

**STRATEGIES & TACTICS
FOR IMPROVING
THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE
OF PRAYER**

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**Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel
5767 - 2007**

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Israel 5765
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Preface

Every Jew realizes that prayer occupies a very large place in Jewish ritual, Jewish law and Jewish thought. Every time a Jew recites a blessing – even the simplest blessing – that blessing is a prayer. Whether it is a one-line blessing that takes all of 15 seconds to recite or the almost endless prayers of Yom Kippur, Jews are always praying. As a result, a veritable library of books has been written about prayer. So why, you ask, is there need for yet another book on prayer?

All the books concerning Jewish prayer can be divided into three neat categories: (1) Books explaining the content of the prayers; (2) books summarizing the laws and customs of prayer; and (3) books about the philosophy and theology of prayer.

This book will create a fourth category. The purpose of this book is to open the discussion of how we are to achieve a true spiritual experience while praying.

The first section, “Essays,” deals with the topic from a theoretical perspective. Is prayer a spiritual act? What are the goals of prayer? Is it necessary to have a spiritual experience while praying?

Certainly the central assumption of this work is that Jewish prayer is primarily a spiritual act that possesses great potential for heightened spiritual experience. The question that remains is how does one attain the spiritual goals of prayer? The answers to this one question form the main body of this work in the section called, “Strategies & Tactics for Improving the Spiritual Experience of Prayer.”

The assumption is that what works for one person does not necessarily work for the next person. Therefore the information is presented as a collection of sources in Hebrew and English accompanied by notes and comments that will assist you, dear reader, to draw your own conclusions how this idea or that idea can be turned into a tool you can use for heightening and enhancing your prayer experience.

It is hoped that you will return to these sources and others you will discover for yourself again and again to draw from them inspiration and knowledge that will affect the way you encounter God through prayer.

David Jay Derovan
Israel, May 2005

The Essential Nature of Prayer

Introduction

Mankind has always tried to communicate with God. When the communication is verbal, we call it prayer. Thus, prayer and praying have been an essential part of religion and religious activity from time immemorial. Indeed, Jewish prayer began with the first Jew, Avraham, who prayed for the people of Sodom, for example.¹ The Bible is filled with innumerable instances of private and public prayer, with prayers uttered just once and prayers to be said again and again. Jews continued to pray throughout the Talmudic and post-Talmudic periods, the result being the prayers contained in our *Siddur*, the consecration of the synagogue as the appropriate place to pray, the creation of the *Tallit*, the training of the *Chazzan* (cantor) to sing the right melodies and a complex of detailed laws and customs which helps us bring all the elements together properly.

Yet, despite it all, it is still relevant to ask, "What is the point of it all? Why pray? What are trying to accomplish through prayer?"

Part I - The Purpose of Mitzvot

To answer the question concerning the purpose of prayer, it is first necessary to understand the overall purpose of *Mitzvot*. The true nature of *Mitzvot* is very often misunderstood. The common conception of *Mitzvot* is that they are the purpose of Torah. While it is certainly true that God gave us the Torah so we may perform His commandments, it is a mistake to view the *Mitzvot* as the end toward which we strive. Rather, *Mitzvot* are the means for achieving the true goal.

A quotation from the *Gemara* serves as proof of this idea. The *Gemara* in *Bava Metzia* says the Second *Beit HaMikdash* was destroyed because the Jews at the time did not behave beyond the letter of the law, *Lifnim MiShurat HaDin* - לפנים משורת הדין. If they did not practice *Mitzvot* beyond the letter of the law, then that means that they at least complied with the law itself! So why was the Temple destroyed if they were all halacha-abiding Jews? The answer lies in the fact that they went through the motions without achieving the goal. It is like assembling all the requisite tools and materials to build a chair, potting around in garage for a week and in the end there is no chair.

What, then, is the overall goal of *Mitzvot*? The purpose of *Mitzvot* is to achieve a life of *Kedushah*, sanctity, as we say at least twice a day in the *Shema*:

למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצוותי והייתם קדושים לאלקיכם.

¹ See *Berayshit* ch. 18.

So you will remember and do all of My commandments and you will be holy to your Lord.²

If *Mitzvot* are the goal, then the verse should end with the word, "commandments – מצוותי." Instead, the verse continues and says that we are expected to do *Mitzvot* so we may become holy.

A life of *Kedushah* means two things: First and foremost it means that as we dedicate ourselves to God, we are to make spiritual contact with Him. God yearns for those fleeting moments when we enter His presence and are soulfully aware that we have indeed done so. Torah and *Mitzvot* are our way of achieving numerous and various spiritual experiences, experiences which we share with God.

The second goal is the molding of the individual into a unique complex of attitudes, ideals, virtues and characteristics which allow us to behave in a manner that brings to the fore our *Tzelem Elokim*, our divine image. The cutting edge of proper Jewish living, of this second goal, is to translate all the Torah we have learned and the *Mitzvot* we have performed into our everyday, mundane, out-in-the-street behavior.

Obviously, these two goals work hand in hand. By turning our ritual behavior into genuine spiritual experiences of God's presence, we affect the way we allow Torah to influence the rest of our lives. And by permitting Torah to permeate into our hearts and minds, to affect and help define the way we behave in business, on the bus or anywhere, we enhance our capability to reach new spiritual heights.

the goals of individual *mitzvot*

Indeed, the performance of each *Mitzvah* helps us achieve the overall goal of God's Torah. These goals fit into the overall scheme of things the way a puzzle piece snaps into those around it to help form the total picture. However, like the puzzle pieces, each *Mitzvah* has its own individual set of goals, its own shape and content.

The specific set of primary goals that we are to achieve through each *Mitzvah* can always be divided into two categories. These categories are the cognitive (intellectual) and the affective (emotional, spiritual) aspects of every *Mitzvah*. Each *Mitzvah* is filled with symbolism and intellectual content. In performing the *Mitzvah*, I am reminded of all this content. When I have finished performing the *Mitzvah*, I remember the "message" conveyed by the *Mitzvah* and allow this information to affect the way I conduct my daily life. And if the ritual does not actively include the content, then I must try to bring the content to mind. "An ignoramus cannot be a pious person."³ The way to accomplish this is by studying Torah. The more I study, the more I will know and remember when the time comes.

The affective, experiential aspect of *Mitzvot* is usually ignored. On the whole, it is not taught in Jewish schools. Most people are uncomfortable discussing it because they are ignorant of it. This is a gross mistake. Just as a coin which is imprinted on only one side is useless, so too, a *Mitzvah* which achieves only one half of its goals is essentially useless. The performance of *Mitzvot* is meant to be moving emotionally and spiritually. One is supposed to have an experience, in the fullest sense of the word, while doing a *Mitzvah*. Somehow, the *Mitzvah* has to touch the soul, not just the mind. Herein lies the spiritual content of the *Mitzvah*. The proper performance of the *Mitzvah* produces a spiritual experience which stays with the individual after the actual act has been

² *Bamidbar* 15:40.

³ *Avot* 2:6.

completed. It also affects the individual, changes him/her, adding and expanding the *Kedushah* in his/her life.

Now that the true nature of *Mitzvot*, in general, has been clarified, we can turn our attention once again to the *Mitzvah* of prayer.

Part II - The Goals of Prayer

The definition of the goals of prayer is to be found in the *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Cha'yim*:

סימן צח - צריך שיהיה לו כוונה בתפילתו

סעיף א': המתפלל צריך שיכוון בלבו פירוש המילות שמוציא בשפתיו, ויחשוב כאלו שכינה כנגדו, ויסיר כל המחשבות הטורדות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפילתו. ויחשוב כי אלו היה מדבר לפני מלך בשר ודם היה מסדר דבריו ומכוין בהם יפה לבל ישל, קל וחומר לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא, שהוא חוקר כל המחשבות. וכך היו עושים חסידים ואנשי מעשה שהיו מתבודדים ומכוונים בתפילתם עד שהיו מגיעים להתפשטות הגשמות ולהתגברות כח השכלי, עד שהיו מגיעים קרוב למעלת הנבואה...

