YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #18: Loving God (VIII):**

**I Was Asleep, But My Heart Was Awake (Part 2)**

**The Appearance of the Beloved**

In the previous *shiur*, we followed the darling’s journey as she searched for her beloved. At the moment when it seems like the darling is about to organize a search party at the entrance to the garden, she clarifies to the maidens of Jerusalem that her connection to her beloved is a unique, mutual connection. The darling is confident that despite the current distance between the two, his heart is reaching out to her in the same way that her heart is reaching out to him: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine; he browses among the lilies” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 6:3). With this statement, the darling attempts to prevent the maidens from trying to seize the beloved for themselves upon finding him.

To our surprise, we hear the soft, gentle voice of the beloved calling out to his darling: “You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirtza, comely as Jerusalem, awesome as bannered hosts” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 6:4). With his response, the beloved similarly emphasizes the singularity of the connection between him and his darling:

There are sixty queens, and eighty concubines, and damsels without number. Only one is my dove, my perfect one, the only one of her mother, the delight of her who bore her. Maidens see and acclaim her; queens and concubines, and praise her. (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 6:8-9)

But from where did the beloved suddenly appear? How did he manage to arrive at the precise moment that we had expected the darling and the maidens to begin their search at the entrance to the garden?

**My Body Was Asleep, But My Heart Was Awake**

It seems that the answer to these questions can be found at the start of the incident that we are currently analyzing. At the very beginning, we read: “I was asleep, but my heart was awake” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2). This sentence is ripe for interpretation. What is the difference between sleep and wakefulness in this context, and what is the connection between “I” and “my heart”?

*Chazal* interpreted this verse in the *Pesikta Zutra*:

“I was asleep, but my heart was awake.” The community of Israel said: I was asleep from suffering, as a person who experienced many hardships, and because of the hardships he was overtaken by slumber and he slept. Similarly, it is as if Israel in their exile are asleep and they do not know to what level they have sunk…

“But my heart was awake.” This is the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said, “God is the stay of my heart, my portion forever” (*Tehillim* 73:26). And He, may His name be blessed forever and through the eons, and His salvation is constant for us, as it is said, “See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps!” (*Tehillim* 121:4).

This *midrash* is the basis of Rashi’s interpretation:

“I was asleep” – When I was confident and tranquil in the First Temple, I despaired of worshipping the Holy One, blessed be He, as one who sleeps and slumbers. “But my heart was awake” – This is the Holy One, blessed be He. So is this explained in the *Pesikta*. “But my heart was awake” – The Holy One, blessed be He, who is “**the stay of my heart, my portion**,” is awake to guard me and to favor me. (Rashi, *Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2)

Man was created from the dust of the earth, and God blew the breath of life into him (see *Bereishit* 2:7). The *Zohar* expounds on this concept: “He who blew [the breath], from His very essence did He blow [the breath]” (*Zohar Bereishit*). Or, as Ramban explains: “Rather, it was the spirit of the great God, out of Whose mouth comes knowledge and discernment. For **he who breathes into the nostrils of another person gives into him something from his own soul**” (Ramban, *Bereishit* 2:7).

Every person has two opposing forces at work within himself: the body and the soul. The body, which was created from the dust of the earth, yearns for earthly matters, while the soul, which was forged from God’s very essence, yearns to cleave to its source.

It is to this that the verse refers when it states “I was asleep” – my body – “but my heart was awake” – my soul. The concept of sleep is germane to the earthly realm; it is a disconnection from the source of life. In contrast, the soul, which is found in a person’s heart, comes from the supernal realm. God is wakeful – He neither slumbers nor sleeps – and therefore the soul is wakeful as well, constantly yearning to cleave to its source.

The constant tension that exists within every person between the desire to become mired in material, earthly matters and the yearning for enduring spiritual transcendence constitutes the basis for the entire story that is unfolding here in *Shir Ha-Shirim*.

The book of *Kohelet* addresses this tension as well:

For in respect of the fate of man and the fate of beast, they have one and the same fate. As the one dies so dies the other, and both have the same life-breath; man has no superiority over beast, since both amount to nothing. Both go to the same place; both came from dust and both return to dust. Who knows if a man’s life-breath does rise upward and if a beast’s breath does sink down into the earth? (*Kohelet* 3:19-21)

From the point of view described here, man has no superiority over beast. Both of them, man and beast, return to dust in the end, to their source. Nevertheless, the author of *Kohelet* wonders, “Who knows?” Perhaps man’s life-breath rises up, unlike a beast’s breath, which sinks down into the earth.

This is the hope of humanity – that man has some superiority over beast as a result of our soul, which is constantly yearning to rise up. A person’s soul is his wakeful heart, which yearns to cleave to its source, to connect and achieve intimacy with God.

