YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**The Philosophy of Prayer**

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**Shiur #19: *Sha’arei Ora* (I)**

The Jewish authorities we will study in the coming *shiurim*, such as the Ari and the Ramchal, draw on the *esoteric* lore of the Kabbala. (We have already seen this in small measure in the Maharal, though he formulates his ideas in non-Kabbalistic terms.) It is therefore a good idea at this point, before we come to the Ari, to familiarize ourselves with the roots of prayer according to the Kabbalistic tradition. To do this, we will go back in time to Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, who lived about 250 years before the Maharal. His book, *Sha'arei Ora* ("The Gates of Light"), is considered one of the fundamental books for those embarking on Kabbala study.

**The Inner Dimension of the Torah and the Names of God**

The foundational concept in Kabbalistic theory is that of the *Sefirot*, the creative forces that intervene between the infinite, unknowable God and our created world. The world of Kabbala is founded on the ten *Sefirot*: *Keter*, the Divine crown; *Chokhma*, wisdom; *Bina*, understanding; *Chesed*, mercy; *Gevura*, power; *Tif'eret*, majesty; *Netzach*, eternity; *Hod*, glory; *Yesod*, foundation; and *Malkhut*, kingdom. These *Sefirot* constitute the world of Divine revelations, i.e., the paths by which God reveals Himself in the world.

At a simple glance, the book *Sha'arei Ora* is also built according to this structure, with ten gates corresponding to the ten *Sefirot*, from the lowest to the highest.

The *Sefirot* represent a gap between the esoteric and the revealed. These concepts are not found in the revealed tradition, and the terms appear as an entirety in only one verse: "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the eternity, and the majesty…" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:11). Even that verse does not explicitly mention all ten of the *Sefirot*. The theory of *Sefirot* does not rely prominently on what is written in revealed Scripture; instead, it is based on Kabbalistic tradition.

However, one of the special features of *Sha'arei Ora* relates precisely to the point where Kabbala meets the plain meaning of the Biblical text. While each chapter of the book deals with one of the *Sefirot*, the book is not based on the aforementioned verse which includes the common names of the *Sefirot*, but rather on the names of God. For each of the *Sefirot* there is a parallel Divine name; *Sha'arei Ora* builds its chapters on those names, and only from them does it arrive at the *Sefirot*. Unlike the *Sefirot*, the names of God are not found only in isolated verses; they are mentioned openly throughout Scripture, and constitute a central and prominent topic.

Notwithstanding the Torah’s straightforward use of various names of God, they cannot be explained in a simple way, as the topic raises fundamental questions. Why does the Torah have multiple names for God? They all represent the one God of Israel, so what is the meaning of each name? What is the difference between the Tetragrammaton and the name *Elokim?* What is the difference between *Ad-nai* and the Tetragrammaton?

To address these questions, the plain meaning of the Biblical text needs the Kabbala. Analysis of God's names in the manner of the Kabbala, which consistently distinguishes between the various names of God, *is* the simple meaning of the text – not in the sense of easy study, for we are dealing here with profound and difficult matters, but in the sense of correspondence to the revealed phenomena found in Scripture. If study of the plain meaning of the text means knowing the basic intention of the Torah, we must delve into the meaning of every Divine name and revelation, and understand in accordance with that the section in which each name appears. There is no other way to explain the differences between the various Divine names.

If this is the simple meaning of Scripture, why doesn't the revealed Torah deal at length with the distinction between the various names of God? There are two main reasons: Because the topic is difficult to absorb, and because it is liable to lead to danger. When a person encounters the different names of God, if he does not approach Scripture with the proper religious perspective, he may conclude that there are multiple gods. Open discussion of the issue is liable to draw a person closer to pagan ideas; therefore, the simple understanding, and the commentaries who sought to explain the Torah in accordance with its plain meaning, return us to the "Holy One, blessed be He" as a general concept. We explain all of God's names in the same way. In Targum Onkelos, for example, the different names of God are translated in parallel fashion. The inner dimension of the Torah is that which can deal with the different Divine revelations and realize thereby the simple intention of the Torah.

