YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Philosophy of Prayer**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #50: Nachman of Breslav (5)**

To conclude our journey through the thought of Rabbi Nachman of Breslav, we will return to a topic that first arose in our study of the Ari – the raising of worlds and clarification of sparks through prayer. As may be recalled, since the time of the Baal Shem Tov, the clarification of sparks has been connected in Chasidism to the extraneous thoughts that arise during prayer.

There is no significant discussion of the raising of worlds in Rabbi Nachman's writings. Rabbi Natan mentions this concept in one of the teachings that he brings under the inspiration of Rabbi Nachman, but it does not seem that the original teaching made any connection to it. There are many other expositions of Rabbi Natan in which he connects teachings he learned from Rabbi Nachman to principles developed by other great Jewish thinkers, based on his familiarity with a wide spiritual world. In this case, as well, it is likely that it was Rabbi Natan himself who introduced the connection to the raising of the worlds. On the other hand, the issue of extraneous thoughts appears frequently in Rabbi Nachman's own teachings.

**Repairing Extraneous Thoughts – A Task Falling Upon the *Tzaddikim***

For all the confusions of the mind and all the disturbances and all the foolishness which we at times experience are all drawn into our prayers. For all the disturbances, etc., and all the thoughts which a person occasionally thinks, all come to mind precisely at the time of prayer. Precisely then, when he gets up to pray, he hears them all; as in (*Tehillim* 106:2): "Who can express the mighty acts of God? Who can make heard all His *tehila* [praise]?" "His *TeHiLa"* is linguistically similar to (*Iyov* 4:18): "His angels He charges with *TaHaLa* [folly]" – i.e., confusion and disturbance. They make themselves heard precisely then, when one gets up to pray and to "express the mighty acts of God." This happens in two manners. One possibility is that they come to be rectified; because they have seen that the person is praying with proper concentration, they therefore come to be rectified, as this is the time when such correction is possible. For they have in them holy sparks that are in need of rectification. Another possibility is that the person is not fit to pray, and they come to disturb him from his praying. No matter what the reason, it is precisely then, at the time of prayer, that all a person's confusions and all his disturbances come and make themselves heard to him. This is why the disturbances and confusions are called *tahala*, because they come precisely at the time of prayer and praise [*tehila*], as explained. And all these prayers, with all the confusions, come to the *tzaddikim*. This is because the *tzaddikim* are an aspect of the Messiah, to whom all the prayers come to be elevated, as in (*Yeshayahu* 48:9): "For My praise, *eChToM* [I will restrain My anger] for you." All the praises come to the aspect of the Messiah who corresponds to the *ChoTeM* [nose], as in: "The breath of our nostrils, the anointed [*mashi'ach* = Messiah] of God" (*Eikha* 4:20). For the Messiah will judge through the sense of smell (*Sanhedrin* 93b). This is as in (*Yeshayahu* 11:3): "He shall breathe of the fear of God" – namely prayers, as in (*Mishlei* 31:30): "the fear of God, that is to be praised." In the prayers which he receives from them, he will smell and sense each and every individual as he is. For, as explained, all a person’s confusions are within his prayers. (*Likkutei Moharan* 30, 7)

In this teaching as well, we see Rabbi Nachman's unique expositions: "*tehila*," praise, is expounded here as "*tahala*," i.e., as a defect. This exposition expresses, perhaps, that prayer is a state that invites confusion and extraneous thoughts. Prayer is when we are alone with our thoughts; we silence the entire outside world, and activate the channel of thought, but in this state other thoughts can also enter. When a person opens a door to thoughts, his entire inner world can enter.

