YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #48: Nachman of Breslav (3)**

In this *shiur*,we will consider an aspect of prayer that does not appear frequently in Rabbi Nachman's own writings but that his great disciple, Rabbi Natan, identified as a central point and discussed extensively – the relationship between Torah and prayer. In light of Rabbi Nachman's position and directives on this issue, Rabbi Natan composed and edited the book *Likkutei Tefillot*, which is a large collection of prayers compiled by Rabbi Natan under the inspiration of Rabbi Nachman’s teachings in *Likkutei Moharan.*

The prevailing attitude is as formulated in the Gemara: "The time for prayer and the time for [study of the] Torah are distinct from each other" (*Shabbat* 10a). When a person is occupied in Torah study, he uses his cognitive faculties in order to understand it, whereas when he prays, he activates his heart. The verse "and serve Him with all your heart" is expounded in two ways, as referring to Torah study and to prayer, each standing on its own. This is also how Rambam mentions these expositions in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot* – as two different channels for the service of God; service of the mind and service of the heart. On the simple level, each channel requires that the person concentrate upon it, fully enter into it, and not deviate from it to other channels at the same time.

For Rabbi Nachman, on the other hand, there is a special connection between Torah study and prayer. This connection has several expressions, the most famous of which is "to make prayers out of teachings."

**Making Prayers Out of Teachings**

Let us first consider the words of Rabbi Natan:

Our Rabbi, may his memory be a blessing (i.e., our great master…Rabbi Nachman *zt”l*, author of *Likkutei Moharan*) cautioned us many times, in several wordings, to make prayers from the teachings. He said that great delight comes from this above. He said that such delights have not yet gone up before God, blessed be He, like the delights generated from prayers that are made from the teachings. He spoke further about this on many occasions and with many people.

While he did not fully explain what his holy intention was regarding this matter, from his remarks in general we understand that the essence of his intention was simply that we should strive to delve into the holy, awesome teachings that were revealed to us in order to understand the practical intent of the teaching. (For this is the essence, since study is not the essential thing; action is, as has been explained by us many times, that the whole essence of the intent of our holy and awesome teacher, *z"l*, in all the teachings that he revealed, was only for the sake of action, that we should strive and be strong and courageous in all strength to fulfill all that was said in each teaching). And we must consider our ways, how far we are from the words mentioned in each teaching, and we must pray and plead before God with multiple pleadings, requests, and supplications, that He have mercy on us and remember us and draw us near in His great mercy, so that we merit to fulfill all that is stated in that teaching, and we must pour out our words before God, blessed be He, regarding every matter mentioned there, so that we merit to fulfill them and reach them in wholeness. (*Likkutei Tefillot*, Introduction)

This does not seem to be an innovation of Rabbi Nachman. We find similar guidance well before him, in *Iggeret ha-Ramban*, the Ramban's Letter. Towards the end of this well-known letter, the Ramban writes: "When you arise from your learning, reflect carefully on what you have studied, to find a lesson in it that you can put into practice." Torah study does not automatically lead to practical observance; when a person closes his books, and moves from study into the world of action, he must consider what aspect of his study he can apply. Rabbi Nachman adds prayer as another link to this axis between the Torah and action – to pray to God that we should merit to fulfill what we have learned. The goal, according to Rabbi Natan, is to actualize our study in practice: "The essence of his intention was simply that we should strive to delve into the holy, awesome teachings that he revealed to us in order to understand the practical intent of the teaching." So far it seems that the goal is as the Ramban wrote, and Rabbi Nachman merely adds that one must pray in order to turn one's study into action.

However, Rabbi Natan describes a situation of great distance: "How far we are from the words mentioned in each teaching." Here, a different picture emerges: there is a fundamental problem of applying our study in the practical world, because of distance. This distance appears already in the words of Rabbi Nachman himself regarding our issue:

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)

Rabbi Nachman’s words indicate that it is not so easy to implement study in the practical world. While according to the Ramban, it suffices to think about what can be applied, Rabbi Nachman presents a deep gap between the world of study and the world of action. Because of this gap, it is not enough to get up from studying and start doing; one has to pray for it.

Upon whom does this depend? What needs to happen in order for us to succeed in implementing study? Ostensibly, it depends on the person; one must make an effort to put the Torah into practice. But from the words of Rabbi Nachman, it appears that success depends not on the person, but on God. This is not a request for specific help, for "help from heaven" that will accompany our efforts, but rather a handing over of all the work to God. We are not capable of doing this by ourselves; we need God to grant it to us. In general, Chasidism emphasized self-effacement before God over human efforts, but with Rabbi Nachman, this emphasis takes on a special tone.

This passage also contains a principle that we saw in the previous *shiur* – turning to God with repeated attempts to persuade Him. One must plead before Him until the request is accepted. There is room to ask if this is an attempt to change the Divine decision, which as mentioned is difficult to grasp, or if it is a process that the person himself is supposed to go through. In any event, the experience that should accompany the worshiper is that he must give his all, and that he must convince God; otherwise, there is no telling what will happen. The ability to implement the Torah depends exclusively on God, but the question of whether and to what extent He will help a person to do so depends on prayer. Prayer is the only component that depends on the person.

