



# Lessons in Prayer & Meditation

## *An Introduction into The Kavanot System of Meditation Used by the Ari'zal – Rashash Schools of Kabbalah*

*By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok  
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### The Difference Between the Prophetic Schools and the Ari'zal School

Spiritual and meditative practices among the Kabbalists are many. There are various different systems whose aims and purpose are also very different from one another.

The system of the Prophetic Kabbalah schools<sup>1</sup> specifically focuses upon meditations based upon verbal recitations of letter permutations and certain types<sup>2</sup> of holy Names. Their purpose is to achieve for the individual a spiritual level of bonding with G-d that is close to prophecy.

Those who meditate using the Sefer Yetzirah are similar to the Prophetic school, but their focus is to bring about physical manipulations of creation through the manipulation of the ethereal letters underlying their physical forms.<sup>3</sup> These two systems, in reality, are so similar that many do not distinguish between them.

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<sup>1</sup> This might be the oldest and most authoritative of kabbalistic schools. In Talmudic times, the prophetic Kabbalah was called Ma'aseh Merkava. Later forms were developed and practiced by Abraham Abulafia (*Hayei Olam HaBa*), Shem Tov Sefardi (*Sha'arei Tzedek*), Yehuda Albatoni (*Sulam Aliyah*), Moshe Cordovero (*Pardes, section Pratei HaShemot*) and last but not least the Ba'al Shem Tov (*Amud HaTefilah*). Even Rabbi Haim Vital taught and practiced aspects of the Prophetic systems. Reference his *Sha'arei Kedusha, part 4* and *Etz Haim, sha'ar 44*.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike the Ari'zal system, the Prophetic school does not address sefirotic interactions. They recite extremely long patterns of permuted letters and vowels. These permutations of letters form the holy Names found in this system. Yet they are not reciting any of the Names corresponding to the sefirotic interactions. They are merely reciting Names that are constructed from scripture verses. This is entirely permitted and is the same as reading the Torah.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Haim Vital wrote a small but powerful commentary on the *Sefer Yetzirah*. While the commentary is mostly "theoretical" in nature, Rabbi Haim nonetheless includes information about how to construct a Golem. Creating a Golem is not something anyone of the Ari'zal-Rashash can perform.



The system of the later Kabbalists, however, specifically that of the Ari'zal and the Rashash is focused in an entirely different direction. Unlike the torah of the Prophetic school, which emphasized the verbalization of the Hebrew letters, the later Kabbalists emphasized exclusive non-verbal contemplation upon the sefirotic interactions. The purpose of the Prophetic schools was to acquire personal benefit. The system of the Ari'zal-Rashash seeks collective benefit for all Israel.

There are two types of meditation used within the Ari'zal-Rashash school. The first type is called *Yihudim*. These are mental images of intertwining holy Names, which represent sefirotic integration. These are mentally contemplated silently, throughout the day and its activities, but most especially in the pre-dawn morning hours. At this time individual *yihudim* are performed in an uninterrupted chain. It is this style of mental contemplations that make up the meditation system used by the Ari'zal-Rashash school and many other later Kabbalists.

### **Kavanot & Prayer**

Yet, there is another type of meditation performed by the Ari'zal school, which is their main focus: these are the ***Kavanot***, the mental contemplations upon the sefirotic interactions underlying the activity of prayer.

The purpose of kavanot is to manipulate the flow of spiritual energy, which the Kabbalists call *shefa*, causing it to travel up and down the immense intricacies of the sefirotic Tree of Life.

Prayer, in and of itself is not a meditation. Meditation is geared toward bringing Divine light to the individual meditator. ***Prayer*** is almost the opposite in that it ***is designed to elevate (or restore) Divine Light to our Creator for the sake of the general good.*** Once Divine light has been restored above, new Divine Light in the form of blessing can be received below. Yet, this is primarily for the collective good, and only secondarily for direct individual benefit.