King David, the sweet singer of Israel, writes in *Tehillim*: “In Your behalf my heart says: ‘Seek My face!’ O Lord, I seek Your face” (*Tehillim* 27:8). There is a certain tension in this verse, as well as a syntactical difficulty. On the one hand, it seems that God is the speaker and that he is asking – even demanding – “Seek My face!” On the other hand, the verse emphasizes that this request comes from the depths of man’s heart. This tension confirms the notion that it is none other than the soul of God that speaks from the heart of man.

In every person, there is a constant, pulsating call from God, to which one must always be attuned. One must listen closely to this inner voice, which is constantly crying out, “Seek My face!”

In light of this, it gradually becomes clear to us that it is useless to search for the beloved in distant, vast expanses. An outward perspective will not help us here, nor is it expected of a person to listen to voices from afar. Rather, the opposite is true. A person must focus his eyes and ears inward, to his inner core, to the epicenter of his soul. He must follow the voice of his heart, the call of “Seek My face!” He must follow the voice of the beloved, who calls out, “Let me in, my own, my darling, my faultless dove!” Let me in – to your heart.

Thus, instead of chasing after the beloved in the heavens and beyond the sea, a person must search internally: “The thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart” (*Devarim* 30:14).

This insight is the result of the effort that the darling expended in seeking out her beloved. Her initial search through the markets and the streets, though it was accompanied by significant hardships and contempt from her surroundings, was eventually marked by success in the end. Then the voice of the beloved suddenly rang out, slicing through the clamor: “You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirtza.” The voice forces us to confront the fact that the sole purpose of our long, convoluted journey was to push a person to penetrate inward, to the inner voice that is constantly crying out.

**I Have Labored and Found**

The darling’s effort was not for nothing, as it contained a hidden blessing. When a person expends effort in searching for something he desires, the effort itself enables him to define more precisely the object of his search, as well as his deep connection to it. The journey to the far reaches of the world is revealed, in the end, as a journey to the inner recesses of one’s own soul.

The Sages taught in the Talmud: “R. Yitzchak also said: If a man says to you… I have labored and found, you may believe him” (*Megilla* 6b). We learn from here that one cannot attain what one desires without effort. Likewise, God only reveals Himself to a person once he demonstrates a significant degree of effort and exertion.

At first glance, it seems that the word “found” in the passage above is somewhat out of place. One would think that after one labors and exerts himself, a more appropriate word would be “achieved.” The toil and effort that one expends in search of God does not result in “finding” God, as if by chance,[[1]](#footnote-1) but in achieving intimacy with God as a direct result of one’s hard work.

Nevertheless, *Chazal* used the word “found” in order to emphasize two fundamental, interconnected points. The first point is that when a person labors, toils, and desires something with all his might, **it is guaranteed that he will achieve his goal**, even if it seems that all his efforts were completely misguided and misdirected. The moment that a person seeks out God, it becomes apparent to him that even more than he sought out God, God sought **him** out.

In this sense, all that the effort one expends represents is the act of opening a window to God from the person’s side. This opening, in turn, leads to a much greater opening: the opening of the gates of heaven before him, as God allows Himself to be found.

This is precisely what we find in *Shir Ha-Shirim*. After the darling’s frantic efforts to seek out her beloved, displaying in doing so her intense longing to reunite with him, the beloved suddenly presents himself, allowing himself to be found: “You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirtza.” It is then that it becomes clear to the darling that her beloved had been right there the whole time.

The second point is that a person’s yearning for intimacy with God, which seems to him at the start of his journey as an aspiration for the lofty and the sublime, for the hidden and the concealed, becomes clear to him at his journey’s end. A person **finds the object of his search within himself**, within his own soul, in those same internal voices that echo within his inner soul: “Seek My face!” The moment a person understands that he is a mere vessel, an agent on a divine mission, he negates his body and allows his soul to unify and connect with God.

At their core, these two points constitute one principle that expresses the fundamental connection between the Creator and His creations. These points are clearly expressed in the great poet R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s wonderful *piyyut*, its words brimming with glory and majesty:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Where, Lord, will I find You? / Your place is high and obscured.

And where won’t I find You? / Your glory fills the world![[3]](#footnote-3) …

I sought Your nearness / With all my heart I called You.

And in my going out to meet You, / I found You coming toward me…

This is the meaning of the opening line in the occurrence in question in *Shir Ha-Shirim*, “I was asleep, but my heart was awake.” There is a duality built into this verse. On the one hand, this is a description of a sleeping body yearning for its source, for the mundane and the earthly; and there is the soul, constantly wakeful, constantly pining for intimacy with God. Based on this description, the great test that a person undergoes is whether his soul is able to lift up his body, so that the two can seek out God together, as one.