Rabbi Nachman suggests two possibilities of how to view the extraneous thoughts: they may come because the person does not have the proper intentions (*kavana*) in his prayer – but they might also come because he *has* the proper intentions, and therefore they have the opportunity to undergo repair. This distinction between the two possibilities appears even before Rabbi Nachman. With Rabbi Nachman, it can be seen as a kind of indication for identifying the cause of the extraneous thoughts: if a person is in a poor spiritual state, the thoughts that come to him match his state. It is possible to understand from his words that the thoughts are drawn after one other; there is an associative connection between them. Thus, if a person is in a low state, his thoughts may lead to low thoughts – but if he is properly focused in his prayer, the thoughts may come to him because they became connected to a positive thought, and were drawn after it.

In any case, Rabbi Nachman emphasizes that rectification of extraneous thoughts falls upon the *tzaddikim*. Regarding this point, Rabbi Nachman's approach is similar to that of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the author of the *Tanya*: not every person should attempt to elevate his thoughts; it is the *tzaddikim* who should repair their thoughts.

**Contending with Extraneous Thoughts**

*Sichot ha-Ran* presents a fundamental approach towards extraneous thoughts, which also mentions Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi:

You may be influenced by false motives and distracted by many outside thoughts when you pray. Ignore them completely. Do your part and say all the prayers in order, ignoring all disturbing thoughts. Do what you must, and disregard these thoughts completely.

The Rebbe [Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi] also said that these disturbing thoughts are actually a great benefit. Without distracting thoughts, prayer would be impossible. Tremendous powers are always at work, attempting to denounce proper prayers. But distracting thoughts serve to disguise our prayers so that they are ignored by the Outside Forces. Then these forces do not denounce the prayers, and they are allowed to enter on high. God knows the real truth. We may have improper motives or be distracted, but in the very depth of our heart, our intent is to God. God knows this. God sees this innermost desire. He sees through the outside and accepts the prayer in love. (*Sichot ha-Ran* 72)

A person should not engage in repairing his alien thoughts. Perhaps the *tzaddikim* should do this, but Rabbi Nachman does not address the *tzaddikim* here. Extraneous thoughts are not a cause for concern, but a "great benefit." There are drawbacks to prayer that is too powerful; prayer in which extraneous thoughts are intermingled evokes fewer prosecutions by the Outside Forces. It would be possible to reprimand the worshipper for the extraneous thoughts that arise in him, but Rabbi Nachman, as is his way, chooses words of encouragement.

Rabbi Nachman then says: "God knows the real truth. We may have improper motives or be distracted, but in the very depth of our heart, our intent is to God." One could say that these too are simply words of encouragement, but it seems that here, the statement is more principled. If it is not mere encouragement, it can be understood that this is the work the person must do when he has extraneous thoughts. Ostensibly, the guidance in such a case is to ignore – to continue praying, to pray without responding to the alien thoughts – but how does one accomplish this? It seems that this is a different kind of ignoring. It is a call to a person to grab hold of his inner self. Know who you are, believe in yourself. It is possible that the prayer will be accepted even without this inner recognition, since God examines the person's heart in any case. But in this way, the person himself can contend with his extraneous thoughts. He can hold fast to his inner self and identity, even in situations of confusion and disturbances.

In the following teaching, Rabbi Nachman once again brings us into a rich imaginary situation:

On the topic of extraneous thoughts during prayer: It is already known that each thought is a complete structure, as is brought. And he said that when a person stands and prays in ordered fashion, paying no attention to extraneous thoughts, he vanquishes them and removes them from himself. (This is as explained elsewhere, that a person ought not focus on them in the least, but should instead proceed with his prayer in ordered fashion, without looking over his shoulder at all, as a result of which the extraneous thoughts automatically depart.) Consequently, as he proceeds with his prayer, he defeats them, cutting off the hand of one and the foot of another, and so too the other limbs. This can be illustrated with the example from war, when a person has to proceed and infiltrate many killers and ambushers. When he is mighty and passes through them, on the way he defeats them. As he proceeds, he cuts off this one's hand and defeats him, and that one's foot…, and so on. (*Likkutei Moharan Tinyana* 122)

This image, of a man surrounded by enemies, knocking them down as he advances, can be understood in two ways. One possibility, which was already mentioned, is that one should simply ignore his extraneous thoughts. The person should walk, run, make an effort and recite the entire prayer while ignoring his extraneous thoughts. According to the other option, Rabbi Nachman is saying that the fact that a person hears many voices does not mean he does not have an identity. He must distinguish between all the voices around him and his inner spinal cord.

