**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #18: The *Chavura* and the *Rebbe***

Thus far, we have discussed the relations within the group of *chassidim* (*chavura*), but what sort of reciprocal relations exist between the *chavura* and the Rebbe? Does the *chavura* need the Rebbe, and does he need them?

From various descriptions in *Tanakh* it seems that the prophets went about in groups (*lahakot*, singular: *lahaka*), with a “head prophet” leading them. R. Kalonymus bases his description in this regard on the verse:

And Shaul sent messengers to take David, and when they saw the band (*lahaka*) of prophets prophesying and Shemuel stationed over them, the spirit of God came upon the messengers of Shaul, and they also prophesied. (*Shemuel* I 19:20)

However, the prophet needs the disciples around him no less than the disciples need their teacher: “The prophet, likewise, needed the ‘sons of the prophets’ and his disciples.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The prophet receives his powers from the stimulation and influence of his students. In order to be influenced by the prophet, a one-time visit was not sufficient: “Is it possible that the prophet could share the greater part of his enlightenment with people who busied themselves with vines and orchards all year round?” The aspiration to achieve prophecy demanded complete devotion – and R. Kalonymus demands the same of those aspiring to *Chasidut*, whose path parallels that of prophecy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The model of the ideal *chavura* as envisioned by R. Kalonymus existed in the generation of the Ba’al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch, and R. Kalonymus describes with longing the reciprocal relations between each of these leaders and their respective groups of followers. For example, he describes how, when the Maggid began his *derasha*, R. Zusha of Anipoli could tell what the Maggid was going to say, even though he was not standing in close physical proximity and was in fact pushed by the crowd all the way out of the synagogue. When asked how he could have known what the Maggid was going to say, he replied: “Just because there, on High, the Rebbe opened the gate, and the light poured out.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Rebbe opened up the source of Divine abundance in the upper worlds, and his disciple gathered up and absorbed that abundance below. Nevertheless, R. Kalonymus concludes, “We cannot even imagine the impact of these disciples on their teacher.” The influence is not one-directional; it is mutual, and without disciples – without a *chavura* – there is no Rebbe.

In the *chavura* of the Maggid of Mezeritch, as in the other *chavurot* in the early period of *Chasidut*, the disciples were a very diverse group, each *chasid* having a different soul-root. After the death of the Maggid, each of his disciples became a leader in his own right, with his own special path. This historical fact is indicative of the relations between the Rebbe and his disciples:

My grandfather, R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk; the Maggid of Kozhnitz; the holy Grand R. Aharon of Karlin; and the Rabbi, of saintly memory,[[4]](#footnote-4) all travelled to the same Rebbe – R. Dov [Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritch] of saintly memory, and they all received the same teaching of *Chasidut*. Nevertheless, we, in our shortness of spirit and limited intellect, see the path of *Chasidut* as it appears in the holy book *No’am Elimelekh* as distinct [in its style and its path of Divine service], and the works of the Maggid of Kozhnitz as distinct, and of the Rabbi as distinct, and the way of holiness of Karlin as distinct. Can it be that it was only when their teacher [the Maggid] died, and they began to lead their own respective flocks, that the separate path of each of them was suddenly revealed? That so long as they were subservient to their teacher, there was no hint of their distinct paths and their unique natures? This cannot be. Bearing this in mind, can we imagine the effect of such holy disciples on their holy teacher? The disciples, each saintly in his own way, and their various approaches, each requiring of their teacher different ways of service and of learning, challenged him, too, as they were nourished by the very same holiness from on high.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The fact that each one of the students of the Maggid was a completely unique personality with a distinct approach and perspective indicates, according to R. Kalonymus, that each received the Torah teachings that he needed in accordance with his soul-root. What his students went on to contribute was not a set of carbon copies of the Maggid – with all his greatness – but rather the revelation of the inner essence of each and every one of them. (Incidentally, this conclusion fits well with R. Kalonymus’s educational approach, which calls for identifying and working with the uniqueness of each student.[[6]](#footnote-6)) To this end, the Maggid had to be familiar with the inner world of each and every one of his students and teach each of them accordingly. This is no simple task, and the fact that each was able to develop as he did points to the strong and unmediated bond that existed between the Maggid and the members of his *chavura*. Had his lessons consisted merely of conveying knowledge, he would not have thereby contributed to the spiritual development of each as an individual.

The lack of a regular presence of the members of the group at the Rebbe has a negative effect not only on them, but also on the Rebbe himself:

For when the Rebbe does not have his *chassidim* around him all the time, such that he can influence them and they can receive and ask of him, then not only does every ascent that he makes in his holy endeavors come to him with great difficulty … [but] this causes the Rebbe himself to fall and regress.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The existence of the *chavura* contributes to everyone – the Rebbe himself and every member of the *chavura*. And since *Chasidut* is built entirely on this structure of the Rebbe and his disciples, in the absence of the active presence of the *chassidim* with the Rebbe, *Chasidut* loses one of its central characteristics.

Perhaps now we can answer the question we started with: What should there be in a *chavura* surrounding the Rebbe, that R. Kalonymus sought in vain in the chasidic courts in and around Warsaw in the early 20th century? After all, as we know, there was no shortage of chasidic groups and Rebbes at this time.

It seems that R. Kalonymus was well aware of the groups that called themselves “*chassidim*,” prayed according to *nusach sefarad*, and would not eat *matza* that had come into contact with any liquid on Pesach. They dressed in chasidic fashion and would visit the Rebbe from time to time to seek a blessing for livelihood or for a good match. This was outward *Chasidut*, but not what R. Kalonymus sought – *Chasidut* of the heart. He wanted a chasidic *chavura* whose aim would be to progress in their service of God, to work on their inner selves and delve into the recesses of the soul, where a person must rely on a friend to whom he reveals his challenges and struggles. He wanted *chassidim* who strove to draw close to the Rebbe, from whom they would seek guidance in discovering their soul-root, not just blessings for material needs. This type of *Chasidut* had died out, and R. Kalonymus hoped, by means of his program, to bring it back to life.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Mevo Ha-She'arim*, p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We will discuss them in our discussion of *Chasidut* and the service of prophecy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mevo Ha-She'arim*, p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Kalonymus apparently refers here to R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the Ba’al Ha-Tanya. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, pp. 8-9 (*A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 6-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 284. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)