YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #25: The Ari (1)**

**Introduction**

In this *shiur*,we will begin to discuss the meaning of prayer in the writings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, better known as the Ari. The subject of prayer in the Ari's writings is immense and very complicated; whatever we say about it will be like a drop in the sea, both quantitatively and qualitatively, especially in light of the fact that his teachings are deeply rooted in the spiritual world of Kabbala. Nevertheless, we must examine the basic concepts that he sets in place, because they will serve as the foundation of the ideas of the scholars of Israel in the generations that follow him. Not everyone will base their approach on his teachings, but many will develop their positions on prayer based on the Ari's approach – including the Ramchal, the *Nefesh ha-Chayyim*, central currents in Chassidut, and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook.

Chronologically, our discussion of prayer has thus far reached the generation of the Maharal. The Ari was born a few years after the Maharal but lived only half as long; he died at the age of 38, long before the Maharal’s death. In contrast to the Maharal, who spent much of his time authoring books, almost no original writings of the Ari have survived. His words were handed down to us primarily through what his disciples – headed by Rabbi Chayyim Vital – recorded of his oral teachings. The duration of the Ari's activity was quite short; he was well-known for only two years, from the beginning of his activity in Tzefat until his death in that city. And yet, amazingly, he made waves throughout the Jewish world. People who studied with him describe an encounter with a person with manifest *Ruach Hakodesh* (holy spirit). The content that he taught was not a rearrangement of known material (as was the case, for example, with his predecessor in Tzefat, Rabbi Moshe Cordevero, in his book, *Pardes Rimonim*), but rather a burst of new elements. Most great authorities of Israel based their teachings on what was said before them; the Ari was one of the few Torah giants who said things that had never been said, and through whom the backbone of the Torah was passed down through the generations.

Rabbi Chayyim Vital, the devoted disciple of the Ari (according to tradition, the Ari told him that he came to Tzefat only for him), arranged the words of the Ari in eight volumes. In one small volume, he arranged material he found in manuscripts of the Ari – "A gate of what I found of my teacher's writings" – which is exceedingly little. In the other volumes, he wrote in the Ari's name what he had culled from his *shiurim* and oral talks. These include: "the Gate of Preliminaries," "the Gate of Verses," "the Gate of Intentions," "the Gate of Reincarnations," "the Gate of the Holy Spirit," and others. He then went on to arrange the Ari's writings in various editions, and the disciples of his disciples published them under the titles "*Etz Chayyim*" and "*Peri Etz Chayyim*."

There is a large gap between prayer as we know it and the prayer of the Kabbalists, who offer prayers in accordance with the rite of the Ari. Prayer with the intentions (*kavanot*)of the Ari can be several times longer than regular prayer, and consists entirely of intentions and declarations of God's unity. The difference between our prayer and the prayer of the Ari can be compared to the difference between how most of us gaze upon a particular object and how a scientist, who sees the atoms of which it is composed, looks at it. This is the Ari's resolution: We see entire sentences before us and understand them, whereas in the intentions of the Ari, the sentences break down into words and letters, which themselves break down into the letter and its coronets, its vowels and cantillation notes. Just as the Ramban says about the Torah that it is entirely the names of God, one can say that according to the Ari, all of prayer is the names of God.

**The Worlds of *Abiya* (אבי"ע)**

In order to allow us to understand what the Ari writes, we will first consider two passages from the words of Rabbi David Cohen, better known as Rav Ha-Nazir, in *Kol Ha-Nevu'a*, which summarize the words of the Ari on the subject of prayer.

A person must serve and repair the world through deeds and speech. This service is prayer, for the repair of the world. Every day and in every prayer, new matters are clarified, matters which had not been clarified before. New minds come, and after the prayer, they go back and disappear. However, the worlds as a whole do not ascend until the arrival of the Messiah, speedily in our days. (*Kol Ha-Nevu'a*, p. 240, chapter 69)

The worlds must be raised from below upwards, so that the lower world be connected to the world above it, to the point that all of the worlds together are connected to the world of Emanation, when the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer is recited while standing, and afterwards they must be lowered from above downwards.

