

Chapter One □ The World of Prayer

Why Change the World?

If you think about it, prayer is a hard thing to understand. We ask Hashem to stop running the world in the way He has been running it until now, and instead start running the world in a different way. Until now, He saw fit to run the world in such a way that we lack a certain thing we want. Now we ask Him to run the world otherwise, so that we can have what we want.

How do our prayers make Hashem change the way He runs the world? And why should we want Him to change things? We believe that everything Hashem does is for the best.¹ Do we imagine that we know better than Hashem what is best for us? And even if it is better for us, why should we get it just because we pray for it? If justice entails that we deserve it, we should get it even without praying. If not, then how does prayer help us get things we do not deserve?

Another point of interest is the explanation given by the Gemara, that women are obligated in the mitzvah of prayer since it is a "request for Heavenly mercy."² What exactly does "Heavenly mercy" mean, and how is it connected to prayer? Furthermore, how does defining prayer as an expression of mercy help us understand a woman's obligation to pray?

The Dawn of Creation

The Torah opens with the words, "*In the beginning, Elokim created Heaven and Earth.*"³ The Name **Elokim** is used here, signifying Hashem's attribute of strict justice, as opposed to the Name of mercy, **יהו"ה**. Rashi explains that Hashem first thought to create the world in accordance with the attribute of justice. When He saw that the world could not survive in this way, He introduced the attribute of mercy, partnering mercy together with justice, as is written, "On the day that **יהו"ה Elokim** made Earth and Heaven."⁴

This also raises several questions: a) Until what point was the world run according to strict justice, and when did Hashem decide to introduce the attribute of mercy? b) How can we understand the implication here that Hashem *thought* to conduct the world in one way, but in practice conducts it otherwise? c) Why must the Torah tell us how Hashem planned to conduct the world, if that is not really how He conducts it? Why is it important for us to know what Hashem first thought?

The first time that the Name of mercy, **יהו"ה**, is used is in the verse describing the creation of man, "On the day that **יהו"ה Elokim** made Earth and Heaven." Until

¹ ברכות ס ע"ב : כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד.

² ברכות כ ע"ב : [נשים] חייבין בתפלה : דרחמי ניהו.

³ בראשית א א : בראשית ברא אלקים את השמים ואת הארץ.

⁴ בראשית ב ד : אלה תולדות השמים והארץ בהבראם ביום עשות יהו"ה אלקים ארץ ושמים.

that point, the Torah uses only the Name of justice, **Elokim**. From here we see that the attribute of mercy was introduced only with the creation of mankind.

In the following comment, Rashi helps us understand how the introduction of mercy into creation coincided with the birth of man: "On Friday, before the creation of man, everything else in the world had already been created. The grass had already been created on the third day, but it did not yet sprout above the face of the earth, since rain had not yet fallen to make it grow. Hashem had not yet sent rain, since Adam had not yet been born to appreciate it. When Adam was born and realized that the world needed rain, he prayed, the rain fell, and all the trees and vegetation grew."

The potential for mercy existed from the beginning, just as the grass existed hidden beneath the earth, but it did not sprout until the prayers of man brought it into existence.

The World Cannot Survive Without Mercy

In strict accordance with the attribute of justice, the physical world cannot endure. This lower world is made up physical material, which cannot stand up to pure justice, since justice is essentially something intellectual.⁵ Therefore, the preservation of the physical world depends on the attribute of mercy.

On an intellectual, theoretical plane, one can make expectations of perfection. But on the practical, physical level of this world, perfection is impossible. There will always be mistakes, since physical matter is by its very nature limited and imperfect. Therefore, the continued existence of the physical world depends on the toleration of imperfection, which is an aspect of mercy.

The entire story of creation up until the creation of man uses the Name of justice, **Elokim**, to show that Hashem first created the world with justice. However, the continued existence of the world depends on mercy. This element of mercy was first awakened with the prayers of Adam. Thus, we see that man's responsibility to bring mercy into creation through his prayer was integral to the original plan of creation. Only thereby can the world continue to exist.

So it is until this day. Mercy continues to flow into the world through the prayers of mankind. With this we can understand why the Gemara defines the essence of prayer as "mercy," and based on this explains woman's obligation to pray. Only through prayer is Hashem's mercy drawn into creation, granting continued existence to those who pray, and to the entire world.

Our Sages call "*avodah*" (Divine service) one of the pillars of the world.⁶ When the Beis Hamikdash stood, this pillar was upheld through the sacrifices. Today, it is

⁵ מהר"ל חידושי אגדות ח"ג עמוד נב.

⁶ אבות (פרק א משנה ב) שמעון הצדיק היה משירי כנסת הגדולה. הוא היה אומר, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים.

upheld through prayer.⁷ Prayer supports the world. Without prayer, there is no mercy in the world and the world cannot continue to exist.

The World of Thought

To understand this point better, let us return to the teaching of Chazal quoted above: "Hashem first thought to create the world according to the attribute of justice. When He saw that the world could not survive in this way, He introduced the attribute of mercy, partnering mercy together with justice." As we asked above, what does it mean that Hashem "thought" to conduct the world in a certain way?

