**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #41: Prayer (continued)**

**Discovering the Divine Presence within Oneself**

A person’s ability to pray rests on the knowledge that a spark of the Divine Presence resides within every Jewish soul. Before praying, this spark must be revealed:

This is the entirety of our ability to pray to God – the fact that the blessed God is within us, at all times.

When a Jew is ready to pray he must first reveal the manifestation of the Divine Presence that descends upon us, in [its] exile, and is to be found within ourselves, but is covered with external trappings. One locates and reveals it through one’s prayer, as encapsulated in the words, “From the depths I call out to You, Lord…” … Through the Divinity that one reveals within himself [in this lower world], he prays to God, and then the prayer that he utters is – as *Kedushat Levi* writes[[1]](#footnote-1) concerning the verse, “And He called: The Lord, the Lord…” (*Shemot* 34:6) – [as it were] like the blessed God calling to Himself…

Prayer is man’s perfection of himself, and through prayer he reveals the Divinity within himself, and it is with this Divinity that he prays…[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is a central teaching of Chassidism that the Divine Presence is not transcendant but also immanent and part of the world, and as such is manifest also in the innermost essence of man.[[3]](#footnote-3) In addition, the soul is part of God,[[4]](#footnote-4) and as such it serves as the foundation for God’s presence within man. The first part of the necessary preparation for prayer is contemplation of one’s innermost essence and awareness of the Divine spark within him:

In truth, the essence of prayer is always only if God prays. As the *gemara* teaches, “How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays?”[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, in the prayer that a Jew utters, God is always also praying. For if this were not so, of what use would his prayer be, as the utterances of [mere] physical substance, in having any effect in the heavens and turning [Divine] anger to mercy? But the Divine spark that is within a person does not always engage in prayer. [It happens] only in someone who is closely bound up with his Divine essence, such that his body and soul are not two independently operating entities, like flatmates that share the same home but who are separate from and unrelated to one another; only when the body, too, yearns to be subservient to the soul, and the body is not moved by physical wants, but only by that which moves the soul. When this is the case, then when he is ready to pray, the Holy One, blessed be He, prays, as we have explained. “From the depths I call to You, O Lord…” – the words of the prayer are not my words; rather, they emerge from [the Divine spark that is in] my innermost depths.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This is a wondrous concept. It seems that a person simply needs to be awakened to and aware of the fact that Divinity speaks out from his midst; his “I” is, in fact, the Divine Presence that prays within him.[[7]](#footnote-7) A similar idea is expressed by early Chassidic masters, such as R. Yissakhar Ber of Zlotshov:

“And Yehuda drew close to him and he said, ‘I pray you, my master…’”: This may be understood in terms of an interpretation of the words of the prayer on Shabbat, “There is none comparable to You and there is none but You” (*ein arukh lekha ve-ein zulatekha*). We find in the *gemara*, “A person prays only if he makes himself as naught” – i.e., that he thinks about the greatness of the Creator and His exaltedness, that there is no place that is devoid of Him, and all is Divinity, and that other than Him there is nothing. Any person who wishes to pray with this in mind and to first think about the greatness of the Creator finds that right from the start, as he starts to think about the greatness of the Creator, he is struck by tremendous awe, and he says to himself, “Who am I, miserable and despicable mortal that I am, a putrid drop, to pray before such a great, elevated and exalted King?” But afterwards, when he thinks further about the greatness of the Creator and understands that there is no place that is devoid of Him – and that even he himself is part of God’s Divinity – then he prays with great fervor, seeking to cleave to his [Divine] root, assuring himself, “I myself, too, am [part of] Divinity.” And this is the meaning of the words, “There is none comparable to You”: There is no-one that can be measured against Your greatness; all creatures are lowly in comparison and unworthy of offering You praise and exaltation. But afterwards he says, “There is none but You” – for there is no place that is devoid of Him, and he himself, too, is part of Divinity and worthy of cleaving to the blessed God. And this is the meaning of, “And Yehuda drew close to him” – at a time when a man of Yehuda [i.e., a Jew] approaches to pray before God, “and he said” – i.e., he thinks to himself. And he must consider the fact that “there is no place that is devoid of Him,” such that “*bi adoni*” [interpreted to mean “my Master is within me”) – i.e., within me, too, there is a part of Divinity. And then he is able to pray. Understand this.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A sense of God’s presence within man and his aspiration to pray and to cleave to his supreme Source is something that the soul years for; it is a revelation of the Divine Presence in one’s midst. This awareness brings a person to a state of intense fervor.

