YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #19: Loving God (IX): The Paths to a Complete Love of God**

**“Take to Heart These Words”**

In the previous *shiurim*, we saw that the spiritual development that a person must undergo in order to reach the love of God must be directed inward. This inward gaze penetrates to the depths of a person’s soul, listening to the voice that cries out from within the heart.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is from there that the divine call constantly beckons.

On the one hand, there is nothing more easily comprehensible, more naturally understood, than the concept of clinging to God as we have defined it: It is a person clinging to his own soul. The root of love is fundamentally based on the root of unity. In fact, the numerical value of the word *ahava* (“love”) is equivalent to that of *echad* (“one”).[[2]](#footnote-2)

A person internalizes his union with the root of his own soul, with God Himself, the source of all life, in Whom all of existence is contained: “You, who held fast to the Lord your God, are all alive today” (*Devarim* 4:4).

On the other hand, there is no more difficult task than loving God. A person lives within the limitations of time and space, with all that this entails. A person is mired in life’s hardships, lured by life’s seductions and pitfalls. They distract him and attempt to cause him to fixate on these things. It is like a salesman, whose sole purpose, at times, is to distract the customer and prevent him from engaging in deep, even-handed, substantive thinking about his purchase.

Background noise constantly accompanies all of our actions, preventing us from listening to our inner voices, which represent the divine call. This is especially true for us today as members of Western society, which is so obsessed with filling our world and our lives with noise and nonstop activity. In contrast, the divine call demands quiet, tranquility, and inner focus.

King Shlomo, the wisest of all men, said: “He who isolates himself pursues his desires” (*Mishlei* 18:1). One explanation of this verse[[3]](#footnote-3) is that a person who indulges in his desires and who is mired in those desires seeks the isolated outlook rather than the unified outlook.

A person’s task is to strengthen the principles of recognizing the oneness of God and loving God within his mind and soul. Even if, at a given moment, one feels that he is under the control of his desires and that the forces working against him are growing stronger, it is still important for this message to remain close to one’s heart, to lie within its grasp at all times, so that when the opportunity arises it can have an impact immediately.

There is a famous commentary attributed to R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk that has been cited in numerous sources, among them his grandson R. Shmuel of Sochatchov, author of *Shem Mi-Shmuel*:

This follows the interpretation that my grandfather, the great *Admor* of Kotzk, provided for the verse, “Take to heart (*al levavekha*, lit. ‘on your heart’)these words with which I charge you this day.” Seemingly, the verse should have read *be-levavekha* (lit. “in your heart”). This indicates that the heart is sealed, but on special occasions it opens. And if a person places these words on his heart as if it was a stone, then when the heart opens, the words will fall inside the heart. (*Shem Mi-Shmuel*, *Vayechi* 5674)

*Shem Mi-Shmuel* continues, explaining his grandfather’s interpretation:

This means that the heart is the Garden of Eden that exists within a person, and the eyes are the gates of the Garden of Eden. Just like the Garden of Eden has walls and gates so that no one who is uncircumcised or impure – nor any outsider or stranger – can enter, but only those who are fit to enter may do so, so it is with a person’s heart. External forces attempt to breach its walls, and thus it requires guarding….

Just as in the material world, when a person walks through a dusty, dirty place, strong winds blow the dust upward, blinding his eyes, entering his body when he breathes, covering his heart and lungs and filling his mouth with grit. Such a person must close his eyes, mouth, and nose so that the dust and dirt cannot enter his body and destroy it. The same is true in spirituality. When it is an inauspicious time and external forces proliferate and attempt to spread out over a person’s soul in order to overwhelm and destroy him, it can be immensely beneficial to close the eyes and heart of one’s soul. By doing this, the evil forces that have amassed and are trying to draw one’s soul into their trap cannot destroy it. As long as the eyes and heart are open, it is easy for the external forces to enter into the innermost part of the soul. And even though, despite the benefit, one incurs a great loss [by closing one’s eyes and heart] in that one cannot illuminate the heart with the divine power and illumination, the benefit still outweighs the loss….