Every day, from the beginning of the prayer service to *Barukh She'amar* is the world of Action. And from *Barukh She'amar* to *Yotzer Or* is the world of Formation. And from *Yotzer Or* to the *Shemoneh Esrei* is the world of Creation. And the entire *Amida* prayer is the world of Emanation. (*Kol Ha-Nevu'a*, p. 241, chapter 71)

The first passage deals with clarifications that are performed during prayer, while the second passage deals with the raising of the worlds that takes place during prayer. These are the main concepts that the Ari coins in the matter of prayer – clarifications and the raising of worlds.

Let's start with an explanation of the concept of “worlds.” We encounter here in the words of the Ari one of the most basic systems of concepts in his teachings: Reality is constructed out of four worlds, known collectively as the four worlds of *Abiya*: *Atzilut –* Emanation; *Beri'a –* Creation; *Yetzira* – Formation; and *Asiya* – Action.

The simple religious conception speaks about two categories of being (of course, at two completely different levels of reality): God and the physical world. Various modes of contemplation – about the verses (the first two verses of the Torah, which distinguish between the seemingly perfect heaven and the earth that was created unformed and void) and the words of *Chazal*, or in accordance with philosophical reason and logic – led medieval authorities to conclude that the world that is not God is comprised of at least two levels, one heavenly and the other earthly, and that the heavenly worlds are different from the earthly world.

This concept was further developed in Jewish philosophy, which divided the world into three parts: our world, which is completely physical; the world of the spheres, which is built out of purer and more abstract material; and above the two of them, the world of the angels – the separate spiritual world, which is completely abstract. These are three different dimensions of the world.

Then came the kabbalists, who taught about the existence of four worlds. They taught that above all the created worlds, there is the world of Emanation – a world that is not separate from the Divine world, but rather gives it expression. (We will not deal here with the less central question of whether the kabbalists understand the three lower worlds in the same way as they are understood by the philosophers.) The world of Emanation (*Atzilut*) is the world that is "by" (*etzel*) the Creator; it is connected to Him. This world is the world of the *Sefirot*, the attributes of God. Just as a person's traits reflect the person, even though they are not him, so God is revealed through the *Sefirot*. It is impossible to distinguish between a person and his characteristics, or between him and his name.

The source for the names of the worlds of *Abiya* is a verse in *Yeshayahu* (43:7): "Every one that is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, I have formed him, yea, I have made him." "Every one that is called by My name, and whom for My glory" – these are the *Sefirot*,which are the names of God and which become revealed afterwards through creation, formation, and action. As stated, it is impossible to separate a person from his name, and so too the names of God are revelations of Him. The world below the world of Emanation, the created world, is already separate from Him.

Another source for these concepts is the story of creation, where we find creation, formation, and action. *Parashat Bereishit* begins with the concept of creation (*beri'a)*: "In the beginning, God created" (*Bereishit* 1:1). This concept appears several more times in the first chapter of the Torah, and prominently in the context of man: "And God created man in His own image" (*Bereishit* 1:27). In the rest of the account of the creation, we find mostly the concept of doing, making (*asiya* – action): "And God made." In the second chapter, which also describes the formation of reality but from a different perspective, we encounter formation (*yetzira*) in the phrase: "Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground" (*Bereishit* 2:7). This, however, is not enough: a deeper connection between God and the world finds expression in the second half of the verse: "And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." The *Zohar* comments on this phrase: "He who breathes, breathes of himself." The Divine breath emanates from God.

These concepts differ from each other: creation denotes something out of nothing; formation involves something new out of an existing thing; and making refers to an action occurring in the existing reality that does not necessarily involve something new. For example, it can refer to the arrangement of things that already exist. In other words: Emanation is nothing, Creation is something out of nothing, Formation is something new from something, and Action is something that is not new. What happens in *Parashat Bereishit* is first the creation of a new world, and afterwards, mostly the arrangement of the created beings after they already exist. When it comes to man, another level appears – the emanation of breath/soul into man, which gives expression to the world of Emanation. This assertion, that man has a Divine soul (and in this sense it belongs to the world of Emanation), is found already in the words of the Ramban, who was one of the earliest Kabbalists.

According to this, all four dimensions appearing in the account of creation describe not only the moment of creation itself, but also the present. These four occurrences are present at all times.

