

CHAPTER 1: MISHNA 18: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Rebbe Shimon says: Be careful about [properly fulfilling the commandments of] "Kriyath Shma" and "Tefilah" (praying Shmoneh Esrei); when you pray, don't make your prayer a fixed activity but rather an appeal for mercy and beseeching G-d for your needs, as it is written "For G-d is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in kindness, and reconsiders evil decrees" (Yoel 2:13). And don't be a "rasha" (an evildoer) before of yourself.

What is the connection between the warning against being a "rasha" before yourself and the earlier lessons of the Mishna that teach one to take care in the commandments of Kriyath Shma and prayer?

Kriyath Shma and prayer embody the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven, with prayer also being service and devotion to G-d. ("Avodah" means service, and the Rabbis teach us that prayer is one form of service of G-d. See T.B. Ta'anit 2a, on the verse "To love the L-rd your G-d, and to serve Him with all your heart." The Maharal discusses the relationship between service and prayer in Ch. 1, Mishna 2, as well as in Netiv Ha'Avodah, and we have elaborated upon it a number of times.)

Man, because of his human dimension, must be attentive to the proper service of G-d. For the goal of man's creation was for him to serve his Creator, and it is through [willingly] accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven as well as by serving G-d that this goal is accomplished. (The Maharal implies that this responsibility results particularly from man as an "adam," as a human being. Both animals and angels lack free will to DECIDE to submit themselves to G-d's authority. So their activities shouldn't be described as true service of G-d, the way a human being's is. Man's DECISION to submit himself to the will of his Creator is itself an act service.)

[After being taught of the importance of service and prayer:] The Tanna teaches further that "when you pray, don't make your prayer a fixed activity." We are taught (Brachoth 28b, 29b): Rebbe Eliezer says "One whose prayer is turned into a fixed activity, isn't praying as supplication." What is considered a fixed activity? Rebbi Yakov bar Idi says in the name of Rebbi Oshiyah "Anyone whose prayer is a burden for him." Rabbanan say "Anyone whose prayer isn't said in the language of beseeching." Rabba and Rav Yosef both say "Anyone who isn't able to introduce a new request or

meaning[when he prays]." Rabbi Zeirah said "I am able to introduce a new meaning [to my prayers], but I am hesitant to do so, lest I be distracted." Abaye bar Avin and Rebbe Chaninah bar Avin say "Anyone who doesn't pray with the glimmer of the sun (as it rises)." And Rebbe Zeirah says "What verse validates this (the importance of praying with the rising sun)? 'He should see you with the sun, and before the moon...'" In the west (Israel), they condemned one who prayed with the setting sun. Why? Because he was liable to be distracted as the time for prayer concluded (and he would miss the time to pray).

From all of the above opinions, we learn that prayer is supposed to be done in the way that a person beseeches another to give him what he needs. If the prayer is done as a fixed activity, out of obligation, then it is not true service (of G-d). True service requires that one be completely dependent on G-d for all his needs, with the feeling that what G-d gives him is done out of mercy and good will. If one prays with the attitude that G-d owes it to him that his requests be fulfilled, then man is not really dependent on G-d.

("Dependence" is viewed as a negative thing today, indicating weakness, and sometimes a psychological disorder. Independence is the goal, and is highly valued. On one level this is very true. But on a deeper level, independence can isolate people from each other. Dependence -- when it is real, as opposed to artificial -- creates a closeness. When we think of the maximum dependence that exists between two people, it would be the dependence of the fetus on the mother while in her womb. This is also the closest, most intimate relationship that can exist between two people. After the baby is born, the dependence is lessened, although it is still great, while the distance increases. As the baby grows into a child and a teenager, there is an ongoing decrease in the dependence, coupled with a growing distance between the two people. A person's true dependence on G-d is what creates a closeness. Ironically, we frequently feel closer to G-d when we experience difficult times, as we recognize our dependence on him.

(If someone OWES us something we are less dependent on him than when we receive it as a favor. When we receive a paycheck, even if we have to stand in line for it, fill out forms for it, and go through other formalities for it, we feel entitled to the money, and we feel independent of the person who happens to give it to us. This is much less true when the money we are receiving is a gift.)

Therefore, a person's prayers must be said from a perspective of beseeching and asking G-d, indicating how much man needs G-d and how completely dependent man is on Him. But if a person prays simply to discharge a duty, this doesn't indicate man's dependence on G-d for his needs, and cannot be termed real service.

The meaning of Rebbe Eliezer's statement that "One whose prayer is turned into a fixed activity, isn't praying as supplication" indicates that when a person DOES pray out of a true need of G-d, and is completely dependent on him for those needs, G-d will grant the requests.

(A servant is completely dependent on his master for all his needs. On the other hand, the master is

bound to provide all those needs, if he expects to get the service he demands. So complete dependence is related to service and devotion. And when the servant truly asks the master for certain needs he has, with NO other motivation than to better serve the master, the request itself is a form of service. And the master is bound to grant the request, if he expects the service.)

(When we find that our prayers seem not to be answered by G-d, one of the reasons could be that our requests have an egocentric dimension to them. If they were made for completely altruistic reasons, with no motivation other than to better serve G-d in line with His will, we are assured that -- unless the request is at odds with some fundamental element in G-d's master plan -- the prayer will be answered.)

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