**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #39: Prayer**

**Prayer as Divine Service**

The service of God – service in general, and “service of the heart” (prayer) in particular – is a great and holy goal.[[1]](#footnote-1) Prayer as Divine service is in some ways even greater than Torah. A teaching cited in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov attributes a special status to prayer:

The soul told the rabbi [the Ba’al Shem Tov] that the fact that supernal matters had been revealed to him was not because of his extensive study of Talmud and the *poskim*, but rather by virtue of prayer, for he always prayed with concentration and devotion, and this is what made him worthy of that supernal level.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This suggests that the greatness of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his unique religious path, by virtue of which he merited Divine revelations, were related to his prayer, rather than to his Torah study. This statement holds prayer, with its power of bringing a person to the highest levels of spiritual insight, above Torah study. While this might not be true of people in general, it was true of the Ba’al Shem Tov, as evidenced by the countless stories and teachings surrounding his special manner of praying.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This in no way diminishes the importance of Torah study, as R. Kalonymus takes pains to emphasize: “Regular Torah study is exceedingly great.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Rather, it highlights the value of prayer.

Despite the greatness and importance of the service of prayer, R. Kalonymus acknolwedges that it is not easy to achieve. The fact that prayer occupied such a central place in *chassidut* necessitated grappling with the great difficulty of carrying out this service and praying properly. Addressing the young Torah scholar, R. Kalonymus demands an honest approach that addresses the challenge, rather than self-deception:

The service of prayer is difficult, and it is not so easy to attain, so how can you think that you are already a *chassid* and that you already pray with fervor? Right now there is no one who can see you, and you need have no shame before yourself. We shall not speak here of the lifeless prayers in which you have not an ounce of intention behind a single word that your mouth utters, [those prayers in which] you do not even remember that you are standing before God, calling upon Him and uttering supplications while your heart is far from Him – and indeed, even from yourself. There are prayers during which, almost from beginning to end, your mind is full of the most meaningless and nonsensical thoughts, and sometimes a thought that is truly reprehensible is drawn along with them. We need not make an accounting of you, for you can see for yourself their value and your own value next to them. [Rather,] we wish to speak here of your better prayers, the prayers concerning which you erroneously claim, “I prayed with fervor; I am a *chassid*.” It is of these that we shall speak; it is these that we shall focus on.

Look well within yourself: Is it true that you are passionate about the prayer and the *mitzva*, or is it simply a matter of you wanting to force yourself into fervor, while in fact there is no energy, no fire? Perhaps even you yourself are not in touch with what is happening inside you, and for this reason you are mistaken in saying, “I am filled with passion…”[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus goes on to peel away more of the layers hiding the simple, painful truth that a person desires to pray but is unable to. He is continually distracted by extraneous thoughts, and feels as though a stone weighs down on his heart:

You want to pray like a *chassid*, to destroy within you all other thoughts for the duration of that time, and to truly pray before God; you desire to express your prayer. If only you were able to express what is in your heart towards God, and you even resolve to pray with fervor… but when you actually approach the task, it is as if a stone rests upon your heart.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the manner of the chassidic masters, R. Kalonymus does not simply point out the difficulties, but also suggests techniques for overcoming them. He describes two main steps on the ladder of prayer, corresponding to the two-stage aspiration set forth in *Tehillim* 34:15: “Turn from evil and do good.” The first stage is to achieve purity of mind – clearing one’s consciousness of extraneous thoughts. The next stage is to reveal the spark of the Divine Presence that exists within oneself and to delve deeply into the service of prayer. We will examine this process in greater detail below.

The service of prayer represents a major topic in R. Kalonymus’s teachings, and the scope of our discussion does not allow for comprehensive treatment of all its aspects and details. We will explore some selected elements relating to the period before prayer, during prayer, and afterwards.

**Prior to Prayer**

**Quieting Extraneous Thoughts**

As noted, it is not easy to attain and maintain concentration before and during prayer. R. Kalonymus suggests a way of dealing with inner noise. His approach is revealed in the testimony of a *chassid* who appears to have been a scholar who was close to the Rebbe. This *chassid* offers an unmediated description of how R. Kalonymus conveyed his advice to his *chassidim*. Owing to the importance of this account, we quote it in full:

In the year 5696 or 5697, when I learned together with friend, the dear scholar Yissakhar Nachman Zev, may God avenge his blood, we merited, with the help of the blessed God, to be called into the Rebbe’s room, by the merit of the aforementioned scholar, for it seems that the Rebbe viewed our study partnership with favor, and so when he called him, I too was invited. It was then that I heard for the first time about the matter of quieting. But unfortunately I do not remember the matter in its entirety; I write here only what I can recall.