**The Topic of the Book: How to Pray**

On the face of it, the central theme of *Sha'arei Ora* is indeed the names of God. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that the main purpose of the book is to teach us how to pray. Many people have written about *Sha'arei Ora* without appreciating the centrality of prayer in the book. It was Rav Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi (Manitou) who first stressed this issue in the framework of *shiurim* that he gave on *Sha'arei Ora* (two volumes of those *shiurim* have been published so far), noting the deep connection between the book and prayer (see *Sod Lashon Ha-kodesh* I, pp. 53ff).

A hint to this occupation with prayer is found already at the beginning of the book, which deals with the name *Ad-nai*. This name is also the first word of the *Amida* prayer: "O Lord [*Ad-nai*], open You my lips; and my mouth shall declare Your praise" (*Tehillim* 51:17). However, in order to clearly see that prayer is the central theme of the book, let us consider the introduction to the book and the opening of each chapter.

Each gate/chapter of *Sha'arei Ora* opens with a verse containing the Divine name to be discussed in that chapter. Almost all of these verses are connected to prayer. We have mentioned "O Lord, open You my lips." Later, we find: "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (*Tehillim* 42:3); "O Lord, God of hosts, hear my prayer" (*Tehillim* 84:9); "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry" (*Tehillim* 39:13), and so forth. Each chapter opens with a verse of prayer, because that is the topic. As stated, the verse is brought to address one of the holy names of God, but the reason for discussing each name is that it is part of the prayer service. When we appeal to God, we must know to Whom we are turning. God is, of course, one and unique, but the question remains: before which aspect of Him are we standing? A person's servant might appeal to him in one way, while his son might turn to him in another way and his wife might approach him in an altogether different manner. We too must know, each time, from which side we are turning to God. The name indicates the manner of His revelation, just as in general, when we wish to become acquainted with a certain person, we first clarify his name. The Gemara states: "Know before whom you are praying," and it can be argued that *Sha'arei Ora* comes to apply this guidance and enable us to know before whom we are praying each time we engage in prayer.

**Prayer and the Names of God**

Let us move on now to the introduction of the book, and see how the author sets prayer at the center of his work.

You asked me, my brother, O friend of my soul, to illuminate before you a path regarding the names of God, may He be exalted and blessed, to realize through them your will and to reach through them your destination. And as I have seen that your intention is better and more honorable than your question, I had to inform you which way will give light and what is the way that God, may He be blessed, desires or does not desire. When you come to know this matter, then you will call out and God will answer, and you will be among those who are close to Him and you will love Him with all your soul, and you will delight in God and He will grant you all the desires of your heart.

What does he mean when he writes: "your intention is better and more honorable than your question"? It might be suggested that this is praise for the intention of the questioner, which is even better than his actual question. But it is more likely that these words are meant as criticism: the questioner's intention is good, but his actual question is not good. What is not good about the question, and why does it matter; is good intention not the most important thing? Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla identifies in the questioner a wish to achieve his personal desire. His intentions are pure, but he is preoccupied with his own desire rather than with God's desire. Prayer, according to him, is first and foremost what God wants. The Kabbala is not a series of secret codes, which when recited achieve our desires. It is supposed to open inner gates within us. When we reach a connection to God through prayer, a dialogue is created, out of which there may also come a Divine response to our wishes.

We see this phenomenon in the Torah in the section dealing with the thirteen attributes of God. God reveals His attributes to Moshe, but that is not enough; in the wake of that revelation, Moshe prays to God: "And You shall pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance" (*Shemot* 34:9). It is not enough to mention God's names; they merely open a door to prayer. They teach us how and from which side to appeal to God. Therefore, at the beginning of his introduction, Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla tries to bring about a conceptual upheaval in the mind of his student: "When you come to know this matter, then you will call out and God will answer." To achieve knowledge of this matter is the goal of the entire book,and with this knowledge, turning to God finally becomes possible.