Indeed, chassidic teachings offer various formulations of this sort of Divine service. One variation, which is oriented to individuals of superlative standing who achieve a very high level of self-nullification and thus become vessels for revelation of God’s word praying from within them, is offered by R. Uziel Meizlish. He describes the chassidic fraternity as a society of prophets over whom God’s spirit hovers and from whose throats the Divine Presence speaks:

We know concerning Moshe Rabbeinu that the Divine Presence would speak from his throat. And although no [prophet as great as] Moshe has arisen [since], there have been some people who merit this level of having His powerful Presence give praise from their throats. And this may be what *Chazal* mean when they say, “From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays…” For this is called, “the high praises of God in their throat” (*Tehillim* 149:6). Meaning, that the exaltation of the Divine Presence is in their throats – that His powerful Presence speaks, as it were, from the throats of the righteous, and then “a double-edged (*pifiyot –* literally, ‘with two mouths’) sword in their hand.”… This is the meaning of, “My Lord, open my lips…” – for one who merits this level is a person who is but a channel into whom words pour from on High, and the person merely opens his mouth…

This is the meaning of the verse, “The Song of songs which is unto Shelomo.| It means that this song is holy of holies unto Shelomo – the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself. Meaning that His powerful Presence itself speaks and sings from the throat of the *tzaddik*. And in the same manner, he concludes, “Let Him kiss me…” – meaning that this is achieved through the Holy One, blessed be He, joining Himself to his mouth in this lower world, from His mouth in the upper world…[[9]](#footnote-9)

In this description, a person is like a prophet, serving merely as a channel to carry God’s word. Here, God is in fact the subject Who is praying, rather than man. At the same time, it is clear that this level cannot be achieved by everyone. It is a special level reserved for *tzaddikim* who nullify themsleves before God.

We find a different situation in which a person is a partner in the Divine prayer described by R. Shelomo of Radomsk:

This is also the meaning of the *gemara*: “From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays? As it is written, ‘And I shall cause them to rejoice in the House of My prayer.’ It does not say ‘their prayer,’ but rather ‘My prayer’” (*Berakhot* 7a), for this is also the measure of prayer that is desirable: [the question of] if the Holy One, blessed be He, is also praying, as it were. And this is why it says, “It does not say, The house of their prayer” – unless it is also “the House of My prayer,” as it is written, “The word of the Lord tested him (*tzerafat-hu*) (or ‘joined him’)” (*Tehillim* 105:19). Meaning that when his prayer joins with (*tzeruf im*) the word of the blessed God, his prayer is heard. And this is the meaning of the verses, “And Moshe cried out to the Lord, saying” (*Shemot* 8:8); “And I pleaded to the Lord at that time, saying” (*Devarim* 3:23) – in other words, the Holy One, blessed be He, said this, and then his prayer was accepted.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In this situation, a person stands in prayer **together** with the Holy One, blessed be He; it is not a state of complete self-nullification as described by R. Uziel.

To which description, then, is R. Kalonymus referring? Does he have in mind a state of complete self-nullification before God, such that it is in fact God alone Who is praying, as described by R. Uziel, or does he refer to the sort of prayer described by R. Shlomo of Radomsk, in which man and God are “partners”? Although there are conceptual similarities with both teachings, I believe that R. Kalonymus presents a third model: not God alone praying from within the person, and not the person praying in partnership with God, but rather a person praying with God’s help: “With [the aid of] the Divinity that is revealed within him, he prays to God.”

Let us consider this option more closely.

What is the meaning of God being within a person? How do we feel this? How do we go about revealing the Divinity within us? R. Kalonymus explains that one of the manifestations of the Divinity within us is the attributes – which are in fact the *sefirot* – that are imbedded in us, such as love and fear.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, in normal, day-to-day situations in which a person is occupied with his affairs, he is not aware of them, “and they are covered in the dust, and he treads upon them with trifling matters of no importance.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Awareness of these attributes is awareness of the Divine Presence within us. When when a person is about to sin and he feels a twinge of fear and says, “I hope no-one can see me,” according to the Ba’al Shem Tov, this represents a manifestation of his Divine spark, for God condenses the fear of Him within a person to this low level, in order to save him from sinning. The same applies also to God’s mercy; an awakening of love for God represents an awakening of the Divine impression of loving-kindness within him.

Before praying, a person has to make the proper preparations in order to reveal the Divine attributes that are imbedded within him and with the help of which he prays. The rungs of the ladder are ordered as follows: The first step is to separate oneself from the world and its affairs, and by clearing the consciousness one allows the Divine forces to start to become manifest. We discussed this stage at length under the heading of “quieting extraneous thoughts.” The second stage entails arousing the forces of love and fear that are within him:

Prior to prayer, one must separate oneself from the world and concentrate on the fact that he is now drawing near to speak with God, as it were. And when he separates himself from the world and its bustling, then the garments with which the Divine spark is clothed [within him] – his abilities, his thoughts, his desires, and all his actions – disappear, and the Divinity that is within them is revealed to the extent that he is now separated from the world and his closeness to God.