Thus, if a person engages in Torah and divine service throughout the week, when the heart is sealed – as this is an inauspicious time, as we have said – when Shabbat arrives and the heart opens – since then there is no fear that the external forces will enter – all the Torah and prayer in which one has engaged throughout the week will automatically enter; not a bit of it is lost.

As we have explained, despite the closeness of the love of God and the necessity of achieving it, it is extremely difficult to attain.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that there are different levels within the love of God. Rambam stresses that the ability to love God fully has only been the lot of a solitary few over the course of history. In *Hilkhot Teshuva* (10:4), Ramam writes that this was achieved by our patriarch Avraham, whom God called *ohavi* (lit. “My lover”).[[4]](#footnote-4) In *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:51), Rambam writes that this level was achieved by the three patriarchs and by Moshe.

In these two works, Rambam points to distraction as the primary factor that prevents one from achieving a complete love of God. In addition, Rambam notes the need to employ supreme concentration and focus all one’s energy on standing before God in order to reach this love. Similarly, Rambam addresses the essence of divine service and outlines ways that a human being can achieve it.

***Moreh Nevukhim*: “Know… and Serve Him”**

Let us first examine *Moreh Nevukhim*. In *Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51, Rambam sets forth the purpose of divine service and the reason that a person must engage in it. Rambam explains that there are two essential stages, based on David’s dying request to his son Shlomo as it appears in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*: “And you, my son Shlomo, **know** the God of your father, **and serve Him with single mind** and fervent heart…” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 28:9). As we see from David’s words, there are two stages: knowing God and serving God.

Knowing God means comprehending God fully, within the limits of human ability. This is how Rambam describes the parameters of the comprehension that is expected of us, as well as the extent to which we must engage in inquiry and knowledge:

Those who undertake to investigate the principles of religion have come into the antechambers.[[5]](#footnote-5) There is no doubt that the people there can be divided into different grades. But those who have succeeded in finding a proof for everything that can be proved, who have a true knowledge of God, so far as a true knowledge can be attained, and are near the truth, wherever an approach to the truth is possible – they are in the palace in which the king lives.

My dear son, so long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and logic, you belong to those who go round about the palace in search of the gate… When you understand physics, you have entered the hall and you walk through its antechambers. And when, after completing the study of natural philosophy, you master metaphysics, you have entered the inner court (see *Yechezkel* 44:21-27) and are with the king in the same palace. You have attained the degree of the wise people, who include men of different grades of perfection. (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51)

There are two areas for a person to study and examine: religious principles and theology; and science, i.e., mathematics and physics. One who studies these areas of knowledge, according to Rambam, will be able to enter the antechambers of the palace. When a person is able to integrate the various areas of knowledge that he studies and understand the meaning of all of existence and its significance, he is able to enter the palace itself.

Rambam emphasizes the limits of human comprehension:

But those who have succeeded in finding a proof for everything that can be proved, who have a true knowledge of God, so far as a true knowledge can be attained, and are near the truth, wherever an approach to the truth is possible…

This, according to Rambam, is the purpose of “Know the God of your father.” From this point on, Rambam begins to address the second task: “And serve Him.”

The normal divine service in which a person must engage entails following the *mitzvot*; one must fulfill the *mitzvot* and take care to avoid transgressing the Torah’s prohibitions. The purpose of this aspect of divine service is to bring a person closer to God and to distance him from the mundane elements of the world:

Know that all such acts of divine service, such as reading the Torah, praying, and performing other *mitzvot*, serve no other purpose than to cause us to occupy and fill our mind with God’s *mitzvot* (may He be uplifted) and free it from worldly business; for we are thus, as it were, engaged in [the service of] God (may He be uplifted), and not in any other thing.

