YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #39: The Reason for Prayer According to Chabad *Chassidut* (2)**

We saw in the previous *shiur* that the *Tanya* (also referred to as *Likutei Amarim*) opens with the structure of the human soul, which it says is comprised of two souls – an animal soul and a Divine soul. The animal soul is described as being located on the left side of the heart, the Divine soul is said to be found in the brain, and there is a tension between the two: which one will control the person? We also saw that the soul's goal is to achieve love and fear of God, and to reach this goal, the intellect must gain control over the emotional attributes of the soul. It is man's task to reach a mental state of loving God, which finds expression in the garments of the soul – thought, speech, and action.

Beyond the notion of the struggle itself, one of novel ideas of the *Tanya* is that there will always be this struggle. Unlike the *tzaddikim*,for whom the struggle has already been decided in a positive way, the *beinonim* – average or intermediate people – are always engaged in a struggle. Throughout their lives, they must strive to make the Divine soul impose its rule on the animal soul.

The Divine service of a *beinoni* reaches its peak in the recital of the *Shema.* The central mode of service is contemplation, with the goal of achieving love of God – thus *Shema*, which entails contemplating the principle that "the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" and arriving from that at the love of God ("And you shall love the Lord your God”), is at the epicenter of service of God. The moments spent reciting the *Shema* provide the *beinoni* with a rare taste of the level above him, the level of the *tzaddik.*

**Subjugation of Evil During the Recitation of Shema**

Let us consider now what happens when one recites the *Shema*, as described in the continuation of a passage we saw in the previous *shiur*:

However, the essence and being of the Divine soul, which are its ten faculties, do not constantly hold undisputed sovereignty and sway over the "small city"[[1]](#footnote-1) except at times that are prepared for it, such as during the recital of the *Shema*or the *Amida,*which is a time when the Supernal Intellect is in a sublime state; and likewise below, this is a propitious time for every man, when he binds his *ChaBaD* (intellectual faculties) to God, to meditate deeply on the greatness of the blessed *Ein Sof,*and to arouse the burning love in the right part of his heart, to cleave to Him by virtue of the fulfillment of the Torah and its commandments out of love. This is the essential aspect of the *Shema,*the recital of which is enjoined by the Torah, and of the blessings which precede and follow it, which are a Rabbincal enactment, the latter being preparation for the fulfillment of the recital of the *Shema,*as explained elsewhere. At such time the evil that is in the left part is subjugated and nullified by the goodness that spreads in the right part, from the wisdom, understanding, and knowledge (*ChaBaD*) in the brain, which are bound to the greatness of the blessed *Ein Sof*. However, after prayer, when the state of sublimity of the Intellect of the blessed *Ein Sof*departs, the evil in the left part reawakens, and he begins to feel a desire for the lusts of the world and its delights. (*Likutei Amarim* 12)

While one recites the *Shema*,the evil within him is "subjugated and nullified by the good." It does not disappear altogether, but only becomes subjugated to the good. The use of this phrase is not accidental.

In another chapter (*Likutei Amarim* 10), the *Ba’al HaTanya* (author of the *Tanya,* Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi) cites the Gemara's distinction between "a righteous man who prospers" and "a righteous man who suffers" – "a completely righteous man" and "an incompletely righteous man." A completely righteous man is one whose evil has converted into goodness, whereas in an incompletely righteous man, his evil "is subjugated and nullified by the good, and therefore he imagines that he has driven it out and it has quite disappeared." The *Ba’al HaTanya* applies the same concept here: During the recitation of the *Shema*, the *beinoni* turns momentarily into a *tzaddik*, but only into an *incompletely* righteous man, since his evil is annulled only temporarily. After the recital of the *Shema*, he will revert to being a *beinoni*. Does this mean that the whole experience was a lie? Is the temporary ascent nothing but a fake? The *Ba’al HaTanya* clarifies this issue: It is true! For one moment, the truth is revealed, and the Divine soul speaks its word!

**Recital of the Shema and the Purpose of Creation**

Why is it that this the service of the *beinoni*, that the evil should be subjugated to the good? And why is it that the essence of a *tzaddik* is that the evil in him converts into goodness? In order to answer these questions, let us examine the position of the *Tanya* on a fundamental issue: the purpose of creation.

In his remarks concerning the purpose of creation, the *Ba’al HaTanya* cites a *midrash* that was hardly ever mentioned by earlier Jewish thinkers in the context of this issue. The source of the *midrash* deals with the dedication of the *Mishkan*; it explains the purpose of the *Mishkan*, but also touches upon the purpose of the entire creation – that God should have "an abode in the lower worlds":

It is a well-known Rabbinic statement that the purpose of the creation of this world is that the Holy One, blessed be He, desired to have an abode in the lower worlds [*Midrash Tanchuma*, *Nasso* 16]. But surely with Him the distinction of "upper" and "lower" has no validity, for He pervades all worlds equally.

