YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #46: Nachman of Breslav (1)**

Each of the major Jewish thinkers we have studied thus far viewed prayer as a deep and broad issue, and is this all the more true regarding Rabbi Nachman of Breslav. We cannot encompass the entire breadth and depth of his teachings on the subject of prayer, not even in the concise manner with which we dealt with the *Tanya* and the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, but we can discuss their central elements.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslav was born in 5532 and died at a young age in 5571, when he was about 39 years old. He lived in the Ukraine region and was buried at his request in Uman. He was an extraordinary personality: stormy, creative, with unique self-awareness and extraordinary recognition of his own worth. There is a deep connection between his teachings and the events that he lived through personally.

Rabbi Nachman can be seen as an independent channel in Chassidism – unlike the students of the Maggid from Mezritch, who continued the Chassidism of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid in the region of White Russia. Rabbi Nachman had a direct line to the Baal Shem Tov, unconnected to the Maggid, through his family lineage. He was the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov and the grandson of one of his greatest students, Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka. His Chassidic teachings are different from those that preceded him; while it is difficult to establish definitive distinctions in the world of Chassidism, it can be said that Rabbi Nachman's teachings are much more associative, and are also saturated with stories and images. Of course, Rabbi Nachman did not invent the use of images; the Baal HaTanyaalso made extensive use of parables, but mainly to explain the deep and abstract ideas that he arrived at intellectually. For Rabbi Nachman, the Torah itself grows through images. His words contain ideas that would not have developed without the images.

Another characteristic of Rabbi Nachman is his free use of midrashic expositions. Movement between words reaches new levels with him, to the point where the student may wonder what, if anything, anchors his ideas; after all, the same sources could have been expounded in a completely different manner. Sometimes there is movement between ideas within the same teaching. This is one of the challenges that accompany the study of *Likutei Moharan*: not to be become overly enchanted or frustrated by the frantic movements in the teachings, and to try to decipher what is happening in them.

In addition to Rabbi Nachman's own *Likutei Moharan*, books were written by his students, and especially by Rabbi Natan – *Sichot Ha-Ran*, *Shivchei Ha-Ran*, and others. Based on their content, these books belong to the spiritual world of Rabbi Nachman himself, but stylistically they are written in much simpler language. This point characterizes the figure of Rabbi Nachman, which consists of extremely profound dimensions alongside extremely simple dimensions.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslav did not groom an heir who would inherit his place as *Admor*. This, along with the extraordinary expressions that Rabbi Nachman used about himself, initially turned Breslav Chassidism into a persecuted minority in the Torah world and even in the world of Chassidism itself. In recent decades, however, it has grown into a large *Chassidut*, with tens of thousands of members.

In our journey through Rabbi Nachman’s words about prayer, we will proceed from reality to its foundations, from the act of prayer to its conceptual foundations.

**“Make a Light for the Ark”**

It is difficult to choose a teaching from which to begin the study of Rabbi Nachman's thoughts on prayer; we will begin with a teaching of the Besht, and from there move on to consider the words of Rabbi Nachman:

The soul said to the master that he merited that supernal matters be revealed to him not because he studied much Talmud and halakhic literature, but only because of prayer – that he always prayed with great intention(*kavana*), and from there he merited a supernal level. (*Baal Shem Tov al Ha-Torah*, *Noach* 28)

According to this passage, the Baal Shem Tov did not reach his level through extensive Torah study, but through his prayer. A similar statement is also brought from a disciple (apparently) of Rabbi Nachman:

Someone asked him [Rabbi Nachman] about the practices which bring a person closer to God, and he instructed him to study Torah. "How?" he asked him. "I am unable to study." "Everything can be attained through prayer," [Rabbi Nachman] answered. “Everything good – Torah, worship, and all the holiness, devotions, and good in all the worlds." He once said: If a dead person were allowed to return to this world to pray, he would certainly pray very beautifully, with all his might. (*Likutei Moharan Tinyana* 111)

According to Rabbi Nachman as well, all levels can be reached through prayer. A similar principle is also found in other teachings. However, while the ideas proposed by the Besht and by Rabbi Nachman are similar, we must clarify whether or not we are dealing with the same type of prayer.

To understand the relationship between the Baal Shem Tov's prayer and that of Rabbi Nachman, we will consider another passage of the Baal Shem Tov, one of his main passages on the subject of prayer. It appears in a collection of statements about prayer, which were assembled in *Baal Shem Tov al Ha-Torah*, *Parashat Noach*, under the heading *Amud Ha-Tefilla*, "the pillar of prayer." The following passage connects prayer to *Parashat Noach*, through an exposition of the verse, "Make a light for the ark" (*Bereishit* 6:16):

"Make a light [*tzohar*] for the ark [*teiva*], closing up to a cubit at the top." The Baal Shem Tov, peace be upon him, explained these words in the following way: let the word (*teiva*) said in Torah or in prayer radiate light (*matzhir*)! For in every letter there are worlds, souls, and divinity, that rise up and interconnect and cleave to one another and to the Divine. Afterwards, these letters connect and conjoin, finally becoming a word. After that, they connect and unify unifications of truth in the Divine - and one must unify one's soul with each of the aforementioned aspects. In this way, all the worlds rise and become as one, and then there is immense joy and immeasurable delight. (*Baal Shem Tov al Ha-Torah*, *Noach* 15)

This passage appears in several versions in the writings of the students of the Baal Shem Tov, but the principle is that the *teivot* of prayer, i.e., the words, must radiate light. In every word and in every letter, spiritual lights are stored that can create worlds to vitalize souls and reveal God.

