**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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

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**Shiur #46: The Story of R. Pinchas ben Yair, and Chasidic Stories (3):**

**R. Zusha of Anipoli and Others**

In the two previous *shiurim*, we discussed the story of R. Pinchas ben Yair and the complex, nuanced molding of his character in the *Bavli (Chullin* 7a*)*: on one hand, his great piety and his constant consciousness of his mission, “performing the will of his Maker”; on the other hand, the distance that his “perfect” approach to life creates between himself and others, precluding real closeness and intimacy. The *Bavli* presents R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi (Rebbi) as a contrast to R. Pinchas ben Yair: he is unquestionably a great leader and a great sage, but one who lives in “this world,” with more human aspects to his personality.

**R. Zusha and R. Nachman**

With the insights gained concerning these contrasting models of leadership in the Talmud, let us now consider some Chasidic stories.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We have already encountered a similar contrast between two Chasidic figures in [*shiur* #14](https://etzion.org.il/en/talmud/studies-gemara/midrash-and-aggada/sippurei-hanotea-hazaken-2) of this series, in the different attitudes towards money demonstrated by R. Simcha Bunim of Peshische and R. Fishele of Strikov; we will return to that story below.

The character of R. Zusha of Anipoli, as portrayed in the following story, contains something of an echo of R. Pinchas ben Yair:

[The Seer of Lublin] recounted what he heard from his teacher, R. Shmelke of Nicholsberg, who went with his brother to the Maggid of Mezeritch and asked, "How is it possible to fulfill the words of the Sages (*Berakhot* 54a): ‘A person is obligated to bless [God] over the bad, just as [he is obligated] to bless over the good, and [to] accept it with simcha (joy)'?”

In response, the holy Maggid instructed them to go to the *beit midrash*; “There you will find someone named Reb Zusha smoking a pipe; he will explain to you the words of the *mishna*.”

They went to the *beit midrash* and told Reb Zusha that the Maggid had told them to ask him.

Reb Zusha started laughing, telling them, "I am surprised that he told you to ask me. How can one pose this question to someone who has never had any bad happen to him, not even for a single moment? From the day I was born, I've had nothing but good. This question needs to be asked to someone who, heaven forfend, has experienced bad things.”

But they were well aware that Reb Zusha, as is known, was extremely poor and afflicted all his life. And in view of this, they understood that one who accepts [suffering] with love does not feel any bad whatsoever. (Translated from Moshe Menachem Mendel Waldan, *Niflaot ha-Rabbi*, Piotrkow, Natan Neta Kranenberg, 5671, pp. 7-8)

R. Zusha lives in the direst physical and economic conditions – but does not feel that to be the case. He is so firmly rooted in the spiritual world that he has no sense of scarcity or suffering; he experiences his life as containing only goodness. This approach is inspiring and impressive, but there is also something that is not human about it. It is possible for a person to see and appreciate that which is good, and to accept that which is bad with love and with faith – but for that to happen, one must recognize the existence of what is bad, and there is in fact great value in the ability to do so. R. Zusha does not see any bad, but for most people, this approach would create discord and make it difficult to deal with the hardships and challenges of life. The figure of R. Zusha is reminiscent of R. Pinchas ben Yair, who lives on a level that is “above” regular, earthly existence. There are advantages to this sort of personality, but it can create distance. It is difficult for ordinary people to identify and connect with someone who experiences life this way. Indeed, R. Zusha – unlike his brother, R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk – was not an *Admor* with a Chasidic court. He was more of a lone *tzaddik*, personifying a very high level of *chasidut*.

