YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in *Chassidut***

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #14: The Story of the Old Man Planting, and the Attitude Towards Work in *Chassidut* (2)**

In the previous *shiur*, we looked at the story of the old man planting trees as Hadrian looks on, focusing on their conversation as it appears in *Vayikra Rabba*:

Hadrian… saw an old man planting trees.

He said to him, “Old man, old man, had you toiled harder in your youth, you would not have to toil in your old age.”

He said to him, “I toiled in my youth, and I toil in my old age, and that which is pleasing to the Lord of the heavens, He has done.” …

He said to him, “By your life, old man, if these trees produce [fruit] in your lifetime…”

Eventually, the trees produced figs.... (*Vayikra Rabba*, 25:5)

As noted in the previous *shiur*, the old man’s response differentiates between work and its results, or sustenance. Furthermore, the location of the story in the *midrash* – in the context of the mitzva of *orla* – allows us to view the mitzva itself as a way of educating us towards that separation.

This perspective is especially interesting because it seems somewhat unusual in *Chazal’s* writings. Conventional wisdom, both among *Chazal* and in later periods, holds that a person has to work for his livelihood and that a person usually makes a living through natural means and processes – i.e., as a result of his labor and efforts. The exceptional position taken here, even if not “practical *halakha*,” deserves further consideration. It is expanded upon in *Chassidut*, where extensive religious thought is devoted to what goes on outside of the *beit midrash* and the synagogue, in different areas of life. We will see below how Chassidic language can contribute to our thinking about the story.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Are our efforts purposeless?**

Our discussion begins with a somewhat radical story by R. Nachman:

Our teacher [R. Nachman] told the following parable to illustrate the folly of this world, in which people work and exert effort to make a living and it seems to them that it is only by their efforts that they can live and survive – while in fact they receive their sustenance only from God’s open hand.

Once there were two wealthy men who lived in the same building – one a great miser, and the other a very hospitable and charitable man. Once a poor man came to the miser asking for alms so he could assuage his hunger. The man said to him: “Here, I have wood that needs to be chopped into little pieces. Work for me, and then I will give you food for your work.” With no choice, the poor man undertook this exhausting work. When he finished working, the rich man told him to go to the home of his generous neighbor, who lived in the same building, and there they would give him what he wanted. The poor man dutifully went off to the hospitable home, believing that the rich man for whom he had toiled, was paying for his meal. The moment he stepped inside, the charitable rich man received him with great honor, and gave him a meal, as he would always do. As the poor man ate, the host heard him groaning and saying, “I worked hard today!” The host asked what sort of work he had been doing, and he told him the whole story about working for the rich neighbor, who had told him that he would receive a meal at this place in return for his work. The host replied, “Reb Yid – you worked for nothing (i.e., no payment) and you are eating for nothing (i.e., no charge)!” (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh* 273)

In this parable, R. Nachman presents the separation between labor and sustenance in a humorous way. A person works and toils, and also earns a living. One has to work, and one has to have faith that he will have something to live on – but we need not necessarily assume that there is a direct connection between the two. This is given powerful expression in the concluding declaration: “Reb Yid – you worked for nothing, and you are eating for nothing!” This might be read as the mirror image of the declaration from the *midrash* – “I toiled in my youth, and I am toiling in my old age, and the Lord of the heavens has done as He pleases.”

We can imagine different expressions on the face of the rich patron as he utters this statement. He might wear a slightly sardonic smile, or perhaps an expression of compassion for the gullibility of the poor man. The “toiling for nothing” might be interpreted in the sense of randomness, something that ultimately served no reason or purpose. After all, the poor man just “happened” to turn first to the home of the miser, who actually had no intention from the outset of giving him anything in return for his labor. But anyone who is familiar with R. Nachman’s teachings will read the first half of the statement, about “toiling for nothing,” along with the second, the “eating for nothing,” as a well-meaning chuckle in a gentle way, identifying with the poor man but also understanding that this was how things had to turn out. Nothing that happened to the poor man that day was accidental, even if the connection between the events is not direct and causal in the usual, worldly sense. The God who eventually led him to the house of the generous patron, where he was given both food and respect, is the same God who previously led him to the house of the miser, where he labored. God wants man to work, and He wants man to make a living, but what man receives comes from God – not as a direct natural result of his own work. Since he eats from God’s hand, “for nothing,” there is no problem with the fact that he also works “for nothing” – that, too, is from God. In this sense, the story isn’t encouraging sloth; rather, it encourages work, in accordance with God’s intention, but with the realization that what one earns is not the result of his work, but rather a gift from God.

