**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #44: During Prayer (continued)**

**Visualizing During Prayer**

As discussed previously, identification with and personal investment in prayer is of critical importance. If there is no emotional arousal, then prayer is essentially sterile. Hence, while an understanding of the meaning of the words is important, it is not sufficient:

Make a conscious effort to intend the meaning of the words. There are several ways to do this. It is possible to simply translate in your mind as you read, so we would say, “*Hallelu*” (give praise); “*et* *Hashem*” (to the Holy One); “*min* *ha-shamayim*” (from the Heavens); and so on. This mode of “intending the prayers” does not awaken the spirit.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Such prayer is deficient because it takes place on the level of mind:

He is looking at mere words, and he understands their meaning, the literal denotation… In other words, his prayer and his Divine service remain in the realm of knowledge and comprehension, above him, for he dwells [below] in this physical, material world, while his prayer exists in the world of intellect and understanding.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is not to say that intellect and comprehension are in any way negative. On the contrary, they originate from a high place – too high, in fact, and thus disconnected from the worshipper’s earthly, material world, where comprehension and intellectual grasp will not suffice. One has to invest additional inner forces. Prayer is “service of the heart,”[[3]](#footnote-3) not “service of the mind.” Hence, a person must be fully invested in the content of his prayer:

Rather, the essence of “intending your prayers” means that when you say, “Praise God from the Heavens,” and so on, you are addressing all of creation and commanding it to praise God. You, who are formed of matter yourself, you are endowed with a soul, and so you have the authority to command. It is your power and your duty to remind every level of creation – angels, microbes, grass in the field – “Praise Him from the Heavens, Praise Him… stars… [and] light…” This is what it means to pray with intention. This is rousing to the spirit.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The worshipper is transformed from a reader of texts into a participant in a drama, and this transformation can in turn revolutionize his relationship with and attitude towards the content of his prayer. He is no longer a neutral onlooker; now he is actively involved. He initiates, he remembers, he cries out, he beseeches, praises, and commands; he identifies with the prayer. The longing, the liturgical praise, and the prayer are the soundtrack of his own life.

Elsewhere R. Kalonymus expands on this idea, demanding that the worshipper engage all of his inner capacities in prayer, including his imagination. We have discussed previously the importance of the imagination; here we find it pressed into service in prayer, along with the faculty of contemplation:

It is different when you apply your thought, your imagination, and your emotions… Then your Divine service is internalized and becomes tangible for you. When you say, “For every knee will bow to You,” even if you feel only the slightest feeling as you utter the words, you will perceive that you – and the whole world with you – are bowed before God and completely nullified before Him. Likewise, when you say, “Praise God from the Heavens…” with intensity, then you are standing and commanding the entire universe – the upper and lower worlds, which are right in front of you – “Stand and give praise; sing with us to God!”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Here R. Kalonymus explains how one makes use of his imagination:

It is not a matter of visualizing the sun and moon, which perhaps are not actually visible right now. Rather, your speech, thoughts, and emotions flow and develop into a texture that you can almost physically see. “For every knee shall bow to You” – how pleasant is this statement! You and all of the universe, in the heavens and in the earth below, are now bowing together to God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here R. Kalonymus raises a familiar problem: Is it only in my imagination that all of Creation joins with me in bowing before God? He offers a most interesting answer, proposing that all spiritual awakening in Divine service that emerges from a place of truth expresses a situation that is real. Thus, if a person feels that all of Creation is joining with him in a song of praise to God, then that is in fact real and true:

Do not say, “If it feels this way, it is nothing more than a product of my imagination. I alone am imagining that we – the upper and lower worlds – are all united in bowing and prostrating ourselves, singing and giving praise together before God… It is not merely a product of your imagination. Since this is what you perceive in your fervor and through your imagination that has been sanctified and strengthened, so it really is. The angels of heaven – all beloved, all flawless, all holy; the *ofanim* and the holy *chayot*, with great noise; the sun and the moon; the earth and all its fullness, and you in the midst of it all – give voice in unity and harmony to songs of praise to God.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Solitary Meditation**

If someone is still unmoved, uninspired, and unexcited by prayer that does not concern his own personal needs, R. Kalonymus suggests heading out of the synagogue to the forest, where one can commune with nature and awaken his spirit:

Have you ever experienced the bliss of prayer that is devoid of ulterior motives or personal interests? Have you ever cried before God as you uttered His praises or been greatly aroused when speaking to Him? Did you feel then His Presence pressing through the limits of your heart and mind, and you yourself could not grasp or understand it? Any tears you will shed during your prayers are like those of a child crying for a toy or a sweet as long as these experiences are beyond you.

This, then, is the way to reach them if you want to: Let go of this world for an hour or two – its hustle and bustle, its cunning deceptions, and all your earthly aspirations. Seclude yourself in privacy – go out into a forest if possible. Let yourself become a simple creature in God’s world. With the sun, the moon, the birds, and the trees, sing songs of praise to Him. Reveal the greatness of God to the world, and fill it with a sense of that greatness.