Our Rebbe and teacher, of blessed memory, opened with the teaching of *Chazal* (*Berakhot* 57b) that a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy. As we know from the Rebbe’s books, he held that a person’s being resists inspiration from on High, and while one’s mind and thoughts are active it is difficult for him to experience such inspiration. While he is asleep and his mind and thoughts are quiet, and he is engaging in no thinking of his own, then Heavenly inspiration may come to him. This is the matter of “one single dream,” etc. We also know of the Rebbe’s teaching that one is spiritually aroused to a greater extent by prayer than one is by Torah [study], for in [studying] Torah one’s self is more actively involved: I study, I think. In prayer, the opposite is true: The whole idea there is self-nullification. But when a person is sleeping, he cannot be wanting anything, for he is asleep. Thus, the aim is to try when possible while he is awake to strive for a state of “sleep” – i.e., to quiet the thoughts and wants that swirl endlessly within him. For this is the way of the mind: Thoughts are entangled with each other and it is difficult for a person to extricate himself from them. (As I merited to hear from our holy Rebbe and teacher: If a person were to examine all his thoughts of even one day, he would see that there is little distinction betweeh him and a madman. The only difference is that the madman acts to bring his thoughts to fruition! But the thoughts themselves, in his own mind, are just like those of the madman.) And so he offered practical advice for quieting the mind.

He said that a person should start by contemplating his thoughts for a short while, a few moments – i.e., ‘What am I thinking?’ – and then he will slowly feel his mind emptying and his thoughts halting their constant rushing. Then he should start to say a single verse, such as, “The Lord your God, true…” in order to now connect his head, which is clear of other thoughts, with a single thought of holiness. Thereafter, he will already be able to ask for his needs, to the extent to which he needs to improve himself by strengthening his faith or his love or fear of God. And I merited to hear from him at that time a gentle manner of strengthening one’s faith. He said, in his holy manner, “I believe with complete faith that the Creator is the only being in the world, and there is nothing that exists besides Him. And the whole world, and all that is in it, is merely a manifestation of God’s light.” He repeated this a few times, not vehemently – for the whole point is to quiet one’s thoughts, and speaking with intensity can only awaken one’s active thinking – but rather very softly. I also merited to hear about love [of God], and these were his holy words: “I would greatly want to be close to the blessed God; I would greatly want to feel closeness to the great Creator.” And he said that this manner of quieting can be applied in repairing all negative traits – but not in a negative way, only in a positive way, via the opposite of the negative trait. For instance, a person who suffers from laziness should not speak of removing laziness, but rather of acquiring alacrity. He explained this by saying that we see for ourselves that if a toddler is crying and we tell him not to cry, the more we talk to him the more he cries. One can also quiet one’s thoughts by focusing on the hour hand of a clock, whose movement is so slow as to be imperceptible; this also calms a person’s wants and thoughts. After the quieting, which is a necessary precondition for any sort of Heavenly inspiration, he instructed to chant the verse, “Teach me, Lord, Your ways…,” to the Rebbe’s special tune.

How pleasant and, at the same time, how awesome was the spectacle that I merited to watch and hear thanks to my friend! The Rebbe elaborated at length on this matter and said that he was certain that it would be of great benefit. He spoke likewise about faith, saying that after using a quieting technique for a few weeks, when a person said, “This is my God and I shall glorify Him,” it would be like pointing with one’s finger, and just as it is all described in the *midrash*. We were not able the first time to grasp even an inkling of what our master and teacher was saying, but some time later God granted us a second opportunity to hear this from his holy mouth, with additional explanation, and he exhorted us greatly to implement this advice.[[7]](#footnote-7)

We can broaden our perspective on the question of the proper attitude towards extraneous thoughts and working on one’s thoughts by looking at some of the teachings that preceded R. Kalonymus. This will help to highlight his innovative contribution with regard to quieting.

A person’s head is usually filled with a stream of thoughts that include everyday concerns, memories, thoughts arising from scenes that one has witnessed, and more. The expression “*machshavot zarot*” (extraneous thoughts), referring to thoughts not related to the realm of holiness and prayer, is commonly used in chassidic literature to express the difficulty in attaining a clear, pure, undisturbed consciousness that is directed completely to the service of God. However, the challenge involved in prayer was not first discussed in *chassidut*. The Sages describe their own difficulties in concentrating during prayer, owing to the endless stream of thoughts:

R. Chiya the Great said: All my days I never concentrated [properly] on my prayer. One time I wanted to concentrate, and I meditated and said, “Who goes up first before the king – the Arkafta or the Exilarch?” Shmuel said: I count the birds/clouds [to help induce the proper state of mind]. R. Bun bar Chiya said: I count rows of tiles [in the ceiling]. R. Matanya said: I count myself lucky, for when I reach *Modim* [the eighteenth blessing, Thanksgiving], I bow instinctively.” (Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 5a).