Thus, the expression “for nothing” (*be-chinam*)need not be understood in the sense of randomness or purposelessness. R. Dan Hauser,[[2]](#footnote-2) for example, proposes the word freedom (*cheirut*)here. Following his interpretation, we might say that R. Nachman is suggesting we free ourselves of the usual economic assumptions that underlie an uncaring society, in which those who succeed and grow wealthy may turn their backs on others who are less successful. The generous patron in the story understands that the source of his own wealth is not his hard work or his success, but rather a gift from God; hence, he is free to part with some of it and to share it with others. The ability to give of one’s own wealth to others is a form of freedom that is not self-evident. Many people – especially among those who have worked hard and have enjoyed success – are chained to their money. Parting from one’s own rightly earned fortune truly requires freedom.

On the other hand, this parable is just part of R. Nachman’s much broader view of the relationship between work and sustenance. The whole picture is far more complex, and we will discuss a different aspect of it later on. First, let us consider the positions of other Chassidic masters.

**Chassidic Perspectives on Work**

The range of approaches is in fact extensive. Some Chassidic masters placed more emphasis on working in order to make a living, while others awarded it less importance. At the latter end of the spectrum, Chassidic works include some very extreme formulations of the independence of sustenance from work, such as the following story about R. Yitzchak of Worke (an early-19th-century disciple of the Seer of Lublin and of the *Admorim* of the Peshische dynasty):

Concerning the levels of trust [in God], the holy Gaon, R. Yitzchak, said that he once saw an honorable (“*kasher*”) man who possessed a very high level of trust, and he did nothing for his sustenance; he spent all his time on Torah, and whenever he needed to eat, he would bend down to the ground and would find enough money for a meal, and thus he was sustained. (Moshe Menachem Mendel Walden, *Ohel Yitzchak*, Piotrkov, 5674, p. 30)

This “honorable person” trusts so fully that he performs no work whatsoever in order to earn a living (but at the same time, he does not rely on others or benefit from their work). In this description, the gathering of coins from the ground is reminiscent of the gathering of manna in the wilderness. From a different perspective, we might view the act of bending down to the ground as a movement of drawing down Divine abundance. In Kabbala – which is of course a major influence in *Chassidut* – we find the idea that the movement of bending down that we perform at “*Barekhu*” on Friday night evokes the agricultural act of layering. (This act is called *havracha* and involves bending a long shoot from a mature plant down towards the ground and burying a short portion of it, leaving the end exposed. After a few months, roots develop where the shoot is buried and the exposed portion of the shoot turns into its own plant, which can be severed from the original one. The words “*barekhu*” and “*havracha*” are etymologically related.) The bending of the shoot downwards into the ground and then up again allows it to draw sustenance directly from the ground.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Admittedly, R. Yitzchak of Worke does not suggest that this is a mainstream approach or that it is correct for everyone. He describes it as one option. But that option is given room, as a “level of trust.”

