YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #35: The Baal Shem Tov (2)**

**The Raising of Worlds That Takes Place During Prayer,**

**According to the Besht**

As we saw in the first two *shiurim*, the Ari brings prayer from concrete confrontation with personal and national problems to the full scope and height of the expanses of reality. He moves prayer to the broadest possible perspective on reality – the clarification of sparks in order to repair the vessels that were shattered at the time of creation, and the raising of worlds to the world of *Atzilut* – Emanation.

Before we examine how these ideas are developed by the Besht, let us expand a little on the structure of the process of raising the worlds. This is a complex issue in the teachings of the Ari, but in general, the process is structured according to the names of God. The four worlds of *Abiya* correspond to the four letters in the Tetragrammaton: *yod – Atzilut,* Emanation; *heh* – *Beri'a*, Creation; *vav* – *Yetzira*, Formation; and *heh* – *Asiya*, Action. That is to say, the worlds are revelations of the name *yod-heh-vav-heh*, and each world reveals what is hidden in one letter of that name.

This principle appears in several different ways, thus there are also different ways to explain it. One basic explanation is as follows: The shape of the letter *yod* expresses the essential foundation of everything. In contrast, the letter *heh* is composed of the letter *yod* which expanded in both directions, and another separate point that was born, as it were, from it and becomes a new reality. In the letter *vav*,the point continues downwards. And in the final *heh*, a new separate reality is once again created. In *Birkot ha-Shachar*, the part of prayer that belongs to the world of Action, the letter *heh* must be raised to the letter *vav*; in *Pesukei de-Zimra*, which belong to the world of Formation, the letter *vav* must be raised to the upper *heh*; and in *Keri'at Shema* and its blessings, which belong to the World of Creation, the letter *heh* is raised to the letter *yod.* That is where we are found during the *Amida* prayer, in the world of Emanation.

As we saw in the last *shiur*, engagement with letters has a central place in prayer according to the Besht.

**Raising the Worlds During Prayer**

The Besht, as conveyed by the Maggid of Mezeritch, also speaks about raising the worlds by way of letters:

In prayer, one should put all his strength into the words, and go from letter to letter until he forgets about physicality, and he should think that the letters join and connect with each other, and this is a great delight. For if in physicality it is a delight, all the more so in spirituality. This is the world of Formation. Afterwards, he should come to the letters of thought and not hear what he is saying. This is coming to the world of Creation. And afterwards he comes to the attribute of *Ayin*, "nothingness," where all of his physical powers are effaced. This is the world of Emanation, the attribute of wisdom. (*Keter Shem Tov*, II, 17c, and *Likkutei Amarim* 7d, s.v. *oraita* (end), and see below *Parashat Shemini*, letter 6)

(*Amud ha-Tefilla*, 16)

The Baal Shem Tov describes prayer here as a process of ascent to the world of Emanation, a description that originates in the teachings of the Ari. The question is, what does he teach us from this description of the service? What does the prayer service look like in the eyes of the Besht?

In this passage, the Besht explicitly mentions all of the worlds except the world of Action. The forgetting of physicality that he mentions is a departure from the world of Action, from the normal reality that a person experiences. In simple terms, he is describing a change of consciousness, from the physical world to a consciousness that is freed from it. A person should invest "all his strength" in this, all of his mental energy. (Sometimes we use expressions like "I prayed well," or "my prayer was weak," but according to the Baal Shem Tov, this depends first and foremost on the person – he must invest all of his strength in his prayer. Prayer is an activity that involves great mental intensity.)

How does a person free himself from physicality? By "going from letter to letter." The Besht opens a gate to break through the physical framework – by way of the letters. Usually, we perceive letters as making up words, and words as making up sentences. We read each letter and each word in light of its meaning and context in the sentence, since they lack all meaning when they stand by themselves. The Besht instructs us to break down the sentences, and even the words, and go from letter to letter. The Hebrew letters are not just conventional symbols used to create a language; rather, each letter has infinite meaning. A letter is like an atom, and every combination of letters is an atomic structure that can create worlds. The letters also have certain expressions in the physical world, but they carry within them a higher and much more comprehensive spiritual quality.

Once the letters have been freed from their earthly meanings, they can be used to create new combinations, new works. Just as a poet must be able to remove words from their mundane context, so he will be able to create images, metaphors, and more, breaking down words into letters also allows for a new creation. This is the next step after liberation from physicality, the world of Formation.

In the next stage, the Besht writes, the person does not hear what he is saying. He is freed even from his senses. There is activity around him that should stimulate his senses; he would be expected to hear the sounds made by his mouth – but he does not hear them, because he exists in an abstract world. This is the world of Creation.

From there, it is possible to pass only to a state of total nullification, to the world of Emanation. At this stage, when the person is absolutely integrated in the world of Emanation, the revelation of the Divine reaches its peak: "There is no place void of Him."

The principles established by the Ari are illuminated in a new light in the words of the Besht. It is possible that he adds his own novel ideas to the teachings of the Ari, but it is also possible that this is how he understands the Ari himself. In any case, two significant elements are introduced here. First, prayer is an experience. A person is not supposed to simply pray as he was told to, and recite what is written in the *siddur*, with the knowledge that in some way his prayer affects the upper worlds (as can perhaps be understood from the words of the Ari, although the Ari's intention is subject to debate). He is supposed go through this process himself.

Secondly, the Besht describes here a profound process of transition between worlds – which takes place entirely in the inner world of the person. The person himself moves from the physical world to a more spiritual world, where the letters serve as the building blocks; from there he moves to an abstract world; until he finally finds himself "next to" the Divine – that is to say, nullified before God. From the words of the Ari, one could understand that the person moves the upper worlds outside of him, but from the Besht it becomes clear that this happens within the person himself. It is possible that he also causes other supernal processes, but that is not the main emphasis. Unlike other kabbalists, who describe how a person performs certain actions and influences distant processes, for the Besht, the heart of the service is the internal process.

During the raising of the worlds, a person goes through a deep mental process, and a change of consciousness takes place in him, which begins with liberation from the concepts of the physical world and moves toward abstract spiritual expanses that are less limited. The culmination of the process is total nullification before God, which is the true presence that fills reality.

(Translated by David Strauss)