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Three Levels of Prayer

In the previous chapter, we explained that in general, there are three aspects of *tefillah*:

- 1) A prayer for a specific request, in other words, for personal needs, such as a livelihood, health, clothing, etc.
- 2) When a person recognizes that Hashem is the One Who withheld this from him, and thus, He is the only address at which to seek to full this lack, the *tefillah* becomes a means to instill *emunah* in Divine Providence.
- 3) The highest aspect, the speech itself with the Creator! "He shall kiss me with the kisses of His lips, because Your closeness is better than wine" (*Shir HaShirim* 1:2), and of Moshe Rabbeinu, it says, "Mouth to mouth I speak to him, and with a vision, not with riddles" (*Bemidbar* 12:8).

In addition, we find in the words of *Chazal* (*Eliyahu Rabbah* 18), "Whenever a Torah scholar sits, reciting and learning Torah by himself, Hashem sits opposite him and recites and learns with him, as it says, "opposite the presence of Hashem." On the verse (*Tehillim* 121:5), "Hashem is your shadow at your right side," *Chazal* taught (*Vayikra Rabbah* 14:5), "What is the meaning of 'Hashem is your shadow'? He is like your shadow. Just as your shadow will laugh if you laugh, cry if you cry, and will respond to your sad or friendly countenance, so does Hashem respond to You in accordance with the way you deal with Him."

The meaning of "Hashem is your shadow" is that Hashem relates to a person the same way the person relates to Him. If one employs his mouth by speaking to the Creator, there is the element of "Mouth to mouth I speak to him." Certainly, we cannot be on the level of Moshe Rabbeinu, because "No prophet like Moshe has risen in Israel" (*Devarim* 34:10), but everyone has a little "Moshe Rabbeinu" within, and through that, he can attain such a level, which is available for each individual!

The very fact that a person can talk to the Creator is the greatest level of all. As we have discussed at length, there are two kinds of speech: there is the way of crying out, which is speech that comes from distress - from an inner disturbance - and there is also speech that comes in the way of "as a man speaks to his friend" - as one speaks to his family: simply and naturally. He senses that the Creator is nearby, and he speaks to Him. He speaks to Hashem from the simple feeling that He is listening to his words, as if the Creator has nothing else to do other than to listen to his words.

As we explained, this is the level of the prayer of *Shemoneh Esreh*, which is recited quietly, in "a small, still voice." When one screams, he feels as if Hashem is far away, but in *Shemoneh Esreh*, one

speaks as if to a friend standing nearby.

This is the summary of what we have said, and we will now continue onward.

Advancing in Stages until the Inner Point of the Soul

We see that when we *daven* (pray), we do not start immediately with the *Shemonah Esreh*, but the order is: *birkos hashachar* (the morning blessings), *korbanos* (the sacrifices), *pesukei dezimra* (the verses of praise), *yotzer ohr* (the blessings before the *Shema*), the *Shema*, and only after that, comes the *Shemoneh Esreh*. The inner meaning of this is that one naturally lives separately, in a state of being alone, and when he approaches *tefillah*, he must leave this separateness and approach the Creator.

Every stage of *tefillah* is an ascent, and the depth of this is that one must leave the stage of separateness and enter more and more to the stage of speaking with the Creator. At first, one feels relatively separate. Later, he is less separate and is closer to the Creator. And so, he becomes closer and closer, until at *Shemoneh Esreh*, he reaches the stage of "a man speaking to his friend."

To what can this be compared? Someone is on one side of the street, and his friend is on the other side, and he shouts to him to wait for him. His strong desire to tell him something prevents him from waiting until the friend goes to greet him from his side of the street. He first screams to him to stop, so that the person will know that he has something to tell him. As they become closer to each other, and the distance between them shrinks, he will still speak loudly so that the person can hear him, but he will gradually lower his voice. When they finally meet, they can speak to each other softly and even whisper. This is the simple meaning of "as a person speaks to his friend."

This is the parable. The inner lesson is that the closer one gets to his Creator, the weaker is the degree of the inner cry of his soul. He can then speak more softly, until he reaches the condition of "a still, small voice."