Rabbi Haim Vital speaks of the purpose and value of prayer in his ***Sefer Olat HaTamid*** (4B). Yet, in order to understand what this passage says about prayer Rabbi Haim begins by discussing the breaking of the vessels and the birth of the klipot. This is discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this work.

*"Know that there is not anything in all creation that is not an aspect of the seven kings that died in the land of Edom (ref. Gen. 36). All the worlds, all of them are aspects of these kings.*



*If these kings did not die and thereby become nullified, making them the source of the klipot (shells), they could have been cleansed and rectified by themselves. However, they did die, they were nullified and did become the source of the klipot.*

*Thus all holiness left in them must be rectified, cleansed, purified and bleached white, so only the refuse, which are the real klipot remain below. When this cleansing and purifying process is completed, there will not remain even a spark of holiness left below; for all the sparks of holiness shall have risen. Then the refuse, the real klipot shall be left by itself below, without any life whatsoever.*

*Thus shall be fulfilled the verse saying, "He [G-d] will destroy death forever." (Is. 25:8). This shall only be after the coming of Mashiah.*

*Now, it is impossible to cleanse all the sparks of holiness from the klipot unless an individual performs the action of cleansing. By the prayers and proper actions of mankind below is the cleansing performed by the [power of the] ten supernal sefirot of Atzilut [G-d].*

***Those who are below are always in need of help from above to complete what they have to do. The powers above also need the help of those below; as it is written, "Ascribe (lit. - Give) strength unto G-d" (Psalm 68:35).***

*It is the power of prayer that is the one specific thing, the principle and essence of what we are discussing here. Nothing works greater to cleanse the fallen vessels than prayer. Therefore have the Sages taught, "Prayer is one of the greatest things in the world" (Ber. 6B). For by prayer mankind causes the upper (sefirotic) union to occur and thereby are the kings cleansed and raised above."*

The goal of these sefirotic interactions, Rabbi Haim writes in his *Sha'ar HaKavanot*<sup>4</sup> is to bring about a union of sefirotic levels (*Partzufim*, also known as "Faces"). These unions are called *yihudim*. Yet, these *yihudim* are of a specific type, they are geared to rectifying the *penimiyut* (inner world) of the general worlds and not their *hitzoniyut* (outer world). This system of *kavanot*, therefore, differs from the prophetic school in that the focus is on collective etheric benefit as opposed to individual spiritual benefit.

### **The Required Silence of Kavanot**

The Ari'zal-Rashash system never ever pronounces any holy Name out loud. They would consider any verbal mention of holy Names and the like to be a reversal of the *yihud* intended.

<sup>4</sup> *Sha'ar HaKavanot* 11D, 12A-B, 59B, Jerusalem edition published by Yeshivat HaHaim V'HaShalom.



*Kavanot* use holy Names as mental pictures to portray sefirotic interactions. **By the power of thought and intent the spiritual interactions pictured actually happen, in the sefirotic realms.**

Thus to recite the holy Names out loud would mean turning the *penimiyut* into *hitzoniyut*. This not only disables sefirotic union (*yihud*); it actually causes *perud* (separation). This is the opposite of rectification, the opposite of everything in the system of the Ari'zal.

The Names seen in *kavanot* deal with the metaphysical worlds. Human contact with these worlds is through the avenue of thought, which is the *penimiyut* of a man. If these interactions were taken out of the realm of thought, this would be thwarting their reality and inverting their polarity. *Penimiyut* (inner world of thought) would become *hitzoniyut* (outer world of action) and this is the Kabbalistic definition of defilement. **Rectification must come from the inside out; to start at the inner most spiritual source and work its way out to the outermost physical forms.**

*Kavanot* are, therefore, intended to transform the mind and the soul. Only once this has occurred, will there be manifest change in the behavior of the individual. This is the way then: the *penimiyut* are rectified first and then they rectify the *hitzoniyut*. To recite holy Names verbally, therefore, brings the holiness of the sefirotic interactions outside of the spiritual realms before they have accomplished their inner purpose.

