**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #42: Prayer (continued)**

**During Prayer**

**Praying with Fervor**

Prayer should be characterized by fervor (*hitpa’alut*), like a person who has some precious object presented to him or who meets his beloved son who he has not seen for a long time, and his excitement is such that he could forget to eat and drink and sleep during that time, since the dearness of his son affects him so deeply that his entire being, his psyche, and his spirit are secondary to it; even hunger fades into insignificance beside it.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, R. Kalonymus uses term “*hitlahavut*” (passion) to indicate a state in which one forgets one’s body and its needs. Indeed, it seems that he uses the terms “*hitpa’alut*” and “*hitlahavut*” interchangeably, for in his attempt to distinguish between them he writes:

Young scholar – we can offer you a yardstick by which to know, when you feel fervor, whether it is mere emotional intensity or whether it may properly be called passion (*hitlahavut*).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Thus, prayer requires emotional intensity, fervor, and passion. A person should savor the connection with God in prayer, which offers a taste of the Garden of Eden:

In a place of song of praise – there shall prayer be, for one cannot exist without the other. A Jew must feel the range of emotions and passions in his Torah and in his prayer, for any spiritual passion and pleasure that a Jew feels is like the sensation of pleasure of the Garden of Eden.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We earlier discussed at length the idea of serving God with fervor and passion, the necessity of these attributes, and why true chassidic Divine service is impossible without them. Thus, we can understand the importance of these inner movements (fervor, emotion, and passion) in prayer. Admittedly, R. Kalonymus’s intention is to broaden these movements to encompass observance of the other commandments a well, so that they exert their effect throughout a person’s day, but it is clear that in the realm of prayer, at least, they are simply indispensible.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The road to fervor in prayer starts with contemplating before Whom one stands and investing powerful thought in this meditation.[[5]](#footnote-5) In his sermon for *Parshat Noach* in the year 5690 (1929), R. Kalonymus draws a distinction between a person who thinks of prayer as a means for satisfying his needs and one who treasures the opportunity to draw close to God:

For a Jew – even a simple individual – when he prays to God for his needs and engages in powerful thought about how he is currently standing before God, Who holds the life of all the worlds in His hands and Who possesses the power and sovereignty to send salvation for all of his physical and spiritual needs, and how his own vitality, and that of the members of his household and of all of Israel, and all their other needs, are dependent on this moment as he stands in prayer and supplication before God – then he pours out his soul before God, such that he is altogether taken up in his fervor, and all his powers are subjugated and nullified before God.

And all the more so in the case of a person who has the heart and mind capable of fervor even when he is not asking for his needs, but merely declaring, “Blessed are You, O Lord…,” and who thinks, “How close I am to God right now,” such that he truly talks to God in the second person – “You.” And he feels that he has broken his way through all the worlds, all the barriers and curtains separating him, to arrive directly before God, and he now stands before His majestic holiness and His awesome majesty, declaring, “You, O Lord, are blessed.” How passionate and full of fervor he is in view of this! All his physical aspects are overridden, and he is completely subservient to God, from the radiance of His holiness that rests upon him.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Maggid of Mezeritch is well-known for his teaching that a person should not pray for his own needs (“like a dog that barks” for its needs to be met),[[7]](#footnote-7) but rather should pray for the rectification and restoration of the Divine Presence, which is a higher and more general need of all of Israel, and a *tikkun* of *atzilut*. In this teaching of R. Kalonymus, there is similarly a distinction between a “requesting” prayer, in which a person asks for what he wants and needs, and a prayer that does not “request,” but his perspective is different from that of the Maggid of Mezeritch. R. Kalonymus argues that one may arrive at a state of fervor even when asking for his own personal needs, which is quite legitimate. However, a person on a higher spiritual level is able to achieve fervor in his prayer even when he makes no physical or spiritual requests of God; the mere fact of standing before God arouses in him a powerful and meaningful sense of closeness to Him.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Signs**

R. Kalonymus offers the worshipper signs by means of which he can gauge whether he is indeed achieving passion and fervor in his prayer. The importance of these signs lies in the fact that a person can use them to measure his spiritual state, since spiritual service is like a ladder, and person who aspires to ascend this ladder should know where he stands.

It is possible to discern whether a person has reached the stage of “passion,” which is a higher level than emotional intensity (*hitragshut*). The sign of this transition is that one’s intensity is such that he can no longer maintain a state of cool detachment. This may be ascertained as follows:

Try to halt all movement. If you have indeed reached the level of *hitlahavut*, then your burning psyche will not allow you to rest; you will cry out, you will experience great longing, you will weep and you will rejoice… But if, when you desist from all movement, all is at rest, with no resistance and no emotion, just quiet and calm, and you would even be able to carry on a mundane conversation if you were not standing in prayer, this is a sign that your movements were forced and coerced, with no effect… for a young scholar *chassid* who prays with true emotion – when he suddenly halts, he should feel a pang in his heart caused by longing for God… no less than he longs for his parents or his children when he travels and is far removed from them.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Another sign that R. Kalonymus proposes is the length of the prayer in which the worshipper manages to maintain his state of intensity. He argues that only servants of God who are on a high spiritual level are able to maintain their passion throughout the prayer service. It is not something that anyone can achieve, certainly not someone who is only starting out on the path of Divine service. Even if one is able to concentrate on the meaning of the words throughout the prayer, he will not be able to maintain the same level of passion throughout; he will only feel it in certain parts of the prayer. By the end,

If it seems to you that it was all uttered with [the same level of] passion, then you should know that you did not even achieve [real] emotional intensity; whereas if you experienced ups and downs, patches of light and patches of shadow, then it is possible that you did indeed achieve emotional intensity.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A person may run into real difficulties if he uses these signs improperly. Instead of being immersed in prayer, he will be constantly examining and evaluating himself as he prays, and thus destroy any possibility of concentrating and truly cleaving to God. R. Kalonymus is aware of this danger, and while he regards these signs as important indicators, he explains the need to limit one’s use of them.

The most important principle is that one’s prayer must be “simple in its power and its intention”; passion will develop on its own. While engaged in prayer, a person should not be busy investigating and measuring the quality of his prayer, or whether or not he has achieved “passion” or “intensity”, for then he will end up losing out on meaningful prayer altogether.

The proper time for this evaluation and the use of these signs is not during prayer itself.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, it is important that a person evaluate himself from time to time, for one tends to see only the good in oneself, and he may waste a good portion of his life laboring under the illusion that he is praying as he should, while if he would make use of the signs and learn how to direct and apply his emotions during prayer, he could achieve much more.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 6. This teaching was written around the time of *Parshat* *Noach* in the year 5690 (1929). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 13. For more on the distinction between these two concepts, see chapter 5 ([shiur #22](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-22-chassidic-service-god-continued))). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on powerful thought, see chapter 5 ([shiur #25](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-25-chassidic-service-god-continued)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov* (Brooklyn, 5732), par. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Similarly, R. Kalonymus elsewhere draws a distinction between “prayer” (*tefilla*) and “requesting” (*bakasha*); the latter is an expression of an “extraneous desire,” while the former is service of the heart, emanating from the recesses of the heart (*Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 295). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A difficulty arises here. On the one hand R. Kalonymus writes that a person should evaluate himself in this regard only after praying (*Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 58), but on the other hand he proposes signs that can only really be applied when one is in the midst of prayer – for instance, ceasing all movement while praying and evaluating the effect of this on one’s emotional state (ibid., p. 57). This seeming paradox requires further inquiry. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)