YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #34: The Baal Shem Tov (1)**

**The Foundations of Prayer**

Prayer occupies a special place in Chassidism, a world too vast and deep for us to undertake fully here. Comprehensive study is made more difficult by the fact that the classical works of Chassidism, especially those of the Besht (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov) and other early Chassidic masters, were usually not written in a systematic and orderly manner. Our discussion of Chassidism should be seen as an opening of the gate to this unique school of thought, not as a summary of its teachings. The gates we will open in this study will make it possible to learn in further detail from the Chassidic writings themselves.

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700-1760), commonly known as the Besht, is a unique figure, as is indeed reflected in his name – "Baal Shem," that is, a figure with healing abilities and supernatural powers. When the Italian Ramchal passed away, the Besht was already at the height of his activity in other areas – i.e., Eastern Europe. The Besht was of the type of personality to become surrounded by a group of followers, like the Ari and the Ramchal. With the Besht, the social aspect expressed itself not only in his building that group, but also in the deep way that he viewed each and every Jew. He brought the concept of *deveikut*,"devotion," closer to ordinary people who did not at all speak in such terms. In one of the only passages that he himself wrote, the *Letter of the Besht*, he describes how his soul ascended to heaven and reached the upper worlds – his primary goal there being his concern for the salvation of the people of Israel. This is an example that demonstrates not only the Baal Shem Tov's rare closeness to God, but also his attitude toward every Jew, wherever he may be.

These emphases found expression in later Chassidism as well. Each branch of Chassidism emphasized the various aspects differently, with one or more at the center – but they all came together in the Besht.

Another special characteristic of the Besht lay in the fact that he was able to turn an approach into a movement. There have been other righteous people who had tremendous spiritual inspiration, but who were unable to give rise to a movement that would adopt their special quality and continue it. The disciples of the Besht succeeded in translating his teachings into a system that could be passed on. It is true that their attachment to the personality of the Besht contributed to this success, but it was also the concrete instructions included in his teachings that allowed the transmission to continue.

Prayer, the subject of our study, was central to the Besht. It is said about him that during prayer he was, as it were, in another world. Sometimes a supernatural tremor would take hold of him, to the point that it was evident that he was not there. The Besht's prayer was apparently a spiritual phenomenon that we will not be able to implement, but we can study the guidelines he passed on to his students regarding how to pray.

Before we see how the Besht implements the principles established by the Ari (of clarifying sparks and raising the worlds), let us consider the principles that the Besht himself established for the Chassidic movement.

**“The Whole Earth is Full of His Glory”**

The ultimate foundation of Chassidism is that "the whole earth is full of His glory" (*Yeshayahu* 6:3) and that "there is no place that is void of Him" (*Tikkunei Zohar* 91b). (We will not address here the subtle differences between these two formulations.) These foundations teach us that the entire world is filled with God's presence.

One of the most famous illustrations of this principle is the parable of the walls. This parable is brought in several sources, the earliest apparently being the book *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, written by a grandson of the Besht:

A parable of my grandfather, of blessed memory, regarding a king who surrounded his palace with many walls and barriers by way of the power of illusion. The walls were arranged in concentric circles, one inside the other. There were also rivers and many fierce soldiers, and also lions and bears and other wild animals, so that people would be afraid to approach the king… The light of the king illuminated all the worlds, and his glory filled the earth. Only the walls and barriers hid the face of the king by way of the power of illusion. Proclamations were sent out, saying that whoever comes to the king will be rewarded by him with riches and glory and made an officer in his palace. Who would not desire this? But when many came and saw the outer wall's awesome height and length and the rest of the things that terrify the hearts of man, they turned back. There were some, however, who succeeded in scaling several walls, one after the other, and there stood distinguished officers appointed by the king, distributing great amounts of money to come forward from the walls. Sometimes, after seeing that they have precious wealth and have already found treasures of money, they turned back. Even though one could already see that he went through several walls and rivers and there was no harm there, and there is [in reality] no water and no wall, nevertheless, since every wall was higher and wider than the previous one, and more terrifying, so that whoever wishes would not approach the king – he turned back. But the king's son, who yearned for his father, and the father also had mercy for his son to bring him closer to the light of his face… when he came to the walls and the rivers and the soldiers and the bears and all those who frighten and hide the face of the king, he was greatly puzzled: Why does a merciful king like you, as a father is merciful to his sons, hide himself in such concealments? Where shall I go? And he cried out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?[[1]](#footnote-1) And by the strength of his heart that was burning and breaking to come to his father, he surrendered himself and pushed himself with his strength to jump over the walls and rivers and distributed all his wealth to the soldiers surrounding the center. And when he saw his father, his longing and his devotion and his sorrows rose in his father's ears, and he removed the illusions, and he saw that there was no wall there, and no screen, only a plain land, gardens, and orchards, and everything was pleasant, and the king's servants were standing in precious clothing, and all kinds of singers were standing, and the king was sitting on the throne of his kingdom, the land illuminated by his glory… And the king said: Arise, my beloved son, and he held out to him the golden scepter that was in his hand, and strengthened him, and clothed him with his splendor, light, and garments, and put his crown on his head. And he said to him: I did all this only to test you, and to know what is in your heart, your fear and love for me… And the meaning of the parable is clear… (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, *haftara* for *Ki Tavo*)

