**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #16: The Bnei Machshava Tova *Chavura***

R. Kalonymus did not stop at calling for the renewal of the *chavura*; he went a step further and actually created a *chavura* around himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) Although we have no information as to the size of the group, the identities of the participants, or descriptions of their meetings, R. Aharon Sourasky asserts that R. Kalonymus established the *chavura*, which he called “*bnei machshava tova*,” as

a group of his select disciples; young men who were outstanding in their Torah [knowledge] and their service of God, who were completely under his influence in terms of their thoughts, speech and actions… These were the most exemplary of the *chassidim* of Piaseczno.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Another source from which we can glean information about the *chavura* is the book *Bnei Machshava Tova*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This book – or, to define it more accurately, this modest pamphlet – charts a course for the members of the group to follow in their quest to achieve closeness to God.

This is not a typical chasidic work. Its uniqueness lies in its esoteric writing, directed at the members of a closed society. In contrast to other works in which R. Kalonymus discusses the subject of the *chavura* as part of his discussion of other topics, *Bnei Machshava Tova* is devoted and directed in its entirety to the members of the *chavura*. We will briefly focus on this book in order to learn about Divine service as practiced by this *chavura*.

The pamphlet accompanied the activities of R. Kalonymus’s group, which he referred to as “our *chevraya*,” or “our society.” At the same time, it is clear from the way in which the content is formulated that the guidance is meant to accompany the group in independent activity, even without R. Kalonymus as leader. In other words, R. Kalonymus set down a program for creating such *chavurot* in different places, which could operate without his direct input. We also know that R. Kalonymus sent the pamphlet to his brother, with the intention of having it printed in Jerusalem. This indicates that he wished to disseminate the program and not limit it to his own group – although he stipulated that the pamphlet should be made available only among those willing and capable of meeting its standards and demands.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The aim of the group is to perceive God and sense His presence everywhere, such that the individual “sees that he is in God’s garden, before His Throne of glory – that is the purpose of our society.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Why is there a need for the group? Could the individual not achieve this aim on his own? R. Kalonymus insists that belonging to a *chavura* is a precondition for self-improvement and chasidic service: “That which can be achieved by the group cannot by any means be achieved by the individual.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The group is open to anyone seeking to draw close to God – people who have had enough of their mundane, contemptible lives of “lowly spirit”; people who are ready for uncompromising psychological and spiritual exertion. R. Kalonymus warns anyone who does not meet this criterion not to join the group, explaining that it is not appropriate to watch as a bystander as souls “wash themselves of their impurity.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The scenario might be compared with someone visiting the bathhouse to watch others bathing, with no intention of bathing himself. Curiosity, and the desire to belong to such a group, can attract people who are not willing to invest the effort that this process entails.

R. Kalonymus sets down the following rules for membership in the group:

1. The members of the group, its aims, and its path must be written down in a special notebook, and anyone who joins must sign a “declaration of acceptance” – essentially a declaration of the aspiration to take upon himself the aims of the *chavura* and to act to attain them.

2. Who is eligible to join?

a. Someone who feels pained by his distance from God.

b. He must be a “*ben Torah*,” regardless of how much he actually studies.

c. “He should be a merchant, an artisan, etc. – only he must make time three times a week for the *chavura*.” This item is open to two different interpretations. The first is that a member of the group must be someone who is involved in worldly matters, in some sort of labor or trade. The second way of understanding it is that he can be a merchant or artisan, but someone who is involved in full-time Torah study can also be a member of the group. I am inclined to adopt the first interpretation – that R. Kalonymus wanted the members of his group to be *ba’alei battim,* regular householders, people who worked for a living, and were also *bnei Torah*. Afterwards, he decided to establish groups for full-time Torah scholars, and to this end he set down the program that appears in his *Hakhsharat Avrekhim*, which was published at a later date than *Bnei Machshava Tova*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

d. He must not be ambivalent or irresolute in his decisions.

e. He must be a man of truth, and not the opposite.

3. Every member of the *chavura* must feel self-abnegation towards every Jew and work on reinforcing his desire to improve himself.

4. The members of the group must meet in a set location that is designated for their meetings, at least three times a week, and preferably more.

5. During the meetings, every member may study whatever he chooses, but the major part of the meeting is devoted to joint study of the book *Bnei Machshava Tova*. The study must be carried out “calmly and in depth.” Each of the participants must think and share with his companions how he intends to put the book’s guidance into practice; in this way, the members of the group help each other.

6. “The holy *chevraya* stands on three pillars: the connection between members, fraternal love, and the cleaving of members.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Therefore, each individual must share his challenges with his fellow, and each helps the other with his material and spiritual needs.

7. The location of the meeting and study sessions must be regarded by the group members as a sacred and purifying place.

8. Each member of the group should be respected and viewed as “one of the children of the prophets.”

9. It is good to drink some alcoholic beverage from time to time in order to stimulate the psyche, but certainly not to become inebriated.[[10]](#footnote-10)

10. It is recommended that a *niggun* be sung in order to arouse the psyche, and it is also possible to dance a little, “so long as they do not spend their time only drinking, singing and dancing.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

11. The discussions of the *chavura* are to be kept confidential.

12. An individual from a different city may be accepted to the *chavura*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. It should be noted that in chronological terms, the establishment of the *bnei machshava tova chavura* actually preceded the writing of his book *Bnei Machshava Tova*, and it seems that this book preceded *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*. Apparently, after R. Kalonymus had established his *chavura*, he called for other chasidic leaders to do the same, writing in his books about the necessity of reviving this institution. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Sourasky, “*Toldot Ha-Mechaber shel Ha-Gaon Ha-Kadosh Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Schapiro hy”d Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno Ba’al Chovat Ha-Talmidim Ve-She’ar Sefarim*,” in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* (Tel Aviv, 5752), p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The expression *bnei machshava tova* has its origins in a rabbinical teaching: “A good thought [*machshava tova*] is connected by God; a bad thought is not connected by Him, as it is written (*Tehillim* 66:18), ‘If I had looked upon wickedness with my heart, the Lord would not have heard…’. How, then, am I to understand the verse (*Yirmiyahu* 6:19), ‘Hear, O earth, behold, I will bring evil upon this people, the fruit of their thoughts…’? [We must make the following distinction:] Where a good thought produces fruit [i.e., it has positive results], God connects it with the action. Where a thought does not produce fruit, God does not connect it with the action” (*Tosefta Peah* 1:4, Lieberman edition, p. 41-42). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the preface to *Bnei Machshava Tova*, written by the author’s family members. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, R. Kalonymus speaks about Torah scholars who need to find a way to support themselves (p. 152). However, based on the location of this idea within the list of rules, it would seem that for R. Kalonymus this represented a situation that was *bedieved (*post facto*,* rather than the ideal), whereas in *Bnei Machshava Tova* membership in the *chavura* requires that one work for his living. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)