Another story describes two diametrically opposed approaches to commerce and money, as held by two different *Admorim*:

The renowned *chassid*, the *tzaddik* R. Meir of Shedlitz *z”l*, was very wealthy. It once happened, on a trip to Leipzig and elsewhere to buy merchandise, that he travelled on his way home via the town of Strikov, since he wished to visit the holy rabbi, R. Fishele *z”l* – renowned for being so pious and holy that he had no familiarity with money at all – and to see his holy countenance. When he came before him, the holy rabbi began to discuss *Chassidut* with him, and saw that he was a great, full repository of *Chassidut* and a man of great spiritual stature. He began asking him what he was doing there, and where he had come from, and where he was headed. R. Meir told him the truth – that he was travelling with his merchandise from Leipzig, and so on, on his way home. The holy rabbi was astonished and said to him, “I am surprised at you. How can a man such as yourself, as I have come to know you, involve yourself in such abhorrent matters and spend time on commerce and trade? It would be better were you to involve yourself with Torah and Divine service, rather than laboring in lesser matters. What do you need money for? It is worthless; of what importance is it? It is not foolishness for a man like as yourself, who is fit to occupy a more elevated level?” And so on. The rabbi and *chassid*, R. Meir *z”l,* listened to what he said and remained silent, for he did not know what to say in response. [In the end] he departed and resumed his journey.

A few days later, thieves and robbers seized all the wagons piled high with his merchandise and stole everything, leaving him with nothing; he became destitute. And he had no recollection of what the holy rabbi, R. Fishele *z”l*, had said to him…

And he was greatly anguished over the terrible incident that had happened, and he refused to be comforted, and did not know what to do. Eventually, he decided to go to his rabbi, the holy R. Simcha Bunim *z”l* of Peshische – as he had always done – and tell him of all that had happened and pour out his troubles. And so he did. He came before the holy rabbi, our teacher R. Simcha Bunim *z”l*, his heart grieving and his face bitter with his great affliction. And he recounted to his teacher, the holy rabbi, all the pain of his aching heart at having suddenly been left destitute on the road. The holy rabbi, R. Simcha Bunim, began asking all about the stages of his journey, and which towns he had passed through on his journey to Leipzig, and also on his return. He told him the entire itinerary, from when he set out from his home until his arrival in Peshische. And the holy rabbi learned, from what he had said, that he had taken a detour to Strikov, to the holy R. Fishele *z”l*. And R. Simcha Bunim asked him further what he had sought at our holy teacher, R. Fishele, and what he had discussed with him while he was with him. And he recounted all that had happened there, and everything he had heard from the holy mouth of the holy rabbi, our teacher R. Fishele. He told him everything: that he had told him that it was foolishness for him to busy his head and his thoughts and to spend his time in such vanity as to deal with merchandise, for what did he need money for, and so on. And when the holy R. Simcha Bunim heard this, he slapped his hand on his thigh and said, “Ah! What did you think you were doing when you detoured to him? Did you not know that he has no concept of money at all, and all the money in the world means nothing at all to him? Since you visited him, and he recognized your worth and your state and your level, it troubled him greatly that a man such as yourself would busy himself with such lowly matters, and he regarded it very harshly. And this caused your wealth to be taken from you, and the robbers to overcome you.” Then the *tzaddik*, R. Meir of Shedlitz, understood what the holy words had caused him. And R. Bunim blessed him to grow wealthy again as before. (Mendel Citrin, *Shivchei Tzaddikim*, Warsaw 5643, p. 10)

The position represented in the story by R. Fishele is, of course, even more extreme. It is dismissive of any involvement with money or making a living at all – especially for people of spiritual stature, but also in general. The story contrasts this view with that of a more central figure in *Chassidut* – R. Simcha Bunim of Peshische, who labels R. Fishele’s approach as extremism, and brings the *chassid*, R. Meir, back to the path that he had previously followed, restoring his wealth along the way. This is the bottom line of the story, although it presents the discourse between the two different approaches – leading us to think about the place of money in a person’s life, as opposed to other occupations and values.

