

BS"D Soul Prayer, Class #8, December 10, 2019<sup>1</sup>

## The Dance of Experience and Knowledge

On the difference between prayer and meditation, and the connection between them.

On the one hand, understanding and plumbing the depth of Jewish prayer requires YEARS OF STUDY, and even then, the more you learn, the more profoundly you realize that you know so little. On the other hand, it is possible to experience a profound connection with Hashem through meditative prayer without hardly any prior knowledge. This being the case, the question is, why go to the trouble of spending years learning?

The answer is that, even though it is POSSIBLE to experience a heightened state of awareness (with its attendant sense of joy, harmony, peace, and fulfillment), this is obviously not the ideal. The ideal is a life of learning, of discovering, of constantly expanding and deepening one's knowledge so that he/she may experience Hashem's presence more deeply, and then learn more and then experience more deeply, ad infinitum.

Indeed, it is a dance, the dance of knowledge and experience (head and heart), wherein one understands that any real experience of higher awareness is an invitation to a higher level of knowledge, an invitation to the higher level where that experience came from. In terms we spoke about last year, the heightened state of awareness is the *MAKIF*, the level just above your present internalized (*PENIMI*) level of knowledge. It is coming to you to inspire you to reach higher and deeper. It is coming to you so that you can internalize it and continue reaching for all the higher *makifim* that await you, beyond beyond your present level.

Along these lines, it is interesting to note that although the Baal Shem was a great *Mekubal*, and knew the profound system of the Zohar and the Ari, he nevertheless initially discouraged even the greatest of his disciples from praying with the Ari's *kavanot*, all the more so the rest of us. Why? Because he saw that this type of knowledge (as immensely important and exciting it is) actually limits the meaning of the prayers, and therefore limits the depth of one's experience of GD in the prayers. See below Rav Chayim of Volozhin on the incredible depth that the *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah* incorporated into our prayers. Beyond beyond.

The Baal Shem Tov opted rather for *hitlahavut* (passion) and a sense of *hitkashrut* (internal connection), opening to the infiniteness of the unadulterated experience of the Divine itself, as opposed to limiting it by one's own particular present level of understanding.

According to the Baal Shem Tov, one should simply pronounce the words of the prayers (like *Hodu la'shem kiru bishmo; Ashrei yoshvei betekha, poteyach et yadekha, halleluYah ki tov Hashem; vaybarekh David et Hashem; az yashir Moshe; kadosh kadosh Hashem; shma Yisrael; shirah chadashah shib'chu geulim al sfat hayam*) with such *devekut* (soul-attachment) that he/she reaches a level of *hitpashtut ha'gashmiyut* (losing awareness of one's physical environment and even of one's body), beyond any attempt to understand, etc. (Of course, he was talking to people who knew what *devekut* and *hitpashtut ha'gashmiyut* mean). We thus have a tradition from Rav Pinchas of Koretz, an incredible *tzadik*, that the Baal Shem Tov told him to stop using the *kavanot* of the Ari (again, I will try to explain what this means). He writes, however, that, a few years later, the Baal Shem changed his mind. The Baal Shem concluded that it is important to pray according to the *kavanot* of the Ari. I will attempt to explain this whole thing from my own experience. Sincerely, Avraham

### Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Amud HaTefillah

בתפלה צריך לשום כל כחו בהדיבורים, וילך כך מאות לאות עד שישכח מגופניות, ויחשוב שהאותיות מצטרפים ומתחברים זה עם זה, וזהו תענוג גדול. דמה אם בגשמייות הוא תענוג, מכל שכן ברוחניות. וזהו עולם היצירה. ואחר כך יבא לאותיות המחשבה ולא ישמע מה שהוא מדבר. וזהו בא לעולם הבריאה. ואחר כך הוא בא למדת "אין", שנתבטל אצלו כל כחותיו הגשמיים. וזהו עולם האצילות, מדת חכמה. (כתר שם טוב ח"ב ד"ז ע"ב, וק"א ד"ז ע"ד סוד"ה אורייתא. בעל שם טוב על התורה, עמוד התפלה אות ט"ז, ועיין פ' שמיני אות ר')

