YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #37: The Baal Shem Tov (4)**

**Extraneous Thoughts,**

**According to the Maggid of Mezritch**

We saw in the last *shiur* how the clarification of sparks is accomplished through prayer, according to the Besht (via the Maggid of Mezritch). We learned that the center of the clarification process is in the struggle against extraneous thoughts that arise during prayer, but it became clear at the end that such extraneous thoughts can also indicate that the person has been rejected from God's palace. This *shiur* will examine a little more closely the Maggid’s guidance, based on the teachings of the Besht, regarding how to deal with extraneous thoughts that are liable to push a person away.

**Raising a Thought to its Root**

Let us take another look at a passage we already saw from *Amud ha-Tefilla*:

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, however, 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-Tefila* 107)

At the beginning of the passage, he seems to say an extraneous thought is a sign that the person has not succeeded in passing from one world to the next through prayer, but rather was cast out. However, the Maggid then writes that even if one was cast out, repair is possible. This repair is beneficial not only for the person engaged in prayer, so that he can reenter the palace, but also for clarifying the sparks from the husks.

Let us consider another passage, taken from *Tzava'at ha-Rivash,* another book of collected teachings of the Baal Shem Tov:

One should consider that during prayer, he proceeds from chamber to chamber. When an extraneous thought comes [to a person's mind], he is expelled, because he is judged in every chamber whether he is fit to enter. Thus, if he is not praying with fervor, he should start to pray intensely. And if he is praying with fervor, he should consider the nature of the [extraneous] thought: if it relates to evil love, such as sensuous lust, he should bring it to its [ultimate] source, which is the love of God. For there are only seven types of thought, and they correspond to the seven days of construction (Creation), each of which has an *erev* (evening) and a *boker* (morning). *Erev* is an expression of *ta'aruvot* (mixing), i.e., having an extraneous thought; and *boker* is an expression of *bikur* (visit), i.e., visiting God. The [seven types of thought] are: "love of God" and "love of sin;" "fear of God" and "bad fear" such as hatred; "[good] glorification" of glorifying God and "bad [glorification]" of self-glorification; and likewise with *nitzu'ach* (endurance; victory), *hodaya* (*acknowledgment*; thanksgiving; praise), *yesodot* (foundations), i.e., the sense of bonding.[[1]](#footnote-1) Each of these [seven] is compounded of ten [aspects]. With every bad thought one gives vitality, Heaven forbid, to the "seven nations" [i.e., the seven attributes of impurity]. *Midrash Hane’elam (Zohar*I:86b) thus states: [When God created] the world, it was wavering to and fro. The Holy One, blessed be He, then said that Avraham will come forth into the world – i.e., the attribute of love. But there will also be Yishmael – i.e., [the attribute of] "bad love." A thought of "bad love," therefore, gives vitality to Yishmael and the nine [aspects] that go with him. There is also Yitzchak, i.e., the attribute of "[good] fear," and [correspondingly] Esav, [the attribute of] "bad fear," i.e., murder. A thought of "bad fear," therefore, gives vitality to Esav and the nine [aspects] that go with him, Heaven forbid. Thus, if one happens to think of a "bad love," he should say to himself: "What have I done? I have taken a part of the World of Thought and brought it to a place of filth!" This will effect that he be subdued and come to the [level] of dust, thus bringing the thought to the attribute of *ayin* (naught).Then he will come to the World of Love by reminding himself: "If I love this object, as, for example, a woman, who is but a 'putrid drop,'[[2]](#footnote-2) how much more should I love God!" Likewise, when he hears words of jest which cause him to be mirthful, he should think that it is but a part of the World of Love. Also, when he sees or eats something that gives him pleasure, he should think that it is but a part of the World of Delight. Thus, he should take heed not to materialize that delight, and "then you will find pleasure *al* (lit.: over) God" (*Yeshayahu* 58:14), i.e., *beyond* [the level of the Divine] Name [*Havaya*; the Tetragrammaton], as it were. His whole being, therefore, should be directed to that pleasure in the context of it being part of the World of Delight. Thus he may sit and eat here, yet be in the World of Delight. The pleasure that he caused himself, therefore, will bring delight to God in all worlds. Likewise, when one sees something of which he is afraid, he should say to himself: “Why should I be afraid of this? It is but a human like myself, let alone if it is but an animal or beast! As the awesome God, blessed be He, is vested in that being [enabling it to exist], how much more should I fear [God] Himself!” The same applies to glorification. When people praise him, or he senses pride in the midst of prayer, or people exalt him for his concentrated study, he should bring himself to a sense of awe, i.e., shame, before God. In context of *nitzu*’*ach*, he should overcome that trait or have his understanding lead him to a sense of “Divine victory.” He should do the same with the aspect of *hodaya*; and also with “bonding,” i.e., to be bound up with God alone. (*Tzava'at ha-Rivash* 87)