During prayer, when a person is in a state of inner listening, all the movements of his soul may arise within him. Inner voices can arise, and the tendency in such situations is to listen to all the competing forces moving about inside. According to Rabbi Nachman, the person should say to all these voices: "I know you are here, I know you will continue to accompany me and surround me, but you are not me. I have an inner identity." When a person clings to his inner self, the other voices take on reduced proportions. They don't disappear, but only lose a few limbs ("cutting off the hand of one and the foot of another"). It is possible that they will appear again in the next prayer, but it will already be clear that they are external to the person. In the face of extraneous thoughts, a person has to think what belongs to him and what does not; which thoughts correspond to the depth of his personality and which are not connected to him. This is the guidance we saw earlier: holding onto one's inner self helps him overcome the extraneous thoughts.

**Personal Interests in Prayer**

Another type of extraneous thought is connected to the concepts of honesty and faithfulness:

And the separation of the sparks from the *kelipot* [husks] is mainly by means of faith. For it is common for faith to reside with these fallen holy sparks, in the aspect of "This is Jerusalem; I placed her among the nations, and surrounding her are the lands" (*Yechezkel* 5:5). Jerusalem is "the faithful city" (*Yeshayahu* 1:21) – the aspect of faith; she resides "among the nations, and surrounding her…," for she is among them always, as explained above. These sparks that fell thus cleave and attach themselves round about faith, and she raises them up from there. A person must therefore engage in business dealings faithfully, for it is by means of faith that we raise up the sparks, as explained above. For this is the essential aspect of business activity – to elevate the sparks, as explained above. (*Likkutei Moharan* 280)

Now, the main cause of foreign thoughts [during prayer] is the corruption of *mishpat* [justice]. For *mishpat* is an aspect of *AYNin* [eyes], as in (*Bereishit* 14:7): “They came to AYN Mishpat.” This corresponds to "[Israel will dwell securely, apart,] AYN Yaakov…" (*Devarim* 33:28). And through the corruption of *mishpat,* the eyes are impaired, as in (*Devarim* 16:19): "For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise." This is the concept of foreign thoughts during prayer. They are like clouds covering the eyes, as is written (*Eikha* 3:44): "[God,] You have covered Yourself with a cloud, so that prayer should not pass through." But in the future, the concept of *mishpat* shall be restored, as in (*Yeshayahu* 1:27): "Zion shall be redeemed through *mishpat* [and her captives through charity]." Then, the clouds that cover the eyes will pass, as in (ibid. 52:8): "for eye to eye they will see God returning to Zion." (*Likkutei Moharan* 2, 5)

The term "faith" is used here in the sense of loyalty and honesty, as opposed to personal interests. These interests are related to man's urges; when a person comes to prayer with his personal interests, even if he does not pray to succeed in stealing or misappropriating – his interests have an effect. His personal interest fills his world of thought, and it is through this lens that he contemplates his prayer.

In contrast to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who connects these interests to the lustful animal soul that counters the Divine soul in man, Rabbi Nachman connects them to dishonesty as opposed to honesty and faithfulness.

**Doubt and Heresy**

Another type of extraneous thought can be seen in the following teaching:

Self-sacrifice [literally, soul-sacrifice] is something each Jew does every hour of every day. An example of this is giving one's money to charity. Money is the soul, for "he gives his soul for it" (*Devarim* 24:15). In other words, to earn the money, he first sacrifices his soul in the struggles and dangers. Yet, afterwards, he takes the money and gives it away for the sake of God. It follows, then, that he is sacrificing his soul. The same is true of prayer. We find in *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* (*Zohar* I, 124b) that [prayer] is the concept of "For Your sake we are slain all day long" (*Tehillim* 44:23) – i.e., self-sacrifice. It takes great struggle and great battle with the thoughts and distractions, and stratagems to flee and escape them. Concerning this it is stated: "For Your sake we are slain," as brought in *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*. It follows, then, that this is self-sacrifice.

