



***Authentic Kabbalah - Sephardic Studies
Benei Noah Studies - Anti-Missionary/Anti-Cult Materials***

The Secrets of Successful Prayer

**Selections from Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov
Parashat Noah- Amud HaTefilah**

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Introduction

Our holy Sages have taught that prayer "stands in the high places of the universe." In other words, prayer is one of the most important and powerful tools known to man. Through prayer, even the most impossible of events can be made to happen. Indeed, medical studies have been conducted and have concluded that prayer really does help in the healing of the sick.

If asked to define prayer, most people would say that it is talking to G-d and requesting His intervention for this or that thing. This definition is as good as any. However, it raises a question. We accept by religious faith that omnipotent G-d hears all prayers addressed to Him, yet why does He not answer them all?

Granted some prayers are silly, such as, please G-d let my sports team win, or please G-d let me win the lotto. Other prayers are quite sincere, such please, please G-d heal my dying child. Even many of these sincere prayers go unanswered.

The faithful will always accept their prayers not being answered by responding that whatever happens is G-d's Will and thus is for the best. Of course, we religious always believe this to be true (however hard the circumstances). Yet, is prayer simply a "request list" for G-d? "G-d, gimme this" and "G-d gimme that"? Maybe it is this immature attitude towards prayer that hinders our prayers from being answered.

If we view prayer as a simple wish list, then our prayers lack the necessary vitality for them to storm the gates of heaven and demand that they be heard. Our Sages have admonished us not to make our prayers mere rote recitations. In order for prayers to be

answered, we really have to mean what we pray. Mere recitation of words without intent and devotion is not enough.

The Kabbalists have revealed that all traditional Jewish prayer services have within them great depths of meditative secrets and holy Names. Yet, not everybody is able to study the writings of the Ari'zal and put Kabbalistic "kavanot" meditations into practice. Nevertheless, there is a way that even laymen, who are unaware of the Kabbalistic depths of prayer, can still pray with the same devotion and power of a Kabbalist. The Ari'zal did not reveal this to us, but the Ba'al Shem Tov did.

The greatest legacy that the Ba'al Shem Tov left for posterity is his teachings on prayer. Based upon the ancient meditative systems of the prophetic Kabbalah, the Ba'al Shem Tov placed emphasis on what makes all the deep meditations and holy Names to work. This is the level of one's devotion during the recitation of the words of prayer.

The following translations are only a small selection of the Ba'al Shem's famous teachings on prayer. Although the number of words is small, nonetheless, they contain within them a vast amount of information. Contemplate them as you read and endeavor to apply them in your lives. This might make all the difference whether your prayers are answered or not. Answering prayers is in the Hands of G-d. Praying in the right way is in ours.

Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov **Parashat Noah- Amud HaTefilah**

16. In prayer, one must place all their power in the words. One must go from letter to letter until one forgets the physical world. Contemplate how the letters are binding together and interacting one with another. This causes great pleasure, in the physical planes and all the more so in the spiritual planes. This is the realm of Yetzirah. After this, the letters rise to the realm of thought. [Here] one does not even hear what one is saying. This is the realm of Beriah. After this, one ascends to the level of Ayn (nothingness) wherein which all physical senses are nullified. This is the realm of Atzilut, the attribute of [the sefirat] Hokhma

Note: For more information regarding the order of the elevation of the worlds in prayer, please refer to my tape series "The Kavanot of Shaharit" (available in the Y.B.N. catalogue).

20. When a person wishes to speak [about anything], he should first make sure that his thoughts are radiating through the speech. The word for thought "mahshava" also means "hashav mah" (think about a thing).

28. It was told to the Ba'al Shem Tov [from on High] that he merited to have revealed to him supernal things not because of his great learning in Talmud and law but rather due to his prayers, which he always prayed with great intent (kavana). From this did he merit his high level.

30. The Ba'al Shem Tov has taught, when a man reads the Torah and sees the lights within the Torah's letters, even though he doesn't understand the reasons appropriately, being that he is reading in [a spirit] of great love and attachment, HaShem is not too strict with him, even if he does not read appropriately. This can be compared to a father's love for his young child. When the child makes a request of his father, even if his words are not clear and correct, the father still enjoys this a lot. Thus it is when a man reads words of Torah with love; HaShem loves that person and is not judgmental whether the words were read correctly or not.

