

## How Are We Supposed to Pray?

### What the mainstream kabbalistic sources teach

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I always assumed that prayer involved speaking to the all-knowing and all-powerful G-d Who created the universe and Who alone determines our destinies. Obviously, the more sincere and morally responsible you were, the more powerful your prayers could be but, nevertheless, G-d is close to all who call Him (Tehilim 145:18).

However, exploring some of the most authoritative sources of the mainstream modern kabbalistic world (including those of the Ari and his students), I'm left with the impression that there's no point praying to the Master and Creator of everything, but instead prayers must be directed to a created entity - known as a partzuf - called זעיר אנפין.

My heart tells me that this belief - or at least the way I've understood it - is not compatible with traditional Torah teachings. In that, I might be in line with reservations expressed by Rabbi S.R. Hirsch (and explored in the next chapter). But it's also possible that I've simply misunderstood either the traditional Torah teachings or the mainstream kabbalistic sources. Perhaps you can help me decide.

### ***The Traditional Approach to Prayer***

Before we begin, let's use the Rambam's opinion as a baseline for this discussion. That's not to say that his is the only opinion that's available to us - the fact that most kehilos include "מכניסי רחמים" in סליחות demonstrates that that's not the case - but it is a good place to start.

חמשה הן הנקראים מינים...וכן העובד כוכב או מזל וזולתו כדי להיות מליץ בינו ובין רבון העולמים כל אחד מחמשה אלו הוא מין (רמב"ם פ"ג מהל' תשובה הל' ז')

Five are called heretics...and also one who serves a star, mazal, or anything else in order that it should be an intermediary between him and the Master of all worlds.

היסוד החמישי (מתוך הי"ג עקרים מפירוש הרמב"ם למשנה פרק חלק ממס' סנהדרין)

שהוא יתברך הוא הראוי לעבדו ולגדלו ולהודיעו גדולתו ולעשות מצוותיו. ושלא יעשה כזה למי שהוא תחתיו במציאות, מן המלאכים והכוכבים והגלגלים והיסודות ומה שהורכב מהם. לפי שכולם מטובעים, ועל פעולתם אין משפט ולא בחירה אלא לו לבדו השם יתברך. וכן אין ראוי לעובדם כדי להיותם אמצעים לקרבם אליו, אלא אליו בלבד יכונו המחשבות, ויניחו כל מה שזולתו.

That He - who should be blessed - is appropriate to serve and magnify and to acknowledge His greatness and do His mitzvos. And you should not act this way to one who is below Him in creation; not angels, stars, spheres, or the elements that are founded of them...Similarly, it is not appropriate to serve them so that they should be a means to bring them close. But to He Himself you should address your thoughts, and all others you should abandon.

### ***The Tzfas Approach to Prayer***

Now, by contrast, let's see a few quotations from some mainstream kabbalists. These sources are all widely available (including from multiple internet sources), so you should feel free to look up the originals.

Rabbi Chaim Vital was, by his own account, the primary student of the Ari. In this passage, he claims that the expression "ה' אלוֹקֵיכֶם" actually refers to the two lowest of the partzufim, Zeyr Anpin and his "wife."

והנה עם מה שביארנו לעיל -- כי ז"ן מתחברים בכותל א' משא"כ יעקב -- בזה תבין סוד מ"ש משה לישראל בכניסתן לא"י "ואתם הדבקים בה' אל-היכם חיים כולכם היום", **כי "ה' אל-היכם" הוא ז"ן** - (ספר עץ חיים שער הכללים פרק יא) [ז"ן = זעיר ונוקבא או זכר ונקבה]

*From what we explained previously - that the male and female partzufim are united in a single wall as opposed to Yakov - with this you can understand the secret of what Moshe said to Israel when they entered the Land of Israel: "And you are attached with the Lord your G-d, living all of you today" - for "The Lord your G-d" (refers to) the male and female.*

In his Sha'ar Hakavanos, where he describes the way he feels Jews should pray, the Ari himself associates the name "הו"ה" with Zeyr Anpin. This is specifically within the context of tefila:

ונבאר מלת "יהו-ה". כי צריך אתה לכון כי כבר יצא השפע הנזכר מחוץ למלכות דבינה והגיע לד' מקיפין של הד' מוחין **דז"א הנקרא הו"ה**. - (שער הכוונות דרושי השחר כוונת הברכות)