One cannot immediately start with *Shemonah Esreh*, because, as the *sefarim hakedoshim* say, even a person who cleaves to the Creator all day reaches the highest level of attachment during *tefillah*, especially during *Shemoneh Esreh*.

Even if a person remembers Hashem throughout the day, unless he is talking to Hashem, he will generally be involved in other endeavors, such as Torah study or other matters. Since his head holds additional thoughts, his attachment to Hashem is not absolute, depending on each person's level.

When a person comes to *daven* before Hashem, he detaches from everything around him in the world, and he is totally devoted to speaking with Hashem. But this detachment generally cannot come radically, but in gradual stages, as one would climb a ladder - one level after another.

Thus, when one starts to *daven*, he cannot immediately move from his ordinary state of the day to that of *Shemoneh Esreh* with *deveikus* (attachment). There is a progression when one enters to speak with Hashem. Slowly, one feels more and more closeness to Hashem.

If one wishes to jump right away to *Shemonah Esreh*, he is seeking *kefitzas haderech* (a miraculous contraction of his path). In the physical world, we know that only very few *tzaddikim* earn this miracle; so too, we must know that there is generally no *kefitzas haderech* in spiritual growth!

Therefore, as a rule, a person must proceed gradually. At first, he will speak to Hashem with a certain sense of being distant; then, he will feel closer and closer, until he reaches his inner point of closeness to the Creator.

Certainly, every rule has an exception. There are days in which there is a stronger feeling of distance, and there are days in which one feels closer, but in general, one must go one step at a time. One starts with the lowest stage of the soul, the point furthest from the Creator, and he delves deeper, step after step, until he reaches the inner point of the heart that lives and feels the Creator clearly.

In fact, one does not always have the privilege to reach this inner point. Sometimes, there are outer distractions and a person remains in the outer layers of his soul. But even when a person does have the privilege, the process is one of entering level after level, from palace to palace in the inner soul, until one reaches, as it were, the throne of the king, Hashem's Throne of Glory, on which "sits" the "One Who dwells in the highest realms," Hashem Himself.

But one must be careful that the advancement, the progress from one high level to the next, should be done calmly, not with an inner sense of pushing and pressure. When one pushes himself to want to speak to Hashem, the push is a point of pressure, and understandably, there is no freedom. Some people feel pressured to be calm.... Such people inwardly do want to be calm, but since their will is under pressure, they withhold from themselves the achievement of this desire! The pressure itself is a cause that prevents them from the point of calmness!

When a person knows that he can only advance step after step, and is not pressured to immediately enter the inner point, he will naturally work in a structured and calm way, and will be able to gradually enter further inward, until he reaches the inner point of speech with Hashem.

One who is unaware of these ideas thinks that he must immediately enter all the way inside and really speak to Hashem on that level, and when he can't do it, he feels pressured. In this way, he surely will not progress!

Therefore, one must know that such is the way of the matter. This is Hashem's will, and this is how He created man and the world. His will is that a person should progress from strength to strength, and all the worlds, including this one, are made in the form of different levels. Every step of the way must take time. Some steps require months and even years, and some minor steps allow one to enter more deeply each day, until one reaches inner quiet, is totally calm, and can then really speak to Hashem.

This is one point, and it is relatively simple and easy to understand (as opposed to the following discussion).

Starting the *Avodah* from the Point of Separation

There is a deep question found in the *sefarim hakedoshim*. We must first comment that this is a very subtle point, and one must toil to understand it well.

In the process of *avodah* we are discussing now, there has been an emphasis on inwardness. A person must be *p'nimi* (inward), not *chitzoni* (superficial), so as to reach deeper levels of the soul. The question is: When a person comes to speak to Hashem, he is apparently communicating with a force outside of himself, namely, the Creator. If so, he is not involved with his inner essence, but with something external, the Creator!

If this is one's feeling, he will gradually lose touch with himself and become *chitzoni*, dealing with only external entities. Of course, this kind of *chitzoni* does not mean that one will start looking at store windows, but if one is not focused on his inner essence, but on the Creator, he is apparently focused on an exterior entity. He gets used to thinking that he does not need to work with his very being, but to be involved with the Creator, and he leaves himself to go to the Creator.

