YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #44: The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* (3)**

In the previous *shiur* we saw that Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin defines prayer, in his book *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, as a "Divine need." In his view, prayer is meant not for our personal needs, but for God – a perspective that helps us understand how the Sages compared the prayers to the daily offerings. Prayer is like a sacrifice in that its purpose is to rise upwards.

This assertion includes the understanding that the words of prayer should not be interpreted in accordance with their plain meaning. The words seem to deal with our personal needs, but we are really not supposed to think in prayer about the meaning of the words. Behind the words stand the deep intentions of the Men of the Great Assembly, for the sake of the upper worlds.

**The Role of the Soul**

According to the above, there does not seem to be a place for the soul in prayer. If it is impossible to understand the meaning of the words, then presumably the worshipper should merely utter them with his mouth. It is his utterances that act upon and influence the upper worlds, and this influence will occur by itself, regardless of what is happening inside the person. Unlike Chasidic prayer, where the soul occupies a central place, it would seem in the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* that there is almost no inner service.

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* nevertheless seeks the soul’s place in the process, and this may be what underlies the question with which the second part of the book opens: It is understood how God can be served with "all your heart," but what is the meaning of serving Him "with all your soul"?

Hediscusses this phrase in chapter 14, and brings the soul into the service of prayer in a most significant manner:

However, the explanation of the text discussed above at the beginning of our exposition: "…and to serve him… and with all your soul (*nefesh*)" – that perfect prayer must be performed with the soul – is a great matter to those who somewhat know and understand. And when a person is diligent in this spiritual level (that will be explained, with God's help), his purity [of focus and intention] will continuously grow.For we found in a few places in Scripture and in the statements of our Sages that prayer is called by the name *nefesh* (soul), because some of the important rules regarding the fundamentals of prayer are those derived from the story of Chana, and about her it is written (I *Shmuel* 1:15): "and I have poured out my soul before God"… And the idea is that the service of prayer is in place of the sacrificial service. And just as the matter of the sacrifice was to elevate the soul of the domesticated animal, and for that reason, the accomplishment of the atonement was dependent on the throwing of the blood, it being the soul [*Devarim* 12:23], and so too the consumption by flame of the inner organs, their main point was for the intention of elevating the soul *–* sotoo, the main intent of the matter of prayer is to elevate and to deliver and to attach his soul above. For a person's power of speech is called *nefesh,* as is written (*Bereishit* 2:7): "and the man became a living *nefesh*," and Onkelos translated it as "a speaking *ruach* [spirit/wind]." And so it is apparent to the eye that with every word that a person speaks with his mouth, what comes out of his mouth is the air and vapor of his heart. And speech is the fundamental expression of a person's soul, it being the unique capacity that people have over animals. That being so, every word that comes out of a person's mouth is a power and a part of his soul*.*

For that reason, when one stands to pray before his Maker, he should slough his body off from his soul; that is, he should remove all ideas of the vanities resulting from the body's functions, that have been engraved on and attached to his soul, so that his prayer service will be performed with only his souland his higher will. And specifically, before he stands in prayer, he must annul and remove from upon him, in his mind, all of the pleasures of the body, everything that he enjoys, and all of his preoccupations, until he establishes solidly in his thoughts to despise the body, as if he has no body at all, and only his soulis speaking its prayer. And when he speaks each word, which is a power and part of his soul, he should strongly attach his will to it to actually completely pour his soulinto it, and to attach it to the supernal root of the words of the prayer that exists at the pinnacle of the world. As is written in the *Zohar Va-Yakhel* mentioned in the annotation: "And while his mouth and lips are still murmuring, he should direct his heart/mind, and raise his will higher and higher, to unite everything per the deepest secrets, for there are caught all of the wills and thoughts that are found in the ongoing secret of *Ein-Sof.*"And then it will be considered as if he doesn't exist in this world, and he is one of the residents of the abodes above, to such an extent that even after prayer, it will be very difficult for him to turn his thoughts to the matters of this world, and it will appear to him as if he falls, and climbs [down], and descends from a great height into a deep pit, like the early pious ones who would still themselves for an hour before and an hour after prayer. And this is what the Ari *z"l* also wrote about the reason for this: "to further still the minds…." And this is the idea of what the Sages stated (*Yevamot* 105b): "One who prays must position his heart/mind up high." And so much will this expand and ignite his love of Him (blessed be He), via the power of his soul, to the extent that he will sincerely yearn and desire, so that when he speaks at this moment the specific holy speech of any word from the formula of the prayer, his soulwill completely leave the body, and it will be elevated to attach, as it were, to Him (blessed be His name). This is why it is stated here: "and to serve… with all your soul." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 14)

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* speaks here of the need to forsake the affairs of this world before prayer: "he must annul and remove from upon him, in his mind, all of the pleasures of the body, everything that he enjoys, and all of his preoccupations."

