YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #47: Nachman of Breslav (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we entered through the gates of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, and we saw that Rabbi Nachman, like the Baal Shem Tov, describes prayer as the source of all the supernal levels he merited to attain. We also saw that Rabbi Nachman, like the Baal Shem Tov, expounds on the words "Make a light for the ark" in connection with the illumination of the words of prayer. However, while the Baal Shem Tov took this idea in higher and mystical directions, Rabbi Nachman describes a person who feels trapped in a dark reality and must speak "words of truth" – not in terms of objective truth, but honesty; prayer from the truest and innermost place within the person. This type of prayer is different from the intellectual prayer of the *Rishonim*, from the spiritual-mystical prayer that we saw in the Baal Shem Tov’s teachings, and also from the combination of the two that we saw in the *Tanya*. With Rabbi Nachman, prayer is simple and direct.

In this sense, Rabbi Nachman returns to the simplest meaning of prayer – not a process of intellectual contemplation, nor a departure to the spiritual worlds beyond the words, but speaking directly to God, as one would speak to another person. Such prayer contains within it all the energies that are found in a dialogue between two people, when it is conducted sincerely and from a deep connection.

Rabbi Nachman describes prayer as redemption. When a person manages to have a conversation with God, he is redeemed. When a person is unable to turn to God through speech – that is exile, a state of hardship and deficiency. Redemption is the departure from this state, to the ability to pray.

We will now continue examining the teaching that we began to study in the previous *shiur.*

**Speaking the Truth**

Between the two extremes – ability and inability to pray – Rabbi Nachman outlines a whole scale, with many intermediate levels.

The essential point is that when one is sunk in the worst attack of darkness and the evil force, and he is hemmed in and closed up within the thickest darkness which surrounds and encircles him round and round on every side, Heaven forefend, and he has no opening, rectification, or solution to depart from the darkness – in that case, the best advice for him is to draw himself to the truth. He should look to the genuine truth and search only for the real truth. Against this, there is no darkness or encirclement that can make it dark for him. For truth is God Himself. Thus, he is in the category of "God is my light." And because God is his light, there is no darkness that can make it dark for him. He will surely merit to see the openings from which to depart the darkness, as in, "The opening of Your words illuminates, making the simpleminded understand" (*Tehillim* 119:130). Understand this well.

Now, the main thing is: In his prayers, supplications, and requests – even if he finds it impossible to recite any word of prayer and supplication because of the intense darkness and confusion which surrounds him very, very much from every side – he should still try to at least say what he says with truth, no matter how low its level. Thus, for example, he should say, "God help me!" with truth; even if he cannot say it with the appropriate fervor and arousal, he should nevertheless say it as truthfully as he can. And through the true word, he will merit to see the openings that are within the darkness, and as a result, will merit to come out of the darkness into the light and to pray as he should. [See Teaching no. 9, "The Deeps Covered Them," where all this is explained.]

Moreover, by meriting to break open a way from which to depart, he will also bring merit to others along with him. He will awaken other wicked men to return to God, to bring them out of the darkness and exile in which they are imprisoned. This is also the meaning of: **"**and put the opening of the ark in its side" – that you should make an opening in those who are on the "side." In other words, they are from another side; not from the side of holiness but from the Other Side. Yet he will make an opening to awaken their hearts to return and depart from the darkness. And then: "with a lower, second, and third stories" – this alludes to the aforementioned three worlds – “you shall make it" – for, in truth, You are the one who sustains them, as above. (*Likkutei Moharan Kama*, 112)

Effectively, prayer is the answer to every situation of deficiency. When a person has any type of problem, he should pray about it; if he is unable to pray about it, he should pray about this difficulty itself. He must pray for the ability to pray – prayer about prayer.

Up to this point, Rabbi Nachman seemed to have been talking about someone who is unable to pray, someone who feels hemmed and closed in. Now, however, he goes on to indicate that the principle of sincere prayer from the heart concerns everyone, not only those who are immersed in sins and surrounded by barriers:

Included in all of the above are exalted points with regard to prayer, for each person in accordance with his level. Also included in this matter is the subject of stars and constellations, how they correspond to prayer and how he [the one who prays] gives an influx of bounty to all things. [This is] the meaning of that which the Sages said: There is not a blade of grass which does not have its star [and angel above, which strike it and tell it, "Grow!"] (*Bereishit Rabba* 10, 6). For he draws an influx of bounty upon everything by his true words. And the matter of prayer versions is that there are twelve gates, as is known, and a person must elevate his prayer to the gate of his tribe, because if it reaches the gate of another tribe, it cannot ascend: "A star steps forth out of Yaakov, and a tribe stands up out of Israel” (*Bamidbar*24:17) – "stands up" – and "*Amida* (standing) is nothing other than prayer" (*Berakhot* 6b). And this "a tribe out of Israel" – that he must elevate his prayer [i.e., his “standing”] to the gate of his tribe – this is also "A star *darakh* (steps forth) out of Yaakov," as above. For with this, a unification is made above; "*darakh*" is an allusion to union, from the connotation of (*Bereishit* 6:12), "All flesh had perverted its *derekh* (way)."