**Working with Faith**

I wish to come back to the approach that R. Nachman presents in his parable about the two wealthy neighbors, which is a more complex message. R. Nachman’s approach is neither that of R. Yitzchak of Worke nor that of R. Fishele. He doesn’t negate the need for work, but simply points out the distinction between sustenance and work, and the illusion that persists in the world, to his view, according to which a person’s sustenance is the natural and direct result of his work. A similar idea is offered by R. Moshe Chaim Efraim of Sadilkov, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov and uncle of R. Nachman, in a teaching about the manna in the wilderness:

“And they said to one another: What is it [*man hu*]? For they did not know what it was” (*Shemot* 16:15) – This hints to an idea that came to me by the great mercy and grace of God, along the lines of a teaching of my saintly grandfather, of blessed memory, concerning the verse (*Yirmiyahu* 17:7), “Blessed is the man who trusts (*yivtach*)in the Lord, and whose trust (*mivtacho*) is the Lord,” as follows: there is a *boteach*, a *mavtiach*, and a *muvtach*. The “*boteach*” is the one who places his trust; the “*mavtiach*” is the one who promises; and the “*muvtach*” is the grounds or reason by virtue of which one trusts that the thing will come about. For example: the blessed God promises (*mavtiach*) a person that He will provide all he needs if he follows His ways; the person places his trust (*boteach*) in this; and it is “*muvtach*” – in other words, he trusts that God will certainly provide his sustenance. But there need to be grounds for this, that God will have a means by which he will have sustenance – whether it be through doing business or something else.

This person has not yet reached the essential faith that the main thing is to believe in God, that He alone exists and there is none other, and He needs no grounds or means via which to bring him sustenance. For He is the Cause of all causes and Reason of all reasons, and even if a person performs no “reason” – neither business nor any other preparation for his sustenance – God can still provide him with his sustenance, in His great mercy. And this is the meaning of the verse, “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, and whose trust *is* the Lord”: in other words, his “*muvtach*” is also God, for there is only Him, and there is nothing that would be a reason or grounds for his sustenance or for anything else, by means of which what God promises him would come about, for He has no need for any thing or any preparation that would be grounds or reason; it is all God alone. And when he obtains something on some grounds, he should believe with complete faith that it was truly God Himself who wanted to give him sustenance in this way – not that it was necessary that it happen through reason and preparation, but rather only to trust in God. And this is of a great level… (*Degel Machaneh Efraim*, *Beshalach*)

R. Efraim defines three concepts: the “*boteach*” – the person who trusts in God, that He will bring him sustenance; the “*mavtiach*” – God, who can provide the sustenance; and the “*muvtach*” – the pretext or grounds by means of which the person actually comes to receive his sustenance, such as work. R. Efraim wants us to understand that any “*muvtach*” is in a sense not necessary. Sustenance is not the direct result of the “grounds,” but is completely dependent on the will of God, the “*mavtiach*.” The specific “grounds” is simply one possible way of providing. If, for some practical reason, a person loses a certain source of sustenance, God can take care of his sustenance in other ways.

The *Degel Machaneh Efraim*, like R. Nachman, is not calling for the abandonment of work. Rather, he wants man to have faith that even if right now his sustenance appears to come to him as a direct result of this work, it is ultimately something that is awarded by God, and if He so wished, He could provide man with his sustenance in any other way, without need for the specific “grounds” that happen to pertain right now.

**The Impact of Work – Above and Below**

Let us now return to R. Nachman’s parable. At the end of the parable, R. Natan, disciple of R. Nachman, adds the following conclusion as uttered by his teacher:

And our teacher said: Sustenance is given by God, and people of this world eat for nothing, but they work because of their sins.

It is here that we detect what seems to be a note of “it didn’t need to be this way” concerning work, although this quote does not necessarily offer an interpretation of the story, in which the rich patron declares that the poor man has worked for nothing and is eating for nothing. It may be that the story and the quote represent two different stances that R. Nachman expressed on different occasions. It seems that R. Nachman had a complex, multifaceted attitude towards the value of work, which found expression in different places; it is difficult to make a determination between them. For example, a more complex and slightly different stance is found in *Likutei Moharan*,where R. Nachman enters into a lengthy discussion that also appears to take different directions. The following is a short excerpt from it:

For the needs of the body are extremely numerous; even the essential ones are numerous and very great – food, drink, clothing, housing – such that one can spend his days and years just on those essential needs. And they hamper a person greatly in his Divine service – even though even these needs themselves are also Divine service, for they represent “awakening from below,” for “by means of service below, there is awakening above” (*Zohar*, *Lekh-lekha* 77b). (*Likutei Moharan Tanina* 4,3)