And while he prays, he must subjugate all his strength so that the love and fear [of God] can be active, and operate even through his physical facilities, in the sense that “Anyone who answers Amen with all his strength…”[[13]](#footnote-13)

R. Kalonymus also offers another piece of advice for helping a person to feel the Divine Presence within him. This Divinity is concealed by a person’s egocentrical needs: the need to make a living, the need for respect, and so on. Therefore, if one succeeds in halting the flow of such thoughts, he will discover within himself feelings of pure love and fear, whose source is in the world of *atzilut*. To this end, he needs to prepare himself through a period of waiting before prayer. In addition he should consider it his last day of living in the world.[[14]](#footnote-14) This will serve to arouse within oneself pure love and fear, which are a manifestation of Divinity, and with these he prays:

The following is also advice for how to achieve an awakening and revelation of the spark of Divinity that is within him, without arousing his own selfish needs, and going beyond the practice of waiting for a certain time before praying. For in truth there exists within every Jew, in all his affairs, a spark of the Divine, but a person conceals it with his thoughts and desires and all his occupations, such that even holiness – and even a holy attribute such as fear, when it is revealed to him through his occupations – appears in the form of fear that no-one should see him. If the person would spend a period of time blocking all his thoughts and wants, this spark of Divinity would appear to him without any garments. But since a person chases after his thoughts about what he will do tomorrow, how he will make money, and how he will gain honor, therefore his thoughts flow without interruption. And this is what the *mishna* means when it says, “And repent a day before you die” – that a person should think that, heaven forfend, he has no tomorrow, and he has no reason to think about tomorrow, and he should not let it disturb his thinking. Then pure love and fear, emanating from his *atzilut*, will be revealed to him.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The love and fear within a person are a manifestation of Divinity within him. In order for his prayer to rise up to the upper worlds, he must recognize these attributes and their Divine source. He makes use of them during prayer by arousing the love and fear within him. If he does this, then the force motivating his prayer is God, Who is revealed within him through His attributes, by means of which the person prays.

The following story that is told about the Ba’al Shem Tov highlights these attributes and their importance in having one’s prayer accepted in the upper worlds:

I heard that the holy Ba’al Shem Tov once came to the doorway of the *Beit Midrash*, and he stood and the doorway and did not wish to enter. They asked him why he did not wish to enter, and he answered that he could not, for [the place] was full of Torah and prayer. They continued to question him with great wonder, saying, “But surely if it is a holy place, which is full of Torah and prayer, then it is even more appropriate to enter it!” But then he opened their eyes to help them understand well what he meant: that is is not a virtue of a house of prayer that it be full of Torah and prayer, for this means that the Torah and prayer that those inside engaged in was not uttered with love and fear, and it did not rise up.[[16]](#footnote-16) Everything remained below, and it was for this reason that the place was full of Torah and prayer, from wall to wall, and there was no room to enter. If they had studied and prayed there with proper concentration and with the proper love and fear, then all the teachings and all the prayers would have ascended on High, and nothing would remain below, and then this house of holiness would be empty and there would be plenty of room to enter.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, *Kedushat Levi*, *Parashat Ki Tisa.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Nachman of Breslov writes: “For Israel are literally part of the supernal God; they are literally parts of the Divine Presence” (*Likkutei Moharan* [Jerusalem, 5753] *Kama*, *siman* 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, R. Chaim Vital writes: “Because man is created from both substance and form – i.e., psyche, spirit, and soul, which is part of God on High, as it is written, ‘And He breathed into his nostrils a living soul…’” (*Sha’ar Ruach Ha-Kodesh im Perush Yosef Da’at,* 9b). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Berakhot* 7a: “R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Yossi: From where do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays? It is written, ‘I shall bring them to My holy mountain and cause them to rejoice in the House of My prayer.’ The verse does not say ‘their prayer,’ but rather ‘My prayer’ – and hence we deduce that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*,266:“‘*Middaber*’ – meaning that the words emerge on their own, as in, ‘And he heard the voice speaking (*middaber*) to him from above the covering that was upon the Ark of Testimony, from between the two *keruvim*’ (*Bamidbar* 7:89).” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The following teaching is recorded in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov: “I heard from my teacher [the Ba’al Shem Tov] that the Divine Presence is called ‘prayer,’, as the verse states, ‘And I am prayer’” (*Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* [Jerusalem, 5767], #126). R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk writes: “‘I’ is the Divine Presence, which is called ‘I’…” (*No’am Elimelekh* [Jerusalem, 5752], *Parashat* *Vayeshev*). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Yissakhar of Zlotshov, *Mevasser Tzedek* (Berdichev, 5577), VIII 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Tiferet Uziel* (Williansburg, 5751), *Shir Ha-Shirim*. For more on the Divine word being revealed from within man as a sort of propecy, see R. Schatz, *Ha-Chassidut Ke-Mistika* (Jerusalem, 5748), 110-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Shelomo of Radomsk, *Tiferet Shelomo al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5728), *Parashat Vayera*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It is well known that *Chassidut* emphasized that the *sefirot* are not only to be found in the world of *atzilut*, but are also manifest in man’s psychic and physical build. See M. Idel, *Kabbalah: Hebetim Chadashim* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5753), pp. 161-168. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We have discussed a similar idea – imagining the day of one’s death – but there the purpose was different; the technique was not meant to be used as preparation for prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Tikkunei Zohar* (Jerusalem, 5746), *Tikkun* 10, 25b. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ba'al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah*, *Parashat* *Va’etchanan*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)