YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #26: The Ari (2)**

**Introduction**

In the world of Kabbala, one can speak of two realms: theoretical Kabbala and practical Kabbala. The term "practical Kabbala" can itself be used in two different senses. There is the practical Kabbala that the kabbalistic books themselves strongly warn against, a sort that involves influencing reality in various esoteric manners, which can appear to be magical. The clear teaching of the kabbalistic masters, including Rabbi Chayyim Vital in *Sha'arei Kedusha* (a book of ethics and service of God which aims at bringing the kabbalist to the level of *ruach hakodesh* – holy spirit), is that one should not engage in practical Kabbala of this kind. But practical Kabbala also has another meaning, namely, applying Kabbala in the service of God. This includes the central areas of the worship of God: the *mitzvot* and prayer. (Torah study is also a central area, of course, but it is more closely connected to theoretical Kabbala.) In the teachings of the Ari, it is evident that he directs his study toward this second type of practical Kabbala. Even when he deals with theoretical Kabbala, the goal is to reach practical application in personal service of God – as appears primarily in *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot* and *Sha'ar ha-Mitzvot*, and also in the book *Peri Etz Chayyim*.

With this goal, the Ari penetrates the inner dimensions of prayer, and enters into detailed resolution of letters and coronets. The relationship between the Ari and more plain-sense explanations of prayer can be likened to the relationship between a carpenter, who cuts wood to build furniture, and a theoretical physicist, who breaks the wood down to its atomic and sub-atomic levels.

Not all kabbalists dealt with the practical applications of Kabbala. In general, it can be argued that the Ashkenazic kabbalists were more concerned with theoretical Kabbala, while the Sephardic kabbalists were more involved with practical Kabbala; this is true when it comes to the Ari himself. For this reason, as Rav Kook writes in *Orot ha-Kodesh*, the kabbalists are referred to as "masters of the service" – because their teachings are directed toward real spiritual service in the world of God.

**The Structure of Prayer: From Action to Emanation and Back**

In the previous *shiur*, we saw the picture of the world painted by Kabbala: unlike the Jewish philosophers who speak of three dimensions of reality, the Kabbala speaks of four dimensions – Emanation, Creation, Formation, and Action. We noted that these concepts appear in 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," but the kabbalists hardly ever mention that verse in this context. They are already inside the four worlds and deal with them constantly, without specifying the ground upon which these concepts rest. In general, they do not address the definitions of the worlds. They do not involve themselves in the process we described in the previous *shiur*, explaining why one element of prayer belongs to the world of Formation while another belongs to the world of Creation. They are already at the next stage, within these worlds.

Let us now consider the structure of prayer in the words of the Ari himself:

You should further know about the morning service. It was already explained earlier that from the beginning of the eighteen blessings [of *Birkot ha-Shachar*] until *Barukh She'amar* is the world of Action, and from there to *Yotzer Or* is the world of Formation, and from there until the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer is the world of Creation, and from there until the *Kaddish* that is recited before *Ashrei* is the world of Emanation*,* and from *Ashrei* until *Tefila le-David* we return to the world of Creation, and from there until *Ein kadosh ka-Shem* we return to the world of Formation, and from there until *Aleinu* is the world of Action. What this means is that one must first raise the worlds from below upwards as stated above, and connect the lower world to the world above it, until all the worlds are connected to the world of Emanation when we pray the *Shemoneh Esrei* while standing, at which time a supernal union is achieved. Afterward, one must receive the heavenly abundance that flows from that union and bring it down to the lower world, from above downward. Therefore, when we say *Ashrei yoshvei veitekha* until *Tefila le-David*, we bring the abundance down from Emanation to Creation. This does not mean that we bring down the world of Creation itself. And similarly until *Ein kadosh ka-Shem ki ein biltekha*, when we bring the abundance down from Formation to Action. And afterward, in *Aleinu*, the aforementioned worlds come down, each one in its place. (*Sha'ar ha-Kavanot* – *Derushei Tefilat ha-Shachar*, *derush* 1)

[In the previous *shiur* we noted that the *Amida* prayer takes place in the world of Emanation, and now we see that even the *Tachanun* that follows it belongs to that world. These prayers constitute a single unit. This is somewhat surprising, for in the *Amida* prayer we stand before God, whereas the *Tachanun* prayer seems different in character. It may be suggested that *Tachanun* continues our supplications; it is in *Asherei*,and onward,that we return to God's praises. One can praise another without standing before him, but a request requires the presence of the party being petitioned.]

As we described in the previous *shiur*: until *Baruch She'amar* is the world of Action; *Pesukei de-Zimra* – the world of Formation; *Keri'at Shema* and its blessings – the world of Creation; the *Amida* prayer and *Tachanun* – the world of Emanation. And then we begin to start back: In *Ashrei* and *U-Va le-Tziyon* – we return to the world of Creation; in the *Shir shel yom –* to the world of Formation; and finally, in *Aleinu le-shabe'ach,* we return to the world of Action. As stated, the words of the Ari contain no explanation as to why each section of the prayer belongs to the world that parallels it, though I suggested an approach in the previous *shiur.* Since the explanation is not manifest, one might think that we are dealing here with technical actions – one recites sections of the prayer, and through them acts upon the upper worlds. Similar to the phenomenon that we saw in *Sha'arei Ora*, here too it is necessary to understand that that the technical actions are only the external side, while on the inside, a very deep and meaningful spiritual occurrence takes place.

**Each Prayer is Different from the Previous One**

 The Ari goes on to discuss the differences between the prayers of the different days of the year:

Every prayer gives rise to entirely new minds. There is no prayer without new lights, unlike any other. You should know that there is a big difference between weekday prayers and Rosh Chodesh prayers and Yom Tov prayers and Chol ha-Mo'ed prayers and Shabbat prayers. What is more, even regarding Yom Tov itself, the prayers of Pesach are unlike the prayers of Shavuot or the prayers of Sukkot. And what is even more, the prayer of one day is unlike the prayer of the day before. And what is even more than all this, even regarding the three prayers of every day, there is a big difference between them, the morning prayer being unlike the afternoon prayer or the evening prayer. The bottom line is that no prayer, from the day the world was created until the distant future, is in any way similar to another. The reason is, as we have already explained, that all of the prayers come to clarify matters regarding the seven kings that died. Every day, and in every prayer, new matters and sparks are clarified that had not been clarified until then. Just as the clarifications that are achieved in each prayer are unlike the clarifications of a different prayer, because those first clarifications were already achieved in the first prayer, and now in the other prayer, other new clarifications are achieved and repaired, and they are not the first ones themselves. And if so, in accordance with the value of the sparks that are clarified in that prayer, so will be the value of the minds stemming from the Lesser Countenance and the Feminine Divine Presence and what is above them. And there is something like this in the lights of *Keri'at Shema*, because no recitation of *Shema* in the world is similar to another for the aforementioned reason. This is the reason that we are commanded always to pray three times a day and to recite *Shema* twice a day, and if a person missed one of them, this is called “something crooked that cannot be made straight” [*Kohelet* 1:15]. The reason is that in every prayer and in every recitation of *Shema*,new clarifications are achieved and new minds flow from above, something that was not done in any other prayer or recitation of *Shema*. (*Sefer Olat Tamid – Sha'ar Kellalot ha-Tefilot*)

We know there are additions to prayer on special days, but the Ari emphasizes that these are in fact different events. For some people, the difference between Shabbat and weekday is insignificant, but according to the Ari, the different prayers attest to the profound occurrence that changes from day to day. The difference is not only between a holiday and a weekday; prayers vary from holiday to holiday, and even from Sunday to Monday, for on each day of the week a different "song of the day" is recited. What is the difference between the seemingly similar weekday prayers? Is something built from all the prayers? Is there a set of prayers, an entire system, or just a collection of different prayers?

