's heart possibly be counted as a mitzvah, given that it is indeed a general obligation (See Sefer HaMitzvot 5)?

Rambam, nevertheless, concludes that Tefillah is a Torah level commandment⁵, on this basis, and evidently, maintained that "serving the Almighty with one's entire heart" was both a specific and general obligation. This unique halakhic phenomenon, of a mitzvah ha-kolelet (general obligation), that has a *'yichud'*, a specific connotation, that of prayer, has reciprocal implications.

On the one hand, it reflects the capacity of prayer to catalyze one's entire spiritual life. Presumably, the *chasidim rishonim*⁶ who spent an hour prior to prayer in preparation, and following prayer in reflection, did so not only on account of how materially such practice elevated their prayer per se, but equally, on account of their basic awareness that qualitatively enhanced prayer was itself absolutely vital to one's holistic Avodat Hashem. Without exaggeration, it may very well have been their intense devotion to prayer that was in no small measure responsible for their attaining the status of *chasidim* altogether. It was not for nothing that R. Yochanan⁷ stated, 'would that a person might pray the entire day', potentiating the entire halakhic universe of voluntary prayer, *tefilat nedava*.

Likewise, when the Talmud⁸ related to the concept of "suffering of love", *yissurim shel ahava*, it qualified that such suffering could only be conceptualized as such if it did not engender diminution of prayer, bittul tefillah. If prayer was negatively impacted, the net impact on Divine service of such suffering could not be constituted as having the same purgative, and indeed, bonding quality.

On the other hand, the interrelationship between prayer and holistic Divine service requires that one's prayer itself be reflective of, and calibrated by, one's entire Avodat Hashem. As Yeshayahu Ha-Navi

⁴ See Sefer Ha'Mitzvot, Shorashim, Number Four.

⁵ This is true of Talmud Torah as well, which is also its own independent mitzvah.

⁶ See Mishnah Berachot 5:1.

⁷ Talmud Bavli Berachot 21b.

⁸ See Berachot 5a. It is entirely unsurprising in this context that the Talmud includes bittul Torah as another disqualifying factor in identifying *yissurim shel ahava*. This indeed, serves to buttress Rambam's integrating Tefillah and Torah within the mitzvah of Avodat Hashem.

famously stated, when the Jewish people were engaged in grievous sins prior to the destruction of the first Beit HaMikdash, “even as you increase prayer, I shall not listen; your hands are filled with blood.”

To cite an admittedly less dramatic example, we find Rava’s rebuke of R. Hamnuna, as well as R. Zeira’s upbraiding of R. Yirmiah, when both of them felt that the objects of their displeasure were inappropriately sacrificing Torah study on the altar of prayer. Conversely, we note, as Ramban did⁹, the practice of Rav Yehuda¹⁰ to pray only on a monthly basis, so that his immersive Torah study might proceed unabated. Apparently, the frequency of prayer, at least in principle, might be calibrated in accordance with a person’s other spiritual pursuits.

Indeed, the Talmud¹¹ was even prepared to link the efficacy of prayer to more general spiritual conduct, noting that the generation of Rav Yehuda, the scope of whose learning was far more constricted than later generations, were granted immediate Divine response to prayer, in contrast to later generations. The Talmud notes that the distinction lay not within the realm of prayer per se, but in the earlier generation’s willingness to engage in sacrificial behavior for the sake of Kiddush Hashem.

In summation, prayer, the specific form of Avodah, can only be meaningful in the context of one’s general Avodah. This should be no surprise, as prayer is rooted in the sacrificial realm (Berachot 26b), where the same principle maintains: “the offering of the wicked is an abomination unto the Lord.” Indeed, as the verse concludes, “*u’Tefillat yesharim retzono*”¹², it is only the prayer of the upright which He truly desires.

III.

Ramban¹³, in his critique of Rambam’s interpretation of the verse “and you shall serve Him with your entire heart,” explains that the verse means to perform each and every mitzvah with a sense of total and utter conviction, without any hesitation or doubt whatsoever. In essence, it is a commandment regarding the *manner* and *state of mind* in which every single mitzvah is performed.

⁹ This is one of numerous Talmudic proofs cited by Ramban in his rejection of Rambam’s assertion that prayer is a daily obligation of Biblical origin. Ramban notes that if daily prayer was in fact an obligation of Biblical origin, Rav Yehuda’s practice could not have been justified. See Hasagot Ha’Ramban al Sefer Ha’Mitzvot L’Rambam Mitzvah 5.

¹⁰ See Talmud Bavli Rosh HaShanah 34a.

¹¹ Talmud Bavli Berachot 20a.

¹² Mishlei 15:8.

¹³ Ramban, *ibid*.

In this essay, Ramban twice expresses an openness to the possibility that prayer may be elevated to a Torah obligation in times of crisis¹⁴. Ramban reasons that if one truly believed with one's total heart, how can one possibly not call out to the Almighty in desperate petition when he finds himself in dire straits, *mima'amakim*? Failure to engage in prayer at such times is reflective of a far broader deficiency in one's holistic Divine service.

As such, even in the context of this very significant disagreement regarding the Biblical status of daily prayer, Rambam and Ramban clearly agree that Torah level prayer is fundamentally integrated with one's total Avodat Hashem.

This should be no surprise. Our Sages most often refer to prayer as “standing before the king”, *amidah bifnei ha-melech*. This was the very first modality of prayer, introduced by Avraham (Brachot 26b), *ein amida ela tefilla*, and this standing itself implies a total submission to the will of the Almighty, far beyond the discharging of a local obligation to pray.

It is equally for this reason that prayer is linked by the halakha of *semichat geulah l'tefillah*, to Keriat Shema, the paradigmatic act of acceptance of the yoke of Heaven, *Kabbalat Malchut Shamayim*.

As Ramban stated, *specifically in the context of communal prayer*: “And the intention of raising of the voice in prayer and the intention of synagogues and the merit of communal prayer is that there be a place for people to gather and **concede to God that He created them and makes them exist**, and to publicize this and to say in front of Him, ‘We are Your creatures.’ (Ramban Shemot 13:16).

Prayer, in plain terms, is an encounter with the source of all meaning in life, and He whose total will establishes the basis of all personal conduct. This encounter has the capacity to shape the entire contours of our holistic Divine service, sharpening sensitivities and deepening commitment across the entire range of mitzvot. Conversely, the encounter itself derives much of its meaning, and even a good deal of its efficacy, from its consistency with a person's broader service, “*u'tefillat yesharim retzono*.”

¹⁴ It is Rambam's view that prayer in times of crisis is a separate commandment altogether. See Mitzvot Aseh, 59, as well as Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Ta'aniyot, Chapter 1.