Chapter 98 - The Obligation to Pray with the Proper Concentration

Section 1: The one who prays must wholeheartedly concentrate on the meaning of the words which he utters with his lips. He must imagine that he stands in the presence of God. He should remove all other thoughts [from his mind], until his consciousness and concentration are completely absorbed with his prayer. He must imagine that if he were speaking before an earthly king, he would carefully compose his words and concentrate on them so as not to falter, all the more so [when speaking] before the King of all kings, the "Holy One, blessed be He", who sees to the very heart of all thoughts. This was the practice of the early pious people and men of good deeds. They would meditate in solitude and concentrate on their prayers until they achieved a transcendent spiritual state wherein their soul overpowered their body, thus approaching a state of prophecy...

When the author of the *Shulchan Arukh* says, "Wholeheartedly concentrate on the meaning of the words - שיכוון פירוש המילות", he is referring to the cognitive goal of prayer. The prayers are loaded - almost overloaded - with content. Each word, each sentence, each paragraph and the combination thereof is filled with meaning. These are the words or arrows which we fling heavenward in an attempt to get our message to God. Yet these same words/arrows are aimed at us, at our hearts. Therefore, we must understand the words that we pray. Halachically, I am allowed to say the prayers in any language I understand, because I must concentrate on the meaning of what I say so that I may come away from the act of prayer filled with knowledge of God, and His relationship to the world and to me personally.⁴

⁴ Note: Only the first line of שמע ישראל - *Shema Yisra'el* must be said in Hebrew, for no translation can even begin to catch the nuance and meaning of these words.

If that was the totality of prayer, then we would have no need for synagogues, we would not have to say the prayers using our mouths, instead we could sit on the couch in our living room with our feet up and sight-read them. However, there is a flip side to this coin. The rest of the quotation from the *Shulchan Arukh* details the second goal of prayer, the experience of prayer, which is described in the following manner:

ויסיר כל המחשבות הטורדות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפילתו
"He should remove all other thoughts [from his mind], until his consciousness and concentration are completely absorbed with his prayer."

This means that to achieve the experience of prayer one has to remove every intruding thought and stimulus from the conscious mind, to the point that all that remains is the content of the prayers. This is *Kavanah* (literally, concentration) in its purest form. The *Shulchan Arukh* mentions the early *Chasidim*⁵ who used a technique called *Hitbodidut*, a form of solitary meditation, to achieve this heightened state of concentration. While this state of pure concentration of the conscious mind on the prayer is not easy to attain, it is truly the equivalent of prophecy - נבואה. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once wrote that prayer and prophecy are really the same thing. The only difference is who picks up the phone and dials, so to speak. When God talks to me, it is prophecy. When I talk to God, it is prayer. The experience can be the same, or almost so, as the *Shulchan Arukh* points out.

it's not easy!

The goals of prayer can be summarized as follows: The cognitive goal is to communicate the content of the prayers to God, while letting them speak to me. The affective goal is to have a spiritual experience which is almost the equivalent of prophecy, a true encounter with God.

It is not easy to achieve these goals. It is difficult to concentrate sufficiently throughout the entire prayer service on the meaning of the words. It is even more difficult to achieve a state of total conscious concentration. Maybe that is why we pray three times daily; practice makes perfect! In any event, it is vital that we each try as hard as possible to attain the goals of prayer. On the one hand it takes very little physical effort to pray. On the other hand, if we do it right, we will feel the very presence of God Himself, an experience which would truly affect every aspect of our lives.

Prayer in the context of the *Shulchan Aruch* and in our discussion as well refers to the *Shemonah Esray*, also known as the *Amidah*. This series of nineteen blessings, recited silently three times daily, is both the epitome and the essence of Jewish prayer.

Part III - Two Models of Prayer

Now that we understand the complementary goals of prayer, we can now turn our attention to two different ways to achieve the spiritual, experiential goal of prayer. The *Gemara* in *Berachot* (26b) presents us with a disagreement between Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah and Rav Yehoshu'a ben Levi. As we shall see these two sages present us with two models of prayer.

⁵ Literally: *pious people*, not the followers of the Baal Shem Tov, but extremely pious people who lived in the time of the Mishnah, centuries before the beginning of the Chassidic movement.

It has been stated: Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah said, "The patriarchs established the prayers" (i.e. the daily recital of the *Shemonah Esray*). Rav Joshua ben Levi said, "The prayers were established as the counterpart of the daily public sacrifice."

There is a *Beraitah* in accord with Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah, and there is a *Beraitah* in accord with Rav Joshua ben Levi.

There is a *Beraitah* in accord with Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah: Avraham established *Tefilat Shacharit*, as it says, "Abraham rose early in the morning to the place where he had stood" (*Berayshit* 19:27). "Standing" refers to prayer, as it says, "Then Pinchas stood up and prayed" (*Tehilim* 106:30). Yitzchak established *Tefilat Minchah*, as it says, "Yitzchak went out to talk in the field before evening" (*Berayshit* 24:63), and "talking" refers to prayer, as it says, "A prayer of the afflicted when he faints and pours out his talk before the Lord" (*Tehilim* 203:1). Ya'akov established *Tefilat Ma'ariv*, as it says, "He lighted upon the place" (*Berayshit* 28:11), and "lighting" refers to prayer, as it says, "Therefore do not pray for this people nor lift up pray nor cry for them nor light upon me in their regard" (*Yirmi'yahu* 7:16).

And there is a *Beraitah* in accord with the view of Rav Joshua ben Levi: Why did they say that the morning prayer [may be recited] until midday? For the daily morning sacrifice was offered until midday. Rav Yehudah says, "[It may be offered] until the fourth hour, for the daily morning sacrifice was offered until the fourth hour." Why did they say that the afternoon prayer [may be recited] until the evening? Because the daily afternoon sacrifice was offered until the evening. Rav Yehudah says, "Until the *Pelag HaMinchah* (an hour and a quarter before sunset), for the daily afternoon sacrifice was offered until the *Pelag HaMinchah*." Why did they say, "The evening Prayer has no fixed time"? For the limbs and fat pieces not burned up by the evening were offered all night long. Why did they say, "The additional prayer (*Musaf*) [may be recited] all day"? Because the additional sacrifice was offered all day. Rav Yehudah says, "Until the seventh hour, for the additional sacrifice was offered until the seventh hour." . . .

Does this then refute the position of Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah? Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah would say to you, "In any event, I maintain that the patriarchs instituted the recitation of the prayers then the rabbis connected them to the sacrifices." If you do not maintain this view, who established the *Musaf* according to Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah? [The conclusion is] What happened was that the patriarchs instituted the recitation of the prayers then the rabbis connected them to the sacrifices.

Before we consider the content of what they say, it is important to note that there is really no *Machloket* (disagreement). At the end of the discussion quoted above, Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah agrees with Rav Yehoshu'a ben Levi. Does Rav Yehoshu'a agree with Rav Yosi? The answer is yes! In the *Berayshit Rabbah* on the verse, "He lighted upon the place – ויפגע במקום" (*Berayshit* 28:11), it is Rav Yehoshu'a ben Levi - the one who bases the *Tefilot* on the daily sacrifice – who quotes the *Beraitah* used by the *Gemara* to support his opponent, Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah.

So, if there is no argument, then what are they arguing about? Why does the *Gemara* present seemingly opposing opinions?

In essence, these two sages are arguing as to where to put the emphasis in prayer. Indeed, they are presenting us with two models of prayer. Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah teaches us that our prayers must be like those of the patriarchs. We must pray as they prayed.

A close examination of the context of the verses quoted as proof texts by the *Beraitah* reveals that in each instance Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov were petitioning God for something. As he watches God begin the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Avraham prays that God save Lot and his family. Yitzchak goes to Be'er Lachai Ro'i, where his step-mother Hagar met the angel. He goes there to pray for his own unique prophetic experience, different from that of his father. Ya'akov leaves home for the first time. As he beds down for the night, he prays that God will protect him. Our quick summary does not really do justice to the complexity of the episodes and personalities involved. However, we can see the common thread that binds them together: The model of prayer of the *Avot*, the patriarchs, is to petition God for something we need, whether for ourselves or for someone close to us.