R. Chiya claims that he never in his life concentrated properly on his prayer. Once he tried to focus, and the thought that arose within him was the question of who enters first before the king – the Arkafta (a high dignitary in Persia) or the Exilarch, who is subservient to him. In other words, during his prayer he is distracted by thoughts about the ceremonial order in the king’s palace. Shmuel testifies that he counted birds as a way of focusing his mind; R. Bun bar Chiya counted the tiles in the ceiling of the synagogue. R. Matanya is grateful to his head, which automatically causes him to bow when he reaches the *Modim* blessing, even when he is not concentrating. All in all, this is a most surprising *gemara*. Some suggest that it is not to be understood literally, for how can we possibly suggest that the greatest of the *Amora’im* did not concentrate in their prayer? Thus, R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin, for example, explains that R. Chiya had no need to focus at all, “since he was thus in his entirety, and every word that he spoke, even without him meaning it, was prayer.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Even his supposedly “extraneous thoughts” would have been part of his continuous prayer, for in truth his focus never moved from God. In a different version of his interpretation, R. Tzadok teaches that if a person projects his entire experience onto God, directing all his speech and all his actions towards Him and knowing with all his being that everything has its source in God, aside from Whom nothing else exists, then this focus is sufficient; there is no need to direct the mind beyond this:

“All my days I never concentrated…” – For when a person has such a clear consciousness [of God] – an all-encompassing consciousness that extends to all his thoughts, all his speech, and all his actions, even his everyday conversations, that all is from God alone and that there is none but Him – then it makes no difference in terms of his focus whether he makes an effort to concentrate on this or on that. He simply attributes everything to God and exerts himself in the principal focus of “I have set the Lord before me always” – before me, literally.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the plain meaning of the *gemara*, which suggests that achieving concentration in prayer is difficult because of the unsettled state of the human consciousness. R. Tzadok addresses this difficulty in another interpretation that he gives for the same *gemara*: “‘All my days I never concentrated…’ – for concern is the opposite of concentration… and therefore it is impossible to achieve complete conentration in this world at all.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Indeed, it is very difficult to achieve and maintain a pure consciousness that is devoid of any concerns or distractions. R. Yaakov ben Ha-Rosh describes how a person should prepare himself for prayer in such a way that he achieves a pure consciousness:

A person at prayer must direct his heart, as it is written, “You will direct their heart; You will cause Your ear to attend” (*Tehillim* 10:17) – meaning that one must concentrate on the meaning of the words that he utters and imagine that the Divine Presence is before him, as it is written, “I have set the Lord before me always.” And he must arouse his concentration and remove all thoughts that disturb him, until his mind and his focus are purely on his prayer. He should think that if he were speaking before a mortal king, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, he would order his words and concentrate well on them, lest he stumble. How much more, then, must he take care before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, and focus even his thoughts, for before Him thought is like speech, for He knows all thoughts. And thus the pious and distinguished ones would meditate and focus on their prayer, to the point that they achieved separation from their material state and predominance of the spirit of the intellect, such that they came close to the level of prophecy. And if any other thought comes to him during his prayer, he should remain silent until the thought disappears.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Although R. Yaakov emphasizes the importance of removing extranous thoughts, it is not clear from his words how one is to go about doing this. Perhaps he means for a person to persuade himself, as the continuation of his words seems to suggest. A person must tell himself, “If I were going to speak with the king, I would certainly take care with my words.” This will cause him to try his best to pray in exact accordance with the words of the prayer, and if any thought comes to his mind that is not related to his prayer, he must stop and wait until it passes. Attention should be paid to the words, “And thus the pious and distinguished ones would meditate…” Those who managed to clear their thoughts during prayer and to concentrate properly merited to achieve a level that was “close to prophecy.” Purity and clarity of thought is a precondition to achieving prophetic inspiration.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sefer *Tzva’at Ha-Ribash* (Kehat edition, Brooklyn, 5758), p. 41; *Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5767), Introduction, p. 57; M. Idel, *Ha-Chassidut Bein Ekstaza Le-Magia* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5761), pp. 379-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (A. Rubinstein edition, Jerusalem, 5752, pp. 86-94), as well as the many traditions documented in the section *Amud Ha-Tefila* in *Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* (ibid.), *Parshat Noach*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, pp. 450-451. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Dover Tzedek* (Bnei Brak, 5733), *Acharei Mot* #4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Resisei Layla* (Bnei Brak, 5727), #31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., #1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tur, *Orach Chaim* 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)