*And we will explain the word "יהו-ה". You must concentrate (on the fact) that the abundance mentioned has already exited from outside to the Kingdom of Understanding and reached the four circles of the four brains of Zeyr Anpin, which is called "יהו-ה".*

In his recommendation for the "ideal" focus of the Musaf prayer, the Machberes Hakodesh also equates Zeyr Anpin with G-d:

מלאכים המוני מעלה הם או"א שכן בתיקונים הוא אומר כי או"א הם מלאכים לכתר מאצ' יתנו כתר **לז"א שהוא ה' אלהינו** - (ספר מחברת הקודש בסדר מוסף שבת כ) [ז"א = זעיר אנפין]

*Angels of the heavenly host, (the partzufim) Abba and Ima - for in Tikunim it is said that Abba and Ima are the angels of keser from the supernal world (i.e., atzilus) - will give keser to Zeyr Anpin who is the Lord our G-d.*

## **The Broader Tzfas Influence**

Many influential mainstream kabbalists through the generations of and following the Ari consistently and clearly wrote about these practices and, equally consistently, directly attributed their beliefs to sources in the Zohar. Rabbi Immanuel Chai ben Avraham Ricchi, for instance, begins his sefer Yosher Levav with a question:

עמוד 6: מפני מה אנו קוראים לעולם ומשבחים ומתפללים לשם הוי"ה המיוחד לפרצוף ז"א ולא לשמות מפרצופים הגבוהים ממנו או לפרצוף אחרון שבכולם

*Why do we always call, praise, and daven to the (name of G-d that's) specific to the partzuf Zeyr Anpin and not to names of the partzufim that are higher than (Zeyr Anpin) or to the highest of all (the partzufim)?*

Much later in the book, he explains:

עמוד 58: משא"כ פרצוף ז"א שהוא הקב"ה שנשמתו המסתתרת בו ע"י הפרצופים שלפנים ממנו היא הסיבה ראשונה ממש ולה אנו עובדים בעבודתו

*...Which is not true of the partzuf Zeyr Anpin who is the Holy one, blessed be He, whose soul is hidden within him by way of the partzufim deeper within. This is actually the first cause and it is what we serve.*

Later still, he further clarifies the status of Zeyr Anpin, and identifies a source in Zohar:

עמוד 78: כי זה הוא רצון הסיבה ראשונה שיהיה הוא הז"א המוציא והמביא שפעו לתחתונים ואין עוד מלבדו. ודבר זה מבואר בזהר פ' נשא דף קכ"ט ע"א

*For this is the will of the first cause that Zeyr Anpin should be the taker and bringer of his influence to the lower worlds and there is nothing besides him. The matter is clear in the Zohar...*

I'll quote - and then translate - that passage from the Zohar at length. But first, to add some context, here's a fragment from a second passage in Zohar (Parshas Naso) where Erech Anpin, the "highest" of the partzufim, is identified as "Ayn":

זוהר פרשת נשא דף קכט א

ועל האי תאיבו בני ישראל לצרפא בלבהון דכתיב היש יי בקרבנו אם אין. בין זעיר אנפין דאקרי יי ובין אריך אנפין דאקרי אין

*And on this the Jews longed to purify their hearts, as it is written: "Is G-d in our midst or not?" - between Zeyr Anpin that is called "G-d" and Arich Anpin that is called "Ayn".*

Now here's that key Zohar passage:

זוהר פרשת בשלח דף ע"ב:

אמר רבי אבא, מאי דכתיב "היש יהוה בקרבנו אם אין", וכי טפשינו הוו ישראל דלא ידעי מלה דא, והא חמו שכינתא קמייהו, וענני כבוד עלייהו דסחרן לון, ואינון אמרו היש יהוה בקרבנו אם אין, גוברין דחמו זיו יקרא דמלכיהון על ימא, ותנינן ראתה שפחה על הים מה שלא ראה יחזקאל, אינון אשתכחו טפשינו ואמרו היש יהוה בקרבנו אם אין. אלא הכי קאמר רבי שמעון, בעו למנדע בין עתיקא סתימאה דכל סתימין דאקרי אין, ובין זעיר אנפין דאקרי יהוה, ועל דא לא כתיב היש יהוה בקרבנו אם לא, כמה דכתיב הילך בתורתא אם לא, אלא היש יהוה בקרבנו אם אין, אי הכי אמאי אתענשו, אלא **על דעבידו פרודא**, ועבידו בנסינא, דכתיב ועל נסותם את יהוה, אמרו ישראל אי האי נשאל בגוונא חד, ואי האי נשאל בגוונא אחרא, ועל דא מיד "ויבא עמלק"

