**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #11: *Chassidut***

The disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov were called “*chassidim*,” and the movement that he founded was called “*chassidut*.” But what is *chassidut*, and who is a *chasid*?

In his *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, R. Kalonymus addresses his young readers and tries to explain what *chassidut* is all about:

You may ask: What is *chassidut* and in what way is a *chasid* who serves God greater than someone who serves God but is not a *chasid*? Be aware that this is impossible to explain. *Chassidut* is not something merely intellectual, and thus explainable. The intellectual component of *chassidut* is only one part of it, and is itself revealed only after one has engaged in the service of God. This is the same as in prophecy. It is impossible to rationally explain prophecy. A prophet is the only one who actually understands the nature of prophecy – and for him, the phenomenon seems so simple and obvious that he cannot understand why others do not see what he does… This is also the case in *chassidut*, which is the revelation of the tiny spark of prophecy that exists within each Jew… It is impossible to explain *chassidut* with the intellect. Neither the chassidic way of serving God nor the *chasid*’s perception of the world can be explained rationally. It is impossible to intellectually describe how a true *chasid* prays, how his soul becomes inflamed and bound to supernal holiness, or how he sees in the Torah and in the commandment the lovely splendor of God, the world’s glory… When he sees and perceives these things during his periods of spiritual ascent and burning enthusiasm, they seem simple and certain...[[1]](#footnote-1)

The definition is offered through negation; the statement of what *chassidut* is not helps us to understand what it is. The essence of *chassidut* is not something that can be explained using intellectual categories or definitions. The comparison between *chassidut* and prophecy (which is found in many places in R. Kalonymus's writings, as we shall see in our later discussion of prophecy) indicates that the profound depths of *chassidut* can only be perceived through experience, through living life in accordance with the chassidic approach to Divine service, which is capable of bringing the *chassid* to a level of Divine inspiration.

Thus, in order to gain a proper understanding of what *chassidut* is, one must study all of R. Kalonymus's works that deal with Divine service (*Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, *Mevo ha-She'arim*, and *Bnei Machshava Tova*), and perform and follow the instructions set forth in them. After this, one may expect to achieve the “supernal holiness” and perceive the “lovely splendor of God, the world’s glory” – the perception of Godliness that extends throughout Creation. Only then can one truly “taste” *chassidut*.

Interestingly, R. Kalonymus concludes by emphasizing that when a person is young, it is still too early to achieve an in-depth grasp of the essence of *chassidut*:

You have yet to advance to these stages; this is as yet beyond your grasp and even your desire. However, if you have begun to internalize all that we have discussed, you have at least reached the outermost edge of *chassidut*; you have tasted the top of the staff dipped into the honeycomb.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This leads us to an important conclusion: a certain level of maturity is needed in order to achieve the level of “*chassidut*,” but the preparation for that level can and must start at an early age. Indeed, this is the purpose of the book *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*.

In his *Mevo Ha-She'arim*, intended for married students, R. Kalonymus discusses the definition of *chassidut*, but first draws our attention to the fact that *chassidut* is not a new concept; we find it already in the generations of the prophets.[[3]](#footnote-3) In *Tehillim*, King David calls himself a *chasid*: “Guard my soul for I am godly (*chasid ani*)” (*Tehillim* 86:2). In other words, the Ba'al Shem Tov did not introduce a new idea, but rather revived a very ancient value.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The root of the term *chassid* is *chesed,* and that is essentially the aspiration of the *chassid*. *Chesed* refers to unlimited kindness. In an explanation of the different *sefirot* that is found inthe second introduction to *Tikkunei Zohar*, the *sefira* of *chesed* is described as “*chad arikh*”[[5]](#footnote-5) – which, according to R. Kalonymus, means the outpouring of light beyond the limitations of the vessel (in accordance with the kabbalistic concept that all light is manifest within a vessel), like a cup that overflows. Similarly, once a person achieves the level of *chassidut*, his soul is no longer bound by the limitations of his body; his soul is not concealed, but rather is revealed in its longing for closeness to God.

R. Kalonymus declares that “the beginning and essence of *chassidut* is that [the *chasid*] should be a *ba'al nefesh* (literally, possessing a life-force)."[[6]](#footnote-6) What does this mean? Doesn’t every person possesses a *nefesh*? The *nefesh* of a *chasid* is not like the *nefesh* of a person who has not discovered his *nefesh*. A person can be out of touch and unaware of his life-force. His entire purpose is to discover and reveal his life-force and to come to know its qualities, tendencies, and longings. R. Kalonymus quotes from the teachings of R. Chaim Vital, disciple of the Ari, in his introduction to *Sha'arei Kedusha*: "There are those whose life-force itself, by virtue of its extreme purity, reveals itself to them and guides them in all their ways." The revelation of the *nefesh* is not an abstract idea, but rather a concrete process, achieved through a person's consciousness of his inner world and its workings and experiences.

The revelation of the life-force also expresses itself externally; other people are able to sense the grandeur and magnanimity of a person whose life-force is open and exposed. One of the clearest manifestations is enthusiasm and emotion in one's Divine service. In fact, for R. Kalonymus, all inner work is based on exposure of the life-force and the attainment of enthusiasm and emotion. We will expand on this at a later time.

Owing to the *chasid*'s quality of having a revealed life-force and his aspiration to giving and performing kindness, he conducts himself in all areas beyond the letter of the law. He does not act as most people do, adapting their behavior to the accepted norm and generally not exceeding it. The *chasid* always aspires to do more than he is commanded to. For example, if he is engaged in prayer, he will not suffice with merely reciting the words, as the rest of the congregation might, but rather will devote substantial time prior to the prayer service to preparing himself properly for prayer. A *chasid* is not someone who seeks strictures or extra obligations. Rather, he is driven by the vision of holiness, to the point of achieving Divine inspiration.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 118 (*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 99) and also in his sermon on the yahrzeit of his son, on the second day of Sukkot 5701; see *Esh Kodesh*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 118 (*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mevo She'arim*, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For discussion of the historical concept of a *chasid* prior to the *chassidut* of the Ba'al Shem Tov, see M. Rossman, *Ha-Ba'al Shem Tov Mechadesh Ha-Chasidut* (Jerusalem, 5760), pp. 41-51. Rossman argues that the *chassidut* of the Ba'al Shem Tov grew as a branch out of “ancient *chassidut*.” However, R. Kalonymus's position is that the Ba'al Shem Tov was innovative even in relation to the *chassidut* that had preceded him. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tikkunei Zohar* (Jerusalem, 5746), 17a, cited in *Mevo She'arim*, p. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)