**The Course of Prayer – From the World of Action to the World of Emanation**

The Ari connects the four worlds to the various stages of prayer, which appear (following his lead) in many *siddurim* that follow the rite of the Oriental communities. From *Birkot ha-Shachar* (the morning blessings) to *Barukh She'amar*, we are found in the world of Action; in *Pesukei de-Zimra*, in the world of Formation; in *Shema* and its accompanying blessings, in the world of Creation; and in the *Amida* prayer, in the world of Emanation.

We will start with *Birkot Ha-Shachar* and try to decipher the meaning of this structure. According to the Gemara, *Birkot Ha-Shachar* are supposed to be recited during one's usual morning activities. A blessing is recited when one gets out of bed, when one dresses, when one puts on his shoes, etc. Only at a later stage was the recitation of these blessings moved to the synagogue. These blessings relate to activities, and thus to the world of Action. The recitation of the sacrificial service also belongs to this stage of prayer, as it too describes actions.

This stage is followed by *Pesukei de-Zimra*,which are chapters of song and poetry. Poetry involves artistic formation. In this stage of prayer, we contemplate the world through the eyes of poetry, through the songs and poems of King David. Poetry is something that is alive, something that is formed and comes into being. We are still in the same world that we were in during *Birkot ha-Shachar*, but we change our glasses. We no longer contemplate it through descriptions of actions, but rather through song and poetry. *Pesukei de-Zimra* speak of existing reality, but they describe how God causes it to grow and how He creates within it. Thus, prayer shifts from a perspective of Action to the perspective of Formation.

When in the course of prayer do we deal with Creation? In the blessing of *Yotzer Or*. This blessing uses the term "*yotzer*," form, but it deals primarily with the creation of the world, unlike the previous stage which was connected mainly to human actions. The second blessing of *Shema* also represents creation, since it relates to the appearance of the Torah – which is also a creation that penetrates the world. In similar fashion, the exodus from Egypt described in the third blessing can also be seen as a kind of creation. The miracles of Egypt testify in a most comprehensive matter to the Creator and Leader of the world (see, for example, the Ramban in his commentary to *Shemot* 13:16). At this point, we contemplate creation; we encounter not only formation that takes place within reality, but also God's creation of something out of nothing – the creation of the world, the creation of the Torah, and the creation of redemption.

The statement that the *Amida* prayer belongs to the world of Emanation is a significant one, which changes our view of the essence of this prayer. According to this statement, during the *Amida* prayer we are found, as it were, "by" (*etzel*) God. How is this reflected in the prayer? The stage of prayer in which the word "You" is especially prominent is the *Amida* prayer: each of its blessings concludes with the formula "Blessed are You, O Lord," and the first four blessings also open with the word "You" – "Blessed are You, O Lord," "You are mighty," "You are holy," and "You graciously bestow." In the *Amida*, we turn directly to God. One who approaches the *Amida* prayer exclusively from a perspective of petition, and with his entire being says only "I, I, I," is liable to miss what is special about this prayer – that it repeatedly turns to "You, You, You."

An even deeper upheaval may take place over the course of the *Amida* prayer. At the end of that prayer, we come to the blessing "who restores His *Shekhina* to Zion." At this point, it is no longer clear whether we are still petitioning for ourselves or for God, that His *Shekhina* should once again reveal itself. Our separate standing before God becomes blurred, and the requests put forward on our own behalf and on behalf of God are intermingled.

The course of prayer changes our view of the world. What appeared to us before prayer as a collection of actions, we now see as an artistic formation. One can look at a sculptor, who does all kinds of things with his raw material, and see everything he does as technical actions – until the outlines of the sculpture become visible, and it transforms in our eyes into a work of art. The actions reveal themselves as artistic formation. Afterwards, we become exposed to the innovation that underlies reality – to creation. Only after these three stages do we ascend from our world to an encounter with God in the *Amida* prayer. In the *Amida* prayer, we stand right before Him; we are "by" Him in the world of Emanation.

This entire course carries us deep inside, and after the *Amida* prayer come the stages of going back out – three stages of returning to reality.

In the next *shiur*,we will complete the description of prayer as movement within the four worlds of *Abiya*, culminating in the *Amida* prayer which belongs to the world of Emanation. We will then consider the other element introduced by the Ari in the matter of prayer – the task of clarification.

(Translated by David Strauss)