YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #45: The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* (4)**

Continuing our journey through the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*,we will return to concepts that have accompanied us since our initial encounter with the teachings of the Ari: the raising of worlds and the clarification of sparks.

On the one hand, it is important to know that the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* is full of quotations from the Ari. On the other hand, while the central element in the service of God according to the *Nefesh* *Ha-Chaim* is one that appears in the writings of the early kabbalists, it is hardly mentioned at all by the Ari – namely, the idea of service as a Divine need, discussed in the previous *shiurim* about the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* seesprayer, and service of God in general, in light of the perception of man as a factor that influences the worlds. This idea is alluded to by the Ramban, and is expanded upon by Rabbi Meir ben Gabbai in his book *Avodat Ha-Kodesh* as well as in the words of the Shelah, but it is different from the main emphases of the Ari.

**The Raising of the Worlds and of the Soul of Israel**

The element of raising the worlds appears in the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* only in the sections called "*Hagahot*," glosses:

For via the sacrifices in the Temple, which was completely modeled on the heavens (its upper levels, rooms and all of its utensils that were used for service), all the worlds and supernal powers and the pathways of the holy palaces would be interconnected and unified, all of them according to the design of the levels above and still higher, until the *Ein Sof* (blessed be He), as explained in many places in the *Zohar…* And refer to the *Pri Etz Chaim* [by Rabbi Chaim Vital], chapters 5 and 7 of *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla*, [for] the detailed order of the elevation and connection. And that is why it was called "*korban*" [from the root *k/r/v*, meaning “close”],as was stated in the *Bahir*: "Why is it called '*korban*'? Because it draws the holy forms near"… And from the moment that, because of our sins, the service of our Holy Home was interrupted, nothing remained other than the service of prayer to replace it, for it too, its special attribute is to connect and unify the worlds, up to the highest, with *Ein Sof* (blessed be He), as explained in many places in the *Zohar*… And as explained in the *Pri Etz Chaim*, that the entire fundamental purpose of the matter of prayer, from its start until after the completion of the *Amida*, is rectification of the worlds and their elevation from below to above, to bind and to incorporate each one of them into the one above it, higher and higher, until the *Ein Sof* (blessed be He). And refer in that book to chapters 4 through 7 from *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla* for the complete account. And refer to the *Ra'aya Mehemna*, beginning of *Parashat Eikev*, that this is the distinction between (1) the blessings over *mitzvot* and over food, and (2) the blessings that are part of the prayer service. The blessings over *mitzvot* and over food are the drawing down of the abundance, to bring to earth the blessings from above to below, [while] the blessings of the prayer service are to rectify the worlds themselves and elevate them, and to bind each world to the world above it. Refer to the *Pri Etz Chaim*, beginning of *Sha'ar Ha-Berakhot*, and the beginning of chapter three there. And what is further written there in *Ra'aya Mehemna*: "and from above to below" — that is the drawing down of the abundance from above to below after the *Amida*, and this is also from the perspective of returning and elevating the worlds, each one into the one above it, as he wrote in the *Pri Etz Chaim* at the end of chapter 5 of *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla…* (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, part 2, gloss to chap. 14)

The place where we encounter more than anywhere else the correspondence between our world and the upper worlds – and thus, man's ability to influence the upper worlds – is the Temple. The structure of the *Mishkan* and the Temple is an earthly model that reflects heavenly reality.

Here the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* makes a surprising distinction: There are blessings that generate movement from the bottom up, and there are blessings that generate movement from the top down. The blessings of the *Amida* prayer generate movement from the bottom up, whereas the blessings recited over food generate movement from the top down. (The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* notes that on the face of it, this contradicts the words of the Ari, according to which prayer moves both from the bottom up and from the top down; however, the Ari is referring to the stage that comes after the *Amida* prayer, where the movement is indeed from the top down.) This distinction is surprising because the entire approach of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* started with the concept of blessing, and the most fundamental blessing is *Birkat Ha-mazon*, a blessing over food that is commanded by the Torah. The concept of blessing which was explained as a movement upwards would seem to include blessings recited over food, but now it turns out that blessings over food are in fact a movement from the top down.

The subject of raising the worlds appears again, in greater detail, in another gloss:

For that reason, the overall organization of the prayer service is in four parts, corresponding to the four components of *nefesh-ruach-neshama* and the root of the *neshama*.

The sacrifices correspond to the *nefesh* (soul) and to the world of Action, for they are brought as a result of sins relating to the *nefesh*, as it is written: "And if a *nefesh* should sin… he shall bring…" (*Vayikra* 5:1). And the *Pesukei de-Zimra* correspond to the world of the *ruach* – the world of the singing angels. And *Shema* and its blessings correspond to the halls of Creation, acknowledged as the world of *neshamot*.

While reciting the paragraphs of the sacrifices until *Barukh she-Amar*, one should intend to elevate all components of the *nefashot* of Action, i.e., the inner aspect of Action, to integrate them with the *ruchot* of Formation. And he should also integrate his *nefesh* with them, to connect them with his *ruach*.