This can be very dangerous. If one is used to speaking with Hashem and is not sensitive to this danger, he might not know himself at all. He is always involved with the Creator, and he himself disappears! One must know, then, how to take the concept of *tefillah* properly.

We will first explain the proper, inner essence of the matter, and describe the nature of a person who has not been privileged to reach the desired state.

A person who has the privilege to cleave to the Creator fulfills the *pasuk* (*Tehillim* 73:26), "G-d is the rock of my heart and my portion." Hashem is then inside his heart, in the true innermost point of the person, and there is nothing deeper in the person.

This applies to one who has reached the "fiftieth gate" of wisdom, as explained in the *sefarim hakedoshim*. He then feels that Hashem is part of his being, and when he speaks to Hashem, he is not speaking with a separate and external entity, but with his deepest essence.

However, since one cannot attain this level without long and difficult work, when a person speaks to the Creator, he does not feel that he is speaking to his own highest essence, but to an external entity.

There are, then, two forms of *avodah*. In one way, the individual is working with himself, and in the other way, he is working with the Creator.

In other words, the starting point is generally one of separation. After that, one must go out of himself toward the Creator, then return to himself, then go back to the Creator, then return to himself, and so on, continuously.

At first, one must recognize himself. If there is no personality, who is it that is talking to Hashem? Therefore, one must first recognize clearly that he wants to speak to Hashem. There is an "I" who is coming to speak to Hashem. "I give thanks to You, Hashem," implies that there is first an "I," and then, one can give thanks "to You."

There is a higher level, in which the "I" (*ani*) changes to nothingness (*ayin*). This was mentioned before, but at first, in order to have "to You," there must be an "I."

Before one speaks to the Creator, he must start with a simple state. When he comes to speak and instill the basic point that there is a Creator, he does not start and say, "Master of the world, I know that You exist, and I also know that You created the world."

Before he speaks to Hashem, he must clarify from a perspective of separateness that the world has a Creator. He must contemplate and think, "Is it necessary to accept that the world has a Creator? Maybe not, G-d forbid? But, then, how did these things come to be on their own?" The person should work with this point and clarify it on his own, until it is absolutely clear. Only after that, may he come before Hashem and say to Him, "Master of the World, I have thought and contemplated, and I understand that there is a Creator. I know that You exist."

This is a subtle point that must be grasped! There are tens and perhaps hundreds of delusional people walking around who have lost touch with this point. They always speak to the Creator, but there is no person there. They don't live their own lives, and there is a disconnection between the one worshipping and the One being worshipped. If they fall into this error, they can lose the whole process of *avodah* that we have been discussing.

Three Stages - Thought, Speech, and Action

We must mention another point, so that the ideas will be clear and solid.

In general, we may say that there are three garments on the soul: thought, speech, and action. In order to speak to Hashem, one does not need action. One must, of course, fulfill the 613 *mitzvos*, but no action is needed when one comes to speak to the Creator.

It's true that there must be action, and that's very important, as the Ramban says that every "light" must have a "vessel" (an action) to contain it, but this does not relate to our topic. But what is important is that in order to speak to Hashem, one must first have thought. If thought does not precede the speech, then, it is, G-d forbid, without any *da'as*!

Let us now consider how to attain the proper speech. A person might think for a second, or ten seconds, or twenty seconds, and then start talking right away. He first talks to himself, and then, he talks to the Creator.

This method is akin to producing a miscarriage! Every level and every world must be properly built! If there is no solid process of thought before one comes to speak, a person falls too quickly from the world of thought to the world of speech. His thought is too weak, and thus, the speech based on it is not solid, and the entire structure is only like a castle built in the air.

What is the proper kind of thought? First of all, one must know that there is a Creator. He starts thinking about it. He doesn't say anything, but in his thought, he thinks, "Who created the world? There must be a Creator, etc." He contemplates this (each person according to the time needed), until the intellect clearly recognizes that there is a Creator.

In the second stage, he takes this point, and speaks about it to himself: "This is what I thought, and it became clear to me that there is a Creator, because if not, where did the moon come from? From where are the stars? From where are people?" and so on. Only in the third stage does he approach Hashem and speak to Him.