We should note a gap between the beginning of this section and its end: on the one hand, the passage opens with a state of distance, while on the other hand, the process ends in "very great delight on high." One might have expected that from the distance, a person would arrive at the normal state, but he reaches far beyond that. The reason is that this upheaval, from distance to proximity, is in many ways the essence of reality. It is the great upheaval that is to take place in the world, and therefore it causes great delight above. We will deal at length with the movement from distance to proximity in the next *shiur*.

From Rabbi Natan's description in *Sichot ha-Ran*, it seems that Rabbi Nachman wanted prayers to be made from his teachings as well:

When he spoke to me and revealed to me the way to make prayers from the teachings, as is stated (in *Likkutei Tinyana* 25), he said to me, "It would be good to write the prayers for yourself." From his gestures and the way he said it, I understood what a wonderful and awesome thing this was, to make prayers out of teachings. The Rebbe said that it made "very great delight on high." Another time, the Rebbe was speaking to someone who expressed his great desire regarding this. He said: "I very much want my teachings made into prayers, but I do not know to whom to entrust the task." On another occasion, the Rebbe showed me a recently published book called *Yad Ketana* (287). At the end of this book, several concepts are explained in the form of prayers, each one beginning with the words, "O, my God." The Rebbe showed me the book and told me to read it. He was showing me: "See how this author makes many concepts from his expositions into prayers." He hinted that he would like the same done with his holy teachings, to make all his teachings into prayers. As in the case of many other important things, the Rebbe never came out explicitly, but only hinted at what he wanted. He would hint at the weightiest matters in the most trivial manner. There are accusing forces on high that can set up many barriers. It was for this and other reasons that the Rebbe found it difficult to reveal his wishes directly. Therefore, he made use of wondrous allusions that a person could understand on his own if he wanted to. And this includes wondrous matters of the Rebbe's dealings with me, that cannot be explained. The Rebbe also said that when you take a teaching and make it into a prayer, it causes great delight on high, the likes of which have never ascended before God since the day of creation. This is also published in the introduction to the prayers. (*Sichot ha-Ran* 145)

Rabbi Nachman had a very deep desire for his teachings to be made into prayers, and he was pleased by a book that was written in that style, *Yad Ketana*. Rabbi Natan understood this and fulfilled his wish.

Rabbi Nachman himself, as Rabbi Natan describes, alludes in his teachings to great things that someone who is engaged in study can understand on his own. In so doing, he walks in the ways of God, as we saw above from *Likkutei Moharan*: "The wise person who desires truth, God will lead on the path of truth, and he will understand on his own one thing from another."

**Making Teachings Out of Prayers**

We will now see the movement in the opposite direction: from prayer to teaching.

To achieve this, to be able to distinguish, separate and eliminate the bad from the good, one must engage in Torah and prayer. This Torah study should be delving into the depths of the law, i.e., studying the codifiers. For good and bad are connected to the Torah. They are attached through the aspects of forbidden and permitted, impure and pure, kosher and unkosher, which appear in the Torah. And as long as one does not clarify the law, good and bad are mixed, and therefore he is unable to separate and eliminate the bad from the good – in the manner of (*Mishlei* 11:27): "He who seeks bad, it will come to him." Only once he delves into and clarifies the law in practice, and determines the permitted, the kosher and the pure, i.e., by studying the codifiers, can he separate the bad from the good. However, being worthy of the intellect necessary for delving into the depths of the law only comes through prayer, because it is from there that the intellect is drawn. (*Likkutei Moharan* 8)

Usually, when a person wants to study a particular passage, he directs most of his energies to concentration and intellectual effort. Even if one thinks to pray before studying, the prayer will be like the blessing of "*chonen ha-da'at*," asking for help to be able to understand the material. We also recite *birkhot ha-Torah*, which express our recognition of God as the one on whom our study depends, but the simple request is still to be granted reason and understanding. However, according to Rabbi Nachman, prayer is required "because it is from there that the intellect is drawn." Torah study is not exclusively an intellectual act; it is rather a renewed attachment to the Divine source, which requires the person to open his heart. The opening of the heart is done through the channel of prayer.

What we have here is a far-reaching statement about the hierarchy between the Torah and prayer. "The Torah is called a garden… What makes them [Jewish souls, compared to grasses] grow? They draw from the fountain, which is wisdom… From where do they receive the wisdom and intellect, this fountain? It comes from prayer" (*Likkutei Moharan* ibid.). The Torah comes from wisdom, and wisdom comes from prayer. While this is not the only aspect of the relationship between the Torah and prayer, it is still an exceedingly significant statement: Torah depends on prayer.

Rabbi Nachman deals a lot with the human soul and is aware of its various channels; from this understanding, he also provides guidance on how to pass from one channel to another – and not only regarding prayer. For example, it was also important to him to make advice out of his teachings, as is evident in the book *Likkutei Eitzot*. A person approaches the study of the Torah with the intention of understanding, while advice is directed in its formulation and content toward action. The ability to move from channel to channel in the soul, not only between Torah and prayer, is an important tool for Rabbi Nachman.

(Translated by David Strauss)