And know, each person has obstacles in service of the Creator, may His Name be blessed, such as traveling to a *true* tzaddik, and the like. And each person imagines that his obstacles are greater than his fellow's, and that it is difficult to endure them. Know, each person's obstacles are only commensurate with his abilities, according to what he can endure and handle – provided he wants to. And, in truth, there are no obstacles whatsoever, because God is enclothed even in the obstacle itself, as is explained elsewhere (*Likkutei Moharan* I, 115). And the greatest of all obstacles is the obstacle of the mind, i.e., that his intellect and heart are divided concerning God or the *tzaddik*…

The same is true of prayer. Initially, there are many obstacles to prayer. And afterwards, when a person overcomes them and comes to pray, when his heart is twisted and turned away from God, this is the greatest obstacle of all. This is the concept of "My heart is *S’ChaRChaR* [surrounded]" (*Tehillim* 38:11); "surrounded" in Targum is *SChoR* *SChoR*. In other words, his heart is surrounded, enveloped, and twisted by crookedness, questions, and heresies concerning God. This is the concept of "They made their lives bitter with *KaSha* [hard] work" (*Shemot* 1:14) – and in the *Tikkunim* we find: with *KuShya* [difficult questions] (*Tikkunei Zohar* 13, p. 28b), i.e., the difficult questions in his heart, the greatest obstacle of all. And so he must cry out loudly, from the depths of his heart, to his Father in heaven. God will heed his voice and turn to his cry. And it may even happen that from this itself, all the aforementioned questions and obstacles will collapse and be eliminated. In any case, God hears his voice, which is his salvation. Thus the letters of *KuShYA* are an acronym for *Shema YHVH koli* *ekra* ("O God, hear my voice when I cry out") (*Tehillim* 27:7). When overcome by difficult questions and heresy, he need only cry out to God. This is akin to the parable told in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, may the memory of the holy man and *tzaddik* be a blessing, about a king who placed a great treasure in a certain place and, using the power of illusion, enclosed the treasure within many walls. When people came to these walls, it seemed to them that the walls were real, and difficult to breach. Some immediately turned back. Others broke through the first wall and reached the second one, but could not breach it. A few broke through further, but could not breach the rest. Finally, the prince arrived, and said, "I know that all the walls are only an illusion, and in reality there isn't any wall at all!" He proceeded confidently until he had passed through them all. One who is wise will understand the parable on his own, as referring to all the obstacles, lures, and enticements, which conceptually are walls surrounding the treasure of the fear of God. In reality, they are nothing. The main thing is a mighty and courageous heart, as then one has no obstacles. (*Likkutei Moharan Tinyana* 46)

Rabbi Nachman introduces another concept into the discussion: "His heart is surrounded, enveloped, and twisted by crookedness, questions, and heresies concerning God." Prayer is the moment when thoughts of heresy can arise. It is precisely in the situation where a person turns away from all his affairs and stands before God that his relationship with God is put to the test. This is the time when questions may arise: What am I praying for? Is anyone listening to me at all? This is where the distance and concealment that we talked about in the previous *shiur* come in. Sometimes these things become apparent precisely during prayer.

