YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #42: The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* (1)**

We learned in the preceding *shiurim* about the reason for prayer according to the masters of the first generations of Chassidism – the Baal Shem Tov, the Maggid of Mezeritch, and the author of the *Tanya*. We will return to prayer in Chassidism later in our journey, but for now, I would like to move on from the world of Chassidism directly to Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the great student of the Gaon of Vilna, and the conception of prayer in his book, *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*. This book can be seen as a kind of response to the *Tanya* – the systematic volume of Chassidic thought.

The Vilna Gaon is considered the leader of the opposition to Chassidism. He was not the only opponent, but he served as an authoritative mouthpiece for many others, sometimes for reasons different from his own. The author of the *Tanya* was sent at a young age – apparently by the Maggid of Mezeritch – to speak to the Gaon of Vilna, to explain to him the position of Chassidism and to refute the rumors that had spread about it. The Vilna Gaon refused to meet.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin maintained his teacher's position, but operated in different ways. Rabbi Chaim's outstanding enterprise was the establishment of the Volozhin yeshiva. Until then, each yeshiva was part of its surrounding community; generally speaking, not many students from outside a yeshiva’s community came to it, nor did its influence extend beyond the community. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin founded the first yeshiva that was primarily designed to receive students from the outside, and that stood on its own merits and not as part of a community. The Volozhin yeshiva did, in fact, throughout the years of its existence, give rise to many Torah giants in the Jewish world. It also influenced the nature and program of Torah study in *yeshivot* to this day.

Unlike the sharp and incisive polemic conducted against Chassidism by his teacher, the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's activity against Chassidism focused on setting up an alternative – in the form of establishing the yeshiva.

Another of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin's enterprises was writing the book *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, which was published only after his death. The book is made up of four sections and touches on many fundamental issues of faith. Rabbi Chaim deals deeply and significantly with each subject, but his goal throughout is to lead to the fourth and final section of the book, which deals with the subject of Torah study. He does not diminish the importance of other elements in the Jewish world, but strengthens them – and then strengthens the study of Torah even more. While the author of the *Tanya* was in doubt about what ranks higher, Torah or prayer, it is clear to Rabbi Chaim that Torah is above all else. It comes from a higher source, and belongs to a completely different dimension.

Even though prayer is on a lower level than Torah study, prayer has a significant place in the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*: the entire second section of the book is dedicated to prayer, and the author touches on it in the third section as well. During our study, however, we will have to remember its place in Rabbi Chaim's world, namely, below the study of Torah.

**What is a blessing?**

In the first chapter of section 2, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* discusses the verse in the second section of *Keri'at Shema*, "And to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." He devotes the entire second section of his book to explaining service of the heart, which, according to *Chazal*, is prayer. The section opens with an explanation of the concept of blessing:

And the idea is that the word "blessed" [*barukh*] is not an expression of attributing glory and giving praise, as is commonly accepted among the masses, for when He said to Rabbi Yishmael: "Yishmael, my child, bless me" (*Berakhot* 7a), he didn’t utter there any praise in his blessing, rather a prayer and a request for mercy. And similarly in *Bava Metzia* (114a), it is stated: "'And he will bless you' (*Devarim* 24:13) – to the exclusion of consecrated property, which doesn't require a blessing." And then the Talmud argues that this is not correct, for surely it is written: "And you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord" (*Devarim* 8:10). However, the truth is that *barukh* is an expression of increase and expansion, as it is stated: "Accept, please, my blessing" (*Bereishit* 33:11), "and He will bless your food" (*Shemot* 23:25), and "and He will bless the fruit of your womb" (*Devarim* 7:13), and many others similar to these in Scripture, so that it is impossible to explain them as expressions of attributing glory and giving praise, but rather as an expression of increase and expansion. (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim* section 2, chap. 2)

Blessings make up a large part of the prayer service, including *Birkot Ha-shachar*, the blessings of *Shema*, and the *Amida* prayer. *Pesukei de-Zimra* are Scriptural passages, but they are incorporated in the prayer service through the two blessings, *Barukh She-amar* before them and *Yishtabach* after them. What is a blessing? The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* opens with the simple and prevalent understanding of the concept – glory and praise. He rejects this understanding, arguing that in many sources, it is impossible to explain *berakha* as praise, e.g., in the verse, "and He will bless your food."

A similar approach is found among the *Rishonim*, especially among the kabbalists. Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher writes that *berakha* denotes abundance and increase, and the *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* and the *Shela* say the same. Those sages of Israel who adopted a more rational approach objected to this explanation, since God is perfect and we cannot attribute increase to Him. The kabbalistic approach reflects their interpretation of concepts in the Torah in general, which is sometimes actually the interpretation that is closest to the plain meaning of the text. Generally, when commentators explain the plain meaning of the Scriptural text, they try to stick to two components – the simple literal understanding of the verse and human logic. What do we do in the event that the simple meaning of the verse seems contrary to logic? Most commentators will look for a logical explanation even if it does not accord with the plain meaning of the verse, whereas the kabbalists explain the verse as it appears from Scripture even if it is difficult to understand logically. In our case, despite the logical difficulty in understanding the concept of increase in relation to God, according to the kabbalists, this is the simple meaning of the concept of *berakha*.

