YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #60: Summary (1)**

In the coming *shiurim*, I will try to summarize this year's study and the main approaches we have seen.

We began this year's study with an introduction to the foundations of the Ari's teachings about prayer. In general, the Ari continues the basic approach of the earlier kabbalists, who teach about the Divine worlds that are above our world and that man can influence these worlds through prayer. The Ari, however, greatly develops this dimension in several aspects, and also adds unique elements.

First, the Ari attaches supreme importance to the details of the words and letters that make up prayer. He breaks down each sentence, revealing complete spiritual processes in it. This can be compared to the science of physics, which breaks down the matter visible to our eyes into molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, quarks, and more. Furthermore, paraphrasing the ideathat "the Torah in its entirety is comprised of the names of God" (*Zohar Yitro* 87a), we can say that according to the Ari, prayer in its entirety is comprised of the names of God. Anyone who looks at a *siddur* designed for prayer with the *kavanot* (intentions) of the Ari will find a thick volume, full of pages in which the names of God are printed in a variety of ways and forms.

We also saw that, according to the Ari, two significant processes occur during prayer and outline its course: the raising of the worlds and the clarification of sparks. Let us review the concise formulation of the "Nazir," Rabbi David Cohen:

The worlds must be raised from below upwards, so that the lower world will be connected to the world above it, to the point that all of the worlds together will be connected to the world of Emanation, when the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer is recited while standing, and afterwards they must be lowered from above downwards.

Every day, from the beginning of the prayer service to *Barukh She'amar* is the world of Action. And from *Barukh She'amar* to *Yotzer Or* is the world of Formation. And from *Yotzer Or* to the *Shemoneh Esrei* is the world of Creation. And the entire *Amida* prayer is the world of Emanation. (*Kol Ha-Nevu'a*, p. 241, chapter 71)

A person must serve and repair the world through deeds and speech. This service is prayer, for the repair of the world. Every day and in every prayer, new matters are clarified, matters which had not been clarified before. (Ibid. p. 240, chapter 69)

The idea of the raising of the worlds is that the worlds of Creation, Formation, and Action ascend to the world of Emanation over the course of the various parts of prayer, and then return to their place. The idea of the clarification of sparks is that sparks of holiness that fell into the world of impurity when the vessels shattered become clarified and rise up again to holiness. This process is central to the repair of the worlds, according to the Ari, and a significant part of this service takes place every day through prayer.

The prayer of the Ari is the prayer of a kabbalist, and as such, it deals with what is happening in the upper worlds. Furthermore, prayer according to the Ari’s Kabbala is the most complicated of all the kabbalists, and only the most virtuous individuals reach the level at which such prayer can be offered. This notwithstanding, the Ari's teachings about prayer had a great influence on many currents that came after him, even though many of these currents were more interested in what was happening inside man himself and in his world.

In the course of our study, we saw that the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch, followed by different branches of Chassidism, as well as Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin and Rabbi Kook, all dealt in one way or another with these foundations from the Ari, giving them additional dimensions of meaning as well. Thus, although none sufficed with simply explaining the Ari’s principles, the Ari had a great influence on the world of prayer in the streams that followed him.

In the first stage of this summary, we will review the general nature of prayer, according to the thinkers who came after the Ari and whose teachings we studied. In the next stage, we will deal specifically with the raising of the worlds and the clarification of sparks (including the issue of the raising of foreign thoughts that developed from it) and summarize the way in which those who followed the Ari explained them.

**Prayer in the early days of Chassidism (the Besht and the Maggid of Mezeritch) – Devotion, self-effacement, and the letters**

The most fundamental Chassidic principle is that "the entire world is filled with His glory," or, put differently, "no place is void of Him." Prayer in the early period of Chassidism removes a person from his personal needs to an abstract and more alive plane, which belongs to the encounter with the Divine presence. In doing so, it in effect peels off an outer layer of reality, revealing part of the world's inner essence.

The fact that the Divine presence fills reality gives rise to the highest Chassidic ideal – the ideal of *deveikut* (devotion) – and it shapes the nature of prayer. According to the Baal Shem Tov, prayer gives rise to a revolution in one’s consciousness and brings a person to a state of *deveikut* that involves the loss of one's physical senses. This also requires being drawn to prayer with all one's capabilities. For the Maggid, his disciple, prayer of *deveikut* takes on a more prominent character of striving to nullify the self.

