YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #07: R. Kalonymus’s Works (Part III)**

Committing Chassidic teachings to writing goes against the essential nature of *chassidut*, as *chassidut* is not the sort of knowledge that can be learned from books – in contrast to Halakha, for example. *Chassidut* reveals and expresses itself in life as it is lived;[[1]](#footnote-1) it is transmitted from the Rebbe to the *chassid* through the Rebbe’s words and the *chassid*’s listening, through watching the Rebbe’s customs and habits, and through fraternal bonding, through dancing and drinking together. *Chassidut* is life, not simply words on paper. As R. Kalonymus put it:

The essence of *chassidut* is not to be found in a book, but rather in the bones of actual *chassidim*, in a manner reminiscent of the verse, “This is the book of the generations of man.” Men and *chassidim* are the book of *chassidut* – their journeys and actions along with their selves and their feelings, what they did in order to arrive at each spark of light, vitality in performance of *mitzvot* and prayer and any stage of the levels of *chassidut*, and how they felt when achieving each of these… The main locus and literature of *chassidut* is the *chassidim* themselves. There is no orderly written instruction of how a person is to behave if he wishes to become a *chassid*. Any young Torah scholar who is among *chassidim* as they carry out their personal behavior and their physical and spiritual interaction between each other under the influence of their Rebbe will become a *chassid*. (*Mevo She’arim*, p. 278)

In the first generation of Chabad, a similar dilemma arose concerning the relationship between speech and writing. R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, addressed this dilemma in the introduction to his *Likkutei Amarim Tania*, the first Chassidic work to be written systematically as a book rather than a collection of teachings and sermons.[[2]](#footnote-2) On the one hand, he acknowledges the pitfalls of writing; on the other hand, he seeks an alternative to *yechidut* with him – the live encounter between himself and his *chassidim*. From R. Shneur Zalman’s words we sense the tension between a live encounter with the Rebbe and the writing of a book: even if the book truly reflects his living Torah, it cannot touch the soul of the reader and his own specific and unique needs as dictated by his soul-root. A book contains a great many statements and teachings, some of which are directed at others and not at the specific reader in question. In a live encounter, the Rebbe can direct his words with great accuracy so as to address the psychological and spiritual situation and needs of the individual *chassid*. Despite the pitfalls of the written word, however, R. Shneur Zalman’s following was growing exponentially and he found himself unable to devote time to each of his *chassidim* personally. This led to his decision to write the book.

*Likkutei Amarim Tania* was not written with the goal of presenting Chassidic philosophy as originating in the thoughts of the author, but rather in the wake of questions and spiritual problems that his *chassidim* had discussed with him, which led to the development of the teachings presented in the book. R. Shneur Zalman states explicitly that he had his *chassidim* in mind as he wrote.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The criticism directed at R. Shneur Zalman following the publication of his *Likkutei Amarim Tania* came not only from the outside – from opponents of *chassidut* such as the Vilna Gaon, who objected to the content itself – but also from within the Chassidic ranks. One complaint on the part of Chassidic leaders was that the book presented kabbalistic concepts too openly. But another complaint was that it committed the Chassidic approach to writing, in view of the fact that the uniqueness of *chassidut* rests, among other things, on the unmediated bond between the Rebbe and his disciples. A written book seems like a lifeless corpse in comparison.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Indeed, R. Shneur Zalman was a courageous pioneer. This is attested to by a story that appears in *Shivchei Ha-Besht* concerning the Ba’al Shem Tov’s reservations about having his teachings written down, lest they be misunderstood. This fear accompanied many of the leaders of *chassidut* throughout the generations, until our own times:

I heard from the Rabbi of our community: Once, a certain man wrote a teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov as he had heard it from him. At some point the Ba’al Shem Tov perceived a malevolent angel going about holding a book. He said to him, “What is that book that you are holding?” He replied, “It is the book that you wrote.” Then the Ba’al Shem Tov understood that there was someone who was writing down his teachings. He gathered all his followers and asked them, “Who among you is writing my teachings?” The man confessed and brought the Ba’al Shem Tov his writings. The Ba’al Shem Tov looked at them and said, “There is not a single thing here that I taught.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Opposition to the writing of Chassidic teachings in books is also to be found in the *chassidut* of Przysucha and of Kotzk, with the claim that *chassidut* is manifest in *chassidim* themselves:

R. Chanokh Bornstein told me that a certain rabbi came to his grandfather, the renowned *Eglei Tal*, son-in-law of R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. He told him that he was writing a book about Kotzk, and asked that he tell him a bit about Kotzk. The *gaon* rebuked him, saying, “There are living books of Kotzk,” and refused to accede to his request.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Similar sharp disapproval in Polish *chassidut* can be found in the writings of R. Yehosua Horwitz of Dzikov, of the Ropschitz dynasty, who likewise emphasizes the value of direct speech that is heavenly inspired, rather than a teaching that is not spontaneous but rather prepared in advance:

When a *tzaddik* conveys a teaching in public, the purpose is to draw the hearts of Israel towards *teshuva*. But this is true only where the teaching comes to his mind exactly at the time when he needs to say it. When that is the case, he knows that the teaching has been sent from heaven and that he is uttering a teaching of truth, and thus the words that emerge from his heart will enter the hearts [of his listeners] and he will be able to draw the hearts of the Jewish People towards *teshuva*. However, it is not proper that he research the teaching and prepare it in advance, so that he has it ready for when he needs it. For such a teaching will not have its effect, nor make any impression on the heart of the listener, arousing him to *teshuva*. As it has been taught concerning the verse, “And you shall investigate and question… and behold, the matter is true and certain, that this abomination has been perpetrated…” (*Devarim* 17:4): what a person hears from heaven and then teaches then and there – this is a teaching of truth. But if the matter is “true and certain,” having been prepared and researched in advance, then, “an abomination has been perpetrated…”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Here again we encounter a view that is wary of teachings that do not emerge directly from the heart and enter directly into the heart. This certainly applies to the entire realm of literature, which is all produced through “preparation in advance” and is thus, from this perspective, “an abomination.”

In light of the unequivocal preference for speech over writing, and in light of R. Kalonymus’s own statement that “the book of *chassidut* is the bones of the actual *chassidim*,” we must ask ourselves why he set about writing his books at all.

R. Kalonymus asserts that the essence of studying how to be a *chassid* is something that one learns from his rabbis and their disciples: “There is no orderly written instruction of how a person is to behave if he wishes to become a *chassid*.” In other words, it is impossible to learn how to be a *chassid* from books alone. The role of Chassidic literature, to his view, is auxiliary and complementary in nature. The books are an important source for additional guidance in Divine service, providing, in his words, “advice and stratagems.” Indeed, R. Kalonymus’s books for the most part provide insight into the workings of the psyche and practical advice in Chassidic practice, including traditions conveyed from the early generations. As an example, R. Kalonymus quotes from the book *Likkutim Yekarim* concerning how a person should meditate, as well as instruction emphasizing that one should not recite *Tehillim* at great length prior to praying, in order not to tire himself. Another piece of practical advice is to pray from a prayer book, but if the worshipper is firmly focused on the upper world it is better that he pray with his eyes closed.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It seems that R. Kalonymus also sought to close a gap that he sensed in the *chassidut* of his times, and also to preserve treasured knowledge so it would not be lost. He wrote down the personal prescriptions and suggestions of *chassidim* in previous generations – the “oral Torah” that had been handed down from Rebbes to their disciples. For this reason, he set down his ideas in great detail, with elaboration of the background and reason for every piece of instruction.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. In this context, there is an interesting difference of opinion between Gershon Scholem and Martin Buber as to which branch of literature offers the better opportunity to become familiar with the world of *chassidut* – the teachings of the *tzaddikim*, as Scholem maintains, or stories of *tzaddikim*, as according to Buber, who argues that these are a more profound reflection of the essence of *chassidut*: “*Chassidut* is first and foremost a category not of Torah, but rather of life. The primary source for knowing it is its stories; only afterwards comes the theoretical literature…” (G. Scholem, “*Perusho shel Martin Buber Le-Chassidut*,” *Devarim Bego* [Tel Aviv, 5750], p. 367. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Likkutei Amarim Tania*, Introduction, pp. 6-8. See also the commentary of R. Adin Steinzaltz, *Biur Tania* I (Jerusalem, 5757), pp. 22-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Likkutei Amarim Tania*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, the sharp letter penned by R. Avraham of Kalisk opposing the publication of R. Shneur Zalman’s book, in *Iggerot Ba’al Ha-Tania*, D.Z. Hilman ed. (Jerusalem, 5713), pp. 105-107, and especially p. 106, where R. Avraham extols the speech of “our rabbis” who were very careful with their words. His letter conveys his negative view of the concept of committing chassidic teachings to writing. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, A. Rubinstein ed. (Jerusalem, 5752), p. 230. For other versions of the story, see G. Scholem, *Devarim Bego*, pp. 307-308. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Shai Agnon, *Sefer Sofer Ve-Sippur* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5738), p. 434. Another story that appears there reflects the same attitude towards books: “Once, the *tzaddik* R. Moshe of Kobrin happened to be in the city of Trisk. He went to pay his respects to the *Maggid*, R. Avraham of Trisk. The *Maggid* asked him, ‘Did your rabbis leave any books?’ R. Moshe replied, ‘Yes.’ He asked, ‘Manuscripts or print?’ R. Moshe answered, ‘Inscribed on the hearts of Israel, as it is written (*Mishlei* 3), ‘Write them upon the tablet of your heart’” (ibid., p. 436). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Yehoshua of Dzikov, *Ateret Yeshu’a* (Krakow, 5685), *Parashat Chukat*, 46b. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., pp. 278-279. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)