Thus, most human resources must be directed at the inner essence of divine service. This divine service includes the act of standing before God, focusing our thoughts toward Him, and expressing our constant desire to dwell in His midst:

There are some who direct all their mind toward the attainment of perfection in metaphysics, devote themselves entirely to God (may he be magnified and exalted), exclude from their thought every other thing, and employ all their intellectual faculties in the study of the universe, in order to derive from there a proof for the existence of God (may He be uplifted) and to learn in every possible way how God rules all things. They form the class of those who have entered the palace, namely, the class of prophets. One of these attained so much knowledge and concentrated his thoughts to such an extent in the idea of God (may He be uplifted), that it could be said of him, “And he was there with the Lord forty days…” (*Shemot* 34:28); during that holy communion he could ask Him, answer Him, speak to Him, and be addressed by Him, enjoying that which he had attained to such a degree that “he ate no bread and drank no water.” His intellectual energy was so predominant that all coarser functions of the body, especially those connected with the sense of touch, were in abeyance. Some prophets are only able to see, and of these some approach near and see, while others see from a distance: “The Lord revealed Himself to me from far” (*Yirmiyahu* 31:3). We have already spoken of the various degrees of prophecy.

In this passage, Rambam divides the ranks of those who serve God into two groups – wise people and prophets – and each of these groups contains different levels within it.

In a note appended to the chapter, Rambam suggests guidance on engaging in the divine service of the group of wise people:

The first thing you must do is this: Turn your thoughts away from everything while you read the *Shema* or pray, and do not content yourself with maintaining *kavana* (focused intent) when you read the first verse of the *Shema* or the first blessing of the *Amida*. When you have successfully practiced this for many years, try then, whenever you read the Torah or listen to it, to have all your heart and all your thought occupied with understanding what you read or hear. After some time when you have mastered this, accustom yourself to have your mind free from all other thoughts when you read any portion of the other books of the Prophets, or when you recite any blessing, and to have your attention directed exclusively to the perception and the understanding of what you utter. When you have succeeded in properly performing these acts of divine service, and you have your thought, during their performance, entirely abstracted from worldly affairs, take then care that your thought be not disturbed by thinking of your wants or of superfluous things. In short, think of worldly matters when you eat, drink, bathe, talk with your wife and little children, or when you converse with other people. These times, which are frequent and long, I think must suffice to you for reflecting on everything that is necessary as regards business, household, and health. But when you are engaged in the performance of religious duties, have your mind exclusively directed to what you are doing.

When you are alone by yourself, when you are awake on your couch, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God, i.e., to approach Him and to minister before Him in the true manner that I have described to you – not in hollow emotions. This I consider as the highest perfection wise people can attain by the above training.

The fundamental distinction between one who serves God in the manner of the wise people and one who does so in the manner of the prophets relates to the question of whether one should serve God only during certain periods of time. A wise person serves God and concentrates on standing before Him only while he is performing *mitzvot*, studying, praying, or reciting blessings. However, for such a wise person, there are other periods of time when he is engaged in worldly matters, such as when he eats, drinks, and sleeps, as well as when he does business and at other times.

Rambam’s guidance here is meant to allow such a person to concentrate his efforts on enhancing the feeling of standing before God while he performs *mitzvot*, while at the same time minimizing the moments in which he is engaged in worldly matters.

One who serves God in the manner of the prophets does not distinguish between the various activities that occupy him throughout the day. Such a person is in a constant state of preparedness, knowing that he is always standing before God. However, even this overall approach contains various levels of closeness and preparedness, as Rambam relates:

But when a human being has acquired 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!” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5:2). I do not claim that this is the level of ordinary prophets, but only that it is the level of our master Moshe, about whom it says: “Moshe alone shall come near the Lord” (*Shemot* 24:2); and “And he was there with the Lord (*Shemot* 34:28); and “But you remain here with me” (*Devarim* 5:28). The meaning of these verses has been explained by us.

The patriarchs likewise attained this degree of perfection; they approached God (may He be uplifted) in such a manner that through them the name of God became known in the world: “The God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Ya’akov... This shall be My name forever” (*Shemot* 3:15). Their minds were so identified with the knowledge of God that He made a lasting covenant with each of them: “Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob…” (*Vayikra* 26:42). For it is known from statements made in Scripture that the minds of these four – the patriarchs and Moshe – were exclusively filled with the name of God; that is, they comprehended Him and loved Him.

