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Rachamim\Mercy and Ratzon\The Will of Hashem

The blessing of **קולינו שמע** continues with the prayer of **את תפילותינו וברצון ורחמים** - We ask Hashem that He accept our prayers, and that He accept them with His mercy (*rachamim*) and with His will (*ratzon*).

Hashem has mercy on us like a Father, as we say in the *Selichos* - "*Kiracheim av al banim*" - "as the mercy of a father on his children". We ask Hashem in this prayer of Shemoneh Esrei that Hashem should have mercy on us and accept our prayers. But we also ask here that our prayers be accepted with His *ratzon* - that He should answer us according to His will.

The simple meaning of this prayer is as follows. If a child asks something for his father, and the father knows that it's not good for the child, he refuses his child's request; but if the child cries to his father and begs him, he awakens the father's compassion, and the father will give in to the child, because his compassion for his child has been greatly aroused. He'll give his child what the child wants even though he knows that it's not good to give in to his child's request, simply because he has mercy on his child.

Hashem knows what is good for us, and that is why he doesn't always answer our requests, because what we think is good for us might not actually be good for us. But when we pray to Hashem and we beg Him to answer our request, we awaken His Fatherly mercy to give us what we want. But it still might not be according to Hashem's will, for Hashem knows that it's not good for us if we will get our request answered. There was *rachamim* (mercy) here, but there was no *ratzon* (will of Hashem) yet.

Chazal say that "In the way a person wants to go in, he is led", as we see from Bilaam, who prayed for something evil, and Hashem let him be answered. When a person wants something very badly and he pursues it, he is assisted by Heaven to get to his goals - for good or for bad. Therefore, the fact that our prayers are answered doesn't always mean it's good for us, because maybe Hashem is letting us have our way, and that way is really bad for us.

Thus, we don't just ask Hashem to have *rachamim*\mercy on us to answer our prayers; we ask that they be accepted with *ratzon*, according to His will. We daven specially that not only should Hashem have *rachamim*\mercy on us by answering our prayers, but that He should agree to give us what we want, that it should be according to His *ratzon*, and not merely that He is letting us having our way. We don't want to be among those of whom it is said, "In the way a person wants to go in, he is led"; rather, we want to arouse Hashem's will in answering our requests, so that our requests are not just

being answered because Hashem is having mercy on us (because then it might not be good for us if we get answered) but because the answer to our request is totally according to Hashem's will.

We are basically asking Hashem here to answer our requests only if it's according to His will that we be answered, and if not, then we don't want our request to be answered.

Davening During Elul

Let us reflect more into what prayer is, especially what we pray for during Elul, in which people pray for many requests. We ask Hashem during these days for forgiveness, but at the same time, we all want a good year, and that our requests be answered.

We will examine if our prayers that we ask for are turning to either Hashem's *rachamim*, or to His *ratzon*.

Four Reasons Why We Need To Daven

One of the three pillars of the world, Chazal say, is *tefillah*, prayer. The question is: Why do we daven? Hashem knows what is best for us, so why should we daven? If it is good for us to be answered we will get what we want, and if it is bad we won't get what we want - so why do we daven, if everything that is supposed to come to us will come to us anyway? There are many answers that our Sages gave.

1) One answer is based on what we spoke of earlier, that Hashem has a *middas harachamim* (trait of mercy). Therefore, even if Hashem knows that something is not good for a person, still, if one davens to Hashem for something, he awakens the mercy of a Father that Hashem has, so Hashem might give the person what he davens for, even though it's not good for him, because His mercy has been aroused. A father also gives into his child's request for a treat when his mercy for the child is aroused, even though it's not good for the child to have the treat, because it's unhealthy; his natural compassion for his child has overcome his logic, when his child begs him to answer his wish. So too, Hashem acts like a merciful Father; when His mercy is aroused because we are requesting something, He will give it to us even if it's not good for us.

According to this approach, the reason why we daven is because we are really undeserving, to our sins; but through prayer, we awaken Hashem's *middas harachamim* and He gives us what we want even though we are really undeserving.

2) Another answer that our Sages give is because sometimes there are decrees upon a person which are preventing him from receiving what he is supposed to get from Hashem. But through the power of prayer, the barriers can be removed, and he can then receive what he is supposed to get. It is also brought by the Sages that the power of *Pesukei D'Zimra* can remove the barriers that are preventing Heavenly sustenance from reaching a person.

