YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #36: The Baal Shem Tov (3)**

**The Raising of Extraneous Thoughts,**

**According to the Besht**

The previous *shiur* took us from the Ari to the Baal Shem Tov, as his teachings are presented in the writings of the Maggid of Mezritch, to see how the Besht applies the principles laid down by the Ari. We saw how he applies the principle of the raising of the worlds, and now we will see how he applies the principle of clarification of sparks. Note that I have selected only a few of the many passages brought in the name of the Besht that deal with these two subjects. The teachings of the Besht, like those of Chassidism in general, are generally not characterized by systematic writing, and it should not be concluded that the passages we have seen and will see here represent the position of the Besht in its entirety.

**Prayer as Nullification and Devotion**

Before that, I will mention briefly some of the unique emphases of Chassidic prayer. We have already seen that the Besht links entry into the world of Emanation, through prayer, to the concept of *bitul*, nullification. The concept of nullification of the "I" appears many times in the teachings of the Besht and the Maggid as a supreme Chassidic ideal. It is not by chance, then, that in our topic it is the culmination of the entire process, the spiritual summit of the prayer service. It should also be noted that a central ideal in the Chassidism of the Besht and the Maggid is *deveikut*,devotion, which is connected to the nullification of the "I." Prayer, therefore, is connected to devotion according to the Besht – a point that we did not see in the writings of the Ari.

**Prayer as an Activity of the *Shekhina***

The *Amida* prayer opens with the verse, "O Lord, open my lips; and my mouth shall declare Your praise" (*Tehillim* 51:17). According to the simple understanding, this verse is a prayer in preparation for prayer, in which we ask God to help us succeed in praying. The prayer itself is full of other topics, but we do not always manage to pray for them with the proper concentration and intention; therefore, we pray beforehand that we should succeed in offering our prayer in the proper manner.

This prayer about prayer can be understood either narrowly or broadly. One possibility is that while a certain amount of Divine help is in fact needed for prayer, the work falls primarily on us. According to the broader option, prayer is a Divine activity. We are not the ones who speak in prayer, but rather it is the *Shekhina* that speaks in our throats. Such prayer seems far from the experience with which we are familiar, but let us try to imagine the *tzaddik* who reaches this level: after all the spiritual work of raising the worlds through prayer, he reaches a state of devotion to God, to the point that the prayer does not come from him. The worshipper nullifies himself before God; the prayer is merely recited through him, while he himself is not there. We have testimonies about the Maggid of Mezritch that describe him reaching such a level, though not necessarily in prayer; for example, when he would share his teachings with his disciples, it was evident that he was not *with* them. Mentally, he was in a completely different place.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonne, a disciple of the Besht who passed down teachings directly in his name, wrote:

In the works of the Ari, may he be remembered in the coming world, he explains that the prayer of this day is not like the prayer of tomorrow, until the coming of the Messiah. This is the meaning of the Mishna (*Berakhot* 28b): "If one makes his prayer a fixed task, it is not considered a [genuine] supplication." Now, *I heard in the name of my master a proof about this* from the extraneous thoughts that come to a person in the middle of his prayer, reflecting the mystery of the shattering of the vessels, and the 288 sparks that one is required to clarify each day. They come in order to be repaired and elevated. And the extraneous thoughts of today are not like the extraneous thoughts of tomorrow, and this is clear to one who pays attention to them. This is what I learned from my master on the matter of repairing extraneous thoughts: if they are thoughts of sexuality, one can elevate them and bring them to their root of *chesed*, which is the secret of the verse (*Vayikra* 20:17) "If a man takes his sister... this is *chesed*." Thoughts of idolatry are rooted in a flaw in *tiferet*. But this is enough on this subject. (*Toldot Yaakov Yosef*, *Vayakhel* 75c) (*Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, *Amud ha-Tefilla* 120)

It is possible to understand that according to the Ari, prayer should not be understood in its usual sense: it does not deal with the present or with the earthly world, but rather with hidden spiritual realms. These words of the Besht, however, suggest a different understanding, introduced by the words, "I heard in the name of my master a proof about this." The *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* is offering a proof for the Ari's assertion that no prayer is similar to another. What is the proof that every prayer is completely different? We might have expected to hear that prayers recited without the proper intention are identical to each other, whereas a prayer recited with the proper mental concentration can be new and different. However, the proof brought in the name of the Besht is the opposite: "I heard in the name of my master a proof about this from the extraneous thoughts that come to a person in the middle of his prayer." The extraneous thoughts that spring up during prayer, with different content every time, serve as proof that no prayer is the same as another.

How is it possible that the difference between prayers finds expression precisely in those prayers that are not successful?