And this is [the meaning of] Abba Binyamin's having been concerned all his days that his prayer should be close to his bed (*MiTaH*) (*Berakhot* 5b), because "one man for each patriarchal tribe (*MaTeH*) shall you send" (*Bamidbar* 13:2): it is necessary to send the prayer to the tribe of his fathers – i.e., to his tribe, as mentioned. This is [what is meant by] "it should be close to my *MiTaH*" – to his *MaTeH*. "And [he also expressed concern] about my bed, that it should be positioned between north and south" (*Berakhot* ibid.) – as our Sages said: "He who wants to become wise, let him face south; to become wealthy, let him face north" (*Bava Batra* 25b), and in all matters, the golden mean is good, as is known. For "Torah study is good together with an occupation" (*Avot* 2:2) (that is, wisdom with wealth). This is the meaning of "between north and south," that he should follow the mean between them – [namely] prayer, an aspect of "his bed." (That is, [prayer is] between wisdom and wealth, which are aspects of north and south, as above: “he who wants to become wise, let him face south; to become wealthy, let him face north.") And this is the meaning of: "and put the opening of the ark in its side" — let him pray with words of truth, so they will ascend to the gate of his tribe. And this is: "put in its side" – put the opening of the ark, namely, the true words of prayer – "in its side." [Put it] alongside it, in the gate of his tribe, where it ought to be. The point is deep. (Ibid.)

Rabbi Nachman cites a principle that appears in the words of the Ari, according to which there are twelve gates for prayer, corresponding to the twelve tribes, and each version of prayer fits a different gate. A person must aim at the gate that is appropriate for him in order for his prayer to be accepted. If a person had the proper intentions during prayer, but did not pray in a way that is appropriate for his own gate, why won't his prayer be accepted? According to Rabbi Nachman, a prayer should accord with the place in which the person offering it is found. If one prayed with general intention, as a part of Israel as a whole, this is not a prayer that stems from his identity. A person's prayer must truly be his own.

A precise personal prayer seems here to be on a higher level than a general prayer that does not come from one's personal place. There is indeed room to examine whether a person can expand his identity, and thus pray with more general intention. As Rabbi Nachman expanded the circle from personal identity to tribal identity, so it may be possible for a person to expand his own identity and see the collective as his identity. In any case, the importance of prayer as true speech, arising from within the person himself, is evident here.

**Making Personal Requests**

Rabbi Nachman instructs us to pray for everything, about any case of deficiency or problem:

The Rebbe once spoke to one of his disciples about clothing. He said: You must pray for everything. If your garment is torn and must be replaced, pray to God for a new one. Do this for everything. Make it a habit to pray for all your needs, large or small. Your main prayers should be for fundamentals – that God help you in your devotion, that you be worthy of coming close to Him. Still, you should also pray even for these other things.

And he said: One who does not act in this manner, God may give him food and clothing and everything else he needs even though he does not ask for them. But then he is like an animal. God gives every living thing its bread (*Tehillim* 147:9) without being asked. He can give it to a person in this way. But if he does not draw his life through prayer, it is like that of a beast. A man must draw all necessities of life from God through prayer alone.

And thus I also heard from his holy mouth: I once had a slight need for some insignificant thing. When I mentioned it to the Rebbe, he said, "Pray to God for it." I was quite astonished to learn that one must pray to God even for such trivial things, especially in a case like this where it was not even a necessity. Seeing my surprise, the Rebbe asked me, "Is it beneath your dignity to pray to God for a minor thing like this?" He then told me a short story along similar lines, involving a man from Medzeboz. The main lesson is that you must pray for every single thing. This is also explained in *Sefer Ha-Midot* (*The Aleph-Bet Book*, *Prayer* A37). (*Sichot ha-Ran* 233)

According to what we have seen so far, if man's central problem is the absence of closeness to God and the inability to turn to Him – why pray about other problems? Why attribute meaning to the rest of life's affairs, and talk about them before God?

The instruction to pray about life's mundane problems is not because these problems are important. On the contrary, it is prayer that is important. There is a difference between receiving abundance from God without prayer and receiving it after praying for it. When a person asks for sustenance and receives it, the sustenance becomes part of his dialogue with God. Prayer is not a means to achieve other goals; rather, the acquisition of the other things that one wants in life leads to prayer. Even the prayer to merit intimacy with God is answered in the very act of prayer; the fact that the person prays about the matter achieves the purpose of the prayer.

***Hitbodedut* (Seclusion)**

Rabbi Nachman highlights several aspects of prayer that were also discussed before him but on which he places special emphasis. Reciting *Tehillim* is one of them; another central point of emphasis is seclusion.

