**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #36**

**Chassidic Service of God (continued):**

**The Imagination in the Teachings of R. Kalonymus**

**Simple Imagination and Innovative Imagination**

The imagination visualizes two different types of images: simple and innovative. If a person at prayer conjures in his mind a picture of the Temple that reflects his knowledge of how it appears, that is simple imagination. If, however, he elaborates on this image and adds a wealth of auxiliary details, like a painter who allows his imagination free rein, then he is engaged in innovative imagination. R. Kalonymus argues that innovative imagination should play a role in the pictures one creates in his mind. If, for example, the worshipper is imagining the Temple, he should not suffice with the initial image that comes to mind, but rather should try to enrich it and elaborate on it as far as possible:

Thereafter train yourself to expand your thinking, and relate all that you know about the Temple to this [image]. Think: Here the Temple stands complete, the place where God’s Presence can literally be seen and which the Torah commands us to visit three times a year. Why? In order to behold the countenance of the Lord God of hosts. Fire descends [there] from Heaven in full view of all, and the *Kohen* stands with the *Urim Ve-Tumim*; the Jewish People make their requests of the Holy One, blessed be He, for all their needs, and He answers them… And it is in such a holy place, amidst such revelation, that you stand in prayer, praising and talking with the Holy One, blessed be He…

Even at times other than the regular prayers, it is recommended that a person practice such imagery, so that when it is time to pray, he will be able to conjure such an image immediately:

Even in your spare time, think of such images, so that when you are at prayer it will be as though you are standing in the Temple, etc. Thus, when you come to pray, it will be easier to arouse fervor within yourself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

R. Kalonymus proposes that one use innovative imagination in order that the mental images will have long-term impact. If, for example, a person engaged his imagination during *seuda shelishit* and elevated himself to a pinnacle of spiritual experience, we may assume that just as he rose up very high, he will fall all the way back down, as part of the continuous movement of “running and returning.” This may be remedied by conjuring rich, details images, which leave a long-lasting impression on the psyche:

But if you exert your psyche and strengthen your thoughts, then even if at first the images that come to mind are not as whole and perfect as the one we are discussing here, there will nevertheless be fragments of images that will come to mind.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For example, if at *seuda shelishit* a person wants to strengthen his thoughts so that they will not easily fade away, he should pay attention to the nature of the thought that he holds in his mind. If it is related to awe of God, he might imagine the darkness that fell upon Avraham when God revealed Himself to him: “And it came to pass, that, when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Avram; and, behold, a dread, even a great darkness, fell upon him” (*Bereishit* 15:12), and he might tell himself a few times – whether inwardly or actually articulating the words: “I fear my great God, Creator of all worlds.”[[3]](#footnote-3) If, on the other hand, his imagery is in the direction of inspired transcendence, and he wishes to strengthen his thought so that its impression will last for longer, then he might tell himself:

“Happy are we; how good is our portion! We are now far removed from the world and its bustling; we are separated from it all. It is only to He Who is holy and Whose servants are holy that we aspire; it is only to the Infinite Ein-Sof that we cry out and draw close, singing His praises…” And within you there sparkles the verse, “And Moshe came into the darkness where God was”… and your lips whisper the rhyming lines [of the liturgical song, *Ya Echsof*, traditionally sung at *seuda shelishit*]… Master of the universe, spread this holiness of Yours over us during the weekdays, too.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Imagery While Studying *Tanakh* and *Aggada***

Another suggestion for expanding the imagination pertains to the study of *Tanakh* and *midrash*. Here, a person should imagine himself participating in the different narratives recounted in *Tanakh*, meeting the personalities and observing them and their actions and emotions, all with a view to feeling close to them and personally involved in what happens to them.[[5]](#footnote-5) Likewise, a person should study midrashic literature and connect the teachings of *Chazal* to the biblical verses, such that he imagines in his mind the story in its entirety, as inspired by this connection:

When you study *Tanakh*, try to make yourself part of all the holy events that took place as though you had also been there. You accompany Avraham and Yitzchak on their journey to the *akeda* [binding of Yitzchak]; you share in Yaakov’s anguish as he prays to God, “Deliver me, I pray You, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him.”