The Ari goes on to present the novel idea that every prayer is different from all other prayers, for the reason that every prayer comes to achieve a certain clarification in the world; each clarification is new and different from what was already clarified. Here the question arises: What is the relationship between this explanation and the previous explanation regarding the differences between the days? If each prayer achieves a new clarification because the previous clarifications were already achieved, why was it necessary to speak about the differences between weekday, Shabbat, and Yom Tov prayers that stem from the nature of each of those days? We will return to this question in the next *shiur*. First, we will focus here on a particular concept to which the Ari refers in this passage – the death of the kings, which relates to the story of the creation of the world.

**The Service of Clarifications in Prayer**

In trying to explain the creation of the world, plain-sense (*peshat*)commentators and many Jewish philosophers offer a simple explanation: the world was created *ex nihilo* ­– something out of nothing. "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth" means that at first there was no heaven and earth, and then God created them. Kabbala explains creation differently, describing a process of appearance and emanation from the Divine, level after level, from heavenliness to earthliness, until the world as we know it was formed.

The rest of chapter one of *Bereishit*, from the creation of light onward, ostensibly continues the process of creation that began with the creation of heaven and earth, but the second verse seems unusual: "And the earth was unformed and void." The place of this verse in the course of the creation story is unclear.

The Ari explains that the earth **became** unformed and void. There was a break. God created the world, but the world collapsed and turned into chaos. This occurrence is called in the *Zohar* "the death of the kings." According to the *Zohar*, the verses at the end of *Parashat Vayishlach*, which describe the kings of Edom who ruled as kings and died, allude to this event. This is the world of chaos described in the *Zohar* (and also appearing several times in the words of Rav Kook). The verses that follow in the book of *Bereishit*, which describe the process from the creation of the light and on, describe in essence the building of the world of repair, which repairs the first world that was destroyed and turned into a void.[[1]](#footnote-1) When one carefully examines the words of the Ari, one understands that we are not dealing here with an accident; the world did not collapse because of a mistake or a failure, but rather this happened on purpose. In any case, a reality was created that is made up of fragments of vessels, within which are many Divine sparks. During the six days of creation, God repaired creation in a basic manner: He created a world of repair, but He cast the rest of the repair upon us. Finishing the repair is man's job, from the end of the creation of the world and until the present day.

One of the main arenas of this correction is found in prayer. Each prayer draws a spark of holiness from among the broken vessels, and they go up and arouse a new reality above. Therefore, in every prayer, a new clarification is achieved. The event described by the Ari functions in the celestial worlds, but we will try to understand it also in light of what is taking place on the ground, in our prayer.

The task of raising the sparks takes place where there are broken vessels. In the Torah, for example, there are no breaks – only lights. In prayer, our crises and our problems go up, and we stand with them before God. This is already a service of clarifying sparks; we take the shattered vessels of life and present them to God. Prayer is the moment when all that we experience in life receives meaning; it becomes part of our standing before God. We do not contend with accidental events in a localized manner, but rather we raise them all to this encounter. The entire expanse of life becomes part of the prayer; it all becomes a life of mission, the grand task of repair. When we live our lives in this manner, it has an effect upon all the worlds.

The Ari describes what takes place in the heavenly worlds, but this occurrence stems from the power of prayer of the kabbalist here on earth, from the process which he undergoes in his prayer.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Proof for the Ari's reading can be found in the continuation of the account of creation. We see darkness on the first day, in contrast to which the light is created, and water on the second day, which requires a separation between water and water. Why is there no description of the creation of the darkness and of the water? Why does it appear as if they already existed, and there is only the addition of light and the separation of the water? Because they are the result of the earlier stage described in verse 2; they are part of the chaotic world, and the world of repair was created in order to repair it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)