

LESSON ELEVEN
THE GREAT REVIVALIST MOVEMENT: CHASIDISM, PART
TWO, THE ROLE OF PRAYER and THE BA'AL SHEM TOV'S
SUCCESSORS

TEXT ONE --- a story of Zussia, disciple of Dov Ber

...Zussia was a disciple of the holy Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch. But he was a most remarkable pupil, this Zussia! In all the years he spent at Mezeritch, he never heard a single exposition of the word of God from the lips of his famous teacher. The holy Dov Ber would open the book and begin to read: *And the Lord has spoken...* and that was enough for dear Zussia. He was seized by such ecstasy as soon as he heard those four words that he was unable to listen further. This happened each time. Whenever he heard the words, *The Lord has spoken...* he was carried away in rapture. He would begin to shout at the top of his voice: "The Lord has spoken! The Lord has spoken!" and would not stop, so that his famous fellow-disciples were obliged to put him out into the courtyard to have some peace and quiet. Zussia offered no resistance. He had no idea at all what was going on. His whole body shook. In the courtyard he would continue his shouting: "The Lord has spoken! The Lord has spoken!" and throw himself about like an epileptic. It was always a long time before he quieted down. When he was finally able to return, the master's exposition would already be over long since. Thus it was that Zussia never heard a single exposition by the holy Dov Ber. We call this sort of ecstasy **hitlahavut**.

TEXT TWO --- **Keter Shem Tov**, #168

Before beginning to pray, one should reflect that he is prepared to die while praying, as a result of his concentration. There are actually some whose concentration in prayer is so intense that, were nature left to itself, they would die after only five or six words in the presence of the blessed God. Once he thinks of this, he will say to himself: "Why should I have any hidden motive or pride while praying," since he is prepared to die after only a few words. In reality, it is the blessed God's great mercy that He gives him strength to complete his prayer and remain alive.

TEXT THREE --- Kedushat Levi, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, p. 290a

A person should (always) pray with great **hitlahavut**. However, at present, due to our many transgressions, we have such weakened consciousness, we are not able to begin and immediately pray with great **hitlahavut**, but only reach such vitality halfway through our service. However, when the righteous Messiah comes--may it be soon!--then all will know the Lord, as it is written: *The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea* (Isa. 11:9). Then we will immediately be able to begin (prayer) with **hitlahavut** and great fire.

TEXT FOUR --- Shulchan Arukh, O.H. 98:1

One who prays must direct his heart to the meaning of the words he brings forth from his lips, as if the **Shekhinah** were before him. He must remove all troubling thoughts, leaving only his pure intention in prayer. He should consider it as if he were speaking before a king of flesh and blood, for whom he would order his words carefully and with much intentionality, so that he would not stumble. All the more should he do so before the king of all kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who plumbs all thoughts. This is what the pious (**chasidim**) and men of accomplishment would do, sitting in solitude and directing their prayers until they would be stripped of corporeality, and strengthen their intellect until they come near the level of prophecy. And if some other thought would come to them during prayer, they would be silent until this thought would be nullified, thinking of matters which would subdue the heart and redirect it towards the Heavenly Father, and not of matters which divert them.

TEXT FIVE --- Tzava'at Ha-Rivash, #62

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself, what am I?” (**Pirkei Avot** 1:14) When in prayer, you must be stripped of corporeality and not feel your self-existence in this world. This is what Hillel meant in saying: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me”; if I arrive at the state where I no longer know or feel myself, not knowing if I am in this world or not, then I no longer fear stray thoughts. For what stray thought can occur to me!

But “if I am for myself,” if I consider myself as having separate existence in this world, then, on the contrary, I am regarded as nothing, so “what am I,” what is my service worth before the blessed God? For then, stray thoughts disturb me, and I am as nothing in this world. The essential purpose of one’s creation in this world is Divine service, but I cannot do this (properly) because I am disturbed by stray thoughts.

TEXT SIX --- Kedushat Levi, Pekudei, p. 176

...There are those who serve the blessed God with their human intellect, and others whose gaze is fixed as if on **Ayin** (nothingness), and this is impossible without Divine help...He who is granted this supreme degree, with Divine help, to contemplate the **Ayin**, loses the reality of his intellect and he is as if stricken dumb...but when he returns from such a contemplation to the essence of (his) intellect, he finds it full of the Divine splendor (**shefa**).