And from *Barukh she-Amar* until the blessings of *Shema*, he should integrate all of the *nefashot* of Action and the *ruchot* of Formation, as well as the components of his own *nefesh* and *ruach*, with the *neshama* of Creation.

And from the blessings of *Shema* until the *Amida*, he should integrate and elevate all of the *nefesh-ruach-neshama* of Creation-Formation-Action (and his own *nefesh-ruach-neshama* along with them) to integrate them together into the root of the *neshama* and the root of the gathering of all the souls of Israel together.

And for a partial reference for this topic, refer to the *Pri Etz Chaim*, Chapter 1 of *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla*. And this is what the Ari *z"l* hinted there when he stated: "And in this manner the *Shekhina* becomes comprised of all of them"; refer there [for more details]. And this is [the meaning of] what the Ari *z"l* stated, that before prayer, one should accept upon himself the mitzva of "And you shall love your neighbor [as yourself]." (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, part 2, gloss to chap. 18)

The division of prayer into four parts, corresponding to four levels, is familiar to us from the words of the Ari: *Birkot Ha-Shachar* belong to the world of Action, *Pesukei De-Zimra* to the world of Formation, and *Shema* and its blessings to the world of Creation. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* also mentions the worlds of Action, Formation, and Creation. But when he reaches the *Amida* prayer, instead of mentioning the world of Emanation, he writes: “To integrate them together into the root of the *neshama* and the root of the gathering of all the souls of Israel together.” This is the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim’s* interpretation of the world of Emanation – the root of all the souls of Israel! The world of Emanation, according to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim,* does not bring the soul together with the depth of its own essence, or with its absolute cancellation into the Divine nothingness, but rather with its root in the collective expanse – with the root of all the souls of Israel, which together reveal the Divine world. It is interesting that this is hinted at in the opening words of the *Amida*: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God and the God of our fathers – the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Yaakov" – not "the Lord our God, King of the universe," but rather "the Lord our God, and the God of our fathers," the root of the souls of Israel. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* also brings the Ari's guidance to accept upon oneself before prayer the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself." This is not just a matter of designating a moment for ethical reinforcement before prayer, but a declaration that frames the direction of the entire prayer. Already at the beginning of the prayer, one should mark the purpose, the goal to reach in prayer, i.e., the point at which all of the people of Israel are like a unified woven tapestry.

If until now the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* distanced prayer from the reality with which we are familiar, here he takes a step in bringing it closer to that reality – to the people of Israel.

**What Happened to the Clarification of Sparks?**

We have seen how the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* relates to the raising of the worlds, and will move on now to the issue of clarifying the sparks. The Ari told us that sparks are clarified from the husks during prayer, and we saw the Baal Shem Tov's novel position that this clarification is achieved by dealing with one's extraneous thoughts.

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* also deals with the issue of extraneous thoughts in his own way:

And the advice offered about this is as the Maggid stated to the *Beit Yosef* in the second warning at the beginning of the book *Maggid Meisharim*; this is what he said: "To be careful of thinking any thought during prayer, even related to Torah and *mitzvot*, other than the words of the prayer themselves." Pay close attention to his words, that he didn't say to attend to the intention of the words, for in truth, none of us understand the slightest about the depths of the inner meaning of the prayer, for even what has been revealed to us about a few of the intentions of the prayer from our earliest sages, until the recent holy rabbi, man of God, the awe-inspiring Ari *z”l*, who achieved wonders and greatness authoring incredible intentional-meditations, are not, in comparison, more than a drop in the ocean relative to the inner depths of the intentions of the Men of the Great Assembly codifiers of the prayer, who were one-hundred and-twenty elders, among them a number of prophets. And those who are capable of understanding will understand that there is no one currently in the world who is capable of codifying such a wondrous and awesome rectification, to incorporate into and to hide in the formula of the prayer, permanently fixed and configured in a single formula, the rectifications for all the worlds, upper and lower, and the configurations of the components of the Chariot. And each occasion of praying causes new rectifications in the configuration of the worlds and the powers, and the drawing down of other new *mochin*. From the moment that it was codified until the coming of the redeemer (quickly, in our day), there never was and never will be another prayer that, in its details, resembles others that came before and after in any way. "The garments worn in the morning are not worn in the evening, and those worn in the evening…," as is written in the *Tikkunim* (*Tikkun* 22), and so too each day relative to the ones that preceded and follow. And for that reason, the sages stated (*Chagiga* 9b, and in *Bamidbar Rabba*, chapter 9): "'What is distorted cannot be corrected' (*Kohelet* 1:15) – one who missed the recitation of *Shema* or prayer”; and as is written at length in the *Pri Etz Chaim*, chapter 7 of *Sha'ar Ha-Tefilla*, refer there [for more details]. And it would have been impossible if not for the supernal level of prophecy and His holy spirit that manifested over them powerfully during the codification of the formulas of prayer and blessings. He (blessed be His name) placed in their mouths these enumerated words, and hidden within them are all the rectifications. For that reason, who can understand God's hidden secrets to the depths of His (blessed be His name) intention, on which path will the light of each specific word settle?