3) Another reason our Sages give is because Hashem desires our prayers; it is written, "*Let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet.*" Therefore, even when we are deserving, Hashem places us in situations or predicaments that will cause us to daven to Him. Hashem therefore built it into the system of Creation that we need to daven in order to get things, not because of sins or because of anything holding us back, but simply because Hashem desires the prayers of a Jew (the Sages state "Hashem desires the prayers of the righteous"), so that we will get everything only when we daven. According to this approach, prayer is part of the design of Creation: nothing can come to us unless we daven for it, even if we are deserving.

4) There is yet a deeper reason why we must daven. When we start Shemoneh Esrei, we first request, "Hashem, open my lips." We are not just asking Hashem that our lips become opened; we are asking

Hashem that the Shechinah should speak from our throats. Of Moshe it was said, "The Shechinah spoke from his throat." In our soul, there is a 'Moshe Rabbeinu within', a power to talk to Hashem from the Shechinah that resides deep in our soul. This is a very deep matter, and it is only being mentioned here so that we can complete the picture of the discussion here.

The Question To Ask Yourself Before You Formulate A Request To Hashem

We will reflect a little on the following. Every person who is about to daven and make a request from Hashem must realize why he is davening: "Am I davening to Hashem to awaken His *rachamim* - or His *ratzon*?"

There is a method brought which serves as a litmus test in how one can know this: Would the person continue to want something if Hashem would decree that it's not according to the *Ratzon* Hashem? Or would the person be willing to nullify his *ratzon* to Hashem if Hashem doesn't want him to be answered?

This is the question one needs to ask himself.

Without the above awareness, a person will simply daven for his needs (health, livelihood, nachas, shidduchim, or success in spiritual matters) and he never clarifies to himself if he is prepared to accept Hashem's refusal.

One must check deeply into his soul and ask himself what his motivations are: Would I still want my request to be answered if Hashem wouldn't want me to be answered (even if He gives me what I ask for)? Or would I still be able to surrender my *ratzon* if I know that what I want is not Hashem's *ratzon*...?

If one can accept Hashem saying No to him, then such a person is davening with the proper perspective, from his deep *emunah*, from *bittul* (nullification) of his *ratzon*.

Thus, we should only want Hashem's *rachamim* on us if it will lead to His *ratzon* - and not a *rachamim* that doesn't lead to Hashem's *ratzon*.

This is a question one must always ask himself before he davens for something, but it is especially relevant during these days of *Selichos*, in which we daven to Hashem for many requests.

There are many, many private requests that people daven for on Rosh HaShanah. When you daven for anything from Hashem, whether it is health, livelihood, a *shidduch*, *nachas* from your children - you should first clarify to yourself: Am I davening for these things only on condition that Hashem wants me to have these things? If Hashem doesn't want me to be answered, would I still want to be answered? Or would I still continue to want what I'm *davening* for, even if Hashem doesn't want...?

The Sages state that we are called the "children of Hashem" whether we do the will of Hashem or not. Doing "the will of Hashem" means that when we pray, we only want to be answered if Hashem agrees, but if Hashem doesn't want to answer our requests, we are prepared to surrender our will.

This is the question one needs to ask himself: If it's not the *Ratzon* Hashem for me to be answered, would I still want to be answered?

The Things That You Really, Really, Really Want...

When a person makes this inner clarification, he will discover that there is a great struggle inside himself about the things he wants. We all have many, many things we want; that is the way we are.

There are some things we can easily forego if we know that Hashem doesn't want us to have those things, because the truth is, we don't really want those things so badly.

For example, if a person isn't sure if the right yeshivah is good for him or not, it's easier for him to daven to Hashem and say to Hashem, "Hashem, if it's good for me to go to this yeshivah, then let it happen, and if it is not good for me, then don't let it happen." Here it's easy to nullify our will, because we don't want it that badly.

But let's say it's a yeshivah that a person really wants to get into very badly. Then, he talks to Hashem differently: "Hashem, I want so badly to get into this yeshivah - please let it happen!" In such a case, a person is apt to be very stubborn about what he wants, and he will not be prepared so easily to accept a No from Hashem. Or, a person wants a certain shidduch very badly, or he wants to get a certain job very badly; he will stubbornly persist in his prayers about what he wants, and he is not ready to surrender his will to Hashem if the answer is No.

(There are many other such situations as well.)

The Two Parts Inside Us When We Daven

So we must become aware that there are two parts in us when we daven: a part in us that is ready to forego what we want (which shows that we don't want those things so badly), and a part in us which is not ready to give up what we want (because those things are apparently what we want very badly).

