**The Dispute over Kavvanot in the Early Kabbalah**

Since the appearance of the historical Kabbalah in the Middle Ages, it has included directives on Kabbalistic forms of prayer. We know very little about how the Kabbalists of twelfth-century Provence were received, but the little we do know is related to the *kavvanot* or Kabbalistic intentions of prayer. For example, we find in early manuscripts written in the name of R. Avraham ben David (Ra’avad of Posquieres) and R. Yaakov Nazir:

[According to] the tradition of R. Yaakov haNazir, in the first three and last three blessings [one should concentrate] on [the *sefirah* of] Binah, and in the middle [blessings] – during the day, on Tiferet, and during the night, on Binah for all of them. And the tradition of R. Avraham [ben David] of blessed memory [is that in the] first three and last three [blessings one should concentrate] on the Most High, and in the middle [blessings] – on the Creator, *Yotzer Bereshit*.

Moshe Idel has shown in a number of articles that teachings on *kavvanot* can be traced back to the earliest appearance of the Kabbalah and that their adumbrations already appeared in the writings of the German Pietists (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), in which the school of R. Elazar of Worms discussed the legitimacy of addressing one’s prayer to the *Kavod*, an alternate term for the Shekhinah.

However, in the same period that such discussions on *kavvanot* were occurring in Provence, we find a fierce opposition there to the use of such techniques, at times as part of a broader opposition against the Kabbalah as a whole. The best-known critique of the Kabbalah was leveled by R. Meir ben Shimon of Narbonne in his book *Milḥemet Mitzvah*. This sage (known also as Ha-Me’ili) had sharp words for the Kabbalists promoting these new approaches to *kavvanot* in prayer:

What can be said about these fools, whose every prayer and blessing is made to multiple gods…as some of our sages have themselves heard them advising to pray during the day to one created god and in the night to another god higher than it, though it too is created, and on the holy days to yet another, and the Ten Days of Repentance they have turned to days of shame and wrongdoing, praying to one that has been created and to others below it…

One can hear the fervor in the sage’s words as he ridicules his exaggerated versions of Kabbalists’ statements on the *kavvanot*. Some of the proof texts he brings in support of his condemnations are of special importance to the topic at hand; for example, on one occasion he writes:

We learned in the Jerusalem Talmud, at the end of Tractate Berachot: “A mortal man has a Lord, and if trouble should come upon him, he cannot see him immediately, but rather goes and stands at the gate of his Lord’s courtyard and calls to his servant or a member of the household, and they tell the Lord that So-and-So is outside. But it is not so with the Holy One, blessed be He, who says, ‘If trouble has come upon you, do not cry out to Michael or Gabriel, cry out to Me, and I will answer you’”… We can prove from this that one should not call out to any angel in a time of need, nor should one call on an angel to ask that the Holy One, blessed be He, have mercy on him in any matter. So the Torah warns us not to worship or make any kind of offering to any but the Ineffable Name alone, as it is written, “Whoever sacrifices to gods other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed” (Ex. 22:19), on which our sages commented, “[the Torah] designated all rites to the Ineffable Name” (Sanhedrin 60b).

This piercing critique by R. Meir ben Shimon was first discussed by Gershom Scholem and more recently received extensive treatment by Tzachi Weiss. Weiss showed that this critique was typical of the period’s criticism of the Kabbalah in targeting certain radical dualistic ideas that had preceded the appearance of the Kabbalah but which Meir ben Shimon identified with the Kabbalistic doctrine of his day.

Of course, this critique by the Provencal sage reflects the viewpoint of an outsider to the Kabbalah. In this study I will discuss a critique similar to Meir ben Shimon’s yet originating from within the Kabbalistic community itself. Such a critical stance can be found – surprisingly – in the teachings of the most famous Kabbalist of the thirteenth century, Moses Nahmanides.

Before we address Nahmanides’ famous pronouncements on the topic we should point out that, although he wrote at length about the Kabbalistic reasons for the commandments and frequently attributed to them theurgic abilities to influence the *sefirot*, this never led him to suggest changing the manner of their performance. For example, regarding blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashannah, Nahmanides explained that the sounding was meant to arouse “the great shofar,” that is, the *sefirah* of Binah, but he never ordered the one blowing the shofar in the synagogue to concentrate on that *sefirah* – in contrast to, for example, the Zohar, which some decades later would claim that “it is necessary for the one blowing to know the root of the matter and to concentrate on it while blowing, and to perform the act with discernment” (Zohar II, 149b). Likewise, though Nahmanides elaborated on the affinities between the Four Species shaken on the holiday of Sukkot and the various *sefirot*, he never translated this knowledge into any act or ritual. In short, Nahmanides’ theurgy is presented solely as a body of conceptual knowledge and does not aspire to create a Kabbalistic form of practise. The lack of any such step stood in contrast to the teachings of his contemporary Kabbalists who, as mentioned earlier, promoted a unique theory of applying *kavvanot* in prayer and during the performance of the commandments, and certainly in contrast to those Kabbalists of later eras for whom such applications stood at the center of their Kabbalistic system. We do possess manuscripts attributed to Nahmanides that include directions for using *kavvanot* in prayer; however, beside the fact that most of them are in the style of *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and not the early Kabbalists, the attribution of such writings to Nahmanides, like so many other writings from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, is erroneous (for reasons on which we cannot elaborate here). On the other hand, other teachings that certainly are authentic, which provide interpretations of such liturgical texts as the Shema and the Priestly Blessing, never leave the realm of theory to make prescriptions for the practical use of *kavvanot*.

We need not rely on the absence of evidence here, however; there are explicit expressions of Nahmanides’ position vis-à-vis use of *kavvanot*. We will begin with his earliest composition, the sermon *Torat Hashem Temimah*, apparently composed in the late 1230s or early 1240s, many years before the composition of his central work, his Commentary on the Torah. Here Nahmanides merely alludes to the Kabbalistic idea of the *kavvanot*, yet we can already sense his distaste for addressing lower metaphysical powers in prayer. In this sermon, Nahmanides opposes any appeal to angels to serve as advocates before God, understanding such an appeal as a form of idolatry. He writes:

The third form of idolatry is serving the angels…or believing that they have ability to serve as intermediaries between man and God for those who turn to them…and it appears that even to pray to them for this purpose is forbidden to us, as it is said: “A mortal man has a benefactor, and if trouble should come upon him, he cannot see him immediately, but rather goes and stands at the gate of his Lord’s courtyard and calls to his servant or a member of the household, and they tell the Lord that So-and-So is outside. But it is not so with the Holy One, blessed be He, who says, ‘If trouble has come upon you, do not cry out to Michael or Gavriel, cry out to Me.’” This is the meaning of the hymns *Michael Sara Rabah* and *Makhnisei Raḥamim*, as well as the words of the Rabbi [Maimonides] in *The Book of Knowledge*… and regarding this form of idolatry, Scripture says, *vaya’avdu elohim aḥerim*, “and serve other powers,” for the angels are called *elohim*, and they are the powers of heaven… so Scripture says, “Whoever sacrifices to *the powers* other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed” (Ex. 22:19), with a *pataḥ* under the *lamed* [to designate the definitive article], for they are higher powers whose divinity and potency are known to us.

With these words Nahmanides opens a broad new front in the polemic against his opponents. Not only does he criticize those who explicitly turn to angels for aid but he addresses a related phenomenon, the spread of Kabbalistic hymns such as *Michael Sara Rabah* and *Makhnisei Raḥamim*, with their poetic evocations of such appeals. We may recognize here the influence of his master, R. Yehudah ben Bakar, who joined in the debate about *Makhnisei Raḥamim*, coming out in fierce opposition to addressing angels in prayer, and who, in his “Commentary to the Prayers and Blessings,” stated that “it is forbidden to ask any angel to beseech mercy upon him.” Nahmanides frequently repeated this fundamental position against turning to angels in his later and central work, his Commentary on the Torah, for example in his explanation of the verses “You shall have no other gods before Me” and “Whoever sacrifices togods other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed,” which he saw as forbidding appeal to angels. However, Nahmanides includes in his gloss an especially important note that extends this ban to other categories. His comment on that verse reads as follows:

“Whoever sacrifices to the powers other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed” (Ex. 22:19), with a *pataḥ* under the *lamed* [to designate the definite article], for they are supernal powers, referred to as *elohim* in several places in Scripture…and the verse states “other than the Lord alone,” for those who sacrifice to the angels think they do His will and that they are His intermediaries, in order to affect His will, as if the sacrifices are for God and His servants – that is why it says “other than the Lord alone”… **There is a great secret here, from which we can understand the meaning of the sacrifices, and the discerning reader can know it from what we have written elsewhere… and we will also allude to it in the book of Leviticus**, with the help of God, blessed be His name forever and ever.

In his closing words Nahmanides hints that the warning against sacrificing to other powers contains an additional meaning, beyond the basic ban on turning to angels. What is the meaning of his hint? To what other rite does Nahmanides allude? The reference to his comments on Leviticus will provide the answer. In his explanation on the first chapter of that book, Nahmanides included a lengthy discourse on the meaning of the sacrifices. He opens his discussion with a survey of the various reasons given for them, in which he rejects with disgust Maimonides’ historical explanation according to which the ritual of sacrifice was a compromise made for the Jews who had absorbed the religious norms of Egypt. It may be that, in his fervor to dismiss this Maimonidean approach, he was tempted to reveal more than the proverbial hand’s breadth about the Kabbalistic reason for the sacrificial ritual, even as he declared that it was a “hidden secret”:

The entire matter is explained in the Torah, as it is said, “My offering, My bread for My fire,” and *leḥem isheh*, “bread of fire,” that is, bread for the fire, and then for the *ishim*, the men… This sacrifice relates to the divine aspect of Judgment, and the sacrifice must be made to the Lord alone, and not to any other thing in the world, and this is why it is called *oleh* and *isheh*. So Scripture says, “for they offer the Lord’s offerings by fire, the food of their God, and so must be holy” (Lev. 21:6), and so [the Sages] said that in the commandments of the sacrifices there is no mention of the names El or Elohim; rather, “an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord” (Lev. 1:9), for they must be intended only for the Lord; the one bringing the sacrifice must think only of the Ineffable Name… This is the meaning of the Psalm, “Sacrifice a thank offering to God, and pay your vows to the Most High” (Ps. 50:14), “For the Lord Most High is awesome, great king over all the earth” (Ps. 47:3). And we do not swear by any but the Ineffable Name.

The “hidden secret,” then, is part of the daring idea that the sacrifice is intended to nourish the aspect of Din or divine Judgment (referred to here as *isheh*, the *sefirah* of Malkhut). Moreover, it is intended to placate divine Judgment – “*leḥem isheh*, ‘bread of fire,’ that is, bread for the fire, and then for the *ishim*, the men… This sacrifice relates to the divine aspect of Judgment.” To this Kabbalistic explanation, however, Nahmanides attached a lengthy, and very important, addendum: “the sacrifice must be made to the Lord alone, and not intended for any other thing in the world” – that is to say, even though the sacrifice is meant to satiate Malkhut, the aspect of Judgment, at the moment of performing the ritual the heart must be directed only to the Ineffable Name. Nahmanides supports this position by citing the Talmudic dictum “[the Torah] designated all rites to the Ineffable Name.” In fact, Nahmanides is demanding here a certain level of cognitive dissonance: on the one hand, in Nahmanides’s eyes, the act of sacrifice is unequivocally bound up with the divine “anger” of Malkhut, and as such he does not hesitate to define the sacrifice as “the bread” of the divine entity referred to as “fire” in the phrase *leḥem isheh*, and of the “men,” *ishim*, by which Nahmanides refers to the sefirot or other, lower powers in the cosmic array; on the other hand, however – as Nahmanides himself stresses here – while performing the act of sacrifice, the Kohen is required to ignore all of this and focus his intention solely on the one and only God, who stands above all of these powers. Note, we should not understand Nahmanides as rejecting a particular Kabbalistic approach for another or as redirecting one’s intention from one *sefirah* to another. The fact that Nahmanides was not careful to make consistent use of the sefirotic designation “Ineffable Name,” even though the Talmud source provided it as a ready-made term, shows that he sought to return the focus to the traditional designee who is above and beyond all *kavvanot*. In any case, the requirement “to direct” – or, literally, “to empty” -- all worship to the Ineffable Name in fact empties the *kavvanot* of all meaning.

We can find an example of the idolatrous rites against which Nahmanides warns his readers in the continuation of the same commentary on Leviticus, in his explanation of the sin of Nadav and Avihu: “they placed incense on the fire, as Scripture states ‘They will offer You incense to savor’ and directed their hearts only to this…for they placed the incense only on the fire” (Commentary on the Torah, Lev. 10:2). Their sin, then, was not in their action, which Jacob the Patriarch foretold in his blessing of the priestly service (Deut. 33:10); rather, their sin, Nahmanides explains, was that “they directed their hearts only to *this, zot*” – a Kabbalistic code for Malkhut.

It is clear, then, that in his vague comment on the verse “Whoever sacrifices to gods other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed” – “There is a great secret here, from which we can understand the meaning of the sacrifices” – he sought to include alongside the ban on turning to angels a ban on directing one’s worship to particular *sefirot*, at least in the moment of performing the sacrifice.

Nahmanides’ stringency regarding turning to the one and ultimate divine entity exceeded the discussion of sacrifices, which had long ago ceased and were not part of the religious world of his contemporaries. Rather, the way in which he formulated the severe theological warning in discussing the sacrifices reveals its broader context, in that he required the dedication (literally, “emptying”) of **all forms of worship** to the Ineffable Name alone. Likewise, we find exactly the same explanation appears in another comment of his with a more practical application, that is, prayer. In his explanation of “the secret of the blessings,” included in his interpretation of Exodus 15:26, he explains the transition in the liturgy from second to third person – “Blessed are *You*…who has sanctified us with *His* commandments…” – by saying that “In every blessing that includes Kingship (Malkhut), a portion is devoted to offering glory to Malkhut.” That is to say, the mention of the *sefirah* of Malkhut is always made in the third person, for it is never the addressee. That being the case, Nahmanides continues, the Aleinu prayer is also phrased in third person, “since in it we mention the King of Kings of Kings.” So we see that even the language of the blessings and prayers is subordinate in Nahmanides’s eyes to the essential norm that one never addresses the *sefirah* of Malkhut directly.

Nahmanides based his opposition to the use of *kavvanot* on a number of Talmudic sources, the primary source being the statement in Tractate Sanhedrin (60b): “[the Torah] designated all rites to the Ineffable Name.” In its original context, of course, this statement has no connection whatsoever to the *sefirot*. Moreover, the Talmudic dictum itself comes only to forbid idolatrous worship even in unconventional forms. The application of this statement to the use of *kavvanot* is an exegetical manipulation. Nahmanides’ acontextual interpretation of the Talmudic statement is especially striking in light of the fact that elsewhere Nahmanides himself made use of the Talmudic dictum in its plain, contextual meaning.

It turns out, however, that this creative exegesis of the Talmudic statement is not original to Nahmanides, and in fact is already found in the criticism of R. Meir ben Shimon of Narbonne, who wrote, as mentioned above, “So the Torah warns us not to worship or make any kind of offering to any but the Ineffable Name alone, as it is written, ‘Whoever sacrifices to gods other than the Lord alone shall be proscribed,’ on which our sages commented, ‘[the Torah] designated all rites to the Ineffable Name.’” It would be an unlikely coincidence for both sages to have come up with the same surprising interpretation of the Talmudic dictum and to use it in the same context. Given that Meir ben Shimon’s composition was certainly the earlier of the two, we can assume that Nahmanides copied from it. So we see the external criticism of ben Shimon joined with the internal polemic of Nahmanides to form a united front against the Kabbalistic use of *kavvanot*. We must conclude that, if Nahmanides had been asked to add his signature to the letter of protest drafted by ben Shimon he would have agreed, even if he would have preferred to word his opposition more gently. It may be that Nahmanides secretly despised the sage from Provence, who had no knowledge of the Kabbalistic secrets of the blessings and prayers or of their proper performance, but in his essential arguments against the Kabbalists’ use of the *kavvanot*, Meir ben Shimon would have found Nahmanides to be a faithful ally.

We must view Nahmanides’s position within the broader context of his religious world, at the heart of which was the striving for intimate and unmediated contact with the divine. Throughout his writings, Nahmanides consistently and systematically ruled out any possibility of a mediator in one’s relationship with God, delegitimizing not only appeal to angels but any use of magic or astrology, even while believing in their efficacy: “as we are commanded to ‘be upright with the Lord your God,’” wrote Nahmanides in his commentary on Deuteronomy 18:13, “we must devote our hearts to Him alone, and believe that it is He alone who does all things and knows all future events, of which we should seek to know only from Him, from His prophets or His pious devotees, that is, the Urim and Tumim, and not from astrologers or any other source.” What’s more, even turning to doctors was disgraceful (though he himself practiced medicine) as expressed in his famous words, “one who seeks God through a prophet should not turn to doctors – what place do they have in the house of those who do God’s will?” It is no surprise, then, that appeal to the sefirotic intermediaries, whether at the top or the bottom of the sefirotic array, was forcefully rejected by Nahmanides, in the name of preserving a pure and unmediated connection between man and God.

However, we must also view Nahmanides’s opposition through the lens of his biography. Even though Nahmanides can be counted among the most creative rabbinic figures of the Middle Ages, he also represented the conservative extreme. Said conservatism was already evident in his halakhic works, which belonged to the early years of his career. Two such compositions -- *Milḥemet Hashem* and *Sefer ha-Zekhut* – were dedicated to the defense of the Sephardic geonic tradition against criticism by the sages of Provence. In later years Nahmanides expanded his apologetical works with his notes on Maimonides’s *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, in which he came to the defense of early traditions against the consistent criticism of Maimonides. Nahmanides’ conservatism was also expressed in his thought, and elsewhere I have pointed out the careful and even fastidious way in which he integratedinto his teachings a number of Maimonides’s philosophical positions. Nahmanides’ concern for defending the complete and perfect nature of the tradition also found expression in the careful and creative way in which he integrated Kabbbalistic ideas into his religious world. Nahmanides’ anxiety over the growing disconnection from the ancient and authentic tradition was what led him to definte the Kabbalistic ideas within theoretical conceptual categories that would not shake the foundations of his religious world nor threaten either religious practice or the prevailing religious ethos. So Nahmanides laid the foundationof traditional Kabbalistic knowledge, one that was moderate and humble, which we might call “orthodox Kabbalah.” There is reason to assume that it was this framing of the Kabbalah within the traditional world that would later enable its acceptance within broader circles and, in fact, its trickle down into the mainstream of the Jewish religion.