Rav Yehoshu'a ben Levi does not reject the concept of the prayer of the *Avot*. Rather, he offers a counter suggestion as to the most appropriate way to prayer: Our prayer must be modeled on the sacrifices. The sacrifices provide both the precedent for when we should pray and the model of how we should pray. The champion of this point of view and the one who must fully explain it is Rav Cha'yim Voloshin.

worship for god alone - עבודה לעורך גבוה

The most commonly known method for achieving the goals of prayer is *Kavanah*. This concept is explained as having the proper intention in fulfilling the Mitzvah or as intense concentration while praying.⁶ However, there is an alternative opinion which cuts to the very core of the prayer experience.

The proof text which is quoted by the *Midrash* and reiterated by the Rambam⁷ comes from the beginning of the second paragraph of the *Shema*:

ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם.

To serve (worship) Him with all your heart and with all your *Nefesh*.⁸

The Rabbis⁹ ask rhetorically, "What is the service of the heart?" and they answer, "It is prayer." Reb Cha'yim Voloshin, in his *magnum opus*, *Nefesh HaChayim*,¹⁰ cogently points out that the verse modifies the verb, "service" or "worship," with two phrases, not one. Thus, he concludes that there are two levels to prayer. The first is *Avodah SheBaLev*, service of the heart. This is defined as the *Kavanah* involving proper intention and concentration. Indeed, he summarizes this level of prayer in a few short paragraphs. The higher level of prayer requires a discussion which stretches over fifteen chapters and

⁶ See the explanation of the quotation from the *Shulchan Arukh* above.

⁷ Moshe ben Maimon, Rambam, *Mishnah Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Laws of Prayer, 1:1*.

⁸ *Devarim* 11:13. The *Peshat* of the word *Nefesh* is person or life. It does not mean "soul" on a *Peshat* level. However, on a *Derash, Rimes* or *Sod* level, it does often refer to the soul of a person.

⁹ *Sifray* ad. loc.

¹⁰ Rabbi Cha'yim of Voloshin, *Nefesh HaCha'yim, Sha'ar II*.

occupies about twenty-five percent of his book. This higher level is called "worship for God alone - עבודה לצורך גבוה."

Reb Cha'yim concentrates his discussion of prayer on *Shemonah Esray*. This string of nineteen *Berakhot* is the epitome of Jewish prayer. It is the central focus of every prayer service; it contains all three kinds of prayer: Praise, petition and thanks. It is the vehicle for fulfilling the Mitzvah obligation to pray. Thus, it is crucial, in our context, to remember something else regarding the *Shemonah Esray*, as Reb Cha'yim says:¹¹

Those who know will understand by themselves that it was necessary that 120 elders (sages), among them a number of prophets, authored this little petition or this short prayer (i.e., the *Shemonah Esray*). Through their holy spirit (*Ru'ach HaKodesh* - רוח הקודש) and their high-level prophecy, the pathways through the secrets of creation (*Ma'aseh Berayshit* - מעשה בראשית) and the *Merkavah* (מעשה מרכבה - i.e. God's Throne of Glory as described in the beginning of the Book of *Ezekiel*) were clear to them and on that basis they established the text of all the *Berakhot* and prayers. They used those words specifically, for they understood which path that the light produced by each word takes to its resting [place in the spiritual worlds]; since [the light] is very necessary for the repair (*Tikkun* - תיקון) of many [spiritual] worlds and the forces on high and the order of the *Merkavah*. This is what they said, "[God on] high requires the worship (*Avodah* - עבודה)."¹²

Reb Cha'yim's statement is of utmost significance. The "repair (*Tikkun* - תיקון) of many [spiritual] worlds," meaning the spiritual "work" performed by and the immense spiritual impact of the recital of the *Shemonah Esray*, is only possible because the composition of this prayer included the element of prophecy. The prophetic underpinnings provide a metaphysical connection between the uttering of these words and the enormous spiritual experience they afford, as well as the positive waves they make against the shores of the heavens.

prayer instead of sacrifice

The next step is to take advantage of this power inherent in the *Shemonah Esray*. To reach the stage of prayer described by the *Shulchan Arukh* as close to prophecy, the point where the human makes contact with the divine and feels the presence of the *Shekhinah*, requires the understanding that prayer is the job of the soul. We begin the *Shemonah Esray* by taking three steps back and then three forward. We end it the same way, for this symbolizes our stepping out of our plane of existence to enter God's plane of existence. We cannot meet God in the physical world. We cannot use our five senses to reach out to Him, for they can only "read" the physical and God is incorporeal. Therefore, we must reach out to Him with our souls. To do so in prayer, says Reb Cha'yim, means that we must remove ourselves, our ego, our own needs and concerns, when saying the *Shemonah Esray*. The basis of this idea lies in the very source of the *Shemonah Esray*: The daily sacrifice in the Temple. "The prayers were established to parallel the daily sacrifices¹³ which were burnt totally, given totally to [God on] high,

¹¹ *Nefesh HaCha'yim, Sha'ar II*, ch. 10.

¹² See *Shabbat 116b, Menachot 64a*.

¹³ *Berachot 26b*

man having no part in them whatsoever."¹⁴ The fact that the priests did not partake, nor anyone else for that matter, of the sacrifice indicates that it was solely for God. It was "worship for God alone - עבודה לצורך גבוה."

This is what Reb Cha'yim is talking about when he says that prayer must also be "with all your soul - בכל נפשכם."¹⁵

And what was quoted "[God put His voice] before His army"¹⁶ hints at this great principle of prayer, the rule concerning *Kavanah*: To concentrate only on adding strength to the *Kedusha* (i.e. the spiritual worlds). Just as a soldier casts aside all of his personal concerns and needs, willingly giving his all for the glory of the king, so, too, should a correct person direct all of his concentration and purity of his thought during prayer only for the purpose of giving strength to the holy worlds and with his voice to awaken the voice on high, to draw from it blessing and light for all, to remove the stench of impurity from the world, and to repair the universe through His kingship (may His name be blessed), [all this performed] without any [reference] to his own concerns or needs.

Reb Cha'yim keeps coming back to this point:¹⁷

If regarding the prayer of an individual concerning his pain, he must direct his concentration only toward the needs of [God on] high, then certainly, when reciting the words of the *Berakhot* of the *Tefila* (i.e. *Shemonah Esray*) set out by the holy *Anshay Knesset HaGedola*, it is proper not to concentrate on his own needs as reflected in the simple meaning [of the words], rather he should [concentrate only on the] needs of [God on] high, to draw additional and extended blessing and sanctity [down] to the [spiritual] worlds, [emanating] from His connection with them (as we have explained at length).

From the very first moment of mankind's creation, the Torah distinguishes between humans and the rest of God's creature. We have *Tzelem Elokim*, a soul and it is with this bit of implanted divinity that we function on this earth. However, the ultimate lesson to be learned from this, especially in the context of Torah and *Mitzvot*, is that our primary duty, obligation and job in This World to work with that soul, to do spiritual work. Thus, our words, deeds and thoughts have their greatest impact in the spiritual worlds: bolstering and strengthening them, drawing down God's divine essence (His blessing and sanctity), only to send it shooting back to God in a completion of the divine circle and cycle, connecting the *Malkhut* to the *Keter*¹⁸.

waging the mitzvah war

¹⁴ *Nefesh HaCha'yim, Sha'ar II*, ch. 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Yo'el 2*.

¹⁷ *Nefesh HaCha'yim, Sha'ar II*, ch. 12.

¹⁸ *Malkhut* is the lowest spiritual level; *Keter* is the highest spiritual level.

To accomplish this higher goal and to have the concomitant experience is not easy:¹⁹

When all is said and done, each person, according to his own intellect and level, must seek the proper tactics and find the [available] strategies to wage the Mitzvah war, to flee the confusion of impure thoughts, to calm his mind to perform the prayers properly. For us now, the prayers are the replacement for the sacrifices, which were totally dependent upon the thoughts of the priest. With incorrect thoughts he could make the sacrifice *Pigul* (unacceptable), while through his holy thoughts the sacrifices rose as a sweet smell before Him, may His name be blessed.