These are two parts in us; we are not entirely nullified to Hashem, nor are we entirely stubborn towards Hashem. Rather, there is a part in us which can nullify itself to Hashem, and there is also a part in us which doesn't want to nullify itself to Hashem.

All of us, without exception, have these two parts in ourselves.

We all have a part in us which says, "Even if Hashem doesn't want me to be answered, I still want it!" Why? It is because it is written, "*There is no righteous person on the earth who does not sin*" - in other words, we all have a part in us which wants the opposite of Hashem's will, in wanting certain things even if Hashem wouldn't want us to have those things. Simply, it is used to rebel and commit a sin, *rachmana litzlan*; but it is also present in some subtle way as we pray - a part in us wants something even when Hashem doesn't want it.

There is actually a middle point between these two parts of our soul, which consciously recognizes that it is not on the level of total nullification to Hashem, yet it is not does desire either to go against Hashem's will. We can use this part of the soul to daven to Hashem in our requests to ask for Hashem's *rachamim* with the aspiration that we should ask Hashem to be answered only if it His *ratzon*.

This is the depth of our prayer of **וקבל ברחמים וברצון** - we are asking Hashem that even though we are not yet on the level of totally giving up our will for Hashem, we are asking that He should help us be able to nullify our will to Him and thereby only ask Him for things that are according to His will.

Knowing Your Actual Level and Aspiring For Higher Levels

A person cannot be on the higher level (of only asking Hashem to answer him if it's according to His *ratzon* and if not, he doesn't want to be answered) if he's not yet actually there yet. But through prayer that we reach such a level, we can get there.

Tefillah reveals what's on our heart. *Tefillah* is not an intellectual matter; it is a heart matter, for it is

“avodah of the heart”. Thus, just because a person absorbs this concept intellectually, that doesn’t mean he’s on the level yet of davening to Hashem only if it’s His *ratzon*. If his heart hasn’t come to terms with this concept, he won’t be able to aspire for such a level, because it is only something that his intellect knows about. It is not a *tefillah* that’s coming from his heart. One therefore must be aware if his heart has come to terms with this intellectual awareness about *tefillah*.

We must know where our heart is at. Chazal even speak of a person who desires to sin and then davens to Hashem help him! This is the evil use of the power of prayer, in which a person prays for something against Hashem’s will. Besides for the case of sin, even if it’s not something evil such as when we daven for something we want, there is also this concept of wanting something that’s against Hashem’s will. *Tefillah* is avodah of the heart, and not everyone’s heart is ready to accept that we must daven to Hashem only for *ratzon* and not just for His *rachamim*.

Thus, practically speaking, if a person is not yet on the level of accepting this, he should not daven to Hashem in his requests that he be answered only according to His *ratzon*, because since his heart is not matching the words coming out of his mouth, he should not fool himself.

The more a person has better self-awareness and he realizes what level his heart is at, he realizes there is a part in himself which doesn’t want to be nullified and a part which doesn’t want to be nullified, as well as a middle part of himself which wishes to leave the lower level and ascend to the higher level.

Although one should aspire to reach the higher level and try to be less involved with the lower level, the practical avodah is that one should daven with proper self-awareness and thus daven from the level he is currently at.

Is Rosh HaShanah About Hashem, Or Is It About My Needs?

The depth behind this is as follows. There is an argument amongst the works of our earlier Rabbis about how a person should daven in Elul and especially during Rosh HaShanah, if a person may daven for private requests or not, since Rosh HaShanah is about davening for the *Malchiyos*, the revelation of Hashem’s kingship over the world. There were those who held that davening for their private requests is a self-absorbed perspective, so they held it was not suitable to pray for oneself during Elul and Rosh HaShanah. Reb Yisrael Salanter zt”l pointed out, though, that it depends the actual level that a person is holding at. If a person is not yet on the level of only being concerned for *Malchiyos*, he cannot identify with the pain of the Shechinah (the lack of feeling revelation of Hashem’s Presence in the world), then he should not focus his prayers on the revelation of Shechinah, and instead, he should daven on Rosh HaShanah for his needs.

So although the purpose of the avodah of Rosh Hashanah is *Malchiyos*, and not *Zichronos* and *Shofaros* (which awaken our merits so we can have a good year), that is not all there is to Rosh HaShanah. There is the avodah of *Malchiyos*, which is to pray for the revelation of Hashem upon the world, and this prayer emanates from our *lishmah* (altruistic) aspect. But there is another avodah of Rosh HaShanah – to have *Zichronos* and *Shofaros*, which is that we should have a good year. The goal is of course *Malchiyos*, but practically speaking, the level of most people does not totally yearn for *Malchiyos*. People have things they need and want from Hashem, and they are not ready to totally surrender their will to Hashem and just be altruistic.