TEXT SEVEN --- Tzava’at Ha-Rivash, #38-39

Do not recite too many Psalms before prayer, so as not to weaken yourself and not be able to say the mandatory prayers of the day, i.e., the Hymns of Praise (**Pesukei d’Zimra**, the opening segment of the daily morning service), **Sh’ma Yisrael** (and its blessings), and the **Amidah**, with great **devekut**. If you spend your strength on other preparations before prayer (you will not be able to do this). Rather, begin by saying these primary prayers with **devekut**, and if the Blessed God grants you additional strength, say some Psalms and Song of Songs with **devekut**. Similarly, before **Ne’ilah** on Yom Kippur, recite the machzor with **katnut** (lesser consciousness), so that afterwards you will be able to pray (**Ne’ilah**) with (great) **devekut**.

TEXT EIGHT --- a story of the Ba’al Shem Tov

Once the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples were on a journey. In a forest along the way, they chanced upon an abandoned synagogue and decided to pray the **Mincha** service there. The disciples opened the door and invited their master to be the first to enter. Just as he was about to step inside, the holy Ba’al Shem Tov stopped and would not cross the threshold. The **chasidim** were perplexed but reluctant to

question their master. But after a while, when the sun began to set and it would soon be too late for **Mincha**, they summoned up the courage to ask why he would not enter. The Ba'al Shem Tov replied, "I can't go in because it is so crowded; there is no room for us." The **chasidim** were astounded, because the synagogue was empty. Taking note of their confusion, he explained: "A prayer, when uttered sincerely and wholeheartedly, always sprouts wings and soars upward to the Throne of Glory of the Creator Himself. But I sense that the people who once prayed here had no **kavannah**. Their prayers no wings and collapsed and fell upon another, so that the building is now densely packed with dead, wingless prayers--and there is no room for us."

TEXT NINE --- Ben Porat Yosef, p. 38d-39a

I heard a teaching in the name of my teacher (the Ba'al Shem Tov) on the Talmudic directive: "Rabbi Zeira said: Whoever says **Sh'ma, Sh'ma**, is silenced. Rav Pappa said to Abaye: 'Perhaps (he repeated himself because) he did not have **kavannah** at first.' Abaye answered: 'Who treats one's relationship with Heaven as a casual friendship? If he didn't have proper **kavannah** at first, he deserves to be jabbed with the blacksmith's poker until he does!'" (Talmud, Berakhot 33b-34a)

And my teacher challenged this, saying: "But the question still remains! Perhaps the person actually did not have proper **kavannah** at first, and now wants to fulfill his responsibility and pray with proper **kavannah**! Furthermore, why did Rabbi Zeira choose the **Sh'ma** in explaining this law, rather than some other verse? The Ba'al Shem Tov answered by examining the meaning of the acceptance of the responsibility of the Kingship of Heaven (**kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim**). One is obligated to believe that *the whole earth is filled with His blessed glory*, and no place is devoid of His Presence...even with all one's thoughts! His blessed reality is within them, and every thought has in it the entire Divine being.

So if an unseemly or strange thought comes to a person during prayer, (he should understand that) it came so that he can rectify and elevate it. If he does not believe this to be so, it indicates that his acceptance of the responsibility of the Kingship of Heaven is not complete, for he denies God's Presence (within the thought). This is how we can understand the teaching of the Talmud about "**Sh'ma, Sh'ma**."

TEXT TEN --- Keter Shem Tov, #115

From the Ba'al Shem Tov: Once there was a king who ruled strictly, and sent one of his servants to test his subject provinces by pretending he was a servant in rebellion against his master. Several of the subject provinces took up combat against him (the servant) and prevailed over him, while others went along with him. But in one state, there were wise men who sensed that this was all at the request of the king. The moral is clear: there are some who combat the evil impulse...resisting him until they conquer their impulse through severe combat and self-mortifications. And there are others who feel that he is carrying out the will of the Creator.

TEXT ELEVEN --- Tzava'at Ha-Rivash, #137

Consider that just as you contemplate material things, you contemplate the **Shekhinah**'s presence beside you. This is called **avodah b'katnut** (service through lesser consciousness). In this state you may occasionally comprehend that there are many spherical heavens encircling you, while you stand on a point of this small planet earth; the whole world is as nothing compared to the Creator, who is the **Ein Sof** who performed the **tzimtzum** and made space within Himself to create the worlds. Even if you understand this intellectually, you are unable to ascend to the upper worlds. This is the meaning of *From afar the Lord appeared unto me* (Jer. 31:2), that we see God only from a distance.

But through worshiping God with **gadlut** (greater consciousness), you strengthen yourself with great force and ascend in your thought, penetrating all the heavens at once, rising beyond the angels and the **ofanim** and the **seraphim** and the Thrones. This is perfect worship.