Now we can also understand the correct meaning and intention of the *Shulchan Arukh* in Section 98, which appears above:²⁰

For this, when one stands in prayer before his Creator, may His name be blessed, he should strip his body away from his soul (see *Shulchan Arukh Orach Cha'yim* sec. 98) by removing all the silly thoughts coming from his physicality, invading and clinging to his soul preventing his prayer from being purely soulful and his fulfillment of the divine will.

Thus, the kinds of *Kavanah* which are associated with the lower level of prayer become the foundations stones on which this level rests. By concentrating totally with complete, correct intention, we can overcome the impurities of thought which plague us during the recitation of the *Shemonah Esray*.

complete *Devaykut* - attachment to God

To achieve this higher level of prayer is to arrive at complete *Devaykut* - דביקות, attachment to God. It is the moment when our souls cling magnetically to their source:²¹

And as one says each word, which is powered by and is a part of his soul, one should attach his will to it, to give it and pour into it (each word) literally and totally his soul, to attach [one's soul] to the divine root of every word of the prayer, which reaches to the very highest [spiritual] levels in the world, as it says in the *Zohar*,²² "While his mouth and lips move, his heart should direct his will, he should rise higher and higher, to unite all in the secret of secrets, for it is there that all thoughts and desires are rooted in the secret residing in the Infinite (*Ayn Sof*²³ - אין סוף)."

God's will is the beginning of all creation. It is the foundation stone on which everything else, both spiritual and physical, rests. To have your heart and soul direct your will to rise so that it is in congruence with God's will is to rise to the highest

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. ch. 15.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Zohar*, Va'Yak'hel 213b.

²³ *Ain Sof* is the word used to denote God, Himself.

spiritual levels. This is why the Rambam teaches that when the *Shemonah Esray* is finished we take three steps back and bow first to our left-hand side, for we have finished conversing with God "face to face," soul to soul.²⁴

Reb Cha'yim Voloshin's understanding of prayer and his explanation of the nature of *Kavanah* is more than a nice theory. Our summary of his ideas does not do justice to the sheer power and force of his argument. To study *Sha'ar Bet* of the *Nefesh HaCha'yim* is ultimately a very moving experience. There is no question that Reb Cha'yim is correct, to the extent that it must become the basis for how a person actually prays. The individual must use every available halachic tactic to reach that moment of conversing "face to face" with God during the recitation of the *Shemonah Esray*. This is the meaning of prayer as sacrifice.

a question

However, there is something missing. The *Shemonah Esray* is a series of nineteen blessings. Thirteen of those blessings are petitions. We ask God for everything from wisdom to the rebuilding of Jerusalem and more. If the path to coming face to face with God requires me to set aside all of my personal and worldly concerns, then why is over half of my *Shemonah Esray* concerned with exactly those things?

Reb Cha'yim was well aware of this difficulty. His solution is hard to understand and even more difficult to put into practice. You and I have absolutely everything that God thinks we require says Reb Cha'yim. Thus, there is no point in asking God for anything for ourselves. Nevertheless, God is pained whenever we experience pain. When we feel need and the lack of something – even though we should not feel this way – God feels the same need and deficiency. Thus, to alleviate "God's pain," so to speak, we ask for what we *think* we need. When He grants us what we ask for, by extension, He removes His own pain. So, we petition God with thirteen out of nineteen blessings for God's sake, not for ours.

Of all of Reb Cha'yim's ideas, this is the most difficult one to accept. It is almost as if the perfect diamond developed a visible flaw.

REB LEVI YITZCHAK OF BERDITCHEV HAS THE ANSWER

"Less is more." This concept from modern architecture is the key to understanding Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev's contribution to our discussion. Reb Levi Yitzchak certainly accepts Reb Cha'yim's basic idea concerning *Tefilah*. The task is to ascend to God. However, Reb Levi Yitzchak adds that that is not enough. A little less mystical union with God and more concern about using the moment to positively influence what is going on back down on earth is what is necessary, says Reb Levi Yitzchak. A little less can be much more. Here is Reb Levi Yitzchak's presentation of these ideas:²⁵

First, we will explain a quotation from our Rabbis, of blessed memory: "Two descended... This one descended, this one did not descend; this one was answered and this one was not answered; this one prayed a perfect/complete prayer and this one did not pray a perfect/complete prayer." (*Rosh Hashanah* 18a) It is not comprehensible. It

²⁴ See the Rashba, Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, in his *Chiddushim al Aggadot HaShas* on *Berachot* 40b.

²⁵ *Kedushat Levi, Shir HaShirim* pp. 65a-b

should have said, "This one prayed a good prayer..." However, it can be explained: We see that there are *Tzaddikim* who accomplish what they desire with their prayers and there are *Tzaddikim* who do not accomplish.

The idea is this: This great *Tzaddik*, when he comes to the garden-court of the King of the universe's palace, realizing that he has come before the King he forgets what This Worldly matters he had to ask about, and [thus] does not ask. He only remains always attached to the King, for what is most pleasant for him if only to serve the Creator and to be a servant of the King. [Consequently,] he forgets all of his business.

Not so the *Tzaddikim* who are not on this level. Even though he (such a *Tzaddik*) stands before the King, he remembers his request, what he desires to ask about. Therefore, when the [first kind of] *Tzaddik* comes before the King and forgets his request concerning the This Worldly matters he had to ask about, he does not accomplish [anything]. The *Tzaddik* smaller than him, who remembers as he stands before the King his request and [actually] makes his request, he accomplishes.

The first *Tzaddik*, who does not remember his request [and does not] draw the *Shefa* (Divine effluence) into This World, is described as [one who did not pray] a perfect/complete prayer. It has no perfection because he does not draw the *Shefa*; he only thinks of matters of the World to Come, to be a servant of the Creator. The one, who also thought of his request, to draw the *Shefa* into This World, is described as [one who prayed] a perfect/complete prayer, because his prayer has perfection in his drawing the *Shefa* also into This World.

Whether you call it *Shefa*, Divine effluence or flow, or Divine beneficence or blessing or God's assistance and protection, our job in reciting the *Shemonah Esray* is to make it happen. The majority of the *Berachot* in *Shemonah Esray* are petitions. We stand there asking God for so many important things, just as our *Avot* did. Indeed, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev is the champion of Rav Yosi son of Rav Chaninah.

there is no argument

Just as the *Gemara* in *Berachot* ends the *Sugya*, the discussion, with everyone in agreement, we, too, can end our discussion of the two models of prayer by saying that they are both valid. There is no question that the battle to achieve proper and complete *Kavanah* means to offer our souls up on a silver platter to God, to ascend to His world and to encounter Him. At the same time, we must make every effort to be the *Tzaddik* who accomplishes something with his prayers. We must make every effort to convince God to grant us what we are asking for. These are the components of *Tefilah*. This is the true essence of prayer.

Removing Improper Thoughts in Prayer

A Strange Point of Departure

When a chick dies in its shell, how does its soul depart?
He said to them, "The [same] way it enters."²⁶

What a strange exchange from the *Gemara*! Do baby chicks have a soul? Why should we be concerned about how their supposed souls get through the shell of their eggs to fly up to heaven? And what a strange answer? Is it a serious answer or just a tongue-in-cheek response?

Truth to tell, the strangest thing about this unusual piece of Talmud is why Reb Nachman of Bratzlav²⁷ uses it as the basis for a discussion of a very serious problem: How do we remove unwanted, "foreign" thoughts from our consciousness as we say the *Shemonah Esray*?

To answer all of these questions, we must understand the significance of the *Shemonah Esray*. This will provide the appropriate background for understanding the issue of "foreign" thoughts.

The Experience of the Shemonah Esray

In the previous chapter,²⁸ after deciding that the penultimate prayer is the *Shemonah Esray*, the two goals of prayer are detailed. The first goal is the comprehension of the intelligent content of the *Shemonah Esray*. Rabbi Yosef Karo, in his *magnum opus*, the *Shulchan Arukh* described the way to attaining the second goal, the experience of prayer, in the following manner:²⁹

ויסיר כל המחשבות הטורדות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפילתו
He should remove all other thoughts [from his mind], until his consciousness and concentration are completely absorbed with his prayer.