R. Nachman of Breslav seems to offer a more nuanced approach in this regard. He introduces the fourth teaching in *Likkutei Moharan* with the following words:

When a person knows that everything that happens to him is for his benefit, this is a foretaste of the World to Come, as it is written (*Tehillim* 56:11), “When He is Y-H-V-H, I will praise His word; when He is Elo-him, I will praise His word.” And this perception is a foretaste of the World to Come, as our Sages taught concerning the verse (*Zekharia* 14), “On that day, God shall be One and His Name – One”: They ask (*Pesachim* 50a), “Is He not One now?” And they explain, “In our present reality, one recites over something good the blessing, ‘…He Who is good and beneficent’, and over something bad, ‘…the truthful Judge.’ But in the future, it will be entirely ‘...He Who is good and beneficent’ – for the Name Y-H-V-H and the Name Elo-him will be a single unity. (*Likkutei Moharan* 4)

Here R. Nachman cites the Gemara’s observation that in our present reality, the blessing that one recites over the good is different from that which one recites over bad. The halakhic directive itself reflects a worldview that distinguishes between good and bad; it recognizes the existence of bad and does not ignore it. R. Nachman then goes on to present a different psychological approach that perceives the good within the bad, describing it as a perception bound up with “a foretaste of the World to Come.” Further on in this teaching, he examines this position and discusses how it can influence our lives in this world, too. However, his presentation of it seems to recognize, first and foremost, that this is not the basic position for most people (unlike R. Zusha); ultimately, we live in this world. This world is not the place where “God is One and His Name – One.” The experience of something bad as being bad, differentiated from what is good, is part of living in this world and accepting it. It is for this reason that *Chazal* rule that over something that is bad, a person does not bless “…He Who is good and beneficent,” but rather “…the true Judge.” We might identify here something reminiscent of the character of Rebbi, who lives in this world, in the story of his encounter with R. Pinchas ben Yair. However, we might also view Rebbi’s desire for connection with R. Pinchas ben Yair (as demonstrated in his joy when R. Pinchas ben Yair initially accepts his invitation) as a desire for some contact, sometimes, with the World to Come.

**The Rebbe of Kotzk and R. Pinchas ben Yair**

One of the better-known *Admorim* from the Peshische branch of *Chasidut* was R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. The Kotzker Rebbe was known for his uncompromising standards and expectations – of himself, of his *chasidim*, and of the world. In this sense, he also evokes the model of R. Pinchas ben Yair. The following is an example of a teaching that illustrates the standard he demands of himself and of others – especially those in spiritual leadership:

I heard that [the Kotzker Rebbe] said, concerning the *mishna* [that says], “Love work and hate the scholarly leadership (*rabbanut*)”:

[But] if all the world were [made up only of] workers, who could answer our [halakhic] questions? [This is not what the *mishna* means.] Rather, what it means is: “Love work” – in other words, [study of] Torah, which is the work of the scholarly leadership – meaning, that one should know how to give proper instruction. “And hate the *rabbanut*” – meaning, arrogance [that might otherwise come to accompany scholarship]. (Yechiel Moshe Greenwald, *Niflaot Chadashot*, Piotrkov 5657, p. 92)

It has often been suggested that spiritual challenges in this world are meant to elevate the individual’s life, or the physical world, or various aspects of this world. But a different teaching of the Rebbe of Kotzk, which again is representative of his rather extreme view, is that the purpose of this world is “to elevate the heavens”:

It once happened that the holy Rabbi Yaakov of Radzimin, of blessed memory, visited our Rabbi and teacher, the Rebbe of Kotzk. The Rebbe of Kotzk asked him, “Yaakov, for what purpose was man created in the world?” He answered him, “Man was created in the world in order to perfect his soul.”

To which the Rebbe of Kotzk answered in a loud voice, “Yaakov, is that what we learned from our teacher, the Rebbe of Peshische? Rather, man was created in the world in order to raise up the heavens!” (Yo’etz Kim Kadish Rakatz, *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* part III, Lodz, Mesora 5688, p. 71)

Another story about the Rebbe of Kotzk illustrates his independence and his inner conviction, and recalls R. Pinchas ben Yair’s parting from Rebbi, unwilling even to see him from the moment he decides that they follow two different paths. In his youth, R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk had been part of the *beit midrash* of the Seer of Lublin, but at a certain point he left and became a disciple of the “holy Jew” of Peshische, the founder of the Peshische dynasty. The story describes the manner in which this transition took place:

Many times he was there but the approach of the Seer of Lublin did not find favor in his eyes… So he went to and fro in the *beit midrash*, and found a respectable scholar who was [also] walking to and fro. He said to him, “What do you think?” He answered, “Why are you asking me, and of what interest is it to you?” The holy Rabbi Menachem Mendel said to him, “Do you want to travel to Peshische, to the [Holy] Jew? Me too!” Then the scholar saw that [R. Menachem Mendel] could comprehend the thoughts of others, and he said to him, “I am close to the Rebbe [i.e., the Seer of Lublin]. When I go to receive permission to travel, he will ask about the nature of the journey. And the Rebbe, with his holy spirit, knows everything – what, then, shall I do?” R. Menachem Mendel said to him, “We shall not stop by his house [i.e., the house of the Rebbe].’ And they traveled from there to Peshische….

On the way, R. Menachem Mendel became ill [and remained that way] until he came to Peshische.

The scholar ran to the “holy Jew” of Peshische to mention the name of his friend, R. Menachem Mendel, so he would pray for him. The “[holy] Jew” said to him, “He must surely have left the Rebbe [i.e., the Seer of Lublin] without receiving his permission. Go and tell him that he should resolve that when he recovers, he will travel to Lublin to receive permission for the journey.”

Upon hearing this, R. Menachem Mendel said, “I have never regretted (reconsidered) when it comes to the truth!”

To which the [holy] Jew responded, “If he is so adamant in his thinking, then he will recover [even] without that.”

And he was healed. (Moshe Menachem Mendel Waldan, *Niflaot ha-Rabbi*, pp. 34-35)

In another story too, we see not only the supreme value of truth in the Kotzker Rebbe’s worldview, but also his determination to abide by his truth even (or perhaps specifically) where this causes dissent or controversy. Conversely, broad consensus and the absence of disagreement signify, for him, something missing from the truth:

It is known to *chasidim* that the two holy *tzaddikim*, R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk *zt”l*, and R. Yitzchak of Worke *zt”l*, enjoyed good relations. Nevertheless, the *chasidim* who followed them had some differences of opinion. Once it happened that [the *tzaddikim*] were both in the same city, and they went to greet each other. The Rebbe of Worke said to the Rebbe of Kotzk, “I have some news for you: the *chasidim*, our followers, have made peace between them.” Upon hearing this, the Rebbe of Kotzk raised his voice and responded, “If that is so, then the power of deceit has already won, and Satan has succeeded in having the essence of truth erased, heaven forfend, from the world!” The Rebbe of Worke was astounded at this and asked him, “What makes you say this?”

The Rebbe of Kotzk answered, “It is the truth, and I have proof of it: It is written in *Midrash Bereishit* that when the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to create Man, the angels were divided among themselves: *Chesed* (loving-kindness) said, ‘Let him be created – for the entire world will perform acts of kindness.’ Truth said, ‘Let him not be created, for the entire world will be deceit.’ Justice said, ‘Let him be created, for it will all be righteousness.’ Peace said, ‘Let him not be created, for the entire world will be dispute.’ What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took Truth and cast it to the earth, as it is written, “You cast truth earthward” (*Daniel* 8:12). Now, anyone who reads this *midrash* is astounded: Can we accept that Truth was cast to the earth, and there was no further hindrance to the creation of Man? Once this “prosecutor” had been silenced, Peace would still hinder his creation, arguing that man would be full of discord and arguments. What was the response to its claim?