The explanation of the matter, however, is as follows: Before the world was created, He was One Alone, One and Unique, filling all space in which He created the universe. It is still the same now insofar as He is concerned. For the change relates only to those who receive His blessed life-force and light, which they receive through many "garments" that conceal and obscure His blessed light, as is written: "For no man shall see Me and live," and, as our Rabbis, of blessed memory, have explained it, that even angels, who are called *chayot,* cannot see Him. This is the concept of the *hishtalshelut*(downward gradation) of the worlds and their descent, degree by degree, through a multitude of "garments" that screen the light and life that emanate from Him, until there was created this material and gross world, the lowest in degree, than which there is none lower in the aspect of concealment of His blessed light, [a world of] doubled and redoubled darkness, so much so that it is full of *kelipot* and the *sitra achra*which oppose the very Godhead, saying: "I am, and there is nothing else besides me."

Clearly, the purpose of the *hishtalshelut*of the worlds and their descent, degree by degree, is not for the sake of the higher worlds, because for them this is a descent from the light of His blessed Countenance. But the ultimate purpose [of creation] is this lowest world, for such was His blessed will that He shall have satisfaction when the *sitra achra*is subdued and the darkness is turned to light, so that the Divine light of the blessed *Ein Sof*shall shine forth in the place of darkness and *sitra achra*throughout this world, all the more strongly and intensely, with the excellence of light emerging from darkness, than its radiance in the higher worlds, where it shines through "garments" and in concealment of the Countenance, which screen and conceal the light of the blessed *Ein Sof,*in order that they should not dissolve out of existence.

For this purpose, the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel the Torah which is called "might" and "strength"… (*Likutei Amarim* 36)

It is God's will that "He shall have satisfaction when the *sitra achra*is subdued and the darkness is turned to light." Two processes are described here: subduing (*itkafya*) and transforming (*ithafkha*) – the subordination of evil to good and the turning of evil into good. These two processes can only occur in the lower reality. That is why God's will is realized specifically in the earthly world. There is unique significance in the revelation that in places that seem farthest from God – that is where He is found. It is precisely for this reason that the *beinoni* is sent into the world: to do the work of "subduing"; to be, as it were, far away, immersed in material things, but nevertheless worship God. This stands in contrast to the *tzaddik*,who engages in the service of "transforming."

From here let us go back to the recital of the *Shema* and its central position in the *Tanya*. This position is not self-evident; one can carefully study the entire *Tanya* without recognizing it. But the recital of the *Shema* stands at the center of God's service, and not only in this part of the *Tanya*, but later as well. The heading of *Sha'ar ha-Yichud ve-ha’Emuna* (Gate of Unity and Faith) reads: "Let us understand [at least] in a small measure, the statement in the *Zohar*that *Shema Yisrael* is *yichuda ila'a*(higher level Unity) and *Baruch shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va'ed*is *yichuda tata'a*(lower level Unity)." So too, immediately before this, the introduction to *Sha'ar ha-Yichud ve-ha’Emuna* says that it is "based on the first section of the recital of the *Shema*."

In the introduction to *Sha'ar ha-Yichud ve-ha’Emuna*, the *Ba’al HaTanya* answers the well-known question of how it is possible to command love of God when emotions do not seem to be under our control. He answers that there is love that arises naturally of its own accord, which is the love of the *tzaddik*, and there is love that does not arise on its own but can be awakened through profound contemplation. Since one can choose to engage in contemplation, it can be commanded. The *Ba’al HaTanya* also specifies what and how to contemplate, and lists three objects of contemplation. The first is the fact that God is our very life, and just as one loves his soul and life, so should he love God, who is his true soul and actual life. The second contemplation relates to God's greatness, which is spelled out elsewhere. The third contemplation is that which is built into the blessings of the recital of the *Shema*, as we will see.

This is the goal of reciting *Shema*: the contemplation that leads to love of God. It is for this contemplation that the *Ba’al HaTanya* continues to *Sha'ar ha-Yichud ve-ha’Emuna*. One who reads *Sha'ar ha-Yichud ve-ha’Emuna* without the headings and the introduction may think the goal is only the first verse of the *Shema*. But it appears from the headings and the introduction that this is only a step on the path towards love of God. "*Shema Yisrael*" and "*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto*" are meant to lead to "And you shall love the Lord your God."

**The Blessings of the Shema**

The *Ba’al HaTanya* also discusses the blessings of the *Shema*. These blessings require explanation: Are they related only to the recital of the *Shema* itself, or are they connected to the *Amida* prayer? On the one hand, they have a clear connection to the recital of the *Shema*, but, on the other hand, the time frame in which they may be recited is the same as the time frame for the *Amida* prayer, and there are additional proofs that associate the blessings with the one or the other. According to the *Ba’al HaTanya*, the deepest contemplation takes place when reciting the *Shema*,which is from the Torah, and the Sages enacted additional contemplations. The first is contemplating the angels, their high rank, and the *Kedusha* that they recite. The second is contemplating the people of Israel and the great love God has for them. There is love that is awakened by the recognition of God's greatness, and there is love that is stirred up by God's attitude towards us, which inspires a corresponding attitude on our part towards Him. The recognition of this relationship naturally gives rise to love, but one must reach this recognition from within our material state, and for the *beinoni* this requires work.

Since the purpose of creation is the establishment of an abode for God in the lower worlds, the recital of the *Shema* does not end with "And you shall love the Lord your God." One must continue on to "You shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them." From the heights of love we descend into the study of the Torah, to speech that realizes it, and from there to actions. The recital of *Shema* is a movement that raises a person to the upper worlds, and from there brings him back down to the lower worlds.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. As noted in the previous *shiur*, this is a metaphor for the body; see *Kohelet* 9:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)