This is a fundamental, detailed passage representing Chassidic worship of God. It is a wonderful example of how Chassidism applies kabbalistic theory to the human soul and its array of powers, by offering a comprehensive interpretation of the mental equivalent of each of the Divine *sefirot*.

First, writes the Maggid, someone who does not pray with fervor will not be able to become mentally absorbed in his prayer. Therefore, if a person encounters extraneous thoughts, he should first try to pray with greater fervor. Now the question is what to do if the extraneous thoughts continue despite these efforts. In that case, the worshipper should examine the thought and see where it comes from. The thought can be one of seven types, which parallel the seven *sefirot.*  If it is a thought of love, it is based in the *sefira* of *Chesed*; if it is a thought of fear, it is based in the *sefira* of *Gevura*; and so on. That is to say, every thought that arises in a person's mind belongs fundamentally to one of the shattered vessels. The thought may also give vitality to the "seven nations," that is, the attributes in their shattered and negative presentation (e.g., negative kindness, to the extent that "his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him" [*Bereishit* 16:12] – the attribute of Yishmael, who perverted Avraham's kindness; or instilling fear – the attribute of Esav, who perverted Yitzchak’s fear). In any event, the extraneous thought is not considered an enemy that must be destroyed, but a phenomenon which must be reconnected to its source.

When a person encounters such a thought, he does not yet see its root; he must contemplate and try to identify the root. If the thought came by way of the attribute of kindness, and exhibits some defect in that attribute, it can be expelled by way of a thought connected to kindness. The goal is not for the worshipper to be expelled and left outside, but for him to recognize that the source of the thought is in the attribute of kindness, and to raise it to this root. A person who feels some sense of love should raise himself above it to the love of God. The Maggid formulates this idea as a *kal va-chomer* (*a fortiori*)argument: If a person feels love toward a woman, all the more so should he love God.

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi: A Person Should Not Elevate Extraneous Thoughts**

This approach of the Maggid sparked a debate in the following generations of *Chassidut*. The *Yosher Diveri Emet*, for example, said that one can put forward a *kal va-chomer* argument when studying Gemara, but when dealing with reality, it is not so simple. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, author of the *Tanya*, says this guidance is suitable only for *tzaddikim*. One could argue that the Maggid as well is appealing here only to *tzaddikim*, but there is no support for this in the words of the Maggid himself; moreover, it is doubtful whether he even distinguished between a *tzaddik* and ordinary *Chassidim*, for *Chassidut* in his day had not yet developed a select group of *tzaddikim* who studied and served as *rebbes*. In addition, according to the Baal Ha-Tanya, the elevation of thoughts applies only to the *tzaddik* – regarding whom the extraneous thoughts that arise in him are not his own, but other people's – while the Maggid's words indicate that the extraneous thoughts belong to the worshipper himself, each thought stemming from an attribute that has some defect.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's position against the raising of extraneous thoughts is stated explicitly in the *Tanya.* He addresses the crisis that a person experiences when he encounters his shortcomings:

Even if there occur to him lustful imaginations or other extraneous thoughts during theDivine service, in Torah or in devout prayer, he must not let his heart dwell on them but must immediately avert his mind from them. Nor should he be foolish by attempting to raise the attributes of the extraneous thought, as is known. For such things were meant only for *tzaddikim*, in whom extraneous thoughts do not occur of their own making, but those of others. But as for him whose extraneous thought is his own, from the aspect of evil that is in the left part of his heart, how can he raise it up when he himself is bound below?