To achieve the experience of prayer one has to remove every intruding thought and outside stimulus from the conscious mind, to the point that all that remains is the content of the prayers. The *Shulchan Arukh* mentions the early *Chasidim*³⁰ who used a

²⁶ *Talmud Bavli, Bekhorot 8b.*

²⁷ Reb Nachman of Bratzlav, *Likutay MaHaran*, Part I, section 26.

²⁸ See *The Essential Nature of Prayer* page 6 above.

²⁹ *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Cha'yim* sec. 98, paragraph 1.

³⁰ literally: *pious people*, not the followers of the Baal Shem Tov, but extremely pious people who lived centuries before the beginning of the Chassidic movement.

technique called *Hitbodidut*, a form of solitary meditation, to achieve this heightened state of concentration:³¹

וכך היו עושים חסידים ואנשי מעשה שהיו מתבודדים ומכוונים בתפילתם עד שהיו מגיעים להתפשטות הגשמות ולהתגברות כח השכלי, עד שהיו מגיעים קרוב למעלת הנבואה...

This was the practice of the *Chassidim*, the early pious people, and men of good deeds. They would meditate in solitude and concentrate on their prayers until they achieved a transcendent spiritual state wherein their soul overpowered their body, thus approaching a state of prophecy...

While this state of pure concentration of the conscious mind on the prayer is not easy to attain, it is truly the equivalent of *נבואה* - prophecy. Thus, the spiritual payoff, so to speak, can be enormous: A full-fledged experience of God's presence, His *Shekhinah*, can result from the moment of pure, uninterrupted prayer.

The Problem of Foreign Thoughts

While recognizing the goal, every generation of Jewish scholars has also recognized the great difficulty in achieving this highly spiritual moment. The problem is the intermittent or sometimes constant flow of unwanted, interrupting, strange and foreign thoughts; thoughts which have nothing at all to do with the content of the *Shemonah Esray*.

Truth to tell, these thoughts are only strange or foreign in the context of reciting the *Shemonah Esray*. There is nothing unusual in thinking about breakfast during the early morning hours or about work or our mother or politics or last night's T.V. show or about a million other things that occupy us on a daily basis. The problem is getting them out of our consciousness and keeping them out while concentrating on the words of the *Shemonah Esray*. Indeed, just as the author of the *Shulchan Arukh* teaches the goal, he also warns us of the problem. The following is the continuation of the above quotation:³²

ואם תבא לו מחשבה אחרת בתוך התפלה, ישתוק עד שתתבטל המחשבה, וצריך שיחשוב בדברים המכניעים הלב ומכוונים אותו לאביו שבשמים ולא יחשוב בדברים שיש בהם קלות ראש.

If another thought³³ comes to him during the prayer (i.e. the *Shemonah Esray*), he should be quiet until that thought has ceased; and he must think of things that subdue the heart and direct it towards his Father in the heavens; and he should not think of things which are frivolous.

Just as Rabbi Yosef Karo presents the spiritual-experiential goal of prayer as halacha, normative Jewish law, so, too, does he present the need to deal with foreign thoughts during prayer. Notice that he uses the term, "another thought," for in truth this kind of thought is not in and of itself strange. It is only foreign in the spiritual world of the *Shemonah Esray*. Notice, as well, that the mere mention of the problem is accompanied by suggestions as how to rid oneself of these strange thoughts.

³¹ *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Cha'yim* sec. 98, paragraph 1.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ A thought other than those associated with the recitation of the *Shemonah Esray*.

Removing Improper Thoughts

Here, then is the basic problem: How do we remove from our conscious mind thought of anything other than the content of our prayers as we recite the *Shemonah Esray*?

The opening gambit belongs to Rabbi Yosef Karo. He suggests three techniques: 1. Be silent. Stop praying and immediately employ the next method. 2. Think thoughts which will redirect your consciousness to God. 3. Do not think frivolous, light headed thoughts. In other words, make a conscious effort not to think about improper things.

Rabbi Yisra'el Me'ir HaCohen of Radin, in his *Mishnah Berurah* commentary on the *Shulchan Arukh*,³⁴ suggests a number of other methods. First he quotes from *Sefer HaGan*,³⁵ who suggests saying, "Fee, fee, fee," and then spitting on the floor. Even though the *Sefer HaGan* says not to spit fully but only to do something akin to making a raspberry, the author of the *Mishnah Berurah* then quickly quotes the *Magen Avraham*, who rejects this method entirely. "Who's to say," comments the *Magen Avraham*, "That this really works!?" In addition, continues the *Magen Avraham*, such "fee-fee-ing" and raspberry making constitutes a genuine interruption of the prayer which is not allowed!

In the end, the author of the *Mishnah Berurah* suggests that we follow the advice of Rabbi Yesha'yahu Hurwitz.³⁶ Try preventive medicine. Before starting the *Shemonah Esray*, pass your hand over your forehead three times and say each time, "Create for me a pure heart and renew within me a correct spirit."³⁷ While this might seem a bit puzzling to our scientific minds, it is not really an attempt to employ a magical incantation. It is really a symbolic way of creating the correct frame of mind, by wiping away any possibility of strange thoughts while asking God for assistance.

Rabbi Cha'yim of Voloshin³⁸ takes a different approach which is a tried and true method for enhancing one's concentration.

Rather, the essence of worship in prayer is that at the time a person utters a word of prayer, he conjures up in his mind the image of the letters of the word, and he should [simultaneously] intend to thereby add the power of sanctity, which will produce the result of adding to the sanctity and lights above.

Reb Cha'yim defines the purpose of prayer Kabbalistically. The idea is to use the spiritual force and power contained in each and every word of the *Shemonah Esray* to increase the sanctity and divine essence, i.e. the lights, in the spiritual worlds. To have that effect, one must use the Hebrew words and concentrate on their letters.³⁹ In addition to the spiritual ramifications of concentrating on the letters, this mental activity also relates to our problem, as Reb Cha'yim states in the next paragraph:

And for whoever creates a habit of doing this, it is a wonderful, tried and true remedy to remove from himself all bothersome, improper thoughts.

³⁴ *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Cha'yim* sec. 98, paragraph 1, subparagraph 2.

³⁵ Quoted by the *Magen Avraham* ad. loc.

³⁶ Author of the *Shenay Luchot HaBrit*.

³⁷ *Tehilim* 51:12.

³⁸ Rabbi Cha'yim of Voloshin, *Nefesh HaCha'yim, Sha'ar* II, end of ch. 13.

³⁹ See *The Essential Nature of Prayer* above.

Without the Kabbalistic overtones, the technique is a simple one. When you realize that a strange thought has entered your consciousness during the *Shemonah Esray*, stop the recitation. Look at the next word carefully and then close your eyes. Think of what the word looks like. Try to imagine the exact shape of the letters. Say the word and continue the *Shemonah Esray*. Your consciousness will be diverted from the strange thought and will return to the content of the prayer.

Removing Improper Thoughts According to the Chassidim

Beginning with Reb Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov and continuing with his disciples, the Chassidim invested a great deal of time, effort and thought to improve the experience of Mitzvah observance. Contrary to popular opinion, their approach was not a simplistic one of instilling joy through song and dance. The Chassidic masters were serious thinkers who endeavored to achieve new spiritual heights on a personal level and to take their Chassidim along with them. Thus, they became ardent students of the Kabbalah and taught both the theory and application of Jewish mysticism. This, of course, became one of the major bones of contention between the Chassidim and their opponents, the *Mitnagdim*.