*Hitbodedut* (seclusion) is the highest asset and greater than everything. That is, to set aside for oneself at least an hour or more for secluding oneself in some room or a field and speak one's piece with one's Maker, using claims and excuses, with words that evoke favor, placate, and conciliate, in order to entreat and plead with God that He bring one closer to Him – to genuine Divine worship. This prayer and conversation should be in the language one normally uses, one's native tongue, because it is difficult for a person to say everything he wants to say in the Holy Tongue. Also, being unfamiliar with that language, one's heart is not moved by the words, as we are not accustomed to speaking Hebrew. But in our native tongue, in which we normally speak and converse, it is much easier and so more likely for one to feel contrition. This is because the heart is drawn to a person's native tongue and closer to it, on account of his familiarity with it. And one can express oneself fully in his native tongue. Everything that is in his heart he should express and tell to God, be it remorse and repentance for the past, or pleas to genuinely merit drawing closer to God from this day forward, or the like; each individual according to his level.

One should be very careful to make this a daily practice, at a scheduled time. But the rest of the day one should be happy, as mentioned above.

The benefit of this practice is extraordinarily great. It is an extremely good path and guideline for drawing closer to God, because it is a universal guideline that encompasses everything. No matter what a person is lacking in worshiping God – even if he is totally and absolutely distant from God's service – he should speak about it all and ask it of God, as mentioned above. Even if occasionally a person's words are sealed and he cannot open his mouth to say anything at all to God, this itself is nonetheless very good. That is, his readiness and his presence before God, and his yearning and longing to speak despite his inability to do so – this in itself is also very good. Moreover, it is possible to make a conversation and prayer out of this itself. A person should cry out and plead to God about this very thing, that he has become so distant that he is unable to even speak. He should beg God for compassion and grace, that He take pity on him and open his mouth so that he will be able to express himself before Him. And know! many, many renowned *tzaddikim* have related that they attained their high spiritual level only through this practice. The perceptive individual will understand by himself the great benefit of this practice, which rises higher and higher. Furthermore, it is a practice that is accessible to all people, from the least to the greatest. For anyone can make use of this practice and thereby come to a high level. Fortunate is the one who grabs hold of it.

In addition, it is good to turn the Torah into prayer. That is, when one studies or hears some Torah discourse from a genuine *tzaddik*, he should make it into a prayer. He should beseech God and plead with Him concerning each point mentioned in the discourse: When will he, too, be worthy of all this? How distant he is from it! And he should ask God to make him worthy of achieving all that is mentioned in the discourse.

The wise person who desires truth, God will lead on the path of truth. And, understanding on his own one thing from another, [he will know] how to put this into practice in such a way that his words will evoke favor and be well-argued, placating God so that He will draw him closer to genuine Divine worship. This manner of conversation rises to a very high place, especially when one turns Torah into prayer, which results in very great delight on high. (*Likkutei Moharan Tinyana*, 25)

The goal during seclusion is speaking one's piece before God. There are all kinds of conditions that are necessary, or at least highly recommended, to enable this to happen – such as being alone outside of the city, ideally in nature. Rabbi Nachman also advises on how to seclude oneself when these conditions are not possible, such as when a person is unable to leave town. When necessary, one can talk to God under a *tallit*, in bed under a blanket, even over a book in the *beit midrash*. The main thing is to speak one’s piece before one’s Maker. The purpose of seclusion, which is also the focus of prayer is: "to entreat and plead with God that He bring one closer to Him – to genuine Divine worship."

In these words lies another far-reaching innovation of Rabbi Nachman: a person should speak to his Maker as he speaks to his fellow man. Before Rabbi Nachman, when the Sages and the later Jewish authorities described conversation between man and God, they likened it to a conversation between a slave and his master, or at most to a conversation between a son and his father. With Rabbi Nachman, prayer takes place on a very human dimension, like a conversation between two people. Rabbi Nachman also uses the image of a conversation between a son and his father, but in a particularly humanized way. For example, the prayer should include "words that evoke favor, placate, and conciliate." What is the reason for placating and conciliating God? Is it possible to convince Him to act in a way that is different from what He had decreed? This is a question that appeared already in the words of the *Rishonim*, who had difficulty with how prayer can influence God's will, but here it emerges in a sharp way. Rabbi Nachman speaks of turning to God "with claims and excuses." Of course, this does not mean manipulation, for we already saw that Rabbi Nachman demands true and sincere prayer; however, when the person arrives at true prayer of this type, he should turn to God just as he would speak to another human being.

Another expression of this is the matter of language. According to Rabbi Nachman, when in seclusion, a person should speak to God in his native language. Speaking in one's mother tongue is completely different from speaking in another language. In his mother tongue, not only is a person in greater control, and able to express himself better, but over and beyond that, he is found within it. When a person speaks in a language that is not his mother tongue, he grasps it from the side, watching it from the outside. Only in his mother tongue does a person speak fluently from within himself. "I am prayer" says King David in the book of *Tehillim*; a person should be identical to his prayer.

Seclusion is not a simple step. A person cannot always open his heart and speak to God. Even when a person goes out alone into a field, it happens that he has nothing to say. There are guidelines for situations like this, such as to think about what one is going through, what happened to him today or yesterday, what is happening in his family or in the other circles of life around him. This is an opportunity to pay attention to these circles, to lay out for oneself a picture of one’s life. In our daily routine, we are not always aware of what is happening to us; in seclusion, even before a person turns to God, a person gets the opportunity to make internal order of his life.

(Translated by David Strauss)