And the same applies when you study *midrash*. There are many *midrashim* on verses of *Tanakh* that reveal more about the events that took place. For instance, the Creation; the story of the sale of Yosef; etc., for *Chazal* reveal to us more than we ourselves can see in the Torah. This is better than learning the verses alone, and the elaborations of the *midrashim* alone… For in truth it is all one, and it should all be one in your mind, too.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The “expansion of the imagination” entails creating one’s own innovative interpretation, since any imagining of an existing story might add details and perspectives that might not necessarily appear in the biblical narrative itself, or in the commentaries. But it seems that this possibility does not concern R. Kalonymus. We might view this as a vote in favor of creativity and exegesis based on imagination, although he does emphasize that one should start off by adhering to the biblical verses and the *midrashim*. At the same time, he notes that the biblical narrative does allude to events and descriptions that are not actually set forth in the text, and we have no choice but to fill in the gaps using our imagination.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In order to illustrate how his advice in this regard should be followed, R. Kalonymus offers a description of the Exodus from Egypt. Attention should be paid to his instruction: One starts by asking different questions, and then, as a second stage, he conjures in his mind the various descriptions that could answer these questions:

For example, what impact did the arrival of Moshe Rabbenu and Aharon Ha-Kohen have on *Bnei Yisrael*, bringing their message of redemption from Egypt? How was the news discussed in their homes? And the intelligent, pure-hearted children – did they not ask questions when they heard that from such slavery they would go free?… But since neither the Torah nor the *midrashim* describe how the scenario played itself out, you [must] conjure it up, in your mind and your imagination – a Jewish mind and imagination – in keeping with the manner in which it is described in the Torah and in the *midrashim*, and paint yourself a mental picture, as you imagine it.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If we look closely at his words here, we note the tension between the creative (innovative) imagination, which may deviate from the biblical account, and the need to adhere to the biblical and midrashic narrative framework. Therefore, R. Kalonymus writes that the innovative imagination is “a Jewish mind and imagination.” In other words, a Jew, who is the son of prophets, is entitled to interpret out of his imagination and to create images that go beyond what is set forth explicitly in the Torah and in the *midrashim*. This grants a broad license to use one’s imagination freely in creating mental pictures “as you imagine them.”

We shall not quote here in full R. Kalonymus’s lengthy description of the story of the Exodus. Another brief excerpt is sufficient to show that he seeks to teach the reader how to develop this literary capacity – not for the sake of art itself, but rather, as explained above, in order to connect with the Torah and to develop a sense of wonder concerning its narratives:

“Do not fear, children; do not be afraid,” their parents replied. “It is not the taskmaster who calls out, but rather Pharaoh and his ministers (*Shemot Rabba* 18), who have imposed their fear over the entire land, and whose mere blink of an eye has caused rivers of Jewish blood to be shed. They are now in such trouble that they are going about from door to door among the Jews, asking Moshe and Aharon and all of us, to have mercy on them and not to tarry, but to leave right away. Look now, my children; behold God’s work, for it is mighty.”

The children can contain themselves no longer. They leap from their places, dancing and singing with their pure voices, their parents clapping along: “Blessed be He and blessed be His Name; there is none like the Lord God; there are no acts like Yours…”[[9]](#footnote-9)

R. Kalonymus concludes by expressing the hope that the reader will try out and practice this technique on his own, gradually coming to feel a stirring of his emotions and closeness to God:

I hope to God that now that you have reviewed some such thoughts, you can see for yourself their great benefit. And if at first you might have doubted this, saying, “Of what use is this to us?”, this is no longer the case, for you have undoubtedly been stirred… and filled solely with feelings of sanctity and longing for God. What more could we wish for?[[10]](#footnote-10)

At this point, we must make note of the style of R. Kalonymus’s writing, which is often characterized by pathos and a highly poetic mode of expression. Here, for example, the pathos is expressed in the imaginary scene that he creates surrounding the biblical narrative. Having already discussed the importance of fervor and passion in R. Kalonymus’s teachings, it is easy to understand why he chooses to employ this manner of expression. The aim of the pathos is stir the reader’s emotions – and this is also R. Kalonymus’s purpose in bringing the biblical narrative and rabbinical *midrashim* to life, in order to create a sense of emotional identification within the reader.[[11]](#footnote-11) For this reason, he also proposes studying *midrashim*, as well as *Sefer Ha-Zohar* – the latter not so much for its esoteric teachings as for the many exegetical passages that it contains.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Imagining *Mesirut Nefesh***

