**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #32: Chasidic Service of God (continued):**

**The Uses of Creative Imagination (continued)**

In his *Sha’arei Kedusha*, R. Chaim Vital teaches:

He should purify his body and sanctify it (cleansing it) of impurity, and clean his hands of any sort of theft or robbery… and keep himself from any mundane conversation throughout that entire day, and he should have immersed himself and be wearing white garments, and in a clean place… and far from any anguish or melancholy or sadness, and he should clothe himself with much joy, and divest himself of the physical dimension, and ascend in his thoughts from one firmament to the next, all the way to the seventh firmament, which is called *aravot*.

**And he should imagine that the firmament of *aravot* is covered with an exceedingly great white sheet, upon which the Divine Name (Tetragrammaton) is emblazoned**, in Assyrian script as it is familiar to us, in extremely large lettering — each letter like a mountain. — on a snow-white background. And he should join the letters *yud* to *heh* and *heh* to *yud*, *vav* to *heh* and *heh* to *vav*…[[1]](#footnote-1)

The central portion of the instruction provided here rests entirely on the use of the imagination to generate the ascent through the firmaments, the white background, the form of the letters and their unifications (*yichudim*).[[2]](#footnote-2) The imagery is based on a Talmudic teaching according to which there are seven firmanents:

R. Eliezer said: They [the firmaments] are seven: *shamayim, rakia, shechakim, zevul, maon, makhon,* and *aravot*. And the glory of the Holy One, Blessed be He, dwells in *aravot*, as it is written (*Tehillim* 68:5), “Extol Him Who rides upon the clouds (*aravot*)."[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Kabbalist processes this description into an actual experience of journeying through the upper worlds, all through use of the imagination. R. Chaim Vital goes on to cite R. Menachem Recanati, a 14th-century Italian Kabbalist who authored a Kabbalistic commentary on the Torah, concerning *Chazal’s* teaching that the forefathers died with a Divine “kiss” (*Bava Batra* 17a):

Consider the great secret that I shall reveal to you concerning our Sages’ teaching that “the forefathers died with a [Divine] kiss.”

When the pious ones and singular individuals would meditate and occupy themselves with the esoterica of the upper worlds, they would use their mental powers of imagination as though these things were etched in front of them. And when they would bind their minds to the Supernal mind, the ideas would expand and reveal themselves in blessed proliferation, from the voiding of thought, like a person who opens a dam so the water flows and spreads ever further. For the mind that cleaves [to God] is the source, the unending reservoir and flow…[[4]](#footnote-4)

The excerpt deals with highly esoteric ideas, and we shall address briefly only that aspect that concerns our discussion.[[5]](#footnote-5) The concept of a Divine kiss of death essentially alludes to man’s cleaving to God. Through their supreme cleaving to God in thought, the Kabbalistic masters receive a Divine outpouring which is experienced as awareness and perception of the supreme dimension of reality. One of the earliest stages of this process is use of the imagination to achieve etching or engraving, i.e., the inculcation of these secrets in their psyche. In this process the Kabbalist produces an image of the idea in his mind’s eye in order to internalize it as completely and firmly as possible. Thereafter the mind or psyche ascends to a level at which there is a flow of Divine abundance via the system of the *sefirot*. Here again we see deliberate and purposeful use of the imagination to access a higher level of spiritual awareness.

In his famous work *Mesillat Yesharim*, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto recommends the use of the imagination to attain the attribute of humility. The image that he proposes that a person create in his mind’s eye is that of the Heavenly Court reprimanding him when his soul ascends on high after death. Ramchal assures the reader that if this image is conceived with sufficient clarity and genuine conviction, all feelings of pride will be banished immediately and permanently:

And if he will reflect further and picture the moment of his entering the great court of the heavenly host, seeing himself in the presence of the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, holy and pure to the limits of holiness and purity, in the midst of holy ones, servants of strength, strong in power, doing His bidding, entirely free of imperfection — and he standing before them, deficient, lowly and shameful in point of his nature; unclean and ugly in point of his actions — will he be able to raise his head, to open his mouth? And if he is asked, "Where then is your mouth? Where is the pride and honor that you knew in your world?" what will he answer? How will he meet this rebuke? There is no question that if a person would for one moment form a true, forceful impression of this idea, all pride would take flight from him, never to return. (*Mesillat Yesharim*, “Concerning the Means of Acquiring Humility”)[[6]](#footnote-6)

Under the influence of Ramchal, R. Yisrael Salanter taught his disciples, too, the advantages of guided imagery. He maintained that by this means a person could arouse the sense of awe or fear of God that is the key to progress in the realm of *mussar*:

The faculty of imagination is effective for *mussar*. A person should imagine how, if he were the *Kohen Gadol* who had to enter the Holy of Holies, he would fear greatly for his life, lest he come to harm, heaven forfend…

And a person is remembered and judged for all his actions, just like the *Kohen Gadol* who enters the Holy of Holies, so he is truly in that very situation, and he should be exceedingly fearful. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Now, what is awe [fear of God]? And how is it acquired?... It is established only through expanded activity of the psyche, broadening the idea through sensory imagery…[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Yisrael Salanter’s students — the *mussar* sages, including R. Eliyahu Dessler[[9]](#footnote-9) and others — followed in his footsteps and embraced the use of the imagination in *mussar* service.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Ibid. p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Concerning *yichudim* using the letters of God’s Name, see R. Wacks, *Be-sod Ha-yichud: Ha-yichudim Be-haguto Ha-kabbalit Chasidit shel Rav Chayim ben Shelomo Tyrer Mi-*Czernowitz (Los Angeles: 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Midrash Tehillim* 114b, Buber edition, p. 471. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Menachem Recanati, *Peirush Ha-Recanati al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: 5721), *Parashat Vayechi,* 37b. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Readers seeking further background are well-advised to read M. Idel*, R. Menachem Recanati Ha-mekubal* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: 5758), pp. 125-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, Chapter 23. Translation available at: <http://www.israel613.com/books/MESILAT_YESHARIM.PDF> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Yisrael Salanter, *Iggeret Ha-mussar*, Letter 7, in *Sefer Or Yisrael Ha-shalem* (Bnei Brak: 5739), pp. 47-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. Letter 9, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* (Bnei Brak: 5740), Part I, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)