YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #20: *Sha’arei Ora* (II)**

As we saw in the previous *shiur*, Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla's *Sha'arei Ora* approaches prayer by delving into the names of God, this being the goal of the entire book. His introduction continues:

And the boundary of truth and the tradition of the covenant is that whoever wishes to attain his wishes in the matter of the names of God should strive with all his power in Torah to reach the intention of each and every one of the holy names mentioned in the Torah, such as *E-hyeh, Y-ah, Y-D-V-D, A-donai, E-l, E-lo’a, E-lohim, Sh-adai, Tze-va'ot*. He should know and understand that each and every one of these names, all of them are like keys to each and every thing that a person needs for every purpose in the world. When he contemplates these names, he will find that all of the Torah and the *mitzvot* depend on them. And when he knows the intention of each and every one of these names, he will recognize and know the greatness of He who spoke and brought the world into being. He will fear and dread Him and yearn and desire to cling to Him through the knowledge of His names. Then he will be close to God and his prayer will be accepted. About this it is stated: "I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer Him" (*Tehillim* 91:14-15). The verse does not say: "I will set him on high, because he has remembered My name," but rather "because He has known My name." Knowledge is the essence, and afterwards: "He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him." That is to say, when he needs something, and directs his mind to that name on which that matter depends, then "I will answer him." Surely you see that in a time of trouble, Yaakov mentioned "*E-l Sh-adai*," saying: "And *E-l Sh-adai* give you mercy before the man" (*Bereishit* 43:14). And Daniel, when he prayed for the Temple, said: "And cause Your face to shine upon Your sanctuary that is desolate, for the sake of *A-donai*" (*Daniel* 9:17), even though the Rabbis expounded in *Berakhot*: "For the sake of Avraham who called You *Adon….* And when Chana prayed that God should give her the seed of man, what does it say? "O *Hashem Tze-va'ot*, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your handmaid" (I *Shmuel* 1:11). And even though they expounded this in *Berakhot* as they expounded it, there is still an essence and inner root to the matter, and we come not for the midrashic exposition but for the essence of the matter. This being the case, we must deliver into your hands the essence and root to rely upon. (Introduction)

We have seen that *Sha'arei Ora* warns against preoccupation with holy names other than the names of God that are mentioned in the Torah. If the Torah was given to us with the Divine names in it, then we should be able to have a connection to them, and we are called upon to delve into them. Let us now try to understand why God's names are so necessary for prayer.

**Keys to the Rooms of the Palace**

*Sha'arei Ora* explains as follows: "Each and every one of these names, all of them are like keys to each and every thing that a person needs for every purpose in the world." Imagine a huge palace with many rooms filled with all kinds of wonderful things, but all of the rooms are locked. Only one who has the collection of keys, who knows which key opens which door and what is in each room, can attain the contents of the rooms. On the one hand, this metaphor explains how God's names help a person achieve his desires through prayer, but on the other hand, it may sound problematic: Is prayer a technical act? Does knowing the passcode suffice for a person to get what he wants? Furthermore, the person holding the keys does not have to turn to anyone; his entire action takes place between him and the keys. Can it be that we do not stand before God in prayer, but only before an assortment of His keys?

Let us consider the words of *Sha'arei Ora* later in the book:

After we have informed you that the essence of faith and foundation of [God's] unity is to understand that all of the holy names mentioned in the Torah are included in the Tetragrammaton, namely, *Y-D-V-D*, which is the trunk of the tree, and all the other names, some being roots, others branches, others hidden treasures, each of them enables an action distinct from that of the others. This may be likened to a treasure house that has several rooms, each room designated for a different purpose; in one room there are precious stones and pearls, in another silver, in another gold, in another different kinds of food, in another different kinds of drink, and in another different kinds of clothing. If a person needs food but does not know which room contains the food, he may die of hunger even though the rooms are filled with all good things; not because he was denied his request, but because he does not know which room contains that which he needs. God's holy names work in the very same way. Certain names are designated for prayer, mercy, and forgiveness, others for tears, others for miseries and troubles, others for food and livelihood, others for might, others for lovingkindness, and others for grace. If he does not know to direct his mind in prayer to that name which is the key to what he needs, who is responsible for his not achieving his desire? His own folly and paucity of comprehension. About this it is stated: "The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against the Lord" (*Mishlei* 19:3). For God's hands are open to all, but owing to the folly of a person's not knowing which storehouse contains what he needs, he returns empty-handed and thinks the evil thought that God denied him his desire. This, however, is not true; rather, his own folly, that he does not know which storehouse contains that thing that he wants, kept it from him. About this it is stated: "And your sins have withheld good from you" (*Yirmiyahu* 5:25). Therefore, a person must wander in the paths of Torah and learn the meanings of the holy names, so that he be proficient in them and in their names. And when he has to present God with a request, he should direct his mind to the name that is designated for that request. Not only will he attain all that he wants, but he will be beloved above and precious below, so that he will inherit in this world and in the World-to-Come. (*Sha'arei Ora*, First Gate, Tenth *Sefira*)

*Sha'arei Ora* first clarifies that all of the Divine names relate in the end to the one God, and all of them are included in the Tetragrammaton. Mention is then made once again of the metaphor of rooms and keys. If someone does not achieve what he wants through prayer, it is not because he did not pray or did not have intention in his prayer, but because he did not know how to direct his intention to the right rooms. He might blame God for not answering his prayers, but the problem is with him, that he did not study properly. This passage further sharpens our question: What is prayer, according to *Sha'arei Ora*? First, what is the relationship between prayer and intention and the heart; does one merely need to utter a certain code? Second, what is the place of God in prayer, if it is possible to enter a password and automatically enter the desired room?

**“Who Spoke and Brought the World into Being”**

First, in order to see the issues clearly, we can liken the above to another system with which we are familiar – the natural system. Imagine that *Sha'arei Ora* would say the same things about someone who did not work for a living. According to most thinkers, if someone does not work, but only prays, his prayer will not suffice. Exerting oneself in a natural manner does not contradict prayer. One who toils in the natural world does not circumvent God, but rather utilizes a path that God provided so that he would act within it. *Sha'arei Ora* says there is another whole expanse just like this: Just as one must know the world of nature, so one must know the world of the spirit, through whose path we must act in order to realize the Divine will. This is the first step on the way to understanding *Sha'arei Ora*. Let us now return to the passage with which we opened this *shiur*, and examine it more closely.

*Sha'arei Ora* says about the Divine names that "all of the Torah and the *mitzvot* depend on them." By contemplating the names of God, a person can understand the essence of every section of the Torah and the spiritual idea of every *mitzva*. Over and beyond this, he adds: "When he knows the intention of each and every one of these names, he will recognize and know the greatness of He who spoke and brought the world into being." We raised the concern that preoccupation with the "keys" might detach us from God, but it turns out that studying the Divine names is supposed to bring us closer to Him and deepen our knowledge of the Creator. Something happens here, and not just the recital of slogans. Manitou emphasizes the expression used by *Sha'arei Ora*: "The greatness of He who spoke and brought the world into being." By learning God's names, we encounter the Creator of the world, He who stands behind the world. If so, it turns out that the metaphor of keys to rooms is a limited metaphor. We do not open doors automatically, but rather we meet the King. The Divine names are not gates to rooms in which the King is not present, but rather they allow us to meet His various appearances. "Then he will be close to God and his prayer will be accepted" – his prayer will not be automatically accepted, but only thanks to the closeness to God that his knowledge of His names will generate.

The result of learning God's names is also described at the end of the second passage that we saw above: "Not only will he attain all that he wants, but he will be beloved above and precious below." The petitioner does not receive what he wants automatically, but only because he is the beloved of God. We are dealing with study that creates a bond of love. That which at first glance appears like a technical and mechanical description turns out to be a deep and powerful process.