Nevertheless, he must not be downcast at heart and feel dejected and despicable during the Divine service, which should be with great joy. On the contrary, he should draw fresh strength and intensify [his] effort with all his power to concentrate on the prayer with increased joy and gladness, in the realization that the extraneous thought that had invaded his heart comes from the huskin the left part, which, in the case of the average man [*beinoni*], wages war with the Divine soul within him. For it is known that the way of combatants, as of wrestlers, is that when one is gaining the upper hand, the other likewise strives to prevail with all the resources of his strength. Therefore, when the Divine soul exerts itself and summons its strength for prayer, the husk also gathers strength at such time to confuse her and topple her by means of an extraneous thought of its own.

It is not as many people mistakenly deduce from the occurrence of the extraneous thought that this proves their prayer to be worthless – that if one had prayed as is fitting and proper, no extraneous thoughts would have occurred to him. What they say would be true if there were only one single soul, the same that prays as well as thinks and fancies the extraneous thoughts.

The real truth, however, is that there are two souls waging war against each other in the person's mind, each one wishing and desiring to rule over him and pervade his mind exclusively. Thus, all thoughts of Torah and the fear of Heaven come from the Divine soul, while all mundane matters come from the animal soul, except that the Divine soul is clothed in it. This is like the example of a person praying with devotion, while facing him there stands a wicked heathen who chats and speaks to him in order to confuse him. Surely the thing to do in such a case would be not to answer him good or evil, but rather to pretend to be deaf without hearing, and to comply with the verse, "Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him." Similarly, he must answer nothing, nor engage in any argument or counter-argument with the extraneous thought, for he who wrestles with a filthy person is bound to become soiled himself. Rather, he should adopt an attitude as if he neither knows nor hears the thoughts that have befallen him; he must remove them from his mind and strengthen still more the power of his concentration. However, if he finds it hard to dismiss them from his mind, because they distract his mind with great intensity, then he should humble his spirit before God and supplicate Him in his thought to have compassion upon him in His abundant mercies, as a father who takes pity on his children who stem from his brain; so may the Lord have pity on his soul, which is derived from Him who is blessed, and deliver it from the turbulent waters; for His sake He will do it, for His people is truly a part of the Lord. (*Tanya*, *Likkutei Amarim* 28)

This passage emphasizes two things. One point of emphasis appears throughout the *Tanya*, namely, that man is in a constant battle. The service of the *beinoni*, throughout his life, is a struggle between his good and evil impulses, between the Divine soul and the animal soul. The second emphasis seems in accord with the non-Chassidic ethical theory that a person is measured according to his struggles. A person should not regret his prolonged confrontation with his evil impulses, because this is his great service of God, which is very desirable in God's eyes. This service fills a higher need. There are people in the world who are absolutely righteous, who are above all struggles with the evil inclination, but God is especially exalted with those who must contend with their evil impulses.

The words of the Baal Ha-Tanyafollow from his perception of the soul: if the soul is entirely Divine, every thought arising in it has a source above. If, however, a person is comprised of two souls, the extraneous thoughts are part of the struggle between them. But it also follows from this conception that a person should not be distressed about his extraneous thoughts. They are not his fault, but rather a result of the animal soul within him. Therefore, one should not be distressed when an extraneous thought appears, but he should also not engage in elevating it. Contrary to the words of the Maggid, the author of the *Tanya* teaches that one should ignore his extraneous thoughts.

If that is the case, how does the author of the *Tanya* apply the principle of the Ari? How is the service of clarifications expressed in his prayer? These questions will be answered in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The seventh, not mentioned here, is *malkhut* (kingship; sovereignty), which relates to accepting God’s sovereignty on the good side and submission to evil on the bad side. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Avot* 3:1, in which every person is advised to remain cognizant of his origins as a “putrid drop,” his future in a place of dust and worms, and the accounting he will one day be called to give before God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)