In other words, there must be three well-established phases. The first phase is real contemplation, spending a long time contemplating well about the matter. The second phase is that after the contemplation, one begins to speak to himself: "The world has a Master, He controls the palace, and I see His Divine Providence." The third phase is where he speaks to Hashem and says, "Master of the world, I have clarified for myself that there is a Creator, that You exist, that you control the palace, that every detail happens through You," and so on.

If one jumps immediately to the third phase, we can anticipate a total collapse! Even if one only skips over the first phase, the phase of thought, and jumps right away to the second phase, that of speech, it will still be difficult for his efforts to have any lasting value.

Clarifying the Will

These are three of the phases, but in truth, there is an additional phase, a deeper one, which comes first, and that is the *ratzon* (the will)!

A person begins to clarify that there is a Creator. Essentially, why does he care if there is Creator or not? What pushes him to clarify this? The fear of *gehinnom* (Purgatory)? A lack of inner satisfaction, or perhaps the desire to succeed? What pushes him?

Whenever someone thinks about something, there must be a cause that makes him think. If a person is approached and requested to ponder the current events of a certain city in a distant land, he will certainly answer, "That does not interest me! I don't live in that country, and I don't know the person who lives there whom you want me to be interested in." Even if he doesn't have time constraints, he will not agree to think about that, because he has no interest in the matter. For there to be interest,

there must be a connection and a certain *ratzon* concerning the matter.

When a person clarifies that there is a Creator, he must first consider why he wants to clarify this! One might respond that if we would go on the street and turn to people and ask if they know there is a Creator, most would surely answer, "I don't care if there is or isn't! What difference is it to me? I'm fine!" "So isn't it enough," he would respond, "that I am interested in the existence of the Creator?"

Yet this is a mistake! One must clarify for himself why indeed he is not one of those people who don't care, and why he does want to know about the Creator. Is the only reason that his father told him about this? Or perhaps he thinks he sees that it's not correct, or maybe he's just afraid of *gehinnom*, or he doesn't find satisfaction in this world? What moves him to want to go through this?

There is tremendous depth to the concept of the *ratzon*. Yet even if a person has not attained the awareness of why he wants, it must be clear to him that he really wants it.

There are many people who begin to get involved in all kinds of endeavors, and they keep up their interests for two weeks, or a month, or two months, but they eventually quit. They started, saw it was hard - not as easy as they had thought - and thus, they quit. Why did they quit? Because their will was not on a very high level. They wanted to attain money, they thought it was an easy task, but when it became clear that it requires more effort and investment than presumed, they simply gave up. Their level of will did not have the power to push them to progress in the face of such difficulties.

In order for one to truly serve the Creator, he must really want to. After one really wants to, he must contemplate properly! After the contemplation, one must speak to himself, and only after that, can he speak to the Creator.

Here we must repeat and emphasize: one must first gain a general picture of the matter, and then apply the information. Only with the Creator, do we find, "'Guard' and 'Remember' in the same statement." The created beings must pause between one section and the next, and it's impossible to say everything all at once. The big picture will become clear at the end, after we explain everything, with the help of Hashem, to the extent of the time available to us. But at first, one must know clearly what the first phase is, what the second is, the third, and the fourth. If it's not clear, there will be confusion about the topic.

In conclusion, then, there must be a real desire. Once there is this real desire, there must be a structure of thought, during which one contemplates for a long time that there is a Creator, and that He is nearby, and that there is Divine Providence, and so on. He then discusses these things with himself, and from there, he goes on to the last phase - the speech with the Creator.

One must not jump right away to the phase of speaking to Hashem. Even if one has already spent half a year working on an earlier phase, he must still spend the first few minutes each time going through this process. Certainly, this depends on the time, and the times vary, but in general, this is how the structure is formed.

There are times when a person is in pain, and his whole being begins to scream, and he pours his heart out before Hashem. This is not a negative occurrence, but you must know what the true process is, and what the exception to the rule is.

In general, this is the process of building oneself. This has been a brief discussion, but it is very fundamental, and any error in these details can generate inner confusion, *chas veshalom*, and remove a person from his true world.

May Hashem help us to make these words perfectly clear and accepted by your hearts.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/bilvavi-part-2-chapter-14-getting-closer-hashem>