On the other hand, one can understand that the expression “I was asleep” also represents the negation of the body, which serves as a vessel for a person’s divine mission. When a person internalizes the fact that the sole purpose of his very existence is to serve as a tool for performing God’s will, then the heart can awaken and the soul can connect with its Creator and answer the knocking of the beloved. This was Rambam’s approach in interpreting this verse, as he writes in *Moreh Nevukhim*:

But when a human being has attained a true comprehension [of God], and rejoices in what he has attained, such that while speaking with others or attending to his bodily needs, his mind is all that time with God (may He be blessed) and he is constantly near Him with his heart, even though his body is with other human beings. As the poetic parables (*Shir Ha-Shirim*), which deal with these matters, state: “I was asleep, but my heart was awake. Hark, my beloved knocks!” (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51 [note])

**My Soul Yearns for You in the Night**

An additional perspective on the tension between “I was asleep” and “my heart was awake” and between the heart that refers to God in the third person and the heart that speaks to Him in the first person (“In Your behalf my heart says: ‘Seek My face!’”) can be found in the *Zohar*:

“And this shall be to you a law for all time: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial…” (*Vayikra* 16:29). R. Chiyya opened [his discourse and] said, “My soul yearns for You in the night (*nafshi ivitikha ba-layla*); in the morning my spirit longs for You (*af ruchi ve-kirbi ashachareka*)” (*Yeshayahu* 26:9). “*Nafshi ivitikha* (lit. ‘I yearn for You’) *ba-layla*”: It should have read: “*Nafshi ivatekha* (lit. ‘it yearns for You’) *ba-layla*.” What does it mean, “*Nafshi ivitikha*”? “*Af ruchi ve-kirbi ashachareka* (lit. ‘I long for You’)” should have said: “*Yeshachareka* (lit. ‘It longs for You’).” We have learned that God is spirit and soul of all, so Israel is saying: “You are my soul and spirit,” [therefore] I have yearned for You, to cling to You, “I long for You” to find Your goodwill.(*Zohar*, *Vayikra* 67a)

R. Chiyya opens his “homily” on Yom Kippur with a verse from *Yeshayahu* that contains a grammatical problem. The prophet speaks of the soul and the spirit in the third person, but the continuation of the verse is in the first person. Instead of using the word *ivatekha*, meaning “It yearns for you,” the verse uses the word *ivitikha*, meaning “I yearn for you.” Therefore, R. Chiyya interprets that the prophet views God as the soul and spirit of the nation of Israel.

On Yom Kippur, a person must afflict his soul and submit his body to God’s will. By doing this, his soul can cling to God and unite with Him. This is the meaning of the grammatical tension in the verse. From a certain perspective, a person is separate from his Creator. However, from a deeper perspective, when one afflicts his soul, he creates intimacy with God, and the third person becomes the first person.

This is apparent from the continuation of the *Zohar*:

It has been taught: The perfect service that a person should offer the Holy One, blessed be He, is as we have learned: “You shall love the Lord your God…” (*Devarim* 6:5) – loving the Holy One, blessed be He, with the love of his very soul. This is perfect love, love of his soul and his spirit. Just as these cleave to the body and the body loves them, so should a person cleave to loving the Holy One, blessed be He, clinging to Him with the love of his soul and his very spirit. As it is written: “My soul yearns for You in the night” – that is, my very soul yearns for You. “In the morning my spirit longs for You” – to cleave to You with great love. “In the night” – for out of love for the Holy One, blessed be He, a person should rise every night to engage in His service until morning is aroused and a thread of love is drawn upon him. (*Zohar*, *Vayikra* 68a)

The principle of love that is required of us is a person’s complete adherence – in soul and spirit – to intimacy with God. The main emphasis here is the night, since night is the time when a person’s body generally sleeps. One does not attend to his body’s needs (“I was asleep”) and he can use this opportunity to turn his attention to the more profound elements of life (“But my heart was awake”): the spiritual and eternal matters. Thus, by afflicting himself on Yom Kippur, a person is able to bring to expression the forces of the soul,[[4]](#footnote-4) which are constantly yearning to cling to God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See *Sanhedrin* 97a: “Three things come unawares: Messiah, **a found article**, and a scorpion.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This excerpt contains the first two lines of the *piyyut* and two other lines from later in the *piyyut*, which express the principles in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Your glory fills the world – it fills the entire universe and all of creation, and it fills a person, who is a miniature representation of the world in himself. At that moment, a person’s heart is not only his physical heart, but also an expression of his soul and the *Shekhina* that resides within it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the relationship between the *nefesh* (soul) and *ru’ach* (spirit) mentioned in this verse and the *neshama*, see *Zohar Chadash*, *Rut* 38b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See also the commentary of the *Tanya*:

   This is the interpretation of the verse: “My soul yearns for You,” which means, “Since You, O Lord, are my true soul and spirit,” [therefore] I have yearned for You.” That is to say, “I long and yearn for You like a man who craves the life of his soul, and when he is weak and exhausted he longs and yearns for his soul to revive in him; and also when he goes to sleep he longs and yearns for his soul to be restored to him when he awakens from his sleep. So do I long and yearn to draw the light of the blessed *Ein Sof*, the Life of true life, within me through occupation in the Torah when I awaken during the night from my sleep.” For the Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are one and the same.

   See also *Ha-Ketav Ve-Hakabbala*, *Bamidbar* 11:15, who cites these excerpts from the *Zohar* in explaining Moshe’s virtue in his efforts to cling to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)