In this state of mind, begin by reciting, “*Adon Olam* – Master of the universe…,” “*Yedid Nefesh* – Beloved Companion of my being…” See how your soul then rushes out to greet the approach of its Maker. God has come, so to speak, to hear your sweet song, and a holy passion engulfs you. Only the gushing of your warm tears will be able to calm your passion.

Then you will know why Moshe prayed to become a bird of the sky after his passing (*Bereishit Rabba* 11:9);[[8]](#footnote-8) he yearned to sing praise to God as a simple creature before Him.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Meditation is not a chassidic invention; it is a tradition going back to the time of our earliest forefathers. R. Avraham ben ha-Rambam writes in his *Ha-Maspik Le-Ovdei Hashem* that the reason why the forefathers chose to be shepherds was because of their desire to commune with God and to distance themselves from human company, which disturbs one’s inner peace.[[10]](#footnote-10) R. Nachman of Breslov includes a recommendation to meditate in many of his teachings, but he is not the only Chassidic master who endorses this practice. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, for example, writes:

Before praying, one must meditate, as our Sages taught: “The early pious ones would pause for a while before prayer, and for a while after prayer…” And this is called, “the outskirts of the wilderness” – the “wilderness” is meditation.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The meditation described here is a quieting of the mind. To prepare one’s consciousness and clear it of all disturbances prior to prayer, one need not necessarily go out to a field or a forest; the same process can happen in the synagogue.

But the meditation described by R. Kalonymus has a different purpose. As noted, he proposes it for someone who finds himself incapable of fervor and passion in prayer that is not related to his personal needs – from which we deduce that when this person has a personal problem (his health, his livelihood, his family, etc.), he has no problem focusing on what he is saying. The problem arises only when the prayer is unrelated to himself – e.g., prayers of praise and thanksgiving. This meditation, undertaken in the forest, seeks to locate the individual within the backdrop described in the prayer. R. Kalonymus proposes that a person become a “simple creature in God’s world.” Here the individual is not looking in from the outside, but rather comes to feel that he is a partner and comrade of all creatures that exist in nature; he is part of them and one of them, along with the sun and the moon, the birds, and the trees of the forest, all of which join in song to God. He sings in the choir that is comprised of all of Creation. This is altogether different from the situation of someone who observes the picture from the side. No matter how beautiful the picture may look to him, he will always be outside of it.

The experience is conveyed eloquently in such prayers as *Barkhi Nafshi*, which is recited as part of the morning prayer on Rosh Chodesh:

Bless God, O my soul. Hashem, my God, You are exceedingly great; You are garbed in majesty and splendor. You are cloaked in light like a garment, stretching out the heavens like a curtain. He who covers over His upper chambers with water; He Who makes clouds His chariot; He Who walks on wings of wind; He makes the wind His messengers, the flaming fire His attendants. He established the earth upon its foundations, so it would not falter, forever and ever. The watery deep – You covered it as with a garment; upon the mountains water would stand… He sends the springs into the streams; they flow between the mountains. They water every beast of the field, they quench the wild creatures’ thirst. Near them dwell the birds of the heavens; from among the branches they voice their song… There where the birds nest, the stork with its home among cypresses; high mountains for the wild goats… He made the moon for festivals the sun knows its destination. You make darkness and it is night, when every forest animal stirs… (*Tehillim* 104:1-20)

Could anyone imagine a more appropriate setting for this prayer than out in nature, as R. Kalonymus proposes, where man has a sense of belonging to his natural surroundings?

R. Nachman offers a similar suggestion and illuminates the advantage of this setting from a different angle:

Know that when a person prays in the field, all the vegetation enters into the prayer, helping him and strengthening him in his prayer. It is for this reason that prayer is called “*sicha*” (conversation), alluding to “the shrub (*siach*) of the field” (*Bereishit* 2:5), since all the shrubs of the field empower and assist his prayer. This is also the meaning of, “And Yitzchak went out to commune (*la-suach*) in the field” (ibid. 24:63), for his prayer was with the help and the power of the field. All the shrubs of the field aided and strengthened his prayer, as explained above. And it is for this reason that prayer is called “*sicha*,” as noted.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the teachings of R. Nachman, solitary meditation occupies a central place in Divine service, not only for the purposes of prayer, as for R. Kalonymus, but rather as a separate form of Divine service, with its own defined time and place and characterized by daily soul-searching and dialogue with God. For R. Kalonymus, in contrast, meditation is yet another technique for arousing fervor in one’s Divine service in general, and in prayer in particular.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 49 (*Conscious Community*, p. 82). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “What kind of service is performed by the heart? This refers to prayer.” (*Ta’anit* 2a) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 49 (*Conscious Community*, p. 82) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, addition 2 to version A, ch. 4; *Otzar Midrashim* (Eisenstein) (New York, 5688), p. 366. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, p. 336 (*To Heal the Soul*, pp. 43-44). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, *Ha-Maspik Le-Ovdei Hashem* (Jerusalem, 5733), pp. 177-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parashat* *Beshalach*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Nachman of Breslov, *Likkutei Moharan Batra*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)