In prayer, you must put all your strength/energy into the words you utter. Concentrating thus, move from one letter to the next until you lose awareness of your physicality and your physical surroundings. Focus on how the letters combine and unite with each other. This itself is a great *taanug* (delight, pleasure). Consider, if the union of two human beings on the physical plane results in such great delight, how much greater is this delight on the spiritual plane. This is the experience of the dimension of *Yetzirah*. From here you proceed to the letters of Thought where you no longer physically hear yourself speaking. Here you have entered the dimension of *Beriah*. From here you proceed to the level of *ayin* (no-thing-ness), wherein all physical sensation is nullified. This is the dimension of *Atzilut*, the level of divine *Chokhmah*. (*Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Amud HaTefillah* §16)

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המכוון בתפלתו בכל הכוונות הידועות לו, אינו מכוון רק אותן הידועות לו, אבל כשאומר התיבה בהתקשרות גדול, נכלל בכל התיבה כל הכוונות מעצמן ומאליהן. שכל אות ואות הוא עולם שלם, וכשאמר התיבה בהתקשרות גדול, בוודאי מתעוררין אותן העולמות בעליונים, ועושה פעולות גדולות בזה. לכן יראה אדם להתפלל בהתקשרות ובהתלהבות גדולה, ובוודאי יעשה בזה פעולות גדולות בעולמות העליונים, כי כל אות מעורר למעלה. (צואת הריב"ש ד"ד ע"ב, לקוטים יקרים ד"ז ע"ד. בעל שם טוב על התורה, עמוד התפלה אות כ')

One who prays, making use of all the kabbalistic *kavanot* (intentions) that he knows is limited to exactly that—the specific *kavanot* that he knows. On the other hand, when he says the words of the prayers with complete *hitkashrut* and *devekut*, then all the *kavanot*—far beyond the specific *kavanot* he knows—are spontaneously and effortlessly included in each word. For each letter is an entire universe, such that when one utters them with complete *hitkashrut*, the supernal universes corresponding to them are certainly aroused, and he accomplishes many great actions through this. A person should therefore see to it that he prays with great *hitkashrut* and *hitlahavut*. In this way, he will surely bring about great actions in the supernal universes, for as stated every letter arouses its corresponding root above. (*Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Amud HaTefillah* §26)

ריב"ש אמר אדם שהוא קורא בתורה, ורואה האורות של האותיות שבתורה, אף על פי שאינו מבין הטעמים כראוי, כיון שהוא קורא באהבה גדולה ובהתלהבות, אין השם יתברך מדקדק עמו אף שאין אומרים כראוי. משל לתינוק שאביו אוהבו מאוד ומבקש דבר מאביו. אף על פי שהוא מגמגם ואינו אומר כראוי, אביו נהנה מאוד. לכן כשאדם אומר דברי תורה באהבה, השם יתברך אוהבו מאוד ואין מדקדק אחריו אם אומרם כראוי. כמו שדרשו רבותינו ז"ל "וְדַגְלוּ עָלַי אֶהְבֵּה" (שיר השירים ב' ד'), "וְלִיגְלוּ עָלַי אֶהְבֵּה" (שיר השירים רבה ב' פ"ט ט"ו). (ליקוטים יקרים דף א'. בעל שם טוב על התורה, עמוד התפלה אות ל')

Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem taught: If a person reads from the Torah and perceives the luminosity of its letters, then, even if he does not understand the *taamim* (deeper reasons behind them) as it fitting, still, since he is reading with great love and *hitlahavut*, Hashem will not be strict with him even if he pronounces the words wrong. The matter can be likened to a young child, dearly beloved of his father, who asks something of him. Although the child may stutter and not speak properly, the father still derives great delight from him. Therefore, when a person speaks words of Torah with love, Hashem loves him exceedingly and is not strict regarding the proper pronunciation of the words. Our sages made the same point on the verse, "Ve'diglo alay ahavah—His banner over me [Israel] is love" (Song of Songs 2:4), "Do not read just *ve'diglo*, but '*Ve'liglugo alay ahavah*—His laughter on my account is an expression of His love'" (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 2). (*Likutim Yekarim*, the Maggid of Mezritch; *Baal Shem Tov al HaTorah, Amud HaTefillah* §30)