A clearer expression of the principle of the Divine presence appears in the Baal Shem Tov's assertion that prayer is directed to a level at which the *Shekhina* speaks from a person's mouth – in the sense of, "O Lord, open my lips." This brings the nullification of the self even deeper, to the extent that the prayer is spoken through the person rather than being recited by him.

Another guideline found in the words of the Besht is that the words a person recites in prayer will illuminate. This principle as well relates to the revelation of God in prayer: when a person prays, he does not utter content, but light. He expresses spiritual illumination, revealing the Divine presence.

This guideline, which moves us from the plane of the visible content of the sentences of prayer to the light that they contain, is an opening to a more significant process the Besht teaches about: the breaking down of prayer’s sentences into their constituent words and letters. This process leads to a completely different type of prayer – gradually moving towards the dimension of Divine energy that is found in the letters. Typically, letters are seen as symbols that, when joined together in the agreed-upon ways, create meaningful combinations. The Besht, however, instructs us to break the words down into letters in order to emphasize their inner depth. This, again, is similar to the relationship between an object and the atoms of which it is comprised; when you look at any physical object, and move on to relate to its atomic structure, the particles that make up the object have a much more powerful energy.

The soul is able to look at prayer in this way, such that prayer takes on a completely different quality, which belongs to another dimension. When you break a word down into its letters, and discover the Divine light behind it, you reveal more of the Divine. Joining the letters to form a sentence gives them a certain intention, but also constricts them, whereas disassembling the words strips them and reveals the light in them. The letters are a way out of the limited frames of the content, out of finite human meanings, into the infinite world. Every letter is light. It is a gateway to speaking in a more abstract and internal language, in the language of the heart and soul.

Prayer at the level of the letters opens up a realm of a full spiritual ladder: "For in every letter there are worlds, souls, and divinity, that rise up and interconnect and cleave to one another. Afterwards, these letters connect and conjoin, finally becoming a word. After that, they connect and unify unifications of truth in the Divine."[[1]](#footnote-1) The movement on the ladder of worlds-souls-Divine begins in the physical world with all that is contained therein, progresses inward to the souls, which are the spiritual essences, and in that way reveals the Divine presence.

While the Ari also broke down the sentences of prayer into words and letters, there is a significant difference between the Ari and the Besht. With the Ari, the precise Divine names that are hidden in the words are revealed, as are the precise processes that occur with the appearance of these names. With the Baal Shem Tov, the charges found in the words and letters themselves are revealed, without being transformed into Divine names or precise processes. With the Ari, the transition is from earthly meaning to Divine meaning, whereas with the Baal Shem Tov, the transition is from meaning at all to the light beyond meaning.

**Prayer in the Tanya – Service of contemplation and moments of righteousness reached by a *Beinoni* [Average person]**

From here we moved on to examine the *Tanya*. Let us begin with the fundamentals of the book and then consider their significance with respect to prayer. The *Tanya* teaches that there are two souls in man, one Divine and one animal. The Divine service of an average person, a *beinoni*, involves subjugating his animal soul to his Divine soul, and it is performed through contemplating the greatness of God; this can arouse the love of God in the person’s heart, to the extent that it spreads and compels the animal soul in him to do God's will. In the *beinoni*, the war is constant. He is destined to always struggle, but manages to overcome his lower impulses. The level of the *tzaddik*, in contrast, is not a matter of compulsion but of transformation. The evil within him has already been transformed into good, his impulses are already nullified, and there is no more war within him.

There is a special value to the Divine service of the *beinoni*, who succeeds in overcoming his impulses and serving God with love and reverence. It expresses the fact that the world was created – according to the *Tanya* – because God desires to live in the lower world. In certain respects, it is the successful struggle of the *beinoni* that brings about greater revelation of the Divine presence in the world.

The service of the *beinoni* is based on the fact that "the mind rules over the heart" (*Likkutei Amarim* 12). Contemplation of the greatness of God, through man's powers of spiritual cognition – *chokhma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding), and *da'at* (knowledge) – generates the attributes of love and reverence, which fill the heart with a desire to serve Him and result in the success of the Divine soul in its struggle to overcome the animal soul.

