**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #13: The *Tzaddik***

A superficial review of R. Kalonymus’s teachings might lead the reader to conclude that the *tzaddik* is absent from them, in contrast to the writings of other Polish Admorim and *chassidut* in general. What would lead one to such a conclusion? R. Kalonymus’s teachings award every Jew – young or old – tools for the inner work necessary to progress in one’s Divine service, to the point that it seems as though a person’s Divine service is wholly dependent on himself: “Now the *chassidim* must work on themselves…”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Furthermore, the subject of the *tzaddik* is not discussed often in his works. For instance, if we look at *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, which is aimed at youth, as well as *Benei Machshava Tova*, which is meant for members of a select group, we find that these works contain no instructions about connecting oneself with a *tzaddik*, although this is a central topic in other chasidic literature.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the works of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk and R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz, R. Kalonymus’s grandfathers, the words “*tzaddik*” and “*tzaddikim*” appear hundreds of times, while in R. Kalonymus’s books they make only rare appearance (with the *tzaddik* also referred to as “the Rebbe”).

In mentioning the *tzaddik*, R. Kalonymus presents him as a figure worthy of emulation. For instance, in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* we find:

And why, when you start to imagine how good it would be to be a great *tzaddik*, as close to God as the *tzaddikim* of previous genrations, or how happy you would be if you could pray like the maggid of Kozhnitz, for example…[[3]](#footnote-3)

In *Mevo ha-She’arim*, R. Kalonymus waxes nostalgic about the days when the *tzaddik*’s impact on the *chasid*’s spiritual development was unquestioned, and notes that this is no longer the case, owing to the weakening of the generations.

When we consider R. Kalonymus’s writings, they seem to be a partial substitute of sorts for the lack of *tzaddikim* in his generation. Had R. Kalonymus not perceive such a deficiency, for what reason would he have taken the trouble to write such detailed books of guidance in Divine service? If the *tzaddikim* at the time had been capable of recharging spiritual “batteries,” why would there be any need for books? Indeed, R. Kalonymus speaks quite explicitly of the weakening of the generations. The following teaching addresses a *chasid* who has trouble visualizing the Tetragrammaton, in fulfillment of the commitment, “I have set the Lord before me constantly,” as recommended by the kabbalists over the course of the generations:[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the period of the early *chassidim*, if a *chasid* had such an experience, he would travel to the Rebbe. Whether or not the Rebbe gave him advice with regard to this matter, the oupouring of holiness of the Rebbe and the *chevraya* [group], and the considerable time that the *chasid* spent there, had the power to nullify his physical and mental aspects to the point at which no natural force could stand in his way, and this person would be able to visualize the Holy Name.

This is no longer the case in our times, when the Rebbe is not like R. Ber, of saintly and holy memory, and there is almost no *chevraya* – all we can hope is to maintain it, with God’s help – and the *chasid*’s journey [to the *tzaddik*] is no longer as it was in the past. Although the Rebbe and the *chevraya* and the journey, as they are in the present, still add sanctity to the *chasid* who undertakes chasidic journeys, it is difficult to say that his entire being and nature and feelings are completely nullified, and he is immediately able to visualize the Holy Name with no difficulty at all. Therefore, a person needs to make greater use of guidance than was the case in the past; he must know the the order and workings of the imagination and how to use them positively as in the manner of service set forth above.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The difficulty in visulizing the Divine Name arises from empowerment of the “forces of the physical and mental aspects and feelings,” for one whose “soul is pure, as well as his body… no natural or bodily obstacle can hinder him in visualizing the Tetragrammaton in the way that it is written, at any time that he wishes.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The journey to the *tzaddik* in earlier generations, and the encounter with him, were capable of immediately purifying the *chasid*’s thoughts – both through the *tzaddik*’s influence and through the efforts that the *chasid* himself exerted. In our generation, argues R. Kalonymus, we no longer have *Admorim* like R. Ber (the Maggid of Mezeritsh), and therefore there is a greater need to rely on practical advice; the responsibility now rests with the individual to a greater degree than was once the case. A person now needs to be more aware of the way in which the power of the imagination works, and in this way he will be able to achieve his aim – the visualization of the Holy Name, in fulfillment of the verse, “I have set the Lord before me constantly.”

This example allows us to conclude more generally that R. Kalonymus believes that in our generation, a person bears a greater degree of responsibility for his spiritual state and progress than he did in the generations of the early *chasidim*. A person must be acutely aware of the forces that act on and in his psyche, how they operate, and how to use them for Divine service. This may perhaps explain why R. Kalonymus devoted less attention – both in his sermons and in his writing – to connecting oneself with the *tzaddik*, and more attention to inculcating practical methods of serving God.

To this we may add that in later generations the focus in *chassidut* shifted from the *tzaddik* to the *chassidim*, who became more aware of themselves and were perhaps less willing to nullify themselves before their teachers as they did in the past. Once again, this leads to the conclusion that the *chassid* bears a greater degree of responsibility for his spiritual state.

At the same time, the ideal of the *tzaddik* and his influence on his *chassidim* is not entirely absent from R. Kalonymus’s writing. On the contrary, he speaks of connecting oneself with the *tzaddik* as a matter of extreme importance. The essence of the way of *chassidut* is not about intellectual learning, which can be acquired solely from books. *Chasidut* is not just a body of knowledge. Rather, *chassidut* encompasses all of a person’s existence, in the dimensions of the intellect, imagination, and physical desires. Therefore, chasidic study must take place in unmediated fashion, in the live encounter with the Rebbe:

Therefore, *chassidut* cannot convey its ways simply by oral teaching and study, in the same way that matters of the intellect and laws are conveyed. It requires the physical presence of the students at the Rebbe… In *chassidut*, the presence of the student with the Rebbe is an important principle in and of itself. The Rebbe himself, and the student himself, along with the ways of service and self-perfection that are unique to the Rebbe and his student, cannot be contained in logical worlds. One has to experience them in practice, and when one absorbs them – not only at the time when one hears the words of Torah, but at any time that they are present, there is Divine service and unification.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Therefore, if someone seeks to become a *chasid* by studying in books, aiming to understand *chassidutr* through his own intellect…and likewise if he does not travel to the Rebbe, or even if he does travel but does not travel in the way that a *chasid* should, or spend his time at the Rebbe as he should… then he is not a *chasid*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In summary, the path of *chassidut* passes, in principle, via the Rebbe, but owing to the weakening of the generations we cannot expect that a journey to the Rebbe will achieve the necessary *tikkunim* in the *chasid*’s psyche and inner world. Therefore, he has no choice but to work harder on himself than he would have had to in previous generations.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Mevo ha-She’arim*, p. 286. In this context, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi makes an interesting and important comment: “In the future, people will not need guidance from the *tzaddikim*, as the verse teaches, ‘Nor shall a man teach his neighbor, saying, ‘Know God’, for all will know Me…” (*Yirmiyahu* 31:33) (*Likkutei Amarim Tania* [Kfar Chabad, 5753]). Whether the fact that R. Kalonymus place greater responsibility on the *chassidim* themselves is a precursor of that future situation described by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi is a question that requires further reflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Much has been written about the *tzaddik* in *chassidut*. See the list of studies enumerated by M. Idel, *Ha-Chasidut: Bein Ekstaza Le-Magia* (Jeruslaem-Tel Aviv, 5761), p. 347, n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 78 [*A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 64-65]. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We will discuss this in greater depth at a later point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo ha-She’arim*, p. 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)