The *Degel Machaneh Ephraim* ends with the words "the meaning of the parable is clear." On the simple level, he means that the entire world is an illusion. It seems as if reality stands in the way of the appearance of the Divine, but the more we strip reality of its garments, the more we find that the Divine exists and hides within it.

**“Make an Opening for the Ark”**[[2]](#footnote-2)

The passage below is taken from the book, *Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, which contains teachings of the Besht that were collected from various different sources. In general, the Besht did not author books, and teachings in his name are found only in books written by his disciples. The largest collections of his teachings appear in the book *Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, and the section on *Parashat Noach* includes an entire unit called "*Amud ha-Tefilla*," "the Pillar of Prayer," in which the Besht's teachings about prayer were collected.

I heard from my teacher, [the Besht] of blessed memory, that whether learning Torah or praying, if one understands the simple meaning of the words in prayer, or the plain meaning of the *halakha* under study, then he connects the aspect of royalty, *Malkhut,* which is speech, to understanding, *Bina*,which is thought. And the words of the wise are glorious! (*Toledot Yaakov Yosef*, beginning of *Parashat Vaetchanan*, p. 176c) (*Baal Shem Tov al ha-Torah*, *Amud ha-Tefilla* 76)

The concepts at the center of this passage, thought and speech, are also frequently mentioned by the Maggid of Mezeritch, the Besht's disciple, with speech connected to the sphere of *Malkhut* and thought to the sphere of *Bina*. Here, it seems that the Besht is presenting a basic principle: thought must accompany speech in prayer – in other words, when a person prays, he should think about what he is saying. So far, there is nothing novel; anybody discussing prayer would agree with this principle. In the coming passages, however, we will see that the Besht's approach regarding prayer is completely different from all previously known approaches.

One of the most significant passages of the Besht’s teachings on the matter of prayer opens with the verse "Make an opening for the ark":

"Make an opening [*tzohar*] for the ark [*teiva*], closing up to a cubit at the top" (*Bereishit* 6:16). Rabbi Israel Baal Shem, peace be upon him, explained these words as follows: Let the word [*teiva*] said in Torah or in prayer radiate light [*matzhir*].For in every letter there are worlds, souls, and divinity, that rise up and interconnect and cleave to one another. Afterwards, these letters connect and conjoin, finally becoming a word. After that, they connect and unify unifications of truth in the Divine. One must unify one's soul with each of the aforementioned aspects. In this way, all the worlds rise and become as one, and then there is immense joy and immeasurable delight. This is the meaning of "lower, second, and third stories" (*Bereishit* 6:16) – that is, the worlds, souls, and divinities, as it says (*Zohar* III:159a) "there are three worlds, etc." In each and every word, one must listen to what is being spoken, since the *Shekhina* is the world of speech, as it is says (*Zohar* III:230a) "She speaks and He is Her escort." "*Tzohar*" – this "opening" for light – that everything should be illuminated with clarity, giving pleasure to the Creator. One needs great faith (*emuna*) for this, since the *Shekhina* Herself is called *Emunat Amen*, faithful faith (*Zohar* II:16b). Without faith, Heaven forbid, She is called (*Mishlei* 16:28) "A querulous one who alienates a friend." As for the end of the verse, "closing up to a cubit (*ama*)" – this is the Mother (*Ima*). Or it could be said that after the word leaves one's mouth, it does not need to be remembered again; one does not see that it rises to an elevated place, just as one cannot look at the sun, and that is [what is meant by], "closing up at the top." How does one do this? "Go into the ark [*teiva*], you and all your household." (*Bereishit* 7:1) – this means that with all your body and strengths, you shall enter the word [*teiva*]! (*Tzava'at ha-Rivash* 8b, and in the book *Or Torah*) (Ibid. 15)

In general, letter are perceived as symbols that, when combined in agreed-upon ways, create meaningful combinations. In contrast, the Besht instructs us to break words down into their constituent letters in order to reach their inner depth, "for in every letter, there are worlds, souls, and divinity."