This is similar to Adam's sin of eating of the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Evil prior to eating from the Tree of Life. If he ate first from the Tree of Life, then he would have been able and permitted to eat of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Similarly here, when one performs the proper *kavanot* and *yihudim* one has partaken of the spiritual and true *Etz Haim*. (Tree of Life) One is now ready to partake of the *Etz HaDa'at* (Tree of Knowledge) and not be blemished thereby.

Yet, if one were to first eat of *the Etz HaDa'at*, then one falls under its power of Good and Evil. Evil has the potential to dominate because one has not yet clung to life, i.e. the Tree of Life, because one did not partake of its fruit prior. Now, once one is exposed to evil it is too late to partake of the Tree of Life, for then Evil would be introduced into Life. This cannot be. Therefore, was Adam expelled from Eden. So too, the one who wishes to verbally recite the holy Names in *kavanot* and *yihudim* will suffer a similar fate.

As mentioned above, *kavanot* as described by the Ari'zal-Rashash school deal with the ascent and descent of *shefa* through the complicated system of *sefirot*, *partzufim* and *olamot*. The Ari'zal-Rashash Siddur is full with page after page listings of holy Names which outline or diagram the flow of *shefa* through the worlds. The Names themselves are really nothing more than a type of sign-post pointing the "*mikhaven*" (meditator, i.e.,

<sup>5</sup> These concepts are to be found in Rabbi Haim Vital's *Sha'ar HaPesukim* and his *Sefer HaLikutim*.





the one who is following this system) where sefirotically he is (or better to say where the shefa is) in his prayers.

The rectification of the *penimiyut* of the *olamot* (worlds) means the continuous realignment of the sefirotic energies in the metaphysical realms. The *hitzoniyut* of the worlds are the physical forms that we know and recognize. In essence the *penimiyut* deal with that aspect of the worlds that we might call the unconscious. The *kavanot* system thus rectifies the worlds from the inside out.

It is interesting to here compare the different approaches to spirituality used by the Ari'zal system and that of the Prophetic schools. The Prophetic system, which deals with individual and not collective rectification is also working to rectify the *penimiyut* of the worlds, very similarly to the Ari'zal system. The Prophetic school however uses the sounds of the letters as a means to work from the outside in. The letter sounds reverberate deep into the psyche thus causing subtle shifts in the individual unconscious. Yet, one not aware of the true nature of the human soul might actually interpret there to be a difference between the Prophetic school and the Ari'zal system. Actually, the prophetic school, while rectifying the individual soul also affects the collective whole. For there is no one soul that does not contain a microcosm of the collective.

Being that the Prophetic school is not attempting to manipulate shefa through the sefirot their recitations of letters, vowels and combinations is completely different from the Ari'zal school in form of practice and, therefore, totally permitted. For even the modern forms of the Prophetic school which have been incorporated into some trends of Hasidut practice both the old Prophetic ways along side the *kavanot* and *yihudim* of the Ari'zal. It is a foreign concept to these practitioners to consider there to be any conflict between these schools.

While both systems ultimately perform the same function their methods do differ and are actually the opposite from one another. Yet, both systems are true and Rabbi Haim Vital himself incorporated aspects of the Prophetic system into his own. This is clear from his Magnus opus, *Etz Haim, Section 44* and the fourth section of his *Sha'arei Kedusha*, where he quotes the great Prophetic Kabbalistic work: *Hayei Olam HaBa* of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia by name.

### **A Warning!**

One point about the *kavanot* system is crucial to emphasize: unless one knows the details of what one is doing; one can cause more spiritual harm, than good.

*Kavanot* are very intricate and detailed. One cannot simply pick up a kabbalistic siddur and scan the pages. One can look at the pages and feel an emotional connection; one



can even convince oneself that "Divine light" is "jumping" off the pages into one's soul. One can convince oneself to believe anything. However, unless there is proper learning of what the kavanot are and how to use them, one is doing nothing by simply looking into the Kabbalistic siddur. It takes many years of serious devotion and effort to come to the most basic understanding of Kavanot; many more years to master them all.