The revelation of the psyche and a state of passion can be achieved by means of *mesirut nefesh* – self-sacrifice.[[13]](#footnote-13) Here we refer not to the ultimate *mesirut nefesh –* giving up one’s life – heaven forfend, but rather to a taste of the experience of having the soul separate from the body, returning to its Source on high, by means of the imagination. The soul yearns to return to God and to leave the coarse and limiting body:

All the days of his life a person yearns to see the light of the countenance of the living God… If it were possible to divest one’s soul of his body and to cleave to the Supernal Light, he would be joyful… and his heart pains him on account of his soul, which is chained to the body.[[14]](#footnote-14)

During prayer it is possible to sense something of this experience of divesting oneself of physicality and freeing the soul to return to its Source. Ultimately the body, too, rises up with the soul and absorbs something of this elevation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The connection between prayer (including recitation of the *shema*) and *mesirut nefesh* is established in the formulation of the *mishna* in *Berakhot* (9:5): "'And with all your soul' (*Devarim* 6:5) – this means, even if God takes your soul [life]."[[16]](#footnote-16) This ideal is epitomized by the *kiddush Hashem* of R. Akiva, who is a symbol of *mesirut nefesh*:

When R. Akiva was taken to his execution, it was time to recite *shema*. They combed his flesh with iron combs, while he accepted upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. His students said to him, “Our teacher, even to this degree?” He replied, “All my life I was troubled by this verse – 'with all your soul', meaning, 'even if He takes your soul.' I said to myself: When will I have the opportunity to fulfill this? Now that I have the opportunity, shall I not fulfill it?!” He drew out the word *echad* (one) until his soul left him with that word. A Heavenly Voice was heard, saying, “Happy are you, R. Akiva, that your soul departed with *echad*." (*Berakhot* 61b)[[17]](#footnote-17)

R. Yona Girondi[[18]](#footnote-18) discusses a way of fulfilling the commandment of *kiddush Hashem* through the recitation of shema on a daily basis. In his *Iggeret Ha-Teshuva*, he writes:

When a person recites Shema and he reaches the verse, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (*Devarim* 6:5), he should think of what our Sages taught (*Berakhot* 54a): “With all your soul” – meaning, even if God takes your soul. And he should make his soul subservient to God, and ready himself in his mind to give up his life for the sanctification of God's Name and to be killed for His sake, and this is weighed in his favor, as though he had [actually] been killed in sanctification of God's name. This idea is revealed to us from a teaching of the *Sifri*: “With all your soul” – this is as it is written, “For Your sake we are killed all the day [or, every day]” (*Tehillim* 44:23). Can a person then be killed every day? Obviously not; rather, this refers to the righteous ones, concerning whom the text asserts that they are considered as though they were killed every day.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Similar ideas appear in the *Sefer Ha-Zohar*[[20]](#footnote-20) and the works of the kabbalists.[[21]](#footnote-21) In view of these texts, R. Kalonymus emphasizes that mere thought is not sufficient, as one might be misled to think. Rather, one must imagine himself actually leaping into a fiery furnace:

But the thought of *mesirut nefesh* during the recitation of *shema* is not a matter of mere thinking; it has to be really imagined and visualized in one's mind: There is a fiery pyre before you, and you leap into it, in sanctification of God's Name… Not mere thought, but rather an image and visualization, a thought of *mesirut nefesh* that is considered like the actual action; a powerful thought that engages the entire body, to the point that sometimes your body is actually shaken by the jump into the furnace that you have in your mind.[[22]](#footnote-22)

If we try out this visualization of *mesirut nefesh* during prayer, we find that it boosts significantly our self-awareness of the existence of the soul and its manifestations. Indeed, this is R. Kalonymus's declared goal: to achieve closeness to God as well as passion in His service. A person might well ask himself: What does this elevated Divine service have to do with me? It is meant for *tzaddikim* on a very high level; I am not worthy of it. But R. Kalonymus encourages the reader not to be afraid to try, asserting that every individual should serve God to the best of his ability; no one is exempt from trying, even if he can only manage to engage in this service in a minor or partial manner.[[23]](#footnote-23) A person is created in this world, and he can choose whether to live like any of the other living creatures or to distinguish himself as a holy soul. Much depends on the power of his thinking, which can lead him in either direction:

But it depends if a person's thought and imagination are powerful or not. If they are powerful, then his thought and his imagination, visualizing and imagining this powerfully and in elaborate detail, will affect his entire body, which will yearn at this time to distance itself from physicality and to draw closer to God, to behold His pleasantness… But if his thinking is weak, … they are extinguished and lost, with no action and no ascent.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Thought and imagination are so important that they can help a person to rise up from earth to heaven.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A precedent for this idea can be found in R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s *Sefer Ha-Kuzari.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 88. An edition of the Pesach Hagadah was recently published with excerpts from the works of R. Kalonymus relating to the Exodus, including the above imagined scene:**הגדה של פסח עם פירוש גבורת ישראל, מטה משה, תפארת שלמה, ותיאור יציאת מצרים ורשפי אש קודש מתוך אמרות טהורות שנאמרו על ידי נכדם האדמו"ר הקדוש מוה"ר קלונימוס קלמן קלמיש מפיסצ'נא** (Tel Aviv, 5767). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. Hillel Zeitlin notes R. Kalonymus’s use of pathos, but offers no explanation for this choice. See H. Zeitlin, “*Admor – Oman Pedagogi*”, in idem, *Sifran shel Yechidim* (Jerusalem, 5740). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See R. Waks, *Be-Sod Ha-Yichud: Ha-Yichudim Be-Haguto Ha-Kabbalit-Chassidit shel R. Chaim ben Shelomo Tirer Mi-Tshernowitz* (Los Angeles, 2006), pp. 246-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. R. Kalonymus bases himself here on the teachings of his grandfather, R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem, 5748), *Parshat* *Pinchas*, who writes:

The idea of *mesirut nefesh* is that although a person has a fundamental, existential need for food and drink and somewhere to live and clothing and his other requirements, in truth, one should put all the focus of his soul in all his actions and his business towards God alone, to behold the pleasantness of God, and his soul should thirst for the sweet taste of the delightful intimacy of His Divinity. And for as long as he lives he should yearn, “When shall I come and behold the illumination of the countenance of the living God?” And when such a person is at prayer, when he removes his thoughts from this world, his soul tastes something of the sweet pleasantness of the Supernal light, and at that time his soul yearns mightily with all its strength to cleave to the Supernal lights. And when he experiences this powerful urge, he scorns his life; if it were possible to strip his soul of the body and to cleave to the Supernal Light, he would gladly do so, and his heart pains him on account of his soul which is chained to the body, for this prevents him from ascending and cleaving to the Supernal Light. But at this time even his body becomes purified, for by virtue of the great longing that burns within him like a fiery torch to become one with God, so his body is likewise elevated, and this is of benefit to him. Even though after his prayer the longing is not as powerful as it was previously, nevertheless the body is no longer drawn after physicality. It just performs Divine service in all its actions and affairs – in eating, in drinking, and in all other matters; in every endeavor it is part of Divine service. And he thereby raises up the scattered sparks of his soul. And if he constantly works on his yearning, each and every day trying harder and harder to yearn and to cleave to the Creator, then his body will become purified to the point where the matter itself is also transformed into form. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For the perception of *mesirut nefesh* in Jewish philosophy and mysticism, see R. Elior, "*Rabbi Yosef Karo Ve-Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov: Metamorfoza Mistit, Hashra’ah Kabbalit Ve-Hafnama Ruchanit*," *Tarbitz* 65 (5756), pp. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See further M. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God – Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle, 1994), pp. 66­73. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Y. Hacker, “*Klum Hu’atak Kiddush Hashem el Techum Ha-Ruach Likrat Ha-Et Ha-Chadasha*?” in Y. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (eds.), *Kedushat Ha-Chaim Ve-Cheruf Ha-Nefesh* (Jerusalem, 5753), pp. 221-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. R. Yona Girondi, *Iggeret Ha-Teshuva*, pp. 193-194 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. "והיינו ביחודא דשמע ישראל, דכל מאן דשוי הכי רעותיה בהאי קרא, אתחשיב להי כאלו מסר נפשיה על קדושת שמיה" (Zohar III, 195b; I 124b) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Y. Hacker, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)