**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #43: During Prayer (continued)**

**Focus (*Kavana*) in Prayer**

During your prayer, stand in one place by the wall, or with your eyes closed, and pray aloud. Not mere shouting with no concentration [behind the words], but rather with focus and with the hope that by means of this [prayer] your soul will be awakened from its sleep and emerge from its hiding towards its King and Maker, before Whom it stands.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Mental focus and concentration are the essence of prayer. Mere recital of the words and psalms in a mechanical manner, without the investment of one’s longing, desires, and love and fear of God, is like a body without a soul.

What should one concentrate on during prayer? *Kavana* (focus) might be understood as a type of interpretation. One can pray and focus on the plain meaning of the words – “Heal us,” “Hear our voice,” etc., but how is one to think literally of the words, “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise Him on High”? We live on the earth; can we truly speak on behalf of the angels? The problem becomes even more complicated when we speak of kabbalistic *kavanot*. Consider, for example, the formula that R. Chaim Vital, disciple of the Ari, establishes in his *Sha’ar ha-Kavvanot* as the *kavana* for the *Kaddish* following “*U-Va Le-Tzion*”:

The third *Kaddish*, after the *Amidah* and prior to *Ashrei Yoshvei Veitekha*: The *kavana* is that first we raised up all the worlds so that all the worlds would be included in the world of *Atzilut*, so as to effect the supreme unification of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* alone, while all the other worlds become like wings protecting and covering them, as per the secret of the “round goblet” (*agan ha-sahar*) mentioned in a teaching of the Zohar, in a manuscript entitled *Sitrei Otiot shel Hashem Yitbarakh*. Following that unification we have to once again raise up the worlds so that they may receive the abundance that is produced by that unification that was performed. It is for this reason that we now recite *Kaddish*, in order to once again include all of Creation in *Atzilut*, so as to receive the outpouring of that unification, and therefore the *kavana* for this *Kaddish* is through the Name of God in the form where each of the letters comprising the Name is in turned spelled out, with the variation that uses the letter *yud* […] and then all of Creation receives and additional measure of holiness, from the holiness of *U-Va Le-Tzion*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We shall not attempt to explain this *kavana*; our intention is merely to present something of its character and to show how obscure and inaccessible it is for those unfamiliar with kabbalistic concepts. One has to engage in extensive study of Lurianic *kabbala* before it can be applied, although it is a relatively “simple” *kavana*; the writings of the Ari contain concepts and *kavanot* that are far more complex. Chassidism, as we know, followed in the steps of Lurianic *kabbala* in many areas (for example, in the text [*nusach*] of the prayers), since this body of *kabbala* is held as second in importance only to the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*. At the same time, chassidic teachings reflect reservations with regard to the *kavanot* of prayers as taught by the Ari and his disciples. The main reason for this is that while knowledge of the esoteric secrets of *kabbala* and the combinations of letters in the world of *Atzilut* are unquestionably capable of impacing the upper worlds, it is difficult to achieve *devekut* (closeness to God) – which is a supremely important value in chassidism – through these channels. Praying with the *kavanot* of the Ari, with all the myriad details, requires a high level of concentration, while prayer with *devekut* requires a completely different inner movement: an outpouring of the soul, bodily movement, and powerful emotional investment.

A chassidic parable distinguishes between these two approaches to prayer by comparing them to the two possibilities for opening the lock on a safe: One possibility is to use its secret code; the other is to break the lock by force. *Chassidut* preferred *devekut*, which breaks down the barriers between man and God, over a focus on *yichudim* and *kavanot*, which are like secret codes. The parable might also be interpreted in a different way: The spiritual level of the generations is on a decline, and we can no longer know the proper *kavanot* as they were known to the Ari and his disciples. Therefore, what is left to us is prayer from the depths of the heart, which is capable of opening the gates of heaven.[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Kalonymus, who was well-versed in Kabbalah in general and Lurianic kabbalah in particular, also expressed his view with regard to the *kavanot* of the Ari. He agreed that someone who is capable of focusing on the *kavanot* as well as arousing his emotional energy should do both, but he recognized that this is not possible for everyone:

One who is unable to effect both – to focus on the *kavanot* and to arouse himself – should rather forgo the *kavanot* and not use them when he is at prayer.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this matter, he bases his approach on that of his predecessors, who argued that in our times, it is possible to achieve all the *kavanot* of the prayers by using all of one’s inner emotional and psychic forces while reciting the words of the prayer:

And in the holy book *Maor Va-Shemesh*, written by my saintly grandfather, in *Parshat* *Ekev* it is written explicitly that in our generations there is no need to focus on the *kavanot* of the Divine Names during prayer, because the essence of the *kavana* of the Names is based on the punctuation, cantillation marks, and the crowns on letters, and we know that the cantillation marks, punctuation, and crowns parallel the *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama*. Therefore, when a person invests his *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshama* in the letters and words of he prayer, he thereby effectively achieves the unification of the Divine Names, and this *kavana* transcends all the *kavanot*. For it is clear that our generations nowadays are different from previous generations in the matter of focusing on the *kavanot*, and also that a person’s *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshama* are [themselves] the essence of the *kavana*, not just that which is on high.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Elsewhere, R. Kalonymus emphasizes the value of the letters and words of the prayer. Even the prayer of someone who is not familiar with the *kavanot* of the Ari can be effective. If one is aware of the value of the letters comprising the words of the prayer and of the supernal Divine light that is concealed in them, then when he prays he can think about what a great privilege it is to be able to use these letters and words. The passion and fervor arising from this meditation then elevate the spiritual light of the prayer “higher than the holy *yichudim*”:

This is the matter of the *kavanot* in prayer: Along with the basic focus on the meaning of the words, the letters themselves also have meaning, as we know from the holy Zohar and from the Ari z”l, [teaching] how the shape of each letter, its punctuation, its gematria, and the combinations of letters, all have meaning. And even someone who is unable to think about the *kavanot* of the Ari z”l and to effect *yichudim* must also know that the [effect of his prayer] is not limited to the meaning of the words, and he fulfills his obligation not merely by concentrating on the meaning of the words, but also the letters have inherent holiness of their own.