***The holy Zohar and Rabbi Haim Vital both warn potential mekhavnim not to embark upon a path of kavanot until one is fully, let me repeat, FULLY, versed in them.***

***Good intentions simply are not enough with regards to kavanot. One must know well the sefirotic paths of the ascent and decent of shefa. Any mistakes in kavanot meditation can lead to a misappropriation of shefa thus imbalancing the worlds.***

The ***Mishneh Berurah*** commentary to the Shulkhan Arukh (***Orah Haim 98:1***) actually forbids one from using kavanot. These are his words:

*"A person should not contemplate Names or yihudim. Rather one should pray simply, understanding what he says with devotion in his heart. Unless, of course he is one who comes into the secrets of HaShem and knows how to contemplate in his heart with awe and love. But if not, G-d forbid, one can cause great harm. Reference the Magen Avraham [what he wrote] in the name of the Zohar and in the Teshuvot Rashal Siman 98 [who] wrote in length and gave witness that the Rash said that after he studied the secrets of the Kabbalah he would pray like a day old baby."*

A Hasid or a Sephardi might wish to dismiss this view of the ***Mishneh Berurah*** by saying that his Halakhic opinions are for the Ashkenazi community and, therefore, not applicable. Granted many times this is true. However, this is not one of those times. Even the ***Kaf HaHaim*** commentary, which is the authoritative word for Sephardim and Kabbalists, writes in a similar vein. These are his words:

**98:3** *"One who knows that he is not able to fulfill all this (the prerequisites for using kavanot) should not mediate at all upon the Names or [perform] yihudim, rather he should pray simply the meaning of the words. With devotion in his heart . . .*

*One who does not know the order of the kavanot very well is forbidden to use them as it is written in [the holy Zohar, Parashat] Terumah 178A, "what great disgrace will befall the fall who does not know how to unite the Holy Name, and to bind the bond of faith . . . It is better that such a one never be born . . .*



*Thus has the HiDA (Rabbi Hayim David Azulai) wrote in his Mihazik Berakha, Siman 274B, "one who does not have a hand in Kabbalah should not say or recite or even think about the secrets written in the Siddur of the Ari'zal or other shortened versions [of it] (Kitzurim). One does not understand that he is close to loss. . . ."*

**98:4** *The HiDA has written in Sefer Simhat HaRegel, page 17, that the prayers that are arranged in the holy and cleansed siddurs according to the kavanot of the Ari'zal should not be said even by the Kabbalists."*

I have seen many students who study Kabbalah and attempt to use the Kabbalistic siddur. I know of one in particular who has studied these subjects for years, yet has not mastered the intricacies of kavanot. All he does is simply look at the pages of the siddur and offers his heart to Heaven. While I applaud his devotion, which is most sincere and enviable, his practice still may violate the law of the Sephardic Kabbalistic Sages. Remember the *HiDA* and the *Kaf HaHaim* were both leading Kabbalists in their generations. The Halakha that they wrote was entirely according to the Kabbalah. So, when the Kabbalists say that something is forbidden, it is indeed forbidden.

***This is why in the guide to Kabbalistic prayer that I have outlined, I intentionally stayed away from any specifics about sefirotic interactions. I only scratched the surface of the surface.***

***Even so, I know that what I have written will be difficult for many. Indeed, even the little that I have published might not find favor in the eyes of the HiDA and the Kaf HaHaim.***

***If it weren't for the low state of our daily davening, I would never have written this material. However, as the verse says, "Et La'Asot LaShem" (It is time to act for HaShem). Psalm 119:126). My fellow Kabbalists reading these words will understand well what I mean.***

Simply, Kabbalistic prayer is not for everyone. While everyone might have the desire to learn it, not everyone has the discipline and intelligence to do so correctly.

There are other interesting differences between the various schools of Kabbalah practiced today. Although the following does not deal specifically with the topic of prayer, I thought to include these words to expand your insights into the modern world of the Sephardic Kabbalists.

### **The Various Schools Between the Eastern and Western Sephardim**



There are many different voices and systems in the world of Sephardic Kabbalah. The eastern Sephardim have pretty much adopted the Rashash school exclusive to all others. Many times have the Rabbis of this school written and preached *that "ayn lanu eleh divrei HaAri"* (we have nothing other than the words of the Ari).<sup>6</sup> For the eastern Sephardim of Iraqi and Levant origins this means that any system or teaching not dealt with by the Rashash is not dealt with by them, period.

Unfortunately, this narrow approach to Kabbalah leaves out most of Kabbalah. The Rashash, for example never dealt with the Sefer Yetzirah, therefore Rashash Kabbalists to this day do not study Sefer Yetzirah.

I am certain that the Rashash had nothing against the Sefer Yetzirah, he simply had his own way of looking at things and he stuck to it. This is fine for those who share the purity and devotion of a man of the stature of the Rashash.

Unfortunately, in some modern kabbalistic circles the sincerity and devotion of the Rashash is not so clearly apparent. There are those who exclusively study the Rashash's works and unfortunately look askance upon anything and everything else. I know of one Rashash Kabbalist in Jerusalem who believes that any other school of Kabbalah is either less, or outright wrong. This individual, who my Rabbi worked with for many years, does not embody the best of the Kabbalists.

The Sephardim of North Africa (such as the holy Sages of the Abuhatzera family) never adopted the Rashash system as their own, although there were and are individuals from these countries who did and do study it. The Sephardim from North Africa and from Yemen held onto older traditions in Kabbalah that dealt with more "practical" matters.

Usually referred to as "*Kabbalah Ma'asit*" (Magical Kabbalah), these older systems dealt with the usage of holy Names, herbal cures, amulets and angelic invocations. Indeed while both eastern and western Sephardic Kabbalists are held in the highest esteem by all the Sephardic population, it is the Kabbalists of North Africa or Yemen who are known as the miracle workers. I need only mention the holy name of **Baba Sali, Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzera** to make my point.

Indeed it is this same system of "*Kabbalah Ma'asit*" that was used by the Ba'al Shem Tov and later Hasidic masters. They too were known as miracle workers. I reference my readers to the Hebrew text, *Sefer Tolodot Adam* attributed to Rabbis Eliyahu and Joel Ba'al Shem as an example of this ancient type of Kabbalah.

<sup>6</sup> The Rashash himself is quoted as saying this, that he never studied anything other than certain texts of the Ari'zal





The Iraqi and Syrian Sephardic Kabbalists are renown for their spiritual insights. They appear to know that which is invisible to normal men. Let me share with you an example.

Years ago when I was serving as Rabbi to a small Moroccan synagogue in a Jerusalem suburb, one of my students told me the following story.

My student MakhluF once went to see the famous Rav Kaduri, present head of the Kabbalists in Jerusalem. He wanted to receive a blessing for his son, who was having a problem.

As he arrived at Rav Kaduri's residence, the Rav was walking out the door. He rushed to the Rav's side to ask for his blessing. MakhluF told me that before he opened his mouth, Rav Kaduri looked at him and said, *"I know who you are MakhluF and why you have come. The matter with your son will be resolved to your liking very soon."*

The Rav then proceeded about his business. MakhluF was stunned. How did the Rav know his name? They never met before. How did the Rav know about his son? No one knew about the problem other than MakhluF? He walked away in awe of the Rav's ability to know that which is concealed from mere mortal eyes.

He related this story to me and now I relate it to you. This type of story is typical of Kabbalists. Yet, while Rav Kaduri is know for his mysterious powers of insight. The Rabbis of Morocco and Yemen were known as the healers. While Rav Kaduri bestows his blessings, these other Kabbalists bestow their herbs and amulets. Is either better or worse? Does one work more than the other? Who can say? For those who place their faith, correctly upon G-d, the Giver of Health, and not upon which messenger He uses, these questions are irrelevant.

Indeed, Rav Kaduri's reputation as a healer is only second to that of Baba Sali. Recently,<sup>7</sup> an Arab couple came to ask the Rav's blessings. Married for 17 years they could have no children. They traveled around the world and tried every fertility treatment and nothing worked, until they came to the Jewish Rav. The Rav did bless the couple and three months later, the wife was pregnant.

***Kabbalistic power is what it is: a manifestation of G-d's blessings among us. The great Rabbis who have these powers come from all the different Kabbalistic schools.***

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<sup>7</sup> This story was posted on the Internet site of [www.israelwire.com](http://www.israelwire.com), dated Monday, January 18, 1999.



***They are Sephardim and Ashkenazim. They follow the Kabbalah Ma'asit school, the Rashash school, the Abulafia school, the Ba'al Shem Tov school, the Gra school or the RaMHaL school.***

***Regardless of what approach to Kabbalah these great individuals take they all share one thing in common: they are truly devoted servants of the Holy One, blessed be He. This, and only this, gives them the power to do great things. Moreover, they are the first to say so.***

All the different schools of Kabbalah are good so long as they are kosher. Kosher is not defined by public opinion or by personal prejudice. It is defined by Halakhic allegiance and Torah scholarship. This is very important because there is a growing number of false Kabbalistic teachers and Kabbalistic cults that have popped up in recent times.

There is so much “*trefah*” (unclean garbage) in the world of Kabbalah that many kosher teachers are suspicious of anything that is not of their own system. Of course, this suspicion is wrong, but that does not mean that there is nothing about which to be suspicious.

### **Respect For All That's Kosher**

In the earlier part of this century, a new school of Kabbalah arose. A never before heard of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag wrote a new commentary to the Zohar entitled *HaSulam*. This was the beginning of a new path and understanding towards Kabbalah. His work was highly controversial because no one knew from whom he had learned Kabbalah. In other words, from where did he receive his “new” material?

To this day, while his works are respected by all, the Sephardic Kabbalists of Jerusalem do not study them. One of my first teachers in Kabbalah told me that the system of the Ashlag is not “our” system and that we do not study it. Therefore, while the Sephardim mostly do not study the Sulam, many Ashkenazim do.

In fact I know of one Rabbi in Boro Park, Brooklyn, a father of many fine Rabbis, who studies the *Sulam* exclusively. This can all be summed up in the words of the old saying, “*to each their own*” or “*different strokes for different folks*”, or as we say in Hebrew, “*elu v'elu divrei Elokim Hayim*” (these and these are the words of the Living G-d).

Therefore, when we come now to learn about the Kavanot system used by the Rashash school, we must not allow other types of teachings to confuse us. We must remain focused. Kavanot are not performed in the Prophetic schools of Kabbalah. However, this in and of itself is not an absolute truth. Indeed the differing schools of Kabbalah often overlap.



### **Rabbi Haim Vital, The Eclectic Kabbalist**

Rabbi Haim Vital, the codifier of the Ari'zal's system is the one who brought us Kavanot. Yet, he also wrote about angelic invocations (Kabbalah Ma'asit) and about Prophetic letter permutations.

Rabbi Vital was an eclectic Kabbalist par excellence. He did it all. He knew the works of his master the Ari. He also incorporated sections of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's works into his own. He also quoted Rabbi Abraham Abulafia by name and taught the entire Abulafia system of the 72-triad name. The Rashash never touched this area.

Rabbi Vital wrote a commentary to *Brit Menuha*, a great guide to Kabbalah Ma'asit. It is published along side his commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* and his *Sha'arei Kedusha, Part Four*, which is based on Abulafia's works. There also exist other works of Rabbi Haim which have never been published, including his works on Alchemy.

### **Conclusions**

We are truly blessed that in our generation we have a good number of saintly and holy Kabbalists. Be they Sephardi, Ashkenazi or Hasidic, like Rabbi Haim Vital before them, they seek to inspire us all to greater levels of devotion and Divine service. Prayer is one of these tools. Kavanot is like the gasoline in the engine of prayer that enables it to move forward. Regardless of however much or little we can learn understand and apply, we must do what we can; for this is our Halakhic, moral and Kabbalist obligation.