There are earlier statements of this sort, according to which the letters of Hebrew, the sacred tongue, are much more than just conventional signs, the way letters are in other languages. And yet, it is generally understood that when the letters form words and sentences, the meaning of the sentence is greater than the meaning of the letters themselves. The insight that underlies the words of the Besht can be likened to a table as opposed to the wooden parts of which it is comprised. The simple view is that the various parts have a certain importance, but the table has the complete value. However, if we consider the table as an object made up of atoms and molecules, the particles that make up the table have much more powerful energy. This is the view of the Besht, who identifies the energy in the atoms of prayer, in the letters. If the soul is able to look at prayer in this way, the prayer takes on a completely different quality, and the encounter with it brings the worshipper happiness and joy.

Another element that appears here is listening. When a person prays, he should activate his hearing, because the *Shekinah* speaks from his throat. This is a surprising idea. In the best-case scenario, if a person manages to focus his mind while engaged in prayer, he is the one who is supposed to be talking to the *Shekhina* – but here, it turns out that the *Shekinah* is the one speaking. We will return to this element later.

There is a degree of light in prayer. "This opening for light – that everything should be illuminated with clarity." Prayer should be bright and illuminating. The passage ends with the guideline: "With all your body and strengths, you shall enter the word." This is the way to apply what was stated in the passage: to enter completely into one's prayer, with all one's strength. Not only to be highly focused, but to come "with all your body and strengths" – your entire being, including your physical strength. This teaching as well is not found before the Besht.

**Revealing the Divine in Prayer**

Let us summarize the elements that we saw in this passage: (1) Coming to prayer "with all your body and strengths"; (2) That the word should radiate light; (3) Uniting and connecting the letters; (4) The worlds-souls-divinity that is found in every word; and (5) When a person speaks in prayer, it is the *Shekhina* who is speaking through him. These five elements derive mainly from the primary concept mentioned above – stripping reality of its garments in order to meet the Divine presence.

Prayer according to the Besht is not a collection of words that need to be recited, but a turmoil of the soul that must occur within the person. Without this turmoil of the soul, even if a person has said everything he has to say, he has missed the main point of prayer. Prayer is service of the heart, an experience that takes place in the heart. Prayer takes a person from his personal needs to a more abstract and more alive plane, which is associated with an encounter with the Divine presence. In doing so, it actually peels off one of the outer layers of reality, thereby revealing a little of the inner essence of the world.

The call to come to prayer with all one's strength is difficult to implement, since it is impossible to be at full strength throughout an entire prayer service. Therefore, of necessity, a person must know how to organize his powers, in which parts of the prayer to concentrate them. Just as one cannot start driving in fifth gear, so too one cannot start praying at the peak of his strength, but must move forward step by step. There must be a gradual process of entering into prayer. Many instructional passages of the Besht speak about the need to invest different "energy" at different stages in one's prayer. It is not possible or necessary to be in a state of "greatness" in every prayer; in some sections, it is more correct to be in a state of "smallness." One should not pray at the beginning of the service with the same great devotion as he would while reciting *Shema* or the *Amida*. Another example is the Yom Kippur afternoon service, which a person should pray in smallness so as not to exhaust all his strength before getting to the *Ne'ila* service. The state of smallness is necessary in order to conserve strength for the more significant parts of prayer. The transition between smallness and greatness illustrates what happens during prayer: When a person fills with an inner sense of burning, he feels that something has happened while praying. He has a sense of "*vatisa’eini ruach*," "a spirit lifted me up" (*Yechezkel* 3:12), that something raised and elevated him during that prayer. This feeling reflects the Divine presence in prayer.

Similarly, the element of the illumination of the words, "Let the word said in Torah or in prayer radiate light," connects to the revelation of the Divine in prayer. When a person prays, what issues from his mouth is not content but light. He strives for spiritual illumination. The physical illness from which a person prays to be cured, for example, is only a barrier. When one breaks a word down into its letters, and reveals the Divine light that is behind it, more of the Divine is revealed. Joining words to form a sentence gives them a certain meaning, whereas breaking them down lays them bare and reveals the light in them. The letters are the way to remove oneself from the limited frameworks of content, from finite human meanings, to the world of the infinite. Every letter is light. It is a gate to speech in a more abstract and inner language, the language of the heart.

The ladder of worlds-souls-divinity is also movement on this track. The movement begins in the real worlds, with all that is contained in them, and progresses inward to the souls, which are the spiritual essences; in this way, there is a revelation of the Divine.

Now that we have seen the foundations of prayer according to the Besht, we will see in the next *shiur* how they fit in with the fundamental principles of the Ari.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Cf. *Tehillim* 22:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bereishit* 6:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)