How is one to deal with heretical thoughts? "And so he must cry out loudly, from the depths of his heart, to his Father in heaven." Rabbi Nachman offers a surprising and seemingly paradoxical suggestion: to overcome thoughts of heresy by crying out to God from the bottom of one's heart. But it is precisely the revolution in perception here that makes it possible to pass over the doubts and to find the connection itself. The relationship itself is the basis of faith, not its result. Behind this guidance is another element that we already encountered in the previous *shiur*: the world oscillates between a deep feeling of distance and concealment, and the closeness of God that is found beneath the surface. A cry stemming from the experience of great distance has the power to release the person from the exceedingly strong illusion of distance, and bring him into immediate contact with the Divine presence that is always here. A similar idea emerges from the following teaching:

…And it is known that the air of the land of the nations is impure, whereas the air of the Land of Israel is holy and pure, because the Holy One took it out of the hands of the nations and gave it to us. But [in] the land of the nations, it being outside the Land, there, the air is impure. Thus when we clap hands, we thereby rouse the twenty-eight letters of [the act of] Creation, "the *KoaCh* [strength] of His works." We see, then, that it is within His hands to give us the heritage of the peoples. For everything belongs to the Holy One. With this, we have the strength in our hands to purify the air of the land of the nations, because the land of the nations returns to the Holy One's rule. And it is within His hands to give it to whomever he wants, as is written: "to give them the heritage of the peoples." Then, the place in which the Jewish person prays is purified, and he breathes in holy air as in the Land of Israel… This is the explanation of: "Prayers *TiKNUM* [were established] *keneged* [to parallel] the *TeMIDin* [daily-offerings]" (*Berakhot* 26b). *TaMID* is an aspect of the Land of Israel, as is written (*Devarim* 11:12): "[A land that God your Lord looks after;] God your Lord *TaMID* [regularly] keeps His eyes on it." In other words, a person should try to recite his prayer in the air of the Land of Israel. This is the rectification of extraneous thoughts in prayer, which correspond to the above-mentioned "prayers *keneged* [opposing]." *TiKkUNaM* [their rectification] is through the *tamid,* through the aspect of the Land of Israel. And this is the explanation of "and in the hands of the *NeViim* [prophets][[1]](#footnote-1) *ADaMeh* [I spoke parables]" (*Hoshea* 12:11). Through "the hands," clapping, the words are spoken on "*ADaMah* [land] that is holy" (*Zekharya* 2:16)….

"Prayers were established to parallel the *temidin* (daily-offerings)" – i.e., an aspect of the Land of Israel. In other words, by clapping, the idolatrous thoughts are eliminated. This is because: Whoever lives in the Diaspora is like someone who has no God; but whoever lives in the Land of Israel is like someone who has a God. Thus by clapping, he lives in the air of the Land of Israel and has a God, and so the idolatrous thoughts are eliminated. And prayer is an aspect of faith, as is written (*Shemot* 17:12): "His hands were faithful until the sun set." Onkelos renders this as: "[His hands] were spread out in prayer." But opposing faith are the heresies of idolatrous thoughts. Their rectification is through *temidin* – through the Land of Israel, through clapping. (*Likkutei Moharan* 44)

The clapping of hands comes to eliminate the thoughts surrounding the person, and to bring about a cognitive revolution within him upon entering into prayer. Rabbi Nachman describes the air outside the Land of Israel as a murky atmosphere, a complete cultural world that surrounds a person and prevents him from entering into prayer. This type of challenge is often felt during the *Mincha* service, especially at a *minyan* organized at one’s workplace, when a person has to move from one world to another in the middle of the day. He must cleanse all the air in which he is found. It is possible that Rabbi Nachman sees this atmosphere rising from the emerging Western culture, an atmosphere that empties prayer of its meaning and finds no purpose in it.

In his remarks about extraneous thoughts, Rabbi Nachman opens a door for the worshipper – both to face the voices inside him, and to face the external atmosphere that surrounds him. The worshipper is required to grab hold of his most innermost self and his desire to connect with God, and in this way, the gates of prayer will be opened before him.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. “‘*NeViim*’ is similar to *NiV sefatayim* (an expression of the lips), an aspect of the spoken word of prayer” (explanatory translation by Moshe Mykoff, available [here](https://www.sefaria.org/Likutei_Moharan.44.3.3?ven=Likutey_Moharan_Volumes_1-11,_trans._by_Moshe_Mykoff._Breslov_Research_Inst.,_1986-2012&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)