What was true concerning *Mitzvot* in general was certainly correct concerning prayer. Prayer was and still is a major issue in Chassidic life and thought. Louis Jacobs, in a fine book titled, *Hasidic Prayer*,⁴⁰ devotes an entire chapter⁴¹ to the unique approach taken by the early Chassidim of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in dealing with the problem of foreign thoughts. The clearest example of the Chassidic method is found in the first quotation cited by Jacobs.⁴² Here is the complete citation from *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*:⁴³

ושמעתי בשם מורי מופת על זה מן המחשבות זרות שבאו לאדם באמצע תפילה מסוד השבירה ורפ"ח ניצוצין שצריך האדם לברר בכל יום, והם באין שיתקן אותם ולהעלותן. ואין מחשבה זרה של יום זה דומה למחשבה של מחר והוא בחון למי שנותן לב על זה. וכאשר שמעתי ממורי איך יתקן מחשבת זרות: אם הוא הרהורי נשים יכוין להעלותן ולדבקן בשרשן שהוא חסד, בסוד "ואיש אשר יקח אחותו חסד הוא",⁴⁴ ומחשבת עבודה זרה פגם בתפארת ישראל ודי בזה.

I heard in the name of my teacher (Reb Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov) a wondrous thing concerning the foreign thoughts that come to a person in the middle of prayer which come from the secret of the *Shevirah*, the "breaking", and the 288 sparks which a person must separate each day, that they come so he may repair them (*SheYetakayn* - שיתקן) and raise them. The foreign thoughts of one day are not the same as the thoughts of the next day. This is a tested thing, [known] to anyone who pays attention to it.

And I have heard from my teacher (Reb Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov) how to repair foreign thoughts: If he thinks of women, he should concentrate

⁴⁰ Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, Schocken Books: New York, 1978.

⁴¹ Ibid. "The Elevation of Strange Thoughts," pp. 104-120.

⁴² Ibid. p. 105.

⁴³ Rabbi Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, reprinted by Aggudat Bayt Vialepole: Jerusalem, תשל"ג, p. רנא. See also p. תרלב for a similar expression of the same idea.

⁴⁴ *VaYikra* 20:17.

on raising them (i.e. the thoughts) and attaching them to their root which is *Chesed*, loving kindness, through the secret of "And if a man takes his sister, it is *Chesed*."⁴⁵ And thought of idol worship is a flaw in *Tiferet Yisra'el*. Enough concerning this.

Reb Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye was a fervent disciple of Reb Yisra'el Ba'al Shem Tov. Although he had aspirations to follow his master as the head of the movement, he did succeed in becoming one of the early theorists of Chassidic thought. The above quotation from his *magnum opus*, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, first and foremost gives us a glimpse at the theological foundations of the Chassidic method.

According to the Kabbalah of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the *Ari HaKadosh*, the primary foundation of Chassidic thought along with the rest of the classical Rabbinic tradition, the purpose of life is to repair the world spiritually. The necessity for such a repair arose from the *Shevirat HaKaylim*, the breaking of the vessels, during the process of creation, which resulted in the sprinkling of sparks of divine light, the *Nitzotzot HaKedoshim*, among the material matter of This World. The repair work, called *Tikkun* - תיקון, is accomplished by gathering the 288 sparks of divine light⁴⁶ and returning them to their source by elevating them and raising them spiritually. In simple terms, this is what happens spiritually whenever a Jew performs a Mitzvah.

The Chassidim were unique because they publicly taught the theology of the Kabbalah and, more importantly, how to apply it to the observance of *Mitzvot*. Thus, Reb Ya'akov Yosef wrote that the foreign thoughts that impinge on a person's consciousness are not random ones resulting from his everyday interests and occupations. Rather, these are divinely inspired thoughts which contain within them the divine spark, the *Nitzotz*, which must be elevated to its proper root within the spiritual constellation of the *Sefirot*. And the proper time to do this is when the individual is already functioning on a higher, spiritual plane, namely, during the recitation of the *Shemonah Esray*.

Each thought has its own unique root in a particular *Sefirah*. Therefore, thoughts of anything sexual have their root in the *Sefirah* of *Chesed*, love. The proof text is unique for the context is the list of sexual encounters forbidden by the Torah, which include adultery and incest in all of its forms. "And if a man takes his sister, it is *Chesed*."⁴⁷ When the Torah describes an incestuous relationship between a sister and a brother as *Chesed*, it is trying to teach us that this is a perversion of *Chesed*, an aberration of true love. However, the Chassidim understood that the Torah was also hinting at the spiritual root of this phenomenon. Thus, carnal thoughts must be channeled properly so their divine essence is reattached to its divine root.

Needless to say, this understanding of foreign thoughts during prayer is an esoteric one and the resulting technique for dealing with them requires a superior knowledge of Kabbalah and its application to everyday life. As Jacobs describes, this method became a point of controversy among the early Chassidim. As a result it was quickly abandoned. It is too difficult to handle; it requires knowledge and understanding not readily found among laymen; its misapplication, like most Kabbalistic ideas, can lead to disastrous results.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, Schocken: New York, 1954, p. 268 and his footnote no. 73 where he refers to Rabbi Cha'yim Vital's *Etz Cha'yim*, ch. 18, sec. 1.

⁴⁷ *VaYikra* 20:17.

Removing Improper Thoughts According to Reb Nachman of Bratzlav

Even though the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching regarding foreign thoughts was eventually rejected by the mainstream of Chassidic thought, that is not to say that the Chassidim ceased to deal with the issue. This, too, is documented thoroughly by Louis Jacobs. Along with everyone he quotes, Jacobs cites two places where Reb Nachman of Bratzlav speaks of foreign thoughts.

In the first, long citation,⁴⁸ Reb Nachman firmly states that it is impossible for the mind to think of two things at the same time. Therefore, to rid oneself of foreign thoughts, all you have to do is to stop thinking of them and return to concentrating of the prayers.

The second quotation⁴⁹ presents the early Chassidic idea, as taught by Reb Ya'akov Yosef, but Reb Nachman states categorically that only great *Tzaddikim*, righteous ones, have the knowledge and ability to follow this method.

While Jacobs is content to close the book, so to speak, on Reb Nachman, in truth he had much more to say. In a striking passage,⁵⁰ Reb Nachman suggests that when a person anticipates crying while reciting *Tehilim* (*Psalms*) or other petitional prayers, they are actually obstructing the success of their prayers with a foreign thought, i.e. their concern for the need to cry! Reb Nachman has even more to say. Indeed, he suggests the following method for clearing foreign, strange thoughts from one's mind:⁵¹

When a person stands and prays according to the order (of the prayers) and pays no attention to foreign thoughts, by doing so, he is victorious over them and drives them away from himself. Then, as he proceeds through his prayers, he knocks them down. He cuts the hand off of this one and he cuts the leg off of this one, and likewise with the other parts of the body. The explanation is like what happens in war, when [a soldier] must go and pass between many murderers and attackers. If he is a courageous person who passes between them, then as he goes on his way, he chops a hand off of this one, etc.

Even though Reb Nachman's initial advice sounds so deceptively simple, just ignore the strange thought, in practice he suggests being as ruthless and as courageous as a soldier. Just hack your way through them! Push them out of your way! Chop them to pieces, so you can continue with the true job at hand, connecting spiritually with God through the *Shemonah Esray*. His metaphor is a more than a little colorful, but the point is well taken.

This advice based on a military metaphor is not Rav Nachman's last word. There is one more quotation that is very significant for it goes to the very heart of of the purpose and process of prayer.

⁴⁸ See Jacobs, *ob. cit.* p. 113, and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, *Likutay MaHaran*, part I, no. 233, p. 115a.

⁴⁹ Jacobs, *ob. cit.* p. 114, and Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, *Likutay MaHaran*, part I, no. 96, p. 96a.

⁵⁰ *Likutay MaHaran Taninah*, part II, no. 95, p. 41b.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* no. 122, p. 42a.

Back to the Beginning

The picture of Reb Nachman's opinions regarding strange thoughts would not be complete without one more quotation. This citation actually brings us back to our point of initial departure. Reb Nachman starts by quoting the *Gemara* in *Bekhorot*:⁵²

רציצא דמיית בבעותיה, היכא נפיק רוחא?
ואמר להו בהיינו דעאל.

When a chick dies in its shell, how does its soul depart?
He said to them, "The [same] way it enters."