On one hand, R. Nachman is saying here that involvement in matters of this world, including making a living and everything to do with property, distract a person from his main focus: service of God. On the other hand, he views these matters too as part of a person's Divine service. A person's labor is not just a means of making a living, but has value in and of itself, which R. Nachman refers to as an “awakening from below.” This “awakening from below” is the action that a person performs in this physical world, with impact that extends to the upper, spiritual worlds as well, as he explains further on:

For by means of all the affairs and labors that are performed by human beings, the image of each such labor is aroused on high, in the act of Creation, bringing vitality and illumination to the image of that labor of Creation that is on High, which is directed towards that affair and labor that the person performs below, in this world… When he performs the labor and the affair properly, as it should be done, he thereby gives vitality and illumination to the act of Creation, which gives existence to the world, such that this too is service of the Creator. (Ibid.)

According to R. Nachman here, every labor that a person performs is an “awakening from below” that arouses some parallel movement in a more supernal, Divine world. This statement is connected to the view that pervades Kabbala and *Chassidut*, according to which the world we know, and everything in it, is a manifestation of Divinity. Divinity itself is infinite and includes a spiritual representation of everything that exists in the world. The corollary of this is that everything in this world contains some expression of Divinity, for "the entire world is filled with His glory.” This is also connected to another central idea in *Chassidut* concerning the material world and Creation. Creation is not perceived as a one-time event, following which God allows the world to continue on its own. Rather, the act of Creation by God is ongoing at every moment, and everything that exists or that happens in the world at any given moment is the direct result of this constant renewal of Creation.

This in turn means that a person's actions in this world are performed in a reality which is itself an expression of Divinity, and therefore there is a connection between these actions and Divinity itself. This statement awards great importance to every act of work, creation, and building that a person performs in the world. These actions represent partnership with the Creator in the creation of the world – not in the sense of a human complement to the one-time Divine act of Creation thousands of years ago, but rather partnership in the act of Creation that is renewed at every moment. Moreover, the actions performed in this world also arouse creation in the upper, more spiritual worlds, of which this physical world is the material expression.

Thus, for example, the construction of a building in this world that serves all sorts of goals, representing both a certain beauty and a certain purpose, is an expression of the beauty and ideas that have their source in infinite Divinity, which encompasses all these ideas and beauty within itself. The same applies to the planting of a tree: the beauty of the tree that is created in the world, as well as the fruit and the nutrition that it provides, express characteristics of beauty, giving, and nourishing that exist in Divinity. This is a radical statement, that attributes tremendous significance to human actions in the world – even an act of feedback that arouses Divine action on more spiritual levels of the cosmos.

Let us now return to the words of the old man in the *midrash* in *Vayikra Rabba.* R. Nachman’s statement imbues his words and his work with new meaning, which is separate from the physical result of his action or the sustenance that he might have from it. Of course, *Chazal* are not expressing this specific idea, but we may view this Chassidic idea as a development of the initial concept of a separation between work and its result, the buds of which are to be found in the *midrash*. Work is involvement with materials that are expressions of Divinity, and this engagement is party to the arousal of Divinity itself to shower all sorts of abundance, out of the infinite range of expressions of abundance that exist within Divinity, such as beauty, aesthetics, protection, security, sustenance, and more. Thus, the mitzva of *orla* may be read as placing man and his very act of planting during the tree's first three years, when he is cut off from any use of the fruit, as partnership in Creation and in arousal of the upper worlds and the Divine goodness in this world.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Many of the Chassidic sources cited below were inspired by a *shiur* given by Rav Itamar Eldar on *Parashat* Beshalach, “[Not on Bread Alone](https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-beshalach/beshalach-man-does-not-live-bread-alone),” in his series “[*Chassidut le-Parashat Shavua*](https://etzion.org.il/en/series/chassidut-parasha-en).” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dan Hauser, *Al Ketzeh Behonot ha-Havaya*, part III, p. 441. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, *Zohar*, *Teruma Kala* 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)