YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #41: The Reason for Prayer According to Chabad *Chassidut* (4)**

In the previous *shiur*, we saw how the four worlds find expression in the *Tanya*. During prayer, every Jew passes through a series of levels in the service of God – starting with action, continuing with emotion and contemplation, and concluding with nullification. These are different levels in the worship of God and are ordinarily associated with different people; during prayer, everyone is supposed to pass through all of them.

Moving on from the raising of the worlds, we come to the second element that we saw in the Ari's teachings about prayer – the clarification of sparks. As we saw with regard to the raising of the worlds, here too, the author of the *Tanya* takes concepts from the world of Kabbala and clarifies their meaning for the world of the soul.

**The Service of Clarification – Not Vis-à-vis Extraneous Thoughts**

In the background of the discussion about the service of clarification stand the Ari’s words, as we saw in previous *shiurim*, regarding the need to clarify the sparks of holiness, as well as the Baal Shem Tov’s conception of the arena in which this service takes place during prayer – namely, in the raising of a person's extraneous thoughts. We saw that counter to this approach, the author of the *Tanya* instructs us to reject extraneous thoughts:

Even if there occur to him lustful imaginations or other extraneous thoughts duringtheDivine 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 sublimate 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 *kelipa* (husk) in the left part, which, in the case of the *beinoni* (regular person)*,*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 *kelipa* 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, Likutei Amarim* 28)

Essentially, the guidance offered by the Baal HaTanyais the same as was given on this issue before the Baal Shem Tov: if a person has extraneous thoughts while engaged in prayer, he should distract himself from them. The service of clarification by way of extraneous thoughts is appropriate for *tzaddikim*, whose extraneous thoughts are not their own but come to them from others – but a person who is not at the level of a *tzaddik* will be unable to raise the extraneous thoughts that occur to him, because they are his own.

Now the question is: If the service of clarification is not done vis-à-vis a person's extraneous thoughts, what is the place of the service of clarification according to the Baal HaTanya? Where and how is it performed?

**Clarifying the Sparks and Raising the Animal Soul**

The next chapter that we will study is taken from the *Kuntrus Acharon*, printed at the end of the *Tanya.* At the beginning of the discussion, the author notes that Torah study is on a higher level than prayer (the Baal HaTanyaaddressed the relative rankings of Torah study, prayer, and various *mitzvot* in several places in his book). Nevertheless, even though Torah study is on a higher level, the main clarification is achieved during prayer:

The primary service in the period just prior to the coming of the Messiah is prayer, as Rabbi Chaim Vital writes in *Etz Chaim* and *Pri Etz Chaim*. Hence, it is fit and proper, beyond any vaguest doubt, to devote ourselves utterly to [prayer]. It is literally a Torah imperative to those who have knowledge of the efficacy of contemplation, of some profound meditation – each according to his measure — in the presentation of the praises of God, blessed be He, in *Pesukei de-Zimra* and the two pre-*Shema* blessings, *Yotzer* and *Ahava*. Through them he can arouse the love latent in the heart of every Jew, that it attain to a state of revelation, with the openness of the heart during the recital of *Shema* itself. For this is the commandment of love that is in the verse "and you shall love… with all your heart…" that is reckoned first among the 613 *mitzvot*. The Rambam, of blessed memory, writes that it is among the foundations of Torah and its root, and source of all 248 positive commands. For regarding the love latent in the heart of all Israel by birth and nature, no command is relevant at all. This is apparent to the understanding. While the love is concealed, it is still lodged within the Divine soul alone. Only when it attains to a state of revelation in the animating soul is it revealed in the heart in the left ventricle, the abode of the animating soul. This is the meaning of "raising of the sparks" mentioned there in *Etz Chaim* and *Pri Etz Chaim* in reference to prayer, and for this reason, prayer is the primary service in the period just preceding the coming of the Messiah – to elevate the sparks…. This may be either the state of transformation or of subjugation of the animal soul to the Divine soul, as is known. For the blood is the soul… and the blood is renewed daily through food and drink, and is affected and improved by garments and shelter… On the other hand, in earlier generations, when the Divine souls were of a higher order, the purification and elevation were instantaneous in the recital of *Shema* alone and in the blessings preceding it, and the abridged *Pesukei de-Zimra.* And this will suffice for the knowing. (*Likutei Amarim*, *Kuntrus Acharon*, pp. 324-325)

The Baal HaTanyapoints out that prayer is literally an obligation. One might have understood him to be referring to the Rambam’s position that prayer is obligatory by Torah law, but later it becomes clear that his emphasis is different. He is speaking of the importance of contemplative service, emotional and then intellectual, for giving rise to "concealed love" – the love of God. Thus, the obligation under discussion is the mitzvaof loving God. When does a Jew fulfill the love of God? At what moments of his life does he do this? According to the Baal HaTanya, the height of this mitzva's fulfillment is during recital of the *Shema.* The *Shema* is not only a reminder to love God; it is also when the peak of that love is reached.

The Baal HaTanyanotes here that loving God is the first commandment, according to the Rambam. He does not mean to say that it is the first commandment in the Rambam's *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, for the mitzva of "I am the Lord your God" comes before it. Rather, he means that the Rambam’s words imply that love of God is the source and root of the fulfillment of all *mitzvot*. Even the mitzva of "I am the Lord your God" must be observed out of love.

"For this reason, prayer is the primary service in the period just preceding the coming of the Messiah – to elevate the sparks…. This may be either the state of transformation or of subjugation of the animal soul to the Divine soul." To fill the animal soul with the love of God is the service of clarification. Raising the potential in the soul, the inner spark, is a clarification of the sparks. This is the primary service that the Baal HaTanyaoutlines throughout his book, the "subjugation" (or "transformation," by *tzaddikim*) of the animal soul to the Divine soul.

Where should the sparks come from? Not from the world of what is prohibited, but from the world of what is permitted. From the mundane world before it has acquired holiness. When a person eats and then prays with the energy provided by the food, the material food leads to the love of God. The same is true about the clothing a person wears while praying, and the building materials out of which the synagogue is built. The entire material world that a person uses in prayer becomes part of the love of God. This is how the sparks become clarified.

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The clarification of sparks and the raising of worlds merge in the *Tanya*. A person undergoes a process in prayer; as soon as he reaches the love of God and it fills his animal soul, the animal soul and everything connected to it become part of the love of God, and the sparks in it become clarified.

This is the service of clarification in prayer. The Baal HaTanyaalso discusses clarifications achieved through the performance of *mitzvot*, and he distinguishes between that service and the service performed during prayer. The clarifications achieved through performance of *mitzvot* belong to a more external world, whereas the clarifications achieved during prayer take place in one's inner world, in the service of the heart.

(Translated by David Strauss)