However, the kabbalists do not ignore the serious difficulty of how it is possible to attribute deficiency and addition to God. In order to resolve this difficulty, they distinguish between God Himself, to whom deficiency cannot be attributed, and His manifestation. So too, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* clarifies that with respect to God's essence, there can be no increase, and that we are dealing exclusively with His manifestation:

However, the idea of blessing Him, blessed be His name, the intention is not [aimed] towards the essence, so to speak, of the One Master, blessed is He, (never! never!), for He is far above any blessing. Rather, the idea is as is stated in the *Zohar* (*Emor* 98, and in other places), that the Holy One, blessed be He, is [both] revealed and hidden. For the essence of the *Ein Sof*, blessed be He, is the most hidden of the hiddens, and can’t be assigned any name at all, not even the name YHV"H, blessed be He, nor even to the top thorn of its letter *yud*…And what we are able to grasp to some small degree, and [that] we [can] name and describe with a number of names that are physically descriptive, names that are descriptive of relationship, names that describe behavioral qualities, and names that describe personality qualities, as we have encountered in the Torah and in the various expressions of prayer – all of them are only from the perspective of His relationship with the worlds and the powers from the moment of the creation, to set them up, to sustain them, and to control them according to His will, blessed be His name, and those are what are intended by the phrase: "unfolding of the *sefirot*." And the names, appellations and descriptions [used to refer to God] vary according to the distinctions in the details of the governance process that unfold and are drawn to this world (whether for judgment, compassion, or mercy), via the lofty powers and their combinations. Thus, each specific context in the governance process has a unique appellation and a specific name, and this is what the definitions of all the descriptive names that are from the perspective of the created powers teach us. For example "Merciful and Graceful" means "exhibiting mercy and grace toward the created beings." And even the unique primary name YHV"H, blessed is He, is not applied in exclusivity to His essence, blessed be He, that we uniquely attribute to Him; rather [it is applied] from the perspective of His relationship with the worlds, per its definition as "existed, exists, will exist, and brings everything into existence," meaning that He, blessed be He, purposefully relates to the worlds to bring them into existence and to sustain them in each instant. And this is what the Ari *z"l* stated in his holy explanation, brought in the introduction to the *Pri Etz Chaim*, that all the appellations and names, they are names of the essence that are distributed within the *sefirot*. Refer there [for more details]. (Ibid.)

According to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, wherever *Chazal* describe God, we must determine whether they are referring to His essence or His manifestation. He cites many statements that indicate God has no interest in our service – along the lines of "If you act, what will He give you?"[[1]](#footnote-1) – which, in his view, all refer to God's essence. God's manifestation, on the other hand, can and must be increased, and He hinges the increase of His appearance on us – on our prayers and on our *mitzvot.*

The names of God as well belong to this conceptual world. According to the esoteric tradition, as the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* writes, these names do not refer to the Divine essence, but to God's manifestation. With respect to God's essence, Kabbala distances itself from anthropomorphism even more than those who interpret Scripture according to its plain meaning, and is not even willing to give God's essence a name. But with respect to God's manifestation, there are names and there is abundance and increase.

In chapter 3, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* notes that the wording of a blessing moves from the second person, "Blessed are You," to the third person: "that all came into being by way of His word," "who has sanctified us with His *mitzvot*." The beginning of the blessing addresses God with respect to His relationship with the worlds and His manifestation in them. The continuation of the blessing, formulated in the third person, alludes to His hidden and concealed essence, which commands us:

And for that reason, the Men of the Great Assembly established the formula of all blessings associated with commandments using second person (direct) and third person (hidden) expressions. They open with "Blessed are You" – a second person (direct) expression, and close with "who sanctified us… and commanded us…" – a third person (hidden) expression. From the perspective of His purposeful relationship with the worlds, through which we attain some small degree of understanding, we state in the form of directness "blessed are You," for the worlds require – for the matter of increase and expansion – blessings from the essence of Him who interacts with them. And this is [the meaning of] "King of the Universe," as was stated in the *Ra'aya Mehemna* mentioned above: "when He descends to reign over them, and spreads over the created beings…." But the One who commands us and sanctifies us is exclusively His essence, blessed be He, the *Ein Sof*, the most hidden of all hiddens, and therefore they formulated it using an expression of hiddenness: "who sanctified us and commanded us." (Ibid*.* chap. 3)

The appeal to God in the second person is what makes it possible to pray to Him, and also what makes it permissible to pray to Him. After we turn to Him directly, and acquaint ourselves with His desire to relate to the worlds and appear in them, we refer to Him in third person and speak about the infinite Divine source that commands and sanctifies us, that He is exalted and hidden. This knowledge also helps us understand why we must pray: God chose to appear through the world, and now the responsibility for His appearance rests on us. It is man's power and responsibility to pray to God and magnify His manifestation in the world.

This understanding of a blessing affects the prayer as a whole, as we shall see in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Cf. *Iyov* 35:6-7. Similar statements are found in a variety of sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)