The original text in Aramaic has been added here because Reb Nachman's explanation is based on a series of puns on the Aramaic words:

A *Retzitzah* (רציצא) is an *Efro'ach*, a chick. This refers to the *Tzaddik*, in the sense of "A *Tzaddik* will flourish in his days."⁵³ They asked him, [in the *Gemara*,] A *Tzaddik* who "kills" himself and gives up his soul in his prayers and petitions (*Be'Utay*⁵⁴), in which parts of the prayer must he give up his soul the most? He answered them, "*Haykha De'A'al* - היכא דעאל" meaning when he can elevate⁵⁵ the sparks of holiness, the *Nitzotzot HaKedoshim*, meaning when foreign thoughts enter him (i.e. his mind) and it is necessary to elevate them as is known. That is when he must give up his soul.

Reb Nachman understands that all of our questions are truly out of place. The riddle posed by the Rabbis and the puzzling answer they received are really just a metaphor for understanding a crucial point in the process of prayer.

As established previously,⁵⁶ prayer is the work of the soul. And when correctly performed, the act of prayer requires that we be ready to be *Moser Nefesh*, to give up our souls, to reach out to God spiritually, to connect with Him so that His very presence, His *Shekhinah*, is experienced.

It is so very difficult to achieve this moment, described in the *Shulchan Arukh* as the equivalent of prophecy. Comes along Reb Nachman and gives us sage advice: The way to achieve the very height of the prayer experience is to seize the moment when the experiential goal of prayer collides with the problem of foreign thoughts. And the solution is one and the same. Reb Nachman does not give up for one moment the basis of the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching as relayed by Reb Ya'akov Yosef of Polnoye. The foreign thoughts are divinely inspired. They are the cues as to when during the prayer, as we recite the *Shemonah Esray*, we have to literally pray with all our soul, when we must make the greatest spiritual effort. We cannot use the method as taught by Reb

⁵² *Talmud Bavli, Bekhorot 8b.*

⁵³ *Tehilim 72:7.* Here the pun is on the Hebrew translation of the Aramaic. A *Retzitzah* is Aramaic is an *Efro'ach* in Hebrew, which comes from the same root as the word, *Yifrach*, "will flourish" that appears in the quotation from *Tehilim*.

⁵⁴ Here the pun works off the Aramaic text. In the *Gemara* text, "his egg" appears as *Be'Utay*, which also means, in other contexts, "his petitions" as in petitional prayers.

⁵⁵ Here the pun is again on the Aramaic text. In Aramaic, *A'al* means to go in, while in Hebrew it becomes the word which means "to rise."

⁵⁶ See the chapter, *The Essential Nature of Prayer*.

Ya'akov Yosef, but we can learn from it. By being supremely conscious of what we are doing as we pray, we become aware of the impinging strange thought. We pause and with all our might we redirect our minds to the words of the *Shemonah Esray*, uttering them now with greater fervor, with increased concentration, with more soul. Thus, the spark of holiness hidden in the foreign thought rises higher and higher along with our very soul as it reaches upward to cling to its root in God, Himself.

"And So I Was Left Alone"

by Hillel Zeitlin

translated by David Derovan

A single tree stands in the field. Thunder and lightening burst around it fearfully. The storm rips at its branches as the wind howls by. Torrents knock against it; snow covers it; the cold attacks it. The tree stands stripped and solitary.

I live now, as before, among a nation and with a family, among many acquaintances and possibly a few friends. I listen to the heartbeat of the world as a newspaper reporter, and with all this -- I am alone among those of my generation -- alone and estranged -- a stranger among many who are close.

Estranged. For I am possibly the only Jew in this generation who, after many years of travel along mistaken roads of thought and mistaken roads of life, and after great spiritual torment and numerous sleepless nights, has acquired for himself the faith of the fathers, which says that many of the ills in the world can be "sweetened" through complete and pure *Teshuvah* (repentance) through the united *Tefilah* (prayer) of men, through their elevated souls, the power of their pure thoughts, the clearness of their vision, sanctity of their lives, humbleness of their spirit, the humility of their hearts, their unblemished love for all creation and their commiseration with every pain and trouble in the world.

If a calamity occurs it is possible to nullify its effects only through *Teshuvah* (repentance), *Tefilah* (prayer) and *Tzedakah* (charity) of the kind that is almost beyond the power of man to perform.

"Before the decree" and "after the decree."

Between the "before" and the "after" is a huge, awesome void.

And consider: "Whether it is sealed in clay or in blood."

The bitterness of a decree sealed in blood can be sweetened only through the uplifted *Teshuvah* (repentance) of the entire nation. Supposedly, all the "believers" among the nation of Israel realize this. Supposedly, there exist today many "believers" among the people of Israel, and yet, I have never come across ten Jews who will stand together with one irrevocably united heart and prostrate themselves before God on behalf of their people for forty days and nights as did Moses.

And it need not be for forty days and nights, for Moses was able to achieve success with five words "*el na refah na la* - please God, please cure her" (Numbers 12:13). All is dependent upon the depth and purity of the truth and the power of the request.

When I talked to people informally about purity of faith, about fear of heaven and refinement of virtues, there were those who agreed with me, at least they "said" they agreed with me. But when I began to knock at the doors of their hearts saying: "Please listen! You yourself can, with the strength of your *Teshuvah* (repentance) and *Tefilah* (prayer) and your united pleas, remove many of the misfortunes that have befallen the people of Israel. Nothing could be simpler. If you will invest all your strengths in *Tefilah*, you will pray for your brothers, just as Moses invested his soul in his prayer. And it will not be an incidental prayer, but a constant one, daily, and in time of need, one said every moment." When I began to speak in this manner there was not one among them who really understood me. They thought: "What is this fellow talking about? He must be crazy, an idiot." And those who wanted to justify my words said: "He means well with his words, but they are devoid of meaning."

And so, as said above, there are many "believers" among the people of Israel and when someone comes and reminds them of what they supposedly believe, namely that the same God who led Abraham out of Ur Kasdim and the people of Israel out of Egypt; who saved Daniel from the lions' den and Chananya, Mesha'el and Azaryah from the burning ovens; He who has helped us in all our times of need; He who has saved us from all who rose against us to destroy us in the course of four thousand years is still living today. And as His strength was without limit then, so it is now capable of saving us from the depths of the sea, the teeth of the lion and the wolves, who rip our children to pieces.

If only we call out to Him in truth as we did then, we will see wonders as the day we left Egypt, for He is a miracle-working God, performing wonders, hidden and revealed, at all times. When a man will approach them and tell them these things not as *Drash* (a sermon) and not as a Chassidic homily, but in the manner of "rise up and act, arise and fulfill the required and see wonders!" they answer weakly: "Yes, yes... sure that's the way it is; we are believers." And possibly, on the outskirts of their hearts, they might feel that "the man is right -- this is our belief." But probably, in the depths of their hearts, they feel differently, "What has happened happened; everything that you speak of is past, but now..."

And if you continue to talk to them of complete *Teshuvah* (repentance), which implies *Tzedakah* (charity) also, and good deeds and effective *Tefilah* (prayer), they answer: "And do we fail to pray? Every practicing Jew prays three times a day! Is this not enough?!"

If there only existed among all these "believers" a faith which is not one of pure habit, produced by environment or a chain of inheritance which is ever growing weaker, but instead a faith living as God Himself lives, living as if it had been personally given to them, then they would realize with all their inner senses that the mechanical *Tefilah* (prayer) of the synagogue, study houses and *Shtieblach* would perhaps allow them to fulfill their halachic obligations, but the use of such *Tefilah* (prayer) would never void any decrees or sweeten their bitterness, let alone, bring about the coming of the Messiah!

If "Torah without pain and trembling does not ascend heavenward," then certainly a *Tefilah* (prayer) which is simply a plea for compassion before God, ground up like a grain in the mill and kneaded solely in the mouth, without heart, without soul, without life, has no effect.

And even if a little *Kavanah* (concentration) or *Devaykut* (God directedness) is added to such prayer, it only helps if the concentration is pure and true and if the *Devaykut* is soulful and heartfelt. To rip asunder the heavens, to break open the locked gates of heaven, to become in truth a sharpened sword against all enemies, one must intensely concentrate every possible bodily and spiritual power into every single word of the prayers.