Apart from this, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* speaks of devotion, "to elevate and to deliver and to attach his soulabove." Prayer is like a sacrifice: Just as with a sacrifice, the blood, which is the soul, is elevated and delivered above, so with prayer, the soul is elevated and delivered above, by way of speech. The speech corresponds to the blood, which is the soul.

What does the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* mean when he speaks of the deliverance of the soul – *mesirut nefesh*? It can be understood that one should concentrate during prayer on being ready to give one's life for the sanctification of God's name; just as with the offering of a sacrifice, one gives the animal's life, so too this should be the consciousness during prayer. There is no doubt that every Jew should live in such a consciousness of being ready to give his life for the sanctification of God's name. The question is whether this is what the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* is referring to here in his words about prayer. It is possible to understand his words differently: With the animal, there is only one way to surrender its soul – by offering the animal on the altar. Man, on the other hand, has other paths for elevating his soul. He doesn't have to die for that.

In the chapters that follow, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* speaks about the letters, the vowel points, and the cantillation notes – which parallel action, speech, and thought, and also the three aspects of the spirit, i.e., *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. Prayer is speech, but behind speech stand *ruach* and *neshama,* and a person is supposed to join all of these forces and layers to prayer. The more a person involves his soul in his prayer, the more significant it will be.

How is all this related to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*’s general position, that prayer is a Divine need?

**To Harness the Soul for the Sake of God**

In the last chapter of this section, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* writes:

And so we find, after one's prayer is well practiced and structured in connecting the three aspects of *nefesh-ruach-neshama* that are in his overall soul, using the letters, vowel points, and cantillation notes in each word (as was explained above in chapter 16), he should make a great effort, with his single-minded thought and intention, to, after this, attach all three aspects of *nefesh-ruach-neshama* to the *neshama* mentioned above (it being the root of his *neshama*), using the letter permutations of the words in their holy supernal root. And when he attaches at this level, then it is possible to be considered as if he is no longer in the world at all. In any case, the world will be, from his perspective, nullified completely. For that level is far above the current level of the person, as I wrote previously, and he will integrate himself into the root of his *neshama*, in the overall supernal root of the *neshamot* of the whole of Israel taken all together. (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, sec. 2, chap. 18)

When a person enters into prayer while detaching himself from this world, he is already taking the first step towards the purpose of prayer. If a person is supposed to free himself from the thought that prayer deals with the affairs of this world, as soon as he detaches himself from these matters, he is already on the road to the true meaning of prayer, for the sake of God.

Regarding the involvement of the soul in prayer, when a person leaves the affairs of the world and puts his soul into prayer, he sees himself as working for the sake of God. He harnesses all the powers of his soul for God. He is a soldier in the king's army. The meaning of the fact that a person serves as the king's soldier is not limited to his chances of dying; his goal is not to die, but to act on behalf of the king. Although the act of prayer is merely speech, the utterance of words without concentrating on their meaning – when one connects all the powers of the soul to such speech, he detaches himself from the affairs of this world and devotes himself for the sake of God. In this respect, the involvement of the soul has a significant role, which is deeply related to the general approach of service as a Divine need.

In Chassidism, as well, there is talk about the soul's involvement in prayer, but there the goal is to remove the barriers of the world and be nullified before God. For the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim,* on the other hand,man is supposed to stand and serve before God. In general, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* makes mention here of concepts that also appear in Chassidism – love, devotion, nullification – but he imposes upon them his unique character. For the Maggid of Mezeritch, the love is between the son and his father, whereas for the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, love is the total dedication of a soldier to his king. For the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, devotion means devotion to the mission, as in the ethical code of any army. Nullification, as well, appears in the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, but not to God; rather, to the root of the people of Israel, which is a Divine revelation. This, too, reminds us of the soldier's nullification for the sake of the king’s kingdom as a whole. We will not go into the full depth of these concepts in this forum; I will merely note that the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim's* nullification does not lead to nothingness, but rather to man's existence and standing, so that he can complete the Divine mission.

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It is important to note a point that the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* repeats: Nothing stated in this chapter detracts from the importance of halakhic regulations. As part of his presentation of a position that counters Chassidism, he speaks about the inner meaning of prayer, but emphasizes several times that this does not come at the expense of the practical framework, such as the times of prayer. Throughout the book, he stands guard and protects the halakhic order.

Another general comment about the position of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*: He does not teach us how to actually repair prayer – how to deal with the problems that arise around it. He determines what needs to be done. He does talk about repentance and repair in the event that a person did not do what he was supposed to do, but not about the struggle itself. This corresponds to the general atmosphere of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*: he does not enter a person's soul and talk about his difficulties or what he is going through, but rather sets down the ideas, the principles.

In the next *shiur*,we will complete our study of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* and see how he relates to the two principles that we saw in the words of the Ari – the raising of worlds and the clarification of sparks.

(Translated by David Strauss)