Let us see now how Rabbi Nachman approached the same verse. I recommend for the first reading of what he writes that we not delve into the content of the words, but rather that we set the various images before our eyes, and see what picture forms in our minds from the reading:

"Make a light for the ark, and to a cubit finish it up above; and the opening of the ark put in its side; with lower, second, and third stories make it" (*Bereishit* 6:16). Rashi explains: A light: some say a precious jewel, and some say a window. Surely, it is known that "the wicked walk round and round” (*Tehillim* 12:9). For the Other Side [*sitra achra*] surrounds holiness, because "[God] made one to contrast the other" (*Kohelet* 7:14). This is particularly so for someone who has already been drawn after the Other Side and [has made] his place there, God forbid. They surround him from every side. And should his spirit be aroused to return to God, he finds it very difficult to pray and utter words before God, for they surround him from every side, each one according to his circumstance, as above. Now, because it is impossible for him to say anything before God with fear and love, and with befitting vitality, all the words and prayers that he does speak are incapable of breaking through the dividing partitions and screens, so as to ascend Above. They remain below, beneath the screens, until he is deserving and returns honestly, and speaks words that are worthy of being received with fear and love from the depth of the heart, with great arousal. Then, the illuminating word breaks through all the dividing partitions and screens, and elevates together with it all the words which until now remained below. (*Likutei Moharan* *Kama*, 112)

Let us try to draw these images in our minds. There is an ark, an ark that has no window (in accordance with the opinion that the *tzohar* was not an opening), with wicked people walking around it. Inside the ark is a man who is in distress; he is surrounded from all directions, and it is difficult for him to speak. He is also surrounded by partitions and screens, so that even if he succeeds in speaking, the words that issue from his mouth meet those partitions and are blocked. Only when one prayer succeeds in breaching the barriers, all the prayers that have been blocked until that point break out and leave as well.

Before we see how the barriers can be breached, let's stop for a moment and try to understand why Rabbi Nachman uses this world of images at all. Why not explain the matter conceptually? It seems that Rabbi Nachman wants to convey an occurrence that takes place during prayer. He not only presents spiritual principles, but also throws us into the event itself.

But how does one merit to this? The main thing, upon which everything depends, is truth. To go in the way of truth commensurate with one's level. For the seal of the Holy One is truth (*Shabbat* 55a). It is the foundation of everything, because "*EMeT* (truth) is beginning, middle, and end (*alef-mem-tav*)." And, because he is on the level of truth, the light of God Himself, whose seal is truth, he is then, so to speak, enclothed in him. Then it is said of him (*Tehillim* 27:1): "God is my light and my help."

What is the way to break through the partitions? The path presented by Rabbi Nachman is through truth, but it is not yet clear *how* truth enables prayer to breach and ascend. From here, Rabbi Nachman returns to the image of the ark:

And, because God is his light, he is able to find many openings from which to depart from the darkness and exile in which he is enclosed. For the truth is that there are many openings there, as our Sages teach (*Menachot* 29b): "When someone comes to defile himself, they open up for him" – there are many openings for him. And, since there are many openings, he is able to depart. But "the fool walks in darkness" (*Kohelet* 2:14) and will not see the openings to depart. He is imprisoned and bound there, and will not be allowed to depart until he merits speaking words of truth before God. Then the words illuminate, and God is his light, as above. At that point, "the opening of Your words illuminates, making the simpleminded understand” (*Tehillim* 119:130). For the illuminating words, i.e., the aforementioned words of truth, show him the opening. Thus, [the verse] concludes: "making the simpleminded understand" – the simpleminded, who are situated in darkness and cannot see [how] to depart, will understand and see the openings from which to depart the darkness. As it is written (*Yeshayahu* 49:9): "That you may say to the imprisoned 'Depart!’; to those that are in darkness, 'Show yourselves!'" But the truth has to be a complete truth, evident and clear, without any flaws. The intelligent person, who understands, should pray all his days that [at least] once in his life he merits to properly speak one word of truth before God. There are many levels in this. And when one merits to an aspect of the real truth, then God is his light, and he then illuminates on his own because the light of God is enclothed in him. However, someone who has as yet not attained the highest level of truth but is nevertheless on a level of truth, though he does not himself illuminate since he has not attained the right truth – even so, this [partial] truth helps so that another person can shine into him. And in this, too, there are levels and circumstances. The intelligent person will understand them on his own.

The ark looks as if it is dark and closed, without any opening, but it really has openings that must be found. The source that Rabbi Nachman cites in this context is, "When someone comes to defile himself, they open up for him." On the simple level, this means that if one turns towards impurity, an opportunity for impurity is opened for him. But when one is in a closed place, "they open up for him" means there is an exit. This is a surprising exposition, and the surprise is part of the idea presented by Rabbi Nachman – in the depth of the closed ark, inside the prison, a Divine light suddenly shines that makes it possible for one to get out.

The Baal Shem Tov spoke about illuminating words, and took it in the direction of supernal spiritual illuminations; for Rabbi Nachman, illumination is truth. He is not referring to objective truth, to evidence and proof of God's reality, but rather to true speech from the heart, speech that issues forth from where the person is. When a person turns to God and says he cannot speak, that he is immersed in sins, that he longs for the closeness of God to such an extent that he barely feels even the longing – these words break the glass ceiling that blocks prayers. Such talk can light up any darkness.

We have seen the similarity between the words of Rabbi Nachman and the words of the Baal Shem Tov about prayer, and also the difference between them: the same phrase that the Baal Shem Tov took to lofty heights, "Make a light for the ark," Rabbi Nachman brings down to the simplest, most authentic and sincere prayer.

(Translated by David Strauss)