I have only to repeat the words of the ancients: "A man's prayers are not heard unless he puts his soul in the palm of his hand."

Have you paid attention to this request? Have you correctly understood the phrase "put his soul in the palm of his hand"? And if you have paid attention to this demand and you realize in truth what it means to put one's soul in the palm of one's hand, why do you think that with the habitual prayer of today's synagogues, prayer which in the time of Rabbi Judah HaLevi was considered no more than the chirping of a bird, that it is possible to come nearer to the One who has angels and seraphim fluttering about in fear of His decree?

And yet, I found no attentive ear to these simple, yet deep and true words. At times, I have heard some sort of answer, "sure... sure... possible... possible... Rabbi so and so said... Rabbi so and so said..."

And with this it all comes to an end.

And so I was left alone in my faith, which I acquired by the blood of my heart, among the congregation of "believers," whose God resides only in their mouths and on the outskirts of their hearts, and who place their ultimate faith in the solutions proposed by the heads of their respective political parties rather than in the power of *Teshuvah* (repentance), *Tefilah* (prayer) and *Tzedakah* (charity). And my hands are outstretched heavenward: "Open their eyes so they may see!"

[Note: Hillel Zeitlin died a martyr's death, garbed in Talit and Tefilin, on the way to Treblinka, on the eve of Rosh HaShanah, 1942.]

Playing Peek-A-Boo with God

Differentiating Between Knowledge and Experience

"It was one of the scariest moments of my life. I was responsible. It started with an audacious request. Real Chutzpah! I was in the middle of negotiating with God. He actually suggested that the entire nation be destroyed because they had created the Golden Calf. I couldn't believe He wanted to do that. So, I was busy trying to defend them.

"And that's when I popped the question. Show me Your glory, I said to Him. My heart was literally fluttering when I asked. I couldn't believe I had the guts to ask.

"You can't see My glory and live," He answered. I didn't reply and I tried not to let my disappointment show on my face, but you know He has a way of seeing through you. So, when He said, 'Here, you'll stand here next to Me. Then I will pass by you, place My hand over your eyes, and after I pass, I'll remove My hand and you'll see My back,'" I was dumbfounded. I simply did not know what to say.

"Before I knew it, I was whisked up and placed in a very narrow crack in the rock. The rock around me was ice cold. I tried to peek out of the crack, but a sudden dark storm had whipped up. Darkness descended upon me so I couldn't see anything. A chill of fear ran straight through me. I felt it in my bones. I was scared beyond belief.

"Suddenly the darkness lifted. There was a violent rush of wind that hammered my face as I peeked out from between the crack in the rocks and there He was! Clear as day, I saw the collar of a cloak and the knot of sparkling, finely polished black leather. I did a double take. It was a Tefilin knot. Then it was gone.

"The next thing I knew, I was picking myself up off the ground, right where I had stood before. It was bright and sunny on the top of Sinai. He was there, just as before. Then I understood.

"What did I understand? You ask. I understood everything and nothing. I understood that He was right all along. All of the knowledge that I or anyone else will ever accumulate concerning Him is really nothing compared to who He really is. And to know who He really is and to simultaneously live in this world is impossible."

What can we really know about God? He is so far removed, so different from anything in this world, that we cannot comprehend Him or know Him at all. At the most, we can understand a little bit of how He operates in this world. All the verses in the Bible, all the wise words of the Talmud Rabbis, all the philosophical and mystic works and teachings relate to the way God manifests (shows) Himself in our created world. Other than the most general, simple axioms, we can know nothing concrete and detailed about God.

In a sense this is what we mean by saying that God is “transcendent.” In Hebrew, we use the word, *Nistar*, meaning hidden. God is hidden from us. He is beyond the reach of our intellect.

This is why we refer to God in the third person. “אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצוונו” – that *He* has sanctified us with *His* commandments...” God is a *He* who is not here, so to speak; the hidden *He*.

“My name is also Moshe. My father’s name was Maimon. I, too, have something to contribute to this discussion.

“Despite my profession – oh, I am a medical doctor – I have devoted my entire life to studying the Torah. Despite his humble protestations, Moshe, our teacher, reached the highest level of prophecy, the level of talking to God face to face. This means that he was awake, not in any trance or dreaming when God spoke to him. It means that He heard God Himself speak to him, without any intermediary, such as an angel. Moshe wasn’t afraid when this happened, nor did he have to wait for any special occasion. Anytime he wished, he could speak to God. In a sense, he was constantly in God’s presence. Most unusual, don’t you think. I certainly think so.

“So, you see, on an on-going basis, for 40 years, God dealt with Moshe on a face to face basis.

“Oh and here is another piece of information you should have: When you conclude the Shemonah Esray, you must take three steps backward and bow three times. The first bow should be to your left-hand side. Why? Because that is God’s right-hand side.”

The Rashba (Rav Shlomo ben Aderet) explains that while reciting the *Shemonah Esray* we stand face to face with God! That is why every *Berachah* begins with *ברוך אתה* – blessed are *You*. This refers to God being immanent, present. We address God as “*You*” because He is literally right in front of us.

“Now it’s my turn. My name is Yona. I live in Spain, in a town called Gerona. I want to repeat to you something my teacher, a different Moshe, Moshe son of Nachman, said to me.

“If you think about what the other two Moshe’s have told us, then you will understand what my revered teacher, Moshe, said. He said that when you recite the Shemonah Esray you must ascend to heaven and stand with God. This, he said, is what the Gemara meant by saying that we must pray with the eyes lowered and with the heart raised.”

Before we recite the *Shemonah Esray*, we take three steps back and after the recitation we do the same thing again. Before the *Shemonah Esray*, we step out of our level of existence and climb three steps into God’s plane of existence. After rising to “heaven” and talking with God, we take our leave, so to speak, by backing down the same staircase. We retrace our steps, moving from His plane of existence back into our world. And we stop on the way to bow, first to our left, His right, because He is literally face to face with us.

“Now it’s my turn to tell a story. It’s called the Zen roller coaster ride. Once, at Disneyland, I rode the Space Mountain, indoor roller coaster. It was great! Zipping through the darkness, watching the lights, like stars, whip by. What a real thrill!

“Sitting next to me was an Asian gentleman, a total stranger. While my friends and I whooped and shrieked, he sat there in total silence. He didn’t utter a sound.

"When the ride finished, he climbed out of the seat and stepped onto the platform. He turned to face the roller coaster car and made a slight bow, turned and walked away.

"Was the ride thrilling for him just as it was for me? I guess so. I assume that's why he bowed. Everyone reacts in his own way. For him it was a Zen roller coaster ride. His emotional experience was internalized, while we, the loud Americans, yelled and screamed, playing out our experience for all to hear.

"Do I understand what happened on that roller coaster ride? Not really, but it was a tremendous, powerful experience that I will never forget, just like I'll never forget the nice little Asian fellow who took the Zen roller coaster ride with me."

There is a sharp difference between knowledge, intellect and understanding as opposed to experience. We all have limited knowledge and understanding of things. Few of us know how a car really works, but we have had the experience of riding in one or driving one. Do you really know how electricity works? What happens in those copper wires? I don't know, but I've experienced a mild electric shock, so I know experientially that the electricity is there.

Moshe *Rabbenu* saw God face to face. "Face to face," as Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam) explained to us, is the way we describe the *experience* of Moshe *Rabbenu's* prophecy, his *experience* of God. However, Moshe, himself, taught us that even his understanding of God was next to nothing, despite all he did know.

In the end, as Rashba and *Rabbenu Yonah* remind us, we, too, can experience God. We'll never truly comprehend God. In that sense, He is hidden and removed from us. However, we, too, can experience God's presence. Three times a day in *Shemonah Esray*, and innumerable times every day, with every *Berachah* we recite, we can rise to His plane of existence, to stand beside Him, to be with Him, to speak to Him face to face.

The very fact that we are given these words to recite means that God is reaching out to us. All we have to do is reach out and take His hand, and be with Him. Indeed, He is with us always. He's ready at a moment's notice to come out of hiding and turn to us with His face beaming with warmth and love.