YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #06: R. Kalonymus’s Works (Part II)**

**Writing Style**

The Chassidic works produced over the generations have reflected different genres. The Chassidic bookshelf includes collections of short articles, often written accounts of teachings that were originally delivered orally. Examples include *Keter Shem Tov*, which records the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and *Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov* by the Maggid of Mezerich. Most Chassidic works are written as books of homiletical teachings that follow the order of the weekly *parasha* reading. The Rebbe would share his insights at the Shabbat meal or after the prayer service, and a disciple would write down the teaching after Shabbat. There were some Admorim who wrote down their teachings themselves, such as R. Yehuda Leib Alter of Gur, author of *Sefat Emet*, and R. Yaakov Yitzchak, the Seer of Lublin, who wrote *Divrei Emet*, *Zot Zikaron*, and *Zikhron Zot*. A few Chassidic teachers set out with the intention of writing a book, as opposed to a compilation of teachings. Examples include R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi (*Sefer Ha-Tanya*), R. Chaim Teirer of Tshernovitz (*Sha’ar Ha-Tefilla*), and R. Aharon of Stroshila (*Sha’arei Ha-Yichud Ve-Ha-Emuna*).

R. Kalonymus’s books belong to this unusual genre, in which the author sets out his teachings in a systematic, structured manner, with the stated purpose of guiding the reader step by step in his spiritual advancement. R. Kalonymus occasionally comments on his style of writing. For example, in *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, he writes:

The main thrust of Chassidic discourse and Chassidic works should be in the direction of broadening *chassidut*, rather than in-depth study of it… For what do we gain by teaching people profound Chassidic concepts if they do not understand – or, if they do understand, then their understanding remains on the level of the intellect alone, but they do not exert themselves to become sanctified and to become Chassidim with all their being?… We must bring the holy down to the level of those who seek holiness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The optimal approach for Chassidic writing, according to R. Kalonymus, is characterized by clarity and scope. The profound ideas voiced over the generations by the great Chassidic teachers should be simplified and translated into language that is comprehensible to the youth, to yeshiva students, as well as to select, elite groups. Each group must be addressed in its own language and on a level commensurate with its spiritual stature. It is less important to offer in-depth, detailed analysis of each and every idea; rather, the teachings of Chassidut should be presented clearly, and every effort should be made to make the Chassidic path of Divine service more accessible to the masses.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In his introduction to *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, R. Kolonymus writes:

We must adapt ourselves and speak their language, practically turning ourselves into children in order to speak to them according to the way they think and the level that they are on.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Even great leaders such as Moshe Rabbeinu knew that they had to step down from their lofty level and speak in the language of the people – not downwards, in a condescending manner, but face to face. The “*yeridat ha-tzaddik*” (descent of the *tzaddik*) approach, according to which the *tzaddik* must come down from his supernal spiritual level and deal with the needs of his Chassidim, is one of the characteristics of Chassidic spiritual work.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The following paragraph typifies the way in which R. Kalonymus addresses the reader, adopting what he calls “heart to heart discourse with the *avrekh*”:

[We seek] to engage you in private discourse between us. Do not be embarrassed in our presence, for it is not a matter of us seeing you nor you seeing us right now; rather, it is God Who sees both of us. It is only via this book that we are engaging you in discourse – not with a view to criticizing you, nor to find and expose some shameful thing in you, heaven forfend. It is a discourse of the heart – my heart whispers to yours. It is discourse of the psyche – my psyche speaks to your psyche… And my soul and my psyche will likewise be built up by you, and through your ascent perhaps, with God’s help, they too will be raised up.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Attention should be paid to the way in which R. Kalonymus seeks to engage in dialogue with the reader. Although he is seemingly presenting a monologue – since the reader is unable to respond to him – there is nevertheless a reciprocal relationship between the two sides. The reader’s response to the writer’s words will become manifest when those words influence him and help him to elevate himself, at which point R. Kalonymus’s “heart and psyche” will likewise be built up even further, as a result of the mutual influence that exists among the souls of Israel.

Another distinctive feature of R. Kalonymus’s writing is his direct way of addressing the reader. He offers profuse encouragement and exhortations using positive language, but sometimes he penetrates the reader’s innermost feelings, analyzing them with cold precision, and sometimes offering sharp rebuke. At times he places a mirror before the reader, calling upon him not to hide from or evade the situation, but rather to grapple with it, with the aim of catalyzing change.

In the following excerpt, R. Kolonymus chastises the student for his laziness, for seeking an “easy life” and avoiding difficult spiritual work. He claims that the reader does not like hearing moral rebuke because since childhood he has never been required to exert himself:

We are not certain that you will listen to us; simply as a result of inattentiveness and lack of effort to work, we are not certain if our words to you will be of any benefit… How can we suspect you of inattentiveness?... But what can we do – the facts speak for themselves and testify that right now you are looking for superficiality rather than deeper exertion, simplicity rather than effort… *Avrekhim* who eat at their parents’ table are similarly unwilling to exert themselves by going out to work. Some of them, even when they study from a book, choose to understand only the easy parts. When they encounter a matter that requires some mental exertion in order to master it, they skip over it or just skim through it, almost without any understanding… They have not been accustomed since childhood to working hard at it, and therefore they do not exert themselves.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This approach of addressing the reader at his own level is also reflected in R. Kalonymus’s style of writing. He conveys lofty concepts in simple language, uses illustrations and parables that make the message more accessible, and – most of all – offers a systematic presentation of complex principles and ideas in *chassidut* and kabbalah in a way that can be grasped by anyone, whether a child or a gifted scholar.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 19 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 14-15) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We will discuss this concept of “descent” in the context of education at a later point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)