The answer seems to be that *Chazal* taught us that the concept of “argument for the sake of Heaven” flows from the source and root of Truth; once Truth has been cast down, it follows that there will be Peace. (Meaning: In that case, the claim of Peace – that the entire world will be dispute – falls apart. Casting Truth to the ground showed him that sometimes there is a peace of falsehood). For he does not care at all whether this is the true and proper way to serve God, or the opposite.” (Moshe Menachem Mendel Waldan, *Ohel Yitzchak*, Piotrkow 5674, p. 35)

Indeed, owing to the difficult and demanding approach of the Rebbe of Kotzk, not many people were able to connect to him, and his *chasidim* were few in number. Still, even he was sometimes able to understand human complexity and to show a degree of indulgence towards the role of money in human life, at least after initially rejecting it. The following story is an interesting reflection of this:

I heard that once, before Rosh Ha-shana, there was a *chasid* who went inside [to speak with the Rebbe], wanting to bid him farewell before going home. [The Rebbe] asked him, “Why do you want to go home for Rosh Hashana?” He told him that he served as the *ba’al tefilla* (prayer leader) in his home (community), for pay. And [the Rebbe] shouted at him, “How can you be permitted to pray [i.e., lead the prayers] for pay?!” And the *chasid* was very afraid. Afterwards, he dismissed him, saying, “[Go and] pray.” Then he paused a little, and then said to him, “[And you may] take payment.” (Yechiel Moshe Greenwald, *Niflaot Chadashot*, p. 92)

There are certain aspects of the conceptual approach of the Rebbe of Kotzk that recall R. Pinchas ben Yair. As noted above, his teacher, R. Simcha Bunam of Peshische, maintained a more moderate approach that was more tolerant of the human need to make a living, and opposed more extreme views. To illustrate this, let us recall part of the story mentioned above, that was recounted in its entirety in [*shiur* #14](https://etzion.org.il/en/talmud/studies-gemara/midrash-and-aggada/sippurei-hanotea-hazaken-2) of this series. In it, R. Fishele represents a personality that recoils from any contact or dealings with money – and there is something captivating about this way of viewing reality, but it ends up harming R. Meir in the story, because it is too idealized and one-dimensional; it leaves no room for a more human or more complex perspective. R. Simcha Bunim, on the other hand, balances the picture and sends R. Meir back to his work and his property:

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)

In the story in the Gemara, in *Massekhet Chullin*, the encounter between R. Pinchas ben Yair and Rebbi (R. Yehuda ha-Nasi) represents a confrontation between two different spiritual approaches: R. Pinchas ben Yair is altogether focused on “performing the will of his Maker”; as part of this overall approach, he makes do with little, does not accept anything from other people, and is repelled by Rebbi’s royal manners and lifestyle, which he views as ostentatious. In the *Bavli*’s account, the stated reason for his aversion to the white mules relates to the danger that they pose. But as we saw, the parallel story in the *Yerushalmi* offers as the reason for his aversion the fact that they are expensive – i.e., an unnecessary expense with which R. Pinchas ben Yair feels it is unfair to burden the people. The story also includes Rebbi, but he is almost an “extra” in it; his stance is apologetic and inferior in relation to R. Pinchas ben Yair’s arguments. His wealth, stateliness and splendor are viewed as a sort of human weakness towards which the reader might, at best, feel empathy and indulgence.

However, there is a third option, which views the way Rebbi lives and operates as a leader as right and proper. Concerning Rebbi himself, there are sources even from the time of *Chazal* that offer a different view – for instance:

And apropos of the greatness of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi, Rabba, son of Rava, says (and some say that it was R. Hillel, son of Rabbi Volas, who says): From the days of Moshe until the days of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi we do not find [great scholarship in] Torah and greatness [including wealth and high political office] combined in one place [i.e., in a single individual]. (*Bavli, Gittin* 59a)

Here we find that Moshe – who was presented in our story from *Massekhet Chullin* as the parallel to R. Pinchas ben Yair – is compared to Rebbi, as a model of leadership that comes with a high economic status and is viewed in a positive light.