Here we come to the service of prayer. Even the *beinoni* has situations in which the struggle is completely decided, similar to the level of the *tzaddik*: in the recitation of *Shema* and in the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer that follows. The recitation of *Shema* involves deep contemplation of the greatness of God; it is the moment when a person takes upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven ("Hear, O Israel...") and arrives at the love of God ("You shall love the Lord your God..."). From this contemplation, the *beinoni* can awaken his soul to the love of God, so that the animal soul will be subjugated before it at least temporarily. The moments of reciting the *Shema* are among the peak moments of the *beinoni*, in which he tastes something of the level above him – the level of the *tzaddik*. Prayer does leave an impression, but after the prayer, the animal soul reawakens and the person returns to the level of the *beinoni*.

**Prayer in the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* – Prayer as a divine need**

Opposite the development of the Chassidic movement came that of the *Mitnagdim,* a movement that receives its conceptual formulation from Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin in his book *Nefesh Ha-Chaim.* The fundamental point with which *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* opens is that man was created in the image of God. He goes on to explain that this means man controls and influences the upper worlds. God created the world in such a way that all the higher forces are influenced by and dependent upon the actions of man's *mitzvot*. Man is the principal creation, and through his actions, he allows Divine revelation to connect with the worlds and Divine abundance to manifest. This principle is referred to by the early kabbalists as “service as a Divine need." (Alongside this, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* emphasizes that unlike Divine revelation, the Divine essence is certainly not affected by human actions at all; service is for the need of God's revelation, not any need of His essence.)

This dictates man's destiny-role. Man is meant to be like a loyal soldier who executes the tasks assigned to him for the integrity of the king's kingdom. His goal goes beyond concern for himself, to responsibility for the entire world – and this is also the measure of the power of his influence.

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* explains at the beginning that this is the meaning of the commandments and the blessings (which contain praise and thanksgiving that reveal the name of God). Later, he asserts that this is also the meaning of the *Amida* prayer, even though the plain sense of its text relates to the individual's personal requests. According to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, the text of the prayer should not be understood in accordance with its plain sense; a person who is engaged in prayer should not be petitioning for his personal needs, but should be engaged in prayer as a Divine need.

He adduces proof for this contention from the Rosh Ha-shanaliturgy, which deals entirely with the kingdom of God and which, according to the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, serves as a prototype for all other prayers – even though they do not seem, according to their plain sense, to follow that model.

The *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* brings another proof from *Chazal*’s statementthat the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer corresponds to the daily offerings brought in the Temple. A sacrifice is an act of our giving to God, and in order to liken prayer to an offering, we must say that prayer as well involves giving to God. This can be understood if prayer is meant to fulfill a Divine need. In light of this, the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* comes to a far-reaching conclusion: our prayers should not be directed at all toward our personal needs.

But here a difficult problem arises. How can we concentrate on the words of our prayers without thinking about the needs those words relate to? This question brings the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* to another far-reaching determination: The *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer is indeed worded in a way that looks like personal requests, but really, the members of the Great Assembly planted deep mysteries within the text. According to their plain meaning, the words of the prayer deal with the needs of the individual, but in the esoteric dimension, they generate influence on spiritual reality, and direct the person’s actions to Divine needs. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin instructs one (based on his interpretation of ancient sources) "to be careful of thinking any thought during prayer, even related to Torah and *mitzvot*, other than the words of the prayer themselves." He demands that one think about the words of the prayer themselves, word for word, and not about their meaning. The prayer is, in a sense, a code that the members of the Great Assembly hid behind familiar words. It is not within our power to understand the code, but only to be careful to say it. There is a fascinating similarity between the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* and the Besht, with respect to breaking down the sentences of prayer from their plain meaning and the transition to the raw materials provided by the words and letters. Alongside the similarity, however, the reasons and goals that lead to this are very different, and thus the meaning is different as well.

In light of this, the intention and spiritual engagement in prayer are directed not to the content of the words, but to the soul’s connection through them to their supernal source, out of a desire to fulfill its mission of repairing the worlds. Prayer engenders liberation from this world and expresses dedication to a Divine need. Chassidism also speaks about the soul's involvement in prayer, but there the goal is to remove the barriers of the world and to be nullified before God. With the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim,* man is supposed to stand and serve before God. The Maggid of Mezeritch often uses the parable of the love between a son and his father. For the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim*, love is a soldier's devotion to his king. Devotion for the *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* becomes devotion to the task and to the One who assigned it.

We will continue our review in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See *shiur* #34 in this series [here](https://etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/baal-shem-tov-1-foundations-prayer) for the source and context of this quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)