So if one is not yet on the level of yearning for *Malchiyos*, although he should definitely try to awaken a yearning for *Malchiyos* on Rosh HaShanah as he davens for it (as Chazal established), he also has to be aware that since he’s not yet on that level, he can aspire for it, but he should know that he is not yet there.

Only a few individuals transform totally on Rosh HaShanah and they leave their self behind, becoming totally altruistic, like Reb Elazar Ben Dordaya, who attained his share in the World To Come in his moment of truth. But almost all people, without exception, are not on that level; a person serves Hashem according to his current level that he has reached.

Of course, there is a great spiritual light during Elul and Rosh HaShanah; we all get inspired, both from our external surroundings as well as from the inner spiritual light that is found in these days. Therefore, Reb Yisrael Salanter said, since this is the level that most people are at, we must daven for our own private requests, because that is a more honest approach to ourselves. If we would daven entirely for *Malchiyos* and not for ourselves, it would be superficial lip service, because our heart isn't matching that level. It wouldn't be truthful.

This doesn't mean to imply that we shouldn't have aspirations. We need to aspire to accept upon ourselves Hashem's Kingship, and we must aspire to reach the level in which we ask things from Hashem only if it will be according to His *ratzon*. But in the practical sense, we must know where we are actually holding, and that being the case, we know that we are mainly concerned for Hashem's *rachamim*, not His *ratzon* and not His *malchus*. We must be honest with ourselves, while at the same time aspiring for the higher levels.

However, it should certainly bother us that we aren't yet on the higher level. It should feel painful to us, and it should not just be an aspiration for *Malchiyos*; it must really bother us that we aren't truthful enough to be on that level. So don't become complacent with your current level and say, "That's the reality. I have aspirations, but *l'maaseh* (practically speaking), I'm not holding there." That should not be the attitude. Rather, it should bother you why you are not yet on that truthful level of aspiring only for *Malchiyos*.

The truth is that the wish for *Malchiyos* is really the nature of our soul, but that nature is very covered over from us. Since *Malchiyos* is the purpose of our avodah, it should feel painful to us that we are not mainly concerned with our purpose.

Rosh HaShanah is mainly about *Malchiyos*, but to our chagrin, most of us are not mainly concerned about restoring the *malchus* (kingship) of Hashem to the world. On one hand, we must realize that this is the level we are at, so we should not fool ourselves by thinking that we really do want it so badly. Therefore, Reb Yisrael Salanter said that our practical avodah is to daven for our needs on Rosh HaShanah. But on the other hand, it should still bother you that you are not that concerned about *Malchiyos*, the purpose of Rosh HaShanah. If it bothers you, you will at least be somewhat connected to that level.

We explained earlier that the desire in a person to want something even when Hashem doesn't want it is something that stems from the unrefined part of our soul which goes against Hashem's will. This should also bother us - it should bother us that we mainly daven to Hashem from that place in ourselves, a part of us that is not ready to surrender to Hashem's will. It can bother us because there is an indeed a point of truth in our soul, which feels pain that there is a part in ourselves that doesn't seek truth and is instead self-serving.

Baruch Hashem we don't always use that part of our soul to commit an outright sin, but still, it should bother us that there is part in us which doesn't want to do what Hashem wants, and not only that, but it is that unrefined point of our soul which we mainly daven from...!

If it bothers us why we aren't mainly concerned about *Malchiyos*, the pain we have will at least make us become connected to *Malchiyos*. And it should bother us that we usually daven to Hashem from a place in ourselves that is not prepared to hear a "No" from Hashem.

The more these things bother us – and the more we daven to Hashem that we merit to leave that self-serving part of ourselves – the more our prayers on Rosh HaShanah will connect us to the purpose of Rosh HaShanah.

In Conclusion

In whatever level you are at, you must be “happy with your lot”. If it bothers you that you’re yet on the higher level, be happy with the fact that you are bothered, because that itself is an accomplishment. If you merited to feel concerned about *Malchiyos* and you felt yourself mainly concerned for Hashem’s *ratzon* and less concerned with His *rachamim*, you should be happy that you reached that level.

Whichever level you are on, you should be happy with your level. You need to be happy with the level you are at, while at the same time aspiring for the higher level.

The more our prayers come from a more truthful place in ourselves, the closer we are to the fulfillment of **וקבל ברחמים וברצון את תפילותינו**.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/tefillah-134-motivations-prayer-rosh-hashanah>