The leadership approach that includes the trappings of wealth and splendor existed among some of the great Chasidic leaders, too. This approach is called “*derekh* *ha-malkhut*” (the “royal” approach),[[2]](#footnote-2) and it is related, inter alia, to a broader realm that is one of the innovations of *Chasidut*: the idea of “*avoda be-gashmiut*,” serving God through the material world itself.[[3]](#footnote-3) The best known example is R. Yisrael, founder of the Ruzhin dynasty (whose golden shoes were discussed in one of the previous *shiurim* in this series), but there were others who adopted this approach as well. A story told about one of them – R. Mordechai of Chernobyl, who lived in the generation before R. Yisrael of Ruzhin – makes explicit mention of the wealth of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, thereby connecting to our Talmudic story in *Massekhet Chullin*. In this story, R. Mordechai’s father, R. Nachum of Chernobyl, who was a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, came to visit his son and was dismayed at the material wealth that he saw there:

When [R. Nachum of Chernobyl] came to the home of his son, the Maggid [R. Mordechai], he said to him, “It is said of you that you have vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and many watches; please can you show them to me?” So the Maggid, R. Mordechai, was forced to show all his possessions to his holy father. His father said to him, “Why do you need these?” The Maggid answered, “The Gemara describes and recounts the great wealth of R. Yehuda ha-Nasi… Behold, it is written in *Massekhet Ketubot* that at the time of Rabbi’s death, he pointed his ten fingers upwards and said, “I did not enjoy/derive benefit from this world even so much as my baby finger.” This is difficult to understand: if he did not derive any benefit from this world, why did he have so much wealth? We must conclude that this, too, represents an approach to serving God. (Reuven Zak, *Kerem Yisrael – Hu Sefer ha-Yachas mi-Shenei Mishpachot ha-Kedoshim… Ruzhin ve-Chernobyl*, Lublin 5690, pp. 53-54)

In this story, the figure of Rebbi serves as a model for Divine service and leadership that operates specifically through wealth and splendor. Moreover, some of the Chasidic leaders who followed this approach regarded it as more challenging than the usual path of simplicity – among other reasons, because of the criticism directed towards it. For example, R. Baruch of Medzibezh, grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov and one of the first leaders to adopt the “*derekh ha-malkhut*” approach, offers a surprising and original interpretation of the verse: “If a man has two wives, the one beloved and the other despised… He may not give birthright precedence to the son of the beloved [wife] over the son of the despised [wife], the [real] firstborn son. Rather, he must acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the despised [wife].…” (*Devarim* 21:15-17):

There is [a *tzaddik*] who serves the blessed God through Torah and prayer alone; he represents the “beloved” (wife), for this [form of] service is beloved and pleasant in the eyes of all who behold it. And there are *tzaddikim* who make a statute and judgment in serving God also in earthly matters – eating, drinking, and other bodily needs… and this represents the “despised” (wife)… And the great majority of people think that the *tzaddik* fulfills his physical needs without any spiritual intentions, like regular people…. But the verse says, “He may not give birthright precedence to the son of the beloved [wife] over the son of the despised [wife], the [real] firstborn son. Rather, he must acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the despised [wife].” For this service of the *tzaddik*, through the needs of physical existence, is considered by God twice as valuable as the service of the “beloved.” (Nachman Liebman mi-Bar, *Butzina de-Nehora*, Lemberg 5640)

As I wrote in the introduction to this series of *shiurim*, sometimes Chasidic stories echo ideas that existed already in the teachings of *Chazal*. Sometimes they enrich them by introducing language and ideas, spiritual and psychological terms, that did not exist among *Chazal*. Sometimes, as we see here, ideas or directions of spiritual thought that are only alluded to in *Chazal’s* teachings, or appear there in embryonic form, or do not appear there at all (if the world and human language were not yet ready for them in the distant past), are revealed to us in Chasidic stories and writings, paving new pathways in Divine service in the world.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Many of the stories cited here are from <https://zusha.org.il/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many of the quotes here and the insights drawn from them are based on David Asaf, *Derekh ha-Malkhut: R. Yisrael mi-Ruzhin u-Mekomo be-Toldot ha-Chasidut*, Jerusalem, 5757. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a general definition of this concept in *Chasidut* and its nature, see Asaf, ibid., pp. 310-311 and the references in his footnotes. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)