When we first encountered the clarification of sparks in the words of the Ari, we saw that this principle derives from the concept of the shattering of the vessels. At the time of the creation of the world, God created the vessels, and when He directed His light through them, the vessels could not withstand it and shattered. The fragments of the vessels sank into husks, in the world of impurity, and now the world is a mixture of sparks of light and debris. This is the reality that preceded creation – "and the earth was unformed and void." During the six days of creation, the repair of the vessels began, but many fragments were still mixed in with the husks, and the task fell to man to continue. On the material level, the shattered vessels find expression in the deficiencies of creation; one example given in this context is mustard, which cannot be eaten in its natural state and serves as an example of other foods that require human processing. In a completely repaired world, there would be no need for such processing. On the spiritual level, the encounter with the shattered vessels, and their repair, takes place in prayer. Service of God is not comprised solely of the repair of the shattered vessels; we saw, for example, the raising of the worlds, which involves the repaired worlds. But repair of the vessels has a central place in the service of prayer.

Where do we see the shattered vessels? When can our consciousness meet this reality? According to the Besht, extraneous thoughts in prayer are a result of the shattered vessels. "They come in order to be repaired and elevated." The sparks arise in prayer so that the person praying can repair them. It is important to note that we are talking about a person who is interested in praying, not someone who is not trying to pray seriously; a person who does not *try* to concentrate while he is praying will clearly remain with his previous thoughts. But if a person tries to concentrate in his prayer, and extraneous thoughts nevertheless enter his mind – these are the thoughts that he is supposed to remove from the debris and elevate.

We have here several novel ideas. First, the Besht transforms the clarification of sparks from an action detached from man's world, connected exclusively to higher worlds, into a part of a person's basic experience while praying. The stage changes from Kabbala to *Chassidut*. Prayer once again becomes service of the heart. Second, the Besht transforms extraneous thoughts from a kind of accident, an unwanted malfunction, to a central part of the prayer service.

I will not yet explain how a person clarifies the sparks with his prayer. Before we address that, it is important to see that this perspective on extraneous thought is not the Besht's only perspective on the matter; thus, we will now examine a different passage.

**Casting Him Out**

The next passage, which is also taken from *Amud ha-Tefilla*, deals with the raising of the worlds, and the transition from one world to the next in the different stages of prayer:

Each person has within him potential powers. In one realm, he needs to use one power, and in a different realm, another. As his soul ascends through the various worlds that it needs to pass through, it is tested: if it is unworthy of ascending to such a world, it is cast out. Sometimes, an extraneous thought is sent in order to cast it out. If one is wise, he might be able to further connect to the Holy One with this very thought. This is because thought is composed of letters, which themselves are organs of the *Shekhina* except that they descended from their proper place on account of the force of the shattering, and their configuration is wrong. Just like some foods, even though each on its own is good, when they are mixed together they taste terrible – so too, these letters, mixed as they are, are terrible.

Understand the essence of the thought – if it's a desire, it comes from the world of desire; a fear comes from the world of fear; pride comes from the world of glory; and so too with all the others. All these fell from the seven days of construction – and when you reconnect them to the Holy One through love of the Creator and fear of the Creator, you bring them back to their source. So too with all traits: each thought fell from a certain quality and can be reconnected to that quality. Then, the husks fall off and the configuration is restored. This is the meaning of the Talmudic passage (*Shabbat* 153a) "One unties the knots and the sacks fall on their own": the "sacks" are the unwanted husks. The Holy One rejoices in such things, just like a prince who falls into captivity – when he is finally brought before the king, the king rejoices even more than with the child who is always close to him. (*Keter Shem Tov*, part II, 3a; *Likkutei Amarim*, 4a [end]) (*Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah, Amud ha-Tefilla* 107)

According to what the Besht says here, there is no guarantee that a person will succeed in ascending from one world to the next through prayer. The failure to ascend can be in two ways: sometimes the person is simply unable to transfer his consciousness from *Pesukei de-Zimra* to *Keri'at Shema* and its blessings, and sometimes he is overcome by an extraneous thought. The extraneous thought is an expression of his inability to enter another world through prayer. The worshipper tries to enter the next hall, but is, as it were, cast out from there by means of the extraneous thought. Why is this considered an expulsion of the worshiper? In light of the principle we saw above, that in prayer the *Shekhina* speaks from the person's throat, we can understand that the thought that arises in a person during prayer also does not come from within him. It is deliberately sent to him in order to cast him out. Since prayer is not a purely personal action, but rather an inspired event that takes place through the person, the extraneous thought is also not the result of his failure to concentrate, but rather an event by way of which he is pushed away.

However, it is also possible to be saved from this expulsion: "If one is wise, he might be able to further connect to the Holy One with this very thought." If the prayer was sent by God, it is possible to grab hold of it and use it to come back inside.

In the next *shiur*, we will clarify how this is accomplished.

(Translated by David Strauss)