The *Sha'arei Ora* continues:

Have you not known? Have you not heard that the everlasting God, the Lord, before whom the heavenly and earthly creatures tremble; because of His fear the earth quakes. "Who can stand before His indignation? And who can abide in the fierceness of His anger?" (*Nachum* 1:6). "Behold, He puts no trust in His holy ones; the heavens are not clean in His sight. How much less one that is abominable and impure, man who drinks iniquity like water!" (*Iyov* 15:15-16). How can one born of woman use His holy names and turn them into an axe to chop with? Who is he whose heart would allow him to do so, to send his hand out to the royal crown and use it? Surely our Rabbis have said that anyone who pronounces the Divine name as it is written has no share in the World-to-Come (*Sanhedrin* 101b). Now, the heavenly saint Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon, who would not pronounce the Divine name in a mundane manner, but only in an honorable manner in order to learn and understand the ways of God, was nevertheless punished; all the more so we who are lowly and deficient. See what God has written in His Torah: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (*Shemot* 20:6). Even though this comes to prohibit a false oath, it was formulated in such a manner that it includes the meaning that you must not bear His name on your lips in vain. For it could have said: "You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God." But it is written: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God," implying two things. And Moshe Rabbeinu, when he ascended on high, learned from the ministering angels the secret of mentioning God's name, and he warned Israel about it, saying: "For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe you greatness to our God" (*Devarim* 32:3). If the heavenly angels are forbidden to mention God's name, all the more so maggots and worms. And even more, someone who is enticed to use the crown of his Maker. And certainly, when there are none at this time who are proficient in mentioning and using His name. If so, one who mentions it will achieve nothing except the loss of his world. About such a person our Rabbis have said: "Whoever takes no thought for the honor of his Maker, it would be fitting had he not come into the world" (*Kiddushin* 40a).

Here the criticism seems to be sharper, and the whole question loses its legitimacy. How can we turn at all to God's names, when we are so far from comprehending them? It is unworthy, and it will also not succeed; whoever tries to use the names of God will fail. The *Sha'arei Ora* continues with his forceful words, but then says:

The truth and the tradition of the covenant is that whoever wishes to achieve his desires by way of the Divine names should strive with all his might in the Torah, to comprehend the meaning of each one of the holy names mentioned in the Torah.

Here it seems that the *Sha'arei Ora* is returning to the view that it is possible to learn the Divine names. What then is the proper approach to the names of God? Is it possible to learn them, or is it unthinkable?

To understand his meaning, one must read his words precisely and distinguish between the "holy names mentioned in the Torah" and other holy names found in Kabbalistic tradition. *Chazal* in various places allude to the existence of holy names. Regarding such names, the *Sha'arei Ora* instructs caution; only singularly pious individuals are able to use those names. Involvement with the holy names is like splitting atoms: the moment that the most fundamental elements are broken down into their factors, energy is released that can be of service to responsible people who understand it, but it can also cause disaster if not used in a knowledgeable and responsible way.

Involvement with the names of God must also be directed to a revelation of the Divine will, not to the attainment of personal desires. Only if the goal is fulfillment of God's will does the inner dimension of the Torah provide tools to realize it. This is what the book addresses, and only with the holy names mentioned in the Torah – not with additional names.

What emerges from this passage is that in order to be successful in prayer, one must delve deeper into Torah study. The names of God are clarified in the Torah. Every section in the Torah offers a branching out of a particular Divine appearance. *Sha'arei Torah* deals with understanding these appearances, and therefore it does not speak of prayer but only of God's names. The ultimate goal, however, is to reach true prayer.

This is not the plain and simple prayer that we offer on a daily basis. Simple prayer has value, but one can strive for deeper prayer, and to achieve that end one must enter the expanse of the Divine names found in the Torah. It is the study of this inner dimension of the Torah that will open the gates of prayer for us, and in the end, the desires of the heart will also be fulfilled. "So shall you delight yourself in the Lord; and He shall give you the petitions of your heart" (*Tehillim* 37:4).

(Translated by David Strauss)