**Entering the Gates of Prayer**

Let us examine another excerpt from the first gate, from which we already saw a different passage:

King Shlomo, peace be upon him, said: "Guard your foot when you go to the house of God" (*Kohelet* 4:17). He informs us in this verse that a person must examine himself and take precautions when he wishes to pray before God, and see and understand whether there are accusers who may hinder the acceptance of his prayers, and he must remove the stones and lift the obstacles from his path. This may be likened to a person who goes to the king's courtyard with a request, that he must hurry and know whether there is some danger or peril on the road. Besides that, he must consider how many gates there are to the king's house, one inside the other, and be familiar with the gatekeepers designated to guard the gates, and be loved by all of them, and know if there is among them an enemy with whom he must make peace. And besides all this, it is appropriate for him to know and contemplate the garments he is wearing, whether it is fitting to enter the king's courtyard with them. As it is stated: "For none might enter within the king's gate clothed with sackcloth" (*Esther* 4:2). And besides all this, it is appropriate for him to examine himself, whether he is fit to speak before the king and the officers and deputies before him, and whether there is among them someone who will challenge his request, and also whether he can bear it if he is delayed in the king's palace for an hour or two. Our Rabbis had to stir us up and tells us a great rule: The earthly kingdom is like the heavenly kingdom, and if in an earthly kingdom he must be careful about all the things that we have mentioned, all the more so when a person goes in to greet the King, King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. (First Gate)

When a person goes to pray, he must first check whether some accusation could be brought against his prayer – not an accusation raised by hidden demons, but by the spiritual state of the person: What have I done since the last time I prayed? Did I perhaps commit a transgression since then; did I perhaps offend someone today? If prayer were a technical act of pressing in a code, it would make no difference whether the petitioner is worthy or not. However, since we are dealing with an encounter with God, the person must examine himself to see whether he is worthy of such an encounter.

According to *Sha'arei Ora*, one should know the gatekeepers, and "be loved by all of them." The king's palace has different gates, and each gate has a guard. There is a guard at the gate of Torah, and he will let in those who have studied Torah properly today. There is a guard at the gate of lovingkindness, and perhaps he will not allow in someone who did not act charitably toward his neighbor today. We have many experiences over the course of the day and pay little attention to some of them; before we engage in prayer, we must stop and examine what we have done and where we stand. With this guidance, the time before prayer becomes a time of soul-searching.

*Sha'arei Ora* goes even further and says a person must examine "the garments he is wearing, whether it is fitting to enter the king's courtyard with them." It is possible that we have been talking until this point about standing before the gatekeepers, and now we are dealing with standing before God Himself. It is also possible that the emphasis at this stage is on the request – "whether there is among them someone who will challenge his request." Perhaps the person is worthy but he is about to make a request that is inappropriate. Perhaps he is unfit to receive the high level of compensation that he is about to ask for in his prayer, owing to his behavior toward the people around him at work. And perhaps the job he is competing for and praying to get, someone else is more worthy to receive.

**“O Lord, Open My Lips”**

According to *Sha'arei Ora*, we enter the *Amida* prayer through the name *A-donai*:

And since no creature in the world has a way of entering into God other than through it, and since every request and supplication enters by way of the name *A-donai*, it was necessary to set at the beginning of all the prayers: "*A-donai*, open my lips" (*Tehillim* 51:17), because this name is written *alef-dalet-nun-yod*, and this is the main thing. And through this name prayers enter before *Y-H-V-H*, may He be blessed." (Ibid.)

This too can be read in a superficial manner, that the name *A-donai* is the passcode for opening the door of prayer. However, when we contemplate the words of *Sha'arei Ora*, it appears that standing before "*A-donai*," the Lord, is a matter of principle. The first step is to recognize God as the Lord. Before we can turn to God, we must define the relationship between us and Him, which is that of a slave before his master. The verse, "*A-donai*, open my lips," means accepting the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, and through that we can enter into prayer.

(Translated by David Strauss)