**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #46: During Prayer (continued)**

**“Running and Returning” in Prayer**

The intense climax of prayer is inevitably followed by a withdrawal and descent. It is a well-known Chassidic principle that life follows a pattern of “running and returning” – ascents and descents. It is impossible to remain stagnant, nor can one sustain a perpetual ascent. Human existence, in both the physical and the spiritual realm, is characterized by movement, fluctuation, ebb and flow. It is specifically because of the tremendous uplifting that one experiences in prayer that he is in danger of a great fall. The greater the ascent, the harder the fall. A teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov establishes the following rule:

It is an important principle that a person cannot maintain the same [spiritual] level, for vitality [or “living beings;” see *Yechezkel* 1:14) runs and returns. If one is unable to ascend higher, then he will necessarily fall, even from his [lofty] level, for it is impossible to remain static. One is either ascending higher or falling from the level that one had achieved.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In a teaching about the alternating “running and returning” in prayer, R. Nachman states that without the movement of “return,” the worshipper would be in danger of being completely consumed and nullified by his intense cleaving:

When we see sometimes how a person grows passionate in his prayer and utters a few words with great fervor, that is evidence of God’s great compassion towards him, for He exposes him to the light of Ein Sof and grants him illumination… And when he nullifies himself in relation to the Ein Sof, he is in a state as described by the verse, “And no man knew…” (*Devarim* 34:6) [concerning the place of Moshe’s grave]. For even he himself is unaware of himself. But this state must be [subject to] “running and returning” in order that he may continue to exist.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In R. Kalonymus’s teachings, we do not find the movement of “running and returning” treated in this way. Instead, he emphasizes a different message – that a person should not fall into despair or decline following his prayer, although there is a need to step back and rest. R. Kalonymus asserts that the Maggid of Mezeritch managed to maintain his state of spiritual intensity even after he concluded his prayer, and as a result was able to ascend higher and higher. His friend, in contrast, would revert after concluding his prayer to his original state, and thus had to repeat his ascent from the start each time anew:

The Maggid went from strength to strength. The reason for this was that he exerted himself, even after his prayer, to remain in the same spiritual state that he had been in during prayer, and thus the next time he prayed he was able to ascend even further… His friend, after praying, would revert to the same state that he had been in before praying, and thus every day he faced the challenge of uplifting the first prayer in the chain… Every person needs to rest, just as someone who is climbing a very tall tree needs to rest along the way. But then he must stay strong and make the effort to grasp and hold onto the tree so that he will not fall off, but rather remain where he is…[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Kalonymus follows in the path of the Maggid, asserting that a person is able to grow closer to God by means of prayer and then, after praying, to rest while maintaining the closeness that he has achieved, so as to continue his progress.

**The Impact of Prayer**

Prayer has the power to make a difference, and its impact is measured on different levels. Sometimes the effect is felt during the prayer itself; sometimes the results become manifest only afterwards. R. Kalonymus cites a teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch concerning a person’s state in the wake of prayer:

It is taught in the name of the Rebbe, R. Dov [Ber of Mezeritch], of blessed memory, who brought in the name of the Ari that after prayer that is favored, there remains a certain *reshimu* (impression) of the *mochin* (consciousness), and that is the submission that remains within the person. In other words, even though a person cannot constantly be in a state of mastery of the mind and the heart, as when he is at prayer, nevertheless the consciousness – the submission – remains with him.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This teaching seems to be taken from *Yosher Divrei Emet* by R. Meshulem Feibush of Zbarazh, who was a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch and the Maggid of Zlotchov:

Indeed, in a later work by R. Dov Ber, of blessed memory, which I have in my possession, it is written that the sign of a prayer that is favored by God to any degree is [the worshipper’s] submission – in other words, whether, after the prayer, he retains submission in his heart. This is called the *reshimu* [impression] of the prayer, as mentioned in the teachings of the Ari *z”l*, that after the prayer there remains a impression of that consciousness. In other words, even though after one’s prayer is over there can no longer be the same mastery of the mind of the heart, as during prayer (as achieved by every individual according to his level), nevertheless there remains the *reshimu* [impression], in the form of submission and humility. And if this is not so, then certainly [the prayer] was not favored at all. One might perhaps merit this sometime.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Meshulam, who elaborates at greater length on the concept originally articulated by the Maggid of Mezeritch, teaches us that the sign of whether one’s prayer was favored by God is whether the person attained “submission.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Submission is a parallel expression of a state of lowliness.[[7]](#footnote-7) Commenting on the verse describing King Menashe, “And when he was in distress, he besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim II* 33:12), R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk taught: “A person who wishes to acquire sanctity and the service of God needs total submission, as per the Tannaitic teaching, ‘Be exceedingly humble.’”[[8]](#footnote-8) In other words, a person can achieve a state of expanded consciousness and an elevated spiritual state while at prayer, but may then find that when his prayer is over he returns to the same state he was in before he began praying. The Ari *z”l* and the Chassidic masters teach that if his prayer was worthy, it has a lasting impact on him; it makes an impression in the form of the submission that remains.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nevertheless, this state of “submission” still requires clarification. R. Kalonymus states that “true submission in a person comes from the illumination that rests upon him. If this is not [the source], then it is not [true] submission.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This is because a sense of lowliness can be a manifestation of spiritual emptiness and debilitation, which can hardly be called “submission.” Rather, submission is when a person is enriched by Torah and filled with strength and positive energy. It is specifically in that situation that he must examine himself to see whether he is in a state of submission:

The way of Torah, is to be “brazen as a leopard…” (*Avot* 5:20) – a strong person of strong mind and will to perform Divine service, but nevertheless submissive – not because he is empty, but rather because of the inner light that dwells within him, such that he nullifies himself and submits to it… For the light within him nullifies itself and submits to holiness, and even after his prayer, an impression is left behind and he remains submissive.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Let us take a closer look at the matter of this light. During prayer, the worshipper is illuminated by a heavenly light, as we learn from a teaching of the Ari *z”l*:

One must not offer a prayer in sadness, for if he does so, his soul cannot receive the Supreme Light that extends to him during prayer.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This light is not an image or metaphor: “Prayer is illumination and an imbuing of light…”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is a real light that can change a person’s state.[[14]](#footnote-14) If he is worthy,

The light surrounds his entire body and penetrates all of his inner essence, and the Supreme Light is impressed upon his whole body and all its functions and powers. Then one is also submissive in prayer, and even after prayer, some impression of that remains within him.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is not the case where sanctity did not surround his entire body and did not permeate his entire inner being, inside and out. Even though his thought might have been directed towards his prayer, his body was not aroused to fervor, and the Supreme impression of white fire was not inscribed in his body, such that his body would be submissive and recognizable as such. Therefore, the whole subject of *kavvana* is treated in the *gemara* in terms of “*kavvana* of the heart” – whether he directed his heart – even though *kavvana* is mainly through one’s thought, which involves the mind. But *kavvana* of the mind is not sufficient; it all depends on their also being *kavvana* of the heart, which includes the entire body.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In order for a person to merit that his prayer has an effect on him and leaves a real impression, it is not enough that he concentrates his thought on what he is saying. He needs to direct and focus his heart, with fervor and passion, to the point where his entire body offers prayer. Attention should be paid to the fact that the light that extends to a person at prayer affects not only the psyche or soul, as mentioned by the Ari *z”l*, but also his body. This fits well with R. Kalonymus’s teaching that the main innovation and message of *chassidut* as taught by the Ba’al Shem Tov concerns revelation of the light within the vessels and within the body.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Ba’al Shem Tov al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5767), *Parashat Ki Tavo* 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Likutei Moharan* (Jerusalem, 5753), *siman* 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Meshulam Feibush of Zbarazh, *Yosher Divrei Emet* (Avraham Yitzchak Kahn edition, Jerusalem, 5734), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here the *tzaddik* is talking about a sign that allows us to gauge whether our prayer was acceptable and favored by God. The *mishna* offers a description of R. Chanina ben Dosa: “It was said of R. Chanina ben Dosa that he would pray for those who were ill, and he would say, ‘So-and-so will live, so-and-so will die.’ They said to him, ‘How do you know this?’ He answered, ‘If my prayer emerges smoothly, then I know that it is accepted; if not, I know that it is obstructed” (*Berakhot* 5:5). This level of knowing directly whether one’s prayer is accepted is uncommon and limited to singular individuals; this is not what our sources are talking about. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Ba’al Shem Tov taught that every time one speaks words of Torah or prayer, there should be a process of “submission, separation, and sweetening” (see *Ba’al Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, *Bereishit* 121), but I find no echo of this teaching in the works of R. Kalonymus, and so I shall not elaborate here. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parshat* *Ki Tisa*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The concept of leaving an impression is reflected in the story of Yaakov, who leaves Beer Sheva and heads to Charan (*Bereishit* 28:10). Rashi asks, “[Seemingly,] all the verse needed to say was that he went to Charan. Why does the verse also mention that he left [Beer Sheva]? To tell us that a *tzaddik’s* departure from a place leaves an impression. So long as a *tzaddik* dwells in a place, he is its majesty, he is its glory, he its splendor. If he leaves, the place loses its majesty, it loses its glory, it loses its splendor…” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Chaim Vital, *Sha’ar Ha-Kavvanot* (Jerusalem, 5738), *Derushei Birkat Ha-Shachar.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, pp. 94-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Another example that illustrates the impact of this light on a person and the sense of its presence is to be found in R. Kalonymus’s guidance in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*. Here he explains to the young student that if he sanctifies himself with Torah study, he will be able to sense the light “that extends from above your head to your very toes.” If one does not feel this after every study session, then the feeling with surely come with time, after he has worked on it. See *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, pp. 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The process of the formation of this impression that is made by the departure of the Supreme Light is described by R. Chaim Vital as part of the process of the creation of the worlds that preceded our present reality )R. Chaim Vital, *Etz Chaim* [Jerusalem, 5670], *sha’ar* 7, chapter 1). The Maggid of Mezeritch and R. Kalonymus borrowed the terminology of these and other sources. According to their approach, the laws of the worlds of *Atzilut* apply also to the world of *Asiya* and also to man in our material world. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)