A similar expression is found in the Gemara, which states that when Moshe Rabbeinu foresaw how the Romans cruelly executed Rebbe Akiva, he asked, "Is this the reward for Torah?"

"Silence! This is how *the thought arose before Me*," Hashem answered.⁸

What is the meaning of this expression? Rebbe Akiva was judged according to Hashem's attribute of strict justice, the attribute that "arose in Hashem's thought" when He planned the creation of the world.⁹

Why are some people judged in strict justice, according to the plan that "arose in Hashem's thought," while others are judged by a partnership of justice and mercy? The difference between them depends on how much they are attached to the physical world. To the degree that a person ascends towards spirituality, he is treated with greater justice and less mercy, since he comes closer to the world of thought, which entails pure justice. Regarding this, Chazal tell us that Hashem is exacting to a hairsbreadth of perfection with those who are closest to Him.¹⁰

The Thought Behind the Deed

What are we meant to learn from all this? Man was created in the image of Hashem. This does not refer to the essence of Hashem, which we cannot possibly fathom or compare to anything, but to how we see Hashem interacting with His world. We are meant to understand this as a parallel to how we also act "in His image."

When we do something, first we think and then we do. The same is true of Hashem. Before His will is carried into action, it first ascends as a thought. (This refers to the decision behind the act. Not to the planning and consideration of how to do it, since Hashem has no such need.)

As such, there are really two parallel worlds of creation existing at once. There is a physical world, in which justice is partnered with mercy. But before and above

⁷ ע"ש בתלמיד רבנו יונה.

⁸ מנחות כט ע"ב: שתוק כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

⁹ של"ה בראשית ג'.

¹⁰ ב"ק נ ע"א: וסביבו נשערה מאד מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא מדקדק עם סביביו אפילו כחוט השערה.

this there is also a world of pure thought, a world of justice, which is the source of this physical world. The world of thought still exists, and it is tempered by mercy and then carried over into the physical world by means of our prayers.

The Purpose of Prayer

According to what we have explained, we can understand that the essence of prayer is a request for mercy. Prayer brings mercy into the world.

Prayer first influences the spiritual planes of existence, and only as a second stage result of this does it influence the physical world too. On a spiritual level, the effects of prayer are instantaneous. For example, the Gemara states: "Anyone who mourns over Yerushalayim merits to see its joy."¹¹ The Gemara does not say that he *will* merit to see its joy in the future, rather it says that he *merits* now, in the present, to see the joy of Yerushalayim's return to glory. Although Yerushalayim has not yet been rebuilt in this physical world, every thought of mourning causes an immediate rebuilding of Yerushalayim in the spiritual worlds.

The same is true of our prayers, which are all worded in the present tense. Every prayer that is properly uttered has an immediate effect to reveal Hashem's mercy. The degree to which this mercy then descends into the physical world depends on how much mercy has been revealed in the spiritual worlds above

With this, we can understand how our prayers serve to change the way Hashem runs the world. Our prayers were part of Hashem's original plan for creation. Hashem made the world in such a way that mankind would pray, and through our prayers we would shape the events of our lives. The situation of strict judgment was meant to be temporary, waiting for us to partner mercy with judgment through our prayers. Hashem wants us to pray, and thereby introduce mercy into the world. The nature of the world, without our prayers, would be to run the course of unmitigated judgment. All the mercy that exists in the world comes only as a result of our prayers.¹²

Our *bitachon* that Hashem does everything for the best does not obviate the need for prayer. To the contrary, only after we pray for mercy do we trust that Hashem has heard our prayers and introduced mercy into His creation. Then, and only then, can we rest assured that even if things go contrary to our hopes, everything is for the best.

We cannot just be lazy and refrain from prayer, trusting in Hashem to deal with us mercifully. Prayer is our necessary *hishtadlus* to reveal Hashem's mercy. It is like any other natural *hishtadlus*, which we have no right to neglect. We cannot excuse ourselves from prayer by claiming, "Hashem knows better than we do what is best

¹¹ תענית ל ע"ב: כל המתאבל על ירושלים זוכה ורואה בשמחתה ושאינו מתאבל על ירושלים אינו רואה בשמחתה.
¹² לש"י ספר הדע"ה.

for us." This is true, but Hashem also commanded us to pray for the revelation of His mercy to make things even better.

Custodians of Hashem's Mercy

Each and every one of us has the ability to bring Hashem's mercy into the world. Every individual has the power to change how Hashem conducts the world, tempering the justice of the original creation with mercy. This is how the world was meant to function, with justice tempered by the mercy that mankind brings about through our prayers.

This framework of creation is what makes prayer possible, and this is actually the essence of prayer: to introduce mercy as a partner to the system of pure justice that existed until then. When people suffer from want or lack of any kind, it is not an expression of Hashem's hatred towards them, *chas v'shalom*. Nor is it an expression of evil in creation. Hashem is the source of all good. He does not send evil into the world. The harm that we experience is only the result of the existing system of justice. This system is meant to be infused with mercy through our prayers.

We hope and long for things to be better and easier than they are now, but in fact Hashem placed in our hands the means for achieving this change. He actually commanded us to do so, and taught us how to do so, through prayer.