#### Rabbi Yaacov ben Asher (1269-1343), *Tur, Orach Chayim* 98

תניא המתפלל צריך שיכוין לבו שנאמר "תְּכִינ לִבְּךָ תִּקְשִׁיב אֲזַנְךָ" (תהלים י' ז'). פירוש שיכוין [בין] פירוש המלות שמוציא בשפתיו ויחשוב כאילו שכינה נכנוד שנאמר "שְׂוִיִּתִּי ה' לִנְגִידִי תָמִיד" (תהלים ט"ז ח'). ויעיר הכוונה ויסיר כל המחשבות הטרוודות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפלתו. ויחשוב כי אילו היה מדבר לפני מלך בשר ודם, שהיום כאן ולמחר בקבר, היה מסדר דבריו ומכוין בהם יפה לבל יכשל. קל וחומר לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה שצריך לכוין אף מחשבתו כי לפני המחשבה כדיבור. וכן היו עושים חסידים ואנשי מעשה. שהיו מתבודדים ומכוונים בתפלתן עד שהיו מגיעים להתפשטות הגשמיות ולהתגברות רוח השכלית עד שהיו מגיעים קרוב למעלת הנבואה. ואם תבא לו מחשבה אחרת בתוך התפלה ישתוק עד שתבטל המחשבה. (טור אורח חיים סימן צ"ח)

It is taught that one who prays must direct/concentrate his heart, as it is written, "Direct their heart [and mind to You] and let Your ears be attentive [to their cries]" (Psalm 10:17). This means that one must concentrate fully on the meaning of the words he utters with his lips, using the power of *machshavah* to approximate the reality of standing in the presence of the *Shekhinah* (Gd's immanence), as it is written, "I have placed YKVK before me at all times" (Psalm 16:8). He should arouse his concentration and remove/banish all disturbing thoughts, so that his mind and concentration remain pure/clear as he prays. [To facilitate this] he should consider that, if he were talking to a mortal king who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, he would arrange his words carefully and concentrate well on what he was saying, lest he stumble, heaven forbid. How much more should he be careful in the presence of the King of kings, the blessed Holy One, before whom one must not only concentrate on what he is saying but on what he is thinking. Before Him, thought is considered as speech. This was the practice of the *chasidim* (pious men) and *anshei maaseh* (masters of the physical plane). They would *mitboded* (isolate/dissociate their consciousness from their thoughts) and *mekhaven* (direct their consciousness) in their prayers, until they would attain *hitpashtut ha'gashmiyut* (divestment of the physical) and were overcome by the spiritual. In this manner they were able to reach a level close to that of prophecy. If, therefore, an extraneous thought enters a person's thoughts in the midst of praying, he should silence his mind until the thought passes.

#### Rav Chayim Volozhin, *Nefesh HaChayim* 2:12-13

Every individual, according to his ability, is obligated to devise methods, literally war tactics, to escape the confusion of impure thoughts in order to be able to compose his thoughts in prayer appropriately... A recommended practice is as the Maggid told the *Beit Yoseph*, "Be careful to restrict your thoughts during prayer to the words of the prayer themselves, so as not to think of any other thoughts, not even thoughts of Torah and *mitzvot*" (*Maggid Mesharim, Azharot* 2)...He does not say that we should focus on the meaning or intention of the words, as in truth we are completely unable to fathom the inner depth of the prayers! This applies even in the face of the *kavanot* provided by our rabbis—from the holy *rishonim* up until the holy Ari. With all their depth, they are like a drop in the ocean compared to the depth of *kavanah* invested in the formulation of the words of prayer composed by the *Anshei Knesset HaGedolah*, which was comprised of 120 elders whose ranks included a number of *neviim*.

#### Rav Pinchas of Koretz

אחרי כמה שנים בא הבעש"ט ואמר לו שהוא ראה שבכל זאת שצריכים לכוון משהו. וזה לשונו, "הבעש"ט ראה שצריך להתפלל בכוונות, ולא מצא כוונות אחרות כי אם של הארי ז"ל..." (ספר אמרי פנחס, שער ד' שער סדר היום אות סא, מובא בספר שיעורים ב'עמוד התפלה' ע"י האדמו"ר מקאמרנא בית שמש, ע' 88)