Rambam does not suggest a method of achieving the level of the group of the prophets or a means of advancing to higher levels within this group, as he relates: “But a person like myself must not imagine that he is able to lead people to this degree of perfection.”

One who serves God, who constantly “places” God before him and never becomes distracted from Him, is protected and shielded from all harm. As King David stated: “I am ever mindful of the Lord’s presence; He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken” (*Tehillim* 16:8). In the Psalm of Protection, the author imagines that God states: “Because he is devoted (*chashak*)to Me I will deliver him; I will keep him safe, for he knows My name” (*Tehillim* 91:14).

As Rambam explains the matter:

This man is well guarded, because he has known Me, and then was devoted (*chashak*) to Me. You know the difference between loving (*ohev*)and being devoted (*choshek*): When love is so intense that one’s thought is exclusively engaged with the object of his love, this is devotion.

***Hilkhot Teshuva*: “Those Who Love Him and Are Obsessed with Him at All Times”**

In *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Rambam emphasizes the supreme virtue of loving God:

What is the proper [degree of] love? That one should love God with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person’s] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for God should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded, “[You shall love the Lord your God] with all your heart and with all your soul” (*Devarim* 6:5). This concept was implied by Shlomo when he stated, as a metaphor: “For I am faint with love” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:5). The totality of *Shir Ha-Shirim* is a parable describing [this love]. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3)

In the final *halakha* of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Rambam writes:

It is a well-known and clear matter that the love of God will not become attached within a person’s heart until he becomes obsessed with it at all times as is fitting, leaving all things in the world except for this. (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:6)

Rambam uses the word “obsessed” (*yishgeh*) in order to describe the great power of love. In his glosses on this *halakha*, Ra’avad questions Rambam’s use of this expression:

Regarding this “obsession” (*shiggayon*), we do not know what [Rambam] meant by this. We can interpret it in two ways: from the language of “song,” as in “A *shiggayon* of David” (*Tehillim* 7:1); or alternatively, that because of one’s love of God, one will err (*tishgeh*) in one’s other matters, since one will not pay attention to them.

It seems to me that Rambam’s use of the term *shiggayon* represents a novel combination of two other similar words: *higgayon* (contemplation) and *shigga’on* (madness). Together, they create the word *shiggayon*, which means that a person contemplates and invests all of his thoughts in God, without holding himself back in the slightest, to the point of madness. What results is the kind of lovesickness that Rambam is describing, which he calls *shiggayon* – contemplating God to the point of obsession.

We have thus demonstrated the greatness of the virtue of loving God; it is truly a stairway whose top reaches the sky, though for us, its base is set in the ground. It behooves us to climb this stairway to the extent that we are able.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. “In Your behalf my heart says: ‘Seek My face!’” (*Tehillim* 27:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On a deeper level, we return to the idea of loving one’s fellow that we introduced at the beginning of our discussion (see Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:17-18). We can claim that the loftiest levels of loving one’s fellow human being are rooted in a person’s ability to abandon the isolating individualistic outlook and adopt the outlook that includes all of mankind. As the prophet Malakhi said: “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we break faith with one another?” (*Malakhi* 2:10). In the context of this outlook, we focus on the unity of mankind, the unity of all of God’s creation. It is precisely where the other becomes unified with us that real love is found. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi’s commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Yeshayahu* 41:8: “But you, Israel, My servant, Ya’akov, whom I have chosen, seed of Avraham *ohavi* (lit. ‘My lover’).” See also *Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 20:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Throughout this chapter, Rambam establishes an analogy to the relationship between different groups of people and the king’s palace, as well as the king himself. Some people have never seen the palace; some have circled around the palace; some have entered the antechambers; some have entered the palace itself; and some have seen the king’s face to various degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)