TEXT TWELVE --- Chasidic story

In the name of Chasidic leader R. Israel of Ruzhin, the story is told of a certain young man who was living at his father-in-law's house in a town dominated by the opponents of Chasidism. He had promised his father-in-law on a handshake (which has the validity of an oath) that he would not travel to visit the Maggid of Mezeritch, but his desire to go could not be restrained; he broke his promise and travelled to Mezeritch on more than one occasion. His father-in-law consulted the town's rabbi and was told that, according to the halakha, his daughter must be

divorced from her husband. Once the couple were divorced, the young man was thrown out of his father-in-law's house and remained penniless. He lived in the **beit midrash** (study house) until he fell ill and died. The Rebbe of Ruzhin concluded the story with the following insight. "When the messiah comes, this young man will take his case to a court of law presided over by the messiah himself. He will summon his father-in-law and charge him with having caused his death but the father-in-law will defend himself on the grounds that he had simply followed the ruling of the town's rabbi. The town's rabbi will be summoned next and he will point to the halakhic basis for his ruling. The messiah will then wish to know why the young man had broken his promise to his father-in-law, and the young man will plead: I was very eager to visit the Rebbe! The messiah will pronounce as follows. To the father-in-law he will say: You followed the ruling of the town's rabbi and you have acted justly. To the rabbi he will say: You ruled according to the halakha and you have acted justly. But I, the messiah, will say: I have come to those who have acted unjustly!"

TEXT THIRTEEN --- Sichot ha-Ran, #6

The evil impulse (**yetzer ha-ra**) is like a prankster running through a crowd showing his tightly closed hand. No one knows what he is holding. He goes up to each one and asks, "What do you suppose I have in my hand?" Each one imagines the closed hand contains just what he desires most. They all hurry and run after the prankster. Then, when he has tricked them all into following him, he opens his hand; it is completely empty.

The same is true of the evil impulse. He fools the world, tricking it into following him. All men think his hand contains what they desire. But in the end, he opens his hand; there is nothing in it and no desire is ever fulfilled. So it is with all worldly pleasures, which are like sunbeams in a dark room. They may actually seem solid, but one who tries to grasp a sunbeam finds nothing in his hand. The same is true of all worldly desires.

TEXT FOURTEEN --- from Sippurim Nifla'im ("Wondrous Stories")

Once there was a prince who had lost his mind and thought he was a turkey. He would sit naked under a table and eat the crumbs and bones off the floor. All the

doctors lost hope in curing him from this malady, and the king was very sad.

Finally, a person came and said that he would cure him. This wise man removed his clothing and joined the king's son under the table. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" asked the son. "Who are YOU and what are YOU doing here?" said the wise man. "I am a turkey," said the son. "I am also a turkey," said the wise man. So they both sat there together for some time until they grew accustomed to each other.

Then the wise man signaled, and shirts were given to him. The wise man said, "Do you think that a turkey cannot wear a shirt? One can wear a shirt and still be a turkey." So they both put on a shirt.

After a while, he signaled and some pants were given to him. He told the son, "Do you think that if you wore pants, you would not be a turkey anymore? One could wear pants and still be a turkey." Soon they both put on the pants, and so on.

Then he signaled and human food was given to him, and he said to the king's son: "Do you think that if one eats human food, one cannot remain a turkey? We can eat and still be turkeys."

Then he said: "One can be a turkey and eat while sitting at a table." He finally cured the king's son completely.

The moral here is self-explanatory. Should one say that one who wants to become close to God cannot do so, for he is like a turkey, in the sense that he is human and materialistic? That is not so; step by step one can come closer and closer to serving God until he succeeds.

TEXT FIFTEEN --- Nachman of Bratslav, Shivchei ha-Ran, #17

Copulation is difficult for the true **tzaddik**. Not only does he have no desire for it at all, but he experiences real suffering in the act, suffering which is like that which the infant undergoes when he is circumcised. This very same suffering, to an even greater degree, is felt by the **tzaddik** during intercourse. The infant has no

awareness, so his suffering is not so great. But the **tzaddik**, because he is aware of the pain, suffers more greatly than does the infant.

---Nachman of Bratslav, **Shivchei ha-Ran**, #17

TEXT SIXTEEN --- Dov Ber of Mezeritch, **Or Torah** on Ps. 126:1, 47a

A king commanded his servants to raise up a very large mountain, removing it from its place--an impossible task! So his servants decided among themselves to dig and break up (**sh-v-r**) the mountain into tiny pieces, so that each person would be able to carry a small portion appropriate to his own particular strength. And in this way they carried out the king's command.

Similarly in this way, God, the King of the universe, commands us to raise up the holy sparks...And it was for this very purpose that the **shevirah** (breaking of the vessels) came about, so that each person might then be able to raise up the fallen sparks, each one according to his own spiritual level...