**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #37**

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

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

**Imagining the Day of Death**

Although we generally avoid thinking about death, for fear of the unknown, the most certain knowledge that a person can have is that one day he is going to die. *Chazal* teach that keeping this fact in mind helps us to overcome our evil inclination (*Berakhot* 5a).[[1]](#footnote-1) On the basis of this and other sources, R. Kalonymus recommends using one’s imagination to visualize the day of death. This arouses a person’s fervor, *teshuva*, and soul-searching. According to R. Kalonymus, one should imagine the progressive stages of illness, parting from one’s dear ones, death, and burial.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This teaching is not unique to R. Kalonymus; similar ideas are to be found in the teachings of the Shela Ha-Kadosh and others.[[3]](#footnote-3) There were also Chassidic masters who incorporated this practice. For instance, R. Natan records that R. Nachman of Breslov used to imagine the day of his death. He depicts this visualization as *melakha* (labor) – in other words, it is not an easy task, but rather a skill that must be acquired:

He [R. Nachman] said that several times he imagined things relating to death, as though he was actually dying, to the point where experienced physically a taste of death. I also heard him say that in his youth he would imagine his death and how people would cry over him, etc., and he visualized clearly all this matter of dying. And he said that it is a *melakha* to imagine this.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What distinguishes R. Kalonymus’s attention to this subject is that he sets forth the visualization in great detail, over about ten pages. Thus, for R. Kalonymus’s *chassidim* it is relatively easy to follow his guidance in this regard, whereas in the case of R. Nachman we have a description of his own habit but no explicit instruction, and thus there is some doubt as to the extent to which his *chassidim* followed his example.

R. Kalonymus bases himself on the above-mentioned teaching in the *gemara* about thinking about the day of one’s death as the ultimate weapon for overcoming the evil inclination. According to R. Kalonymus, the desired effect cannot be achieved by a mere fleeting thought. There must be detailed visualization. If a person practices this diligently, then when the need arises he will be able to conjure the desired images in his mind more easily.

We shall present here a condensed version of the visualization that R. Kalonymus proposes. Of course, a person must imagine himself as the main character and apply and adapt the details to the conditions of his own life.

R. Kalonymus’s description begins with a serious illness, with the patient suffering unbearable pain. His children try to encourage him, but he knows that these are his last moments and he will soon be parted from them. This prospect fills him with sorrow and dread of

“… how my body will be left in a dark pit, in damp ground.” And he looks at his hand and contemplates it – what will become of it? A piece of rotting flesh, and bones; that is all. And they – his wife, his sons, and daughters – what will become of them? Their anguish touches his heart and he is agonized; he weeps for them.[[5]](#footnote-5)

His loved ones come to visit and they offer words of encouragement, trying to raise his spirits. As the pain grows more intense, he is tortured by the thought that he will have to leave them, to lie in a dark grave. He thinks of how he loves singing with them on Shabbat and on festivals, studying Torah and praying with them, but now he will be consigned to a gloomy silence broken only by stirring insects and writhing worms.

On his deathbed he engages in soul-searching, making an accounting of all that he has done and all that he failed to do. He knows that he will soon stand before the Heavenly court, and he is filled with dread at the thought of the prohibitions that he has violated.

What is left of his life, of all the pleasures that he enjoyed? All that remains is “disgust and loathing.” He contemplates himself indulging one of his desires and he is shocked: “This is how I look to God.” He is consumed with shame; he curses the day he was born.

He could have taken a different path; he could have made the most of his life, following the way of Torah and *chassidut*, working on his character, serving God with all his might. But now he is disgusted by his lowly state and the choices he has made, and he is filled with anxiety about how he will be received in the upper world. He wants to do *teshuva*, he weeps, but he cannot be certain that his change of heart and his resolutions have any positive effect, since he has no opportunity to test himself and see whether he would now do things differently.

While he is engrossed in his thoughts, his heart stops beating. There is tumult all around him; doctors come and inject medicines. He views all that is going on around him:

He observes the anguish of his household. His wife screams that she has no more reason to live. His son cries and screams, “I beg You, have mercy and grant me this precious gift, my father, who is more dear to us than our very lives!” His daughters scream as though they themselves are about to expire. And he lies, unmoving, like a stone. The doctor lifts his arm, the assistant lifts his leg, but for him it is as though the arm and the leg belong to someone else… The family try different doctors and assorted medications, but when the time comes, he has to die.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Kalonymus goes on to quote the *Zohar* (*Naso* 126b), which describes in great detail the dying process, with the Angel of Death appearing before a person and taking his spirit. This is not a pleasant picture. A person generally tends to suppress such thoughts, and certainly avoids deliberately visualizing his death:

At times, a person does not wish to think about himself [in this way] and to imagine things that are unpleasant for him; he prefers to focus only on what is good and positive.[[7]](#footnote-7)

With this awareness, R. Kalonymus proposes a solution that is firmly rooted in an understanding of human nature: it is easier to imagine someone else suffering than to imagine the same for oneself. Hence, if someone is “heavy-hearted” to the point that he cannot visualize the scenario as applying to himself, he might imagine the death of one of his most beloved family members:

… How he looked them, when he was with you, speaking and joking with you, and how he looks now, in the grave – blackened, his flesh half gone, his bones exposed… You sit in your comfortable homes… while he, whom you love so much, is in that dark, damp prison…[[8]](#footnote-8)

The wisest of men said, “It is better to go a house of mourning… that the living may take it to heart” (*Kohelet* 7:2). The dread of death spurs the heart to imbue his life with meaning in the present; it prompts him to think about what he has done with his life up until now and what he will do from now onwards.

**Sadness and Bitterness**

The visualization of *mesirut nefesh* and of the day of death leads to a question that the reader is by now probably asking: This depressing and gloomy *mussar* ideal seems far removed from the teachings of *chassidut*! The whole point of *chassidut* is its emphasis on joy under all conditions, with a rejection of the path of melancholy!

R. Kalonymus is attentive to this difficulty and the grim mood that his description arouses:

But know, Chassidic student, that our aim is not, Heaven forefend, to sadden you. We do not wish to sadden you, and you must guard yourself against becoming sad, for we have already mentioned above[[9]](#footnote-9) the teachings of the holy books as to how sadness is far removed – and removes man – from [God’s] service and from a pervading holiness. It is only with a view to subduing the evil inclination and arousing the positive inclination that the *gemara* says that one should keep in mind the day of death – not with a view to making him sad.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The point is to be happy, for the Divine Presence rests only on someone who is joyful over God’s commandments.[[11]](#footnote-11) One cannot grow close to God out of sadness. The use of the imagery relating to the day of one’s death is meant for a very specific purpose, in situations in which this is the only way one can regain control over his evil inclination. However, even when making use of this technique, the point is not to make himself depressed. The aim is merely to subdue the evil inