**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #14: The *Tzaddik*’s Court in all its Glory**

R. Kalonymus looks back with longing at the early days of *Chassidut*, when the journey to the Rebbe would leave a powerful impression on the *chasid*, representing an important dimension of his Divine service. R. Kalonymus presents a detailed comparison between his own generation and the situation as it was in times gone by, as recounted by elderly *chassidim* and documented in various chasidic works, especially *Maor Va-Shemesh*, whose author was R. Kalonymus’s grandfather – R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein of Krakow.

Before reading R. Kalonymus’s thoughts, let us dwell for a moment on descriptions of the journey to the *tzaddik* as described in *Maor Va-Shemesh*, a work in which the subject of the *tzaddik* occupies a most significant place in comparison with the books by R. Kalonymus of Piaseczno. Notably, R. Kalonymus of Krakow was one of the greatest disciples of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk; he was also close to the Seer of Lublin, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, R. Mendele of Rimanov, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, and R. Yechiel Mikhel of Zlotshov.

The role of the *tzaddik* is to elevate the souls of the *chassidim* to their Source – hence the importance of the journey to him:

Every *tzaddik* has people who travel to him to cleave to him; they are branches from the root of his soul, and through their drawing close to him, he elevates and connects their souls with their root on High, and they are his sparks that must be elevated. When a person perfects himself, all of his sparks come to him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The *tzaddik* benefits when *chassidim* gather and draw close to him, and the *chassidim* benefit from their closeness to him as well. By virtue of the *chassidim* drawing close, the *tzaddik* is endowed with new insights in Divine service, and the *chassidim* receive these insights from him:

There is benefit to the *tzaddik*, to whom God-fearing people connect themselves, and there is benefit to the people who connect themselves to the *tzaddik*. The benefit to the *tzaddik* lies in the fact that when a group of people journeys to the *tzaddik*, since their hearts have been aroused and they desire to truly serve God, and they have no idea on their own how to serve God truly, then they come to the *tzaddik* with this arousal to hear from the *tzaddik* God’s Torah and guidance as to how to serve God. Through this awakening, they cause the *tzaddik* to receive great sanctity from the blessed Creator – new ways of thinking to find new insights in the Torah, good advice and good practices for serving God truly, each according to his level of intellect. This is the benefit to the *tzaddik* – that the Holy One, blessed be He, showers him with new insights into Torah and Divine service, for their sake. Thus, the benefit to them is that they receive from the *tzaddik* sanctity and good advice for serving the blessed Creator.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The main point of the journey to the *tzaddik* is to learn from his conduct and to connect oneself with him. Thus, the miracles that he performs are of little importance – and of course a *Chasid* should keep away from someone who is not a true *tzaddik*, even if he has made a name for himself as a miracle-worker. In order to keep away from wonder-workers who are not worthy of the title *tzaddik,* one must cleave to true *tzaddikim*:

For behold, it is the way of the masses that when they hear it said of someone that he performs some or other sign or wonder, they immediately travel to him and believe whatever he tells him, even if his nature and conduct have not been known since his youth. But in truth this means nothing, for the purpose of the journey to the *tzaddik* is in order that we might learn from his ways. When someone has been known for many years for his conduct and his saintliness and his kindness, then people journey to him to learn his ways and to be together with him. But one should not make a priority of signs and wonders without even knowing what sort of person he is; this is worthless, and it is forbidden to journey to such a person…

And if you should say: How, then, can I keep myself away from such a person, who continually demonstrates signs and wonders and draws people’s hearts so they travel to him? The main remedy is that a person should connect himself with true *tzaddikim*, with whom he has long-standing familiarity; to connect himself with company that obeys them, and to strengthen himself with Torah and prayer…[[3]](#footnote-3)

We must assume that in the generation of the *Maor Va-Shemesh*, there were figures who deemed themselves to be *tzaddikim* even though they were not worthy of the title. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain why the author invests so much effort in guiding his readers in distinguishing between true *tzaddikim* and others. In another teaching, he describes the level of R. Elimelekh, who was able to direct his words towards his listeners in such a way that each one was certain that the sermon was directed mainly at himself:

When the Admor, the man of God, our teacher R. Elimelekh, of blessed memory, would stand before his household, with people gathered around him in a circle, and he stood in the middle and recounted a story to them, each one of them felt his heart broken into twelve pieces. Each of them believed that the story R. Elimelekh was telling was directed at him, alluding to his negative behavior… Even though the *tzaddik’s* intention in telling the story was to convey some general message or to highlight some moral lesson, nevertheless his words are full of relevance for everyone who hears them. Thus, even a mundane exchange between learned scholars is worthy of study. And this is how one evaluates a *tzaddik*: if he has this power, then he represents the aspect of Tzion and a true “*tzaddik* who is the foundation of the world.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

R. Kalonymus of Piaseczno describes a *chasid* who, longing to ascend to a higher level of sanctity and to leave behind the “filth” and “lowliness” in which he is mired, decides to travel to the Rebbe. The journey itself is a “path of *teshuva*,” since the preparation for the encounter with the *tzaddik* demands that the *chasid* prepare himself, both physically and – especially – spiritually. The journey to the *tzaddik* is also perceived as a pilgrimage, for why did the Israelites journey to Jerusalem if not to behold the Divine Presence? The journey to the *tzaddik* has a similar purpose: “To behold the pleasantness of the Lord and to visit His Sanctuary… like the Israelites of old, on their journey of pilgrimage to God’s House, to behold the countenance of the Lord of hosts.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The *chasid* would not travel to the *tzaddik* alone. Along the way, he would meet up with other *chassidim*, who were on their way to either the same Rebbe or to other *tzaddikim*. During the journey, each would tell his companions about his material and spiritual challenges and about the caliber of his Rebbe. The *chassidim* would also commit to purifying themselves in repentance over the course of the journey, in preparation for the encounter with the *tzaddik*. R. Kalonymus describes the entry into the Rebbe’s home with a sense of wonder:

Although he has seen his Rebbe many times in the past, he would still find it impossible to describe in words what he feels with the “*shalom aleikhem*” with which he greets him. How he has missed him; his heart and all his soul is so powerfully drawn to his Rebbe; he is ready to give himself up altogether in order to draw close to him… And with what great love the Rebbe extends his hand to him, and with what great loving reproof he looks at him.

And this is sufficient. He already feels the Rebbe’s effect on him; he runs to the *beit midrash* and throws himself into Torah and Divine service… It was for this that he came to the Rebbe, that he might sanctify him and draw him closer to God to a greater degree than he could achieve on his own.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The *chasid* would remain at the Rebbe’s court for a few weeks, feeling himself transformed. On Shabbat, the *chassidim* would sit at the *tisch* as the Rebbe “broke through the heavens, bringing down Torah for them from *atzilut* to *beria*, from *beria* to *yetzira*, and from there to *asiya*.” From time to time, the *chassid* would be permitted to enter the Rebbe’s room to seek guidance in his Divine service, and the Rebbe would respond to each individual in accordance with his level. The *chasid* would exert great efforts while at the Rebbe’s court and would arrive at a deeper awareness of God’s greatness. Upon returning home, he would try to preserve and maintain the Rebbe’s influence. It made no difference whether he made his living as a merchant or as an artisan; he performed his work as a *chasid*.

In later generations, however, this idyll came to an end. The crisis that enveloped *chassidut* – including Shabbat desecration by the younger generation, the Enlightenment, heresy, and the attractions that the youth found in non-Jewish culture[[7]](#footnote-7) – all caused the *chasid* great sorrow. While he might still try to draw close to the Rebbe, he no longer benefited from this contact, owing to the abyss that now separated the Rebbe from his *chassidim*:

Even if his Rebbe would utter words of Torah… he could not pay attention and focus his mind to listen to him… He no longer knew what his Rebbe was talking about… Every Shabbat he would feel himself far removed from *Chassidut* and from Divine service. Sometimes he would even find it difficult to understand why the Rebbe maintained his quest for *Chassidut* – a form of service seemingly too elevated for us. What do we have to do with such greatness? What do we have to do with such elevated *Chassidut*?[[8]](#footnote-8)

The *chasid* would return home, to be re-immersed in the “heretical ideas” that pervaded his city. The slight influence of the Rebbe’s court – if there had in fact been any – dissipated right away, and he felt as though nothing at all had changed, as though the journey had had no effect on him. A few months later, his friends would ask if he would join them on another journey, and he would invent different excuses in order to evade them. After all, having experienced no improvement or elevation in either the material or the spiritual dimension, why would he travel again?

R. Kalonymus’s purpose in describing this gloomy picture is not merely to compare it with the situation in previous generations. He addresses the *chassidim* in his generation, urging them to believe in their power of their contemporary *tzaddikim* to influence their *chassidim* just as the early *tzaddikim* used to. However, in order to imbibe and absorb the Rebbe’s influence, the *chasid* must remain with the *tzaddik* for a reasonable amount of time, and he must do this on a fairly regular basis. There is no point in expecting fundamental change to emerge from a brief, one-time encounter.

We see, then, that although R. Kalonymus builds largely on the writings of the *Maor Va-Shemesh*, the problems that had troubled R. Kalonymus of Krakow in the early nineteenth century were different from those now confronted by R. Kalonymus of Piaseczno, a century later. For example, while the *Maor Va-Shemesh* worried about whether excessive focus on the wonders performed by *tzaddikim* could lead their *chassidim* to “*avoda zara,*”[[9]](#footnote-9) or how to neutralize the influence of those masquerading as *tzaddikim*, R. Kalonymus of Piaseczno is concerned that many *chassidim* have lost hope in the *tzaddikim*’s ability to help them in their spiritual quest. However, he notes that those who nevertheless travel to the *tzaddikim* to learn the ways of *Chassidut* still

feel the effect that *Chassidut* still has on them; the *Shabbatot* and festivals that they spend at the Rebbe are still the most special days of their lives, like the days of old and life in the Garden of Eden for their transcendence…[[10]](#footnote-10)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem, 5748), *Parashat Chukat*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., *Parashat Tetzaveh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., *Parashat Re’eh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., *Parashat Devarim*. In another teaching (on *Parashat Miketz*) that deals with evaluating the *tzaddik’s* level, the *Maor Va-Shemesh* draws a distinction between the experience of a regular *chasid* and the experience of a pious *talmid chakham*: When *chassidim* travel to a true *tzaddik*, they behold him and their hearts are ignited to serve God, and all that they do while they are in his presence assumes additional sanctity. If this is indeed their experience, then he is a “*tzaddik* who is a foundation of the world.” On the other hand, when the journey to the *tzaddik* is made by a group of pious *talmidei* *chakhamim* – who perform *mitzvot* and good deeds and pray even when at home with great devotion – then their test of whether he is a true *tzaddik* is different: When they are in his presence, they are unable to pray and study as they do when at home; their focused devotion wanes a little, like a candle whose light pales in the presence of a great blazing torch, but afterwards their hearts are reinvigorated. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 269. For other dimensions of the menaing of the journey to the *tzaddik* in the teachings of R. Nachman of Breslov, see R. Wacks, “*Ha-Nesi’a Le-Rabbi Nachman Mi-Breslov le-Rosh Ha-Shana – Etgar, Nisayon, Ve-Tikun Ha-Emuna*,” in A. Bazak (ed.), *Be-Rosh Ha-Shana Yikatevun* (Alon Shvut, 5763), pp. 97-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 270-271. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Following his warning concerning *tzaddikim* who are said to perform signs and wonders but who are not well-known and well-established as *tzaddikim* since their youth (as discussed above), he writes: “And if you should say, ‘What harm is there in this? Does he then tell people who travel to him to transgress even the slightest of trasgressions? Of course not; he admonishes them [and guides them] in their service of God, so why do you care that he performs signs and wonders?’ But in truth, know that it is not good to cleave to him and connect oneself with him, for ultimately falsehood cannot endure, and great obstacles will come about through him, and eventually those who are drawn to him will come to idolatry, Heaven forefend” (*Maor Va-Shemesh*, *Parashat* *Re’eh*). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)