Rather, the essence of the prayer service is that, at the moment that the person pronounces each word of the prayer, he should visualize in his thoughts that word as its letters, as it appears, and intend to increase thereby the power of holiness so that it will bear fruit above to multiply their holiness and light, as I wrote previously in chapter ten. For that reason prayer is called: "words that stand at the pinnacle of the world" (*Berakhot* 6b): that each word, as it actually appears, it is what rises higher and higher, each one to its source and root, to perform wondrous actions and rectifications. And this is a marvelous remedy, tried and tested, for those who get themselves used to practicing this, to annul and remove from upon them in this way any vain thoughts that cause anxiety and that obstruct purity of thought and attention, and anyone who increases the regularity of this practice will increase his purity of thought during prayer, and this is simple attention/intention. (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, part 2, chap. 13)

We have already seen the instruction to focus on the words of prayer and not on their meaning, as they are not to be understood in accordance with their plain sense. Now, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* points out that not only is this true as a conceptual understanding of prayer, but it is also useful for dealing with extraneous thoughts. We might have assumed otherwise, that thinking about the meaning of the words of prayer would prevent extraneous thoughts, but the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* explains that it is better to avoid thinking at all – and precisely in that way, the extraneous thought will not arise.

The issue of extraneous thoughts is discussed here, but the entire set of ideals connected to the clarification of the sparks is ignored. There are no sparks, no shattering of the vessels, and no death of the kings. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* refers to those chapters in the writings of the Ari, but he makes no mention of the concepts mentioned there. He even mentions the drawing down of *mochin* from above, which, according to the Ari, is a result of the clarification of the sparks, but the clarification itself is not mentioned!

Let us remember for a moment who spoke about the clarification of the sparks at length – the author of the *Tanya.* At the heart of his discussion was the clarification of *kelipat noga.* In order to understand the fact that the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* ignores this world of concepts, let us examine a passage written by the author of the *Tanya.* During the heated polemic against Chasidism by its opponents, students of his turned to him and proposed that an inquiry be conducted by other neutral Torah authorities who would serve as objective judges. He replied to them in writing, saying it would be impossible, and among other things, he wrote:

Regarding the *Likutei Amarim* and the like, with respect to the raising of the sparks from the husks, etc. – the raising of the sparks is mentioned only in the Kabbala of the Ari *z"l*, and not among the kabbalists who preceded him and also not explicitly in the holy *Zohar.* We know with certainty that the Gaon, the *Chasid*, does not believe about the Kabbala of the Ari in its entirety that it is entirely from the mouth of Eliyahu *z"l*. Only a small part is from Eliyahu *z"l*, while the rest is from his great wisdom. And there is no obligation to believe in it, and the writings were also very corrupted. He who believes this can choose for himself that which is good and right of all the holy writings of the Ari *z"l*, saying this statement is fine and from the mouth of Eliyahu *z"l*, whereas this statement is not from the mouth of Eliyahu *z"l*. What can we say and how can we justify ourselves before him… Those who will decide the matter are the great men of Israel who are well-known for their belief in the Kabbala of the Ari *z"l* in its entirety that it is all from the mouth of Eliyahu *z"l*, such as the Sefardi sages and the like. (*Iggerot Baal Ha-Tanya* 97)

The author of the *Tanya* writes about the Gaon of Vilna that he does not accept the Kabbala of the Ari in its entirety; in his view, while some of the Ari’s teachings come from the prophet Eliyahu, the rest comes from the great mind of the Ari. According to the Gaon of Vilna, there is no obligation to accept those parts. Since the issue of the clarification of sparks appears only in the teachings of the Ari, and does not appear explicitly in the teachings of the kabbalists who preceded him, nor in the *Zohar*, it is impossible to bring Chassidic teachings that are based on it as an argument against the Gaon of Vilna.

This letter indicates that the Gaon of Vilna did not accept the Ari's teachings about the clarification of the sparks – and thus, neither did the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim.* This is an essential point: the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* deals only with problems in the world that arise from human sins, for which repentance is required, not with defects that preceded the creation, such as the shattering of the vessels and the falling of the sparks. This difference has practical significance in the service of God: For the author of the *Tanya*, all service of God is connected to the animal soul, which is a reality that stems from the shattering of the vessels, and therefore, engaging appropriately within the realm of what is permitted occupies a central place in the service of God. The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* does not deal at all with that struggle, and therefore, the focus of his service of God is Torah study. This is the expanse in which a person is supposed to operate. If there are shortcomings that preceded creation, we must rely on the Men of the Great Assembly – that they knew about them and planted the way to deal with them in the intentions that lie behind prayer. We are not supposed to deal with what is beyond our reach; rather, we are to act in the realm designated for us, by studying Torah.

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Here we come to the end of our study of the teachings of the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, at the heart of which are the idea of blessing as abundance and increase, and the idea of prayer as a Divine need. We saw his interpretation of the ascent of the worlds to Emanation, his unique guidance for dealing with extraneous thoughts, and his omission of the issue of clarifying the sparks from the shattering of the vessels. His words in many places parallel elements found in the *Tanya*, but they present the profound alternative of Chassidism's opponents.

(Translated by David Strauss)