44. One who speaks without forethought is like one who improperly spills his seed. For a person's thoughts are a "complete image." The proof of this is when during sexual intercourse, a man's mind is not on his performance, he is unable to perform. Thought is wisdom. Speech is the "child" [born from it]. Even thought is made up of letters, for every thought is formed [of images of things with names which are spelled by] letters. When a person does not think about what he is saying, he is spilling his [spiritual] seed. For [our] speech is our life [force].

45. When a man is at a lower level, he should pray from within the prayer book. Being that he will see the letters [of the words of prayer], he will pray with greater devotion. However, [once] one is bound to the supernal world, it is best to close one's eyes so that what the eyes see will not come and nullify the supernal bond.

49. It is impossible to pray with devotion without support. One must request that HaShem help and assist you.

56. Even when one is on the low [spiritual] level, one must be strongly bonded to the Shekhina. Then, in a single moment, when he contemplates the supernal worlds, immediately he is there. **For what a man thinks, there he is.**

69. A person must learn to regulate himself to pray, even the songs, in a soft voice. One must cry out, but in a whisper. All that one prays and learns must be with all one's strength. The cry that comes from bonding [with G-d] is in silent.

70. Sometimes it is best to serve G-d with only one's soul, i.e., one's mind. The body should remain in its place, so that it will not become sick from over usage. Sometimes a person is able to say his prayers with great love, awe, and inspiration without any hindrances. Yet, to another it appears that one is praying without any concentration. The only one who can accomplish this is one who is very deeply connected to G-d. Such a one can then serve G-d in spirit (mind) [alone] with great love. This type of [Divine] service is greater, and moves along more quickly, with greater attachment to G-d, than prayers that are more apparent (more verbal) on the outside. The forces of evil cannot attach themselves to this type of prayer for it is completely on the inside.

71. Sometimes one is able to pray with great rapidity because his heart is full of fire for G-d. [It is as if] the words come forth from his mouth by themselves.

Note:

It is forbidden to recite holy Names out loud. One who does so can bring a curse down upon one's head.

72. To purify one's thoughts, a tradition received from the Ba'al Shem Tov teaches us to meditate upon the holy Name KUZU (Kof Vav Zayin Vav). It is said that this Name corresponds to [the sefirat] Hokhma, the source of Mind. This Name reflects the attribute of judgement. When the Name is spelled out Kaf Vav Zayin Vav it is numerically equal to [the spelling of the name] Taftafyah (Tav Pey Tav Pey Yod Hey).

75. The Ba'al Shem Tov has taught that the Name KUZU is the "backside" of the Name YHWH. The Name YHWH denotes mercy and the Name KUZU denotes severity. The letters KU of KUZU are numerically equal in value to the Name YHWH. The remainder of the Name KUZU (ZU) is thus the severity [in the Name] over the mercy inherent in the Name YHWH. Thus it says in the Talmud (Ta'anit 21A), "gam zu l'tova" (this too is for good). The attribute of severity (ZU) is also for good, meaning that it is included in mercy.

76. I have heard in the name of the Ba'al Shem Tov that, whether during one's Torah studies or during one's prayers, if one simply understands the meaning of the words that he prays or achieves a simple understanding of the laws he studies, one is able to unite [the sefirat] Malkhut (which corresponds to speech), to [the sefirat] Binah (which corresponds to thought).

78. This is the secret of the Hashmal (angels of the merkava chariot). Our Sages have taught (Hagigah 13B), that times they are silent and at times they are full of noise. [We must learn from them] that [at times] we [too] need to be silent until we are [able] to break [from off of us] the forces of evil. Then can we offer praise, bond [with G-d], and neutralize the forces of severity at their source. This is the secret of prayer that the Ba'al Shem Tov has taught.

79. One should contemplate in prayer that one is arousing the same letters that were used in creating the Heavens and the earth and all created things above and below. Thus when we recite our prayers and praises we are [harmonizing] with all of the worlds and all that was created. You are arousing the letters. The letters are the life force of all created. Thus with everything that you say, with this intent, you elevate all that was created in the Heavens and upon earth.

85. There is no speech without thought. For one thinks prior to speaking. When one thinks before prayer about what he should say and before whom he stands, certainly he will be filled with a spirit of awe and humility. He should be in awe of speech itself, when he contemplates in his heart that the realm of speech, i.e., the Shekhina herself, speaks through him. She includes [within her] all the attributes of awe, love, glory, and everything else, as is known. How then can one not be humbled knowing that he is arousing the Shekhina and all the attributes? This is the meaning of the verse (Ps. 103), "oseh divarav" (makes his things, i.e., words). From one's speech comes one's actions.

Conclusions

Prayer, speech, and thought: they all go together. How unfortunate it is that the majority of us do not know how to pray properly by uniting our hearts and our minds as one. All too often our minyan (prayer quorums) pray so fast that there is no time for the most basic devotions (kavanot). This way is not the right way to pray. Maybe this is why Mashiah has not yet come. Maybe our prayers are not really prayers, but simple mumblings. I, for one, cannot judge this, but it seems that G-d already has. When are prayers are right, Mashiah will come. I view this as a worthwhile goal to pursue. How about you?

End Notes

From a kabbalistic point of view, prayer is meditation. Therefore, to contemplate the words of prayer, letter by letter, while a tedious thing, enables the one who prays to connect with a very powerful spiritual energy latent within the Hebrew letters. While this cannot be done every time one prays and with every word one speaks, nonetheless, whenever it can be done, it releases a tremendous amount of spiritual energy. Contact with this energy tends to be emotionally charging. It is this emotional content that the Ba'al Shem Tov refers to as the "realm of Yetzirah" corresponding to the sefirat Tiferet, the place of the heart. This is the recitation of the Psalms in the morning service.

During the recitation of the Shema prayer and its blessings our minds need to be so focused on bonding with G-d that we, in essence, pray automatically, without need to pay attention to what it is we are saying.

This level is to strive for when we pray the Amidah. During the Amidah, we beseech G-d for our 19 archetypal, collective needs. The Kabbalah teaches us that, indeed it is the Shekhina who is requesting these things from the Holy One, blessed be He. We are simply the conduits for voicing the requests.

The relationship of thought and speech will become evident in the following selections. Thought is to speech what soul is to body.

It is written in the Zohar that reading holy words reverberates spiritual energy. Even if one's reading is not completely correct, the sound of the voice still ascends on high. This can only be accomplished through reading and verbalizing the letters. The Zohar and the Sulam commentary both make it clear that mere scanning is not enough.

Every word we speak is important. When we waste our words with idle speech, we are wasting away our life force energy.

The Neshama soul is the "breath soul". The length of our lives is numbered by how many breaths we breathe and how many words we speak. Both these use up the amount of "breath soul" that was breathed into us at birth. This concept is very familiar to those who have studied Chinese medicine. Similar lessons are taught there.

The Ari'zal instructed us that while praying one should keep one's face glued inside the pages of the siddur (prayerbook). Only for the Amidah should the siddur be closed and one should pray by heart, with eyes closed.

One's relationship with G-d must never be limited by one's emotions. It is the mind that must control the relationship. Many times one does not feel G-d's presence; this is called a "low spiritual level". Nonetheless, once one puts one's mind on G-d by contemplating the supernal worlds, immediately one's thoughts take him above.

This is the great secret of all meditation and prayer. I have discussed much on this topic in other essays in this issue.

This is also the teaching of the Ari'zal. It is the opposite of how so many people pray today. Silence in prayer is so very important. It is the sign of a truly penitent and devoted meditator.

Our Sages have taught that the safeguard of wisdom is silence. Wisdom, as we know, corresponds to the sefirotic realm of Atzilut. This corresponds to the Amidah prayer. In order to achieve the necessary Atzilutic consciousness necessary to pray the Amidah, one must be in a state of silence.

This is one of the seventy names of the Sar HaPanim (Prince of the Presence) Metatron. This specific name is said to offer one protection. I have written about this name in my book "Sefer Segulot" (The Book of Kabbalistic Treasures). See the Y.B.N. catalogue for more details.

Halakha requires one to understand the simple meaning of what he prays. Prayer without understanding (Binah) is not prayer. Therefore, if one does not understand Hebrew, one should pray in the language that he does understand. Better yet, learn Hebrew!

Prior to the beginning of prayer each day one should take a few moments of solitude to focus one's mind on prayer.