*Rabbi Aba said: why does it write (Shemos 17:7) "Is G-d in our midst or not?" Were the Jews such fools that they didn't know this? Did they not see the Shechina before them, and did the clouds of glory not cover them? How could they say "Is G-d in our midst or not?" Men who saw the precious shine of their King on the sea, and (about whom) it's taught that a slave girl saw on the sea things that Yechezkel didn't see; could they have been such fools to say "Is G-d in our midst or not?"*

*Rather, this is what Rabbi Shimon said: they wanted to understand (the difference) between the Ancient One, hidden from all that's hidden, which is called "Ayn," and between Zeyr Anpin which is called G-d. And for that (reason), it doesn't write "Is G-d in our midst or not (אלא דא) - as it writes (Shemos 17:4) "Will they follow in My Torah or not", but "Is G-d in our midst or Ayn".*

*If so, why were they punished? Because they **served a distinct part**, and served as a test, as it says (Shemos 17:7) "And because they tested G-d." The Jews said: "Should one be approached in one way, and the other in another way?" For that it says (Shemos 17:8) "And Amalek came."*

Note that in the first passage the Zohar enumerates two sins: **על דעבידו פרודא**, and **ועבידו בנסינא**. The first sin ("...they served a distinct part") is understood by Rabbi Ricchi to be the "error" of davening to anything (including what we think of as G-d) besides Zeyr Anpin. And, in fact, his reading of the Zohar seems perfectly reasonable.

Even more recent European kabbalists followed this approach in their own writings. R' Chaim Volozhiner (ספר נפש החיים שער ב פרק ב), in the context of prayer, wrote:

כי עצמות א"ס ב"ה סתים מכל סתימין ואין לכנותו ח"ו בשום שם כלל אפילו בשם הו"ה ב"ה ואפי' בקוצו של יו"ד דבי' ... וז"ש האריז"ל בלשונו הקד' הובא בהקדמת פע"ח. שכל הכנויים והשמות הם שמו' העצמו' המתפשטים בספירות וע"ש

*For Atzmus Ain Sof ("the Essence of G-d without end") is hidden from all secrets and there's no way to describe Him in any way, even with the Name "Havaya"...And this the Arizal wrote in his holy language – brought in the introduction to Pri Eitz Chaim – that all descriptions and names are (really just) names of the essence that has spread among the sefiros.*

## **Putting Together the Pieces**

Within a more general context, here's another idea of R' Chaim Vital quoted by R' Volozhiner ( נפש החיים שער א פרק טו):

...שאין עצמות מהותה נכנסת כלל בתוך גוף האדם ואדם הראשון קודם החטא זכה לעצמותה ובסיבת החטא נסתלקה מתוכו ונשארה רק חופפת עליו. לבד משה רבינו ע"ה שזכה לעצמותה תוך גופו ולכן נקרא איש האלקים

*...That (G-d's) Essence of the Existence does not enter at all into the body of a human. And Adam before the sin merited the Essence and, due to the sin, it was removed from his midst and remained only hovering above him. (All this is) besides for Moshe who merited to have the Essence (of G-d) inside his body. For this reason, he is called "man of G-d."*

So, unless I'm missing something significant, it would seem that the Ari and his mainstream followers, basing themselves on their reading of sources in Zohar, believed:

- That partzufim are the created products of G-d
- That the various names of G-d mentioned in Tanach and the siddur actually refer to various partzufim or other creations that are not synonymous with what we think of as G-d
- That there's no value in praying to what we think of as G-d
- That there is a creation (Zeyr Anpin) that was delegated the exclusive job of receiving our prayers and delivering our blessings
- That it's theoretically possible for G-d's Essence to become incarnate within a human body

It is possible that most or all of those sources are not meant to be understood literally. In fact, there is no shortage of reliable individuals who make that very claim. But, at least in the context of these particular passages, that seems very unlikely.