And as the great Maggid, of blessed memory, taught concerning the verse, “You shall make a window for the ark (*teiva*),”[[6]](#footnote-6) with regard to the word (*teiva*) that you utter in prayer, too, you should make a “window” – i.e., light. The words and the letters have their own inherent holiness, and when one prays out loud, with *kavana* that every letter and ever word is a piece of the upper world and a component of the [Divine] Chariot, then he will be passionate in his utterance of every letter and every word, filled with joy and amazement at the parts of the Chariot that are emerging from his own mouth.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of the features that makes R. Kalonymus’s approach to *kavanot* so special is his emphasis on the need for a person to create his own unique kavanot in accordance with his own needs and wants. He attributes this idea to his grandfather, the “Seraph of Mogielnica”:

In his book *Avodat Yissakhar*, the holy R. Berish of Wolbórz… writes: Our sainted rabbi and teacher, the Rebbe of Mogielnica, taught concerning the matter of *kavanot* that whatever *kavanot* a Jew chooses for himself – they are all accepted from him in Heaven.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The creation of a personal *kavana* is in fact the interpretation of a verse in light of the circumstances and state of mind of the worshipper. R. Kalonymus writes:

When one prays, he can define the *kavanot* of the words of the prayer in accordance with his own bodily and spiritual needs, and in accordance with his level of spiritual arousal. In the Torah, although every verse has a plain and simple meaning, the Sages nevertheless illuminate individual words, and even individual letters, with their own meaning. Likewise in prayer – although the entire prayer is a single entity on the plain level, a person can nevertheless imbue every word with special meaning, in accordance with his spiritual state. There is a tradition recorded in the name of my father and teacher, who had a special focus in the Nishmat prayer on the section starting with the words, “Who awakens the slumbering”: He said that his *kavana* was that God should awaken the soul of the Jewish People, which was imprisoned in an endless slumber, oblivious of their holiness. And when one says, for example, “Who straightens the bowed over,” a person might ask of the Master of the universe, “I am bowed over – both with regard to my body and with regard to spirituality. Please ease the yoke of physical and spiritual challenges, and help me to stand upright” – etc.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Following in the footsteps of his forebears, R. Kalonymus opens the door for every individual to find himself within the prayer service. The prayer formula is fixed, but one’s interpretation and experience of it – the content of his kavana – is in accordance with his own world and experience. Just as there are “seventy facets to the Torah,” so there are endless ways of interpreting and understanding prayer. Every individual may and should find the way to apply the content of the prayer to himself and his own experience.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Chaim Vital, *Sha’ar Ha-Kavvanot* (Jerusalem, 5738), *Derushei Ha-Kaddish*, *derush* 1: *Kavanat Ha-Kaddish Ha-Shelishi*. *Sha’ar Ha-Kavvanot* is the fundamental work used by the kabbalists and their students who follow the path of the Ari. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on this see R. Schatz, *Ha-Chassidut Ke-Mystika* (Jerusalem, 5748), chapter 10; M. Idel, *Ha-Chassidut Bein Ekstaza Le-Magia* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5761), chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This verse, recorded in the Torah as God’s instrution to Noach while he was building the ark (*teiva*), is given a different interpretation in *chassidut*, with the word *teiva* understood in its other meaning – “word.” There are many teachings in this regard that are recorded in the name of the Ba’al Shem Tov, their essence being that one must discover the Divine light and the worlds of meaning concealed in the words of the prayer, since the *tzohar* (window) represents an opening through which one is able to ascend to the upper worlds. The following tradition is recorded in the name of the school of the Maggid of Mezeritch:

“You shall make a window for the ark, and you shall finish it to a handbreadth from the top” – The Ba’al Shem Tov, of blessed memory, said: “You shall make a window for the ark” – the *teiva* (in this context, word) should illuminate (*matzhir*, from the same root as *tzohar*, window). For every letter contains entire worlds and souls and Divinity, and these ascend and combine and achieve union with one another, [and] with Divinity, and then the letters connect and unite to form words, and then they form real unificiations with Divinity. And a person must include his own spiritual essence in each and every part of this, and then all the worlds unite as one, and they ascend, and a great, immeasurable joy and pleasure are created […] After the word leaves his mouth he does not see how it ascends on High, just as one is unable to look at the sun, and this is the meaning of the phrase, “you shall finish it from the top” [or, in this context, “it is lost to you as it disappears on High”]. What you *are* able to do, however, is, “Enter the ark [word] – you and all your household” – meaning, invest all your body and strength into the word. (*Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* [Jerusalem, 5767], *Parshat Noach*, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)