As a rule, one uses a metaphor to obscure a deep idea within a seemingly innocuous text, making the truth available only to initiates. But knowing that the text will also be read by countless outsiders, one would be wise to choose a metaphor that's *truly* harmless.

Why, however would anyone couch his ideas within an outer metaphor that not only expresses the *exact opposite* of what he's teaching, but stands opposed to the very core of Jewish belief? And, in addition, why use a metaphor that's not in the least obscure – leaving no clear hint that there's anything deeper to find beneath the surface?

I can, therefore, only conclude that the authors of modern kabbalistic texts fully believed the simple meaning of what they wrote and further believed that that meaning didn't contradict true Torah beliefs.

## **Rabbinic Reaction**

Let me restate my questions from above:

Are the beliefs and practices presented by these kabbalistic sources actually in conflict with those of Rambam and other rishonim? If they are, how could the Torah world's "official" understanding of these matters have evolved so far and so quickly to the point where even suggesting they're new invites accusations of heresy? And why have no ranking Torah authorities over the past centuries said anything publicly about it?

One possibility is that the problems are privately acknowledged, and that offensive kabbalistic principles are informally suppressed by individuals wishing to preserve the authority of kabbala without explicitly promoting problematic beliefs. This would fit a pattern among at least some 19th Century Torah leaders (some examples can be found [in a separate article](#)) to "reinterpret" Torah passages to fit modern needs.

In a remarkable example of this approach, [the ספר שם משמואל](#) quotes the very same passage in Zohar quoted above, but his interpretation (that Zeyr Anpin is a kind of metaphor meaning bracha that comes through your own hard work and Ayn means bracha that comes without effort) is, as far as I can see, going to be pretty much impossible to square with the actual text of the Zohar.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, in the second volume of his *עלי שור* (in the chapter entitled *עמלק*), offered a similarly benign but apparently irreconcilable approach to this Zohar.

And it's also possible that many authorities were simply not familiar with the finer details of the Tzfas system. Getting access to and reading related books was not nearly as simple for Jews in centuries past than it is in our astounding internet age. Knowing the stature of many of modern kabbala's proponents, why wouldn't a responsible rabbi assume there couldn't be anything truly controversial being taught?

There is evidence that even R' Yosef Karo – despite his personal relationship with the big players in the Tzfas community – might never have been fully introduced to the theological system. And even if he was, I suspect that there were times when he would make a conscious effort to separate kabbala from his halachic rulings.

Take, for example, his lengthy discussion of the prohibition of seeking to communicate with the dead ( *דורש אל המתים* (בית יוסף יו"ד קע"ט יג-יד דה"מ אוב). R' Karo offers strong interpretations of a number of seemingly contradictory sources in Chazal before concluding that, indeed, the prohibition of *דורש אל המתים* remains in force in its simplest understanding. This, despite the existence of a passage in Zohar ( *זוהר* ( *חלק ג עא א*) that unambiguously permits the act:

אמר רבי ייסא בשעתא דאצטרין עלמא למטרא אמאי אזלינן לגביהון דמיתייא והא כתיב ודורש אל המתים ואסיר. אמר ליה עד כען לא חמיתא גדפא דצפרא דעדן. ודורש אל המתים אל המתים דייקא. דאינון חייבי עלמא דאינון מעמין עכו"ם דאשתכחו תדיר מתים. אבל ישראל דאינון זכאי קשוט שלמה קרא עלייהו ושבח אני את המתים שכבר מתו בזמנא אחרא ולא השתא. שכבר מתו. והשתא אינון חיים.

*Rabbi Yosa said: "when the world needs rain, why do we go to the dead; does it not say '(do not) seek (the counsel of) the dead'? (Rabbi Chizkiya?) replied:... "(that refers) only to the dead who are (sinners) from the nations of idolaters who are indeed permanently dead...But the Jews who, in truth, are meritorious, are they not truly alive?"*

Here, the Zohar clearly permits seeking the counsel of dead Jews (in obvious conflict with halachic sources like the Rambam). The fact that R' Karo completely ignores such an unambiguous Zohar and, in fact, rules against it, suggests that he prefers to exclude it from the halachic process.

Nevertheless, later halachic authorities like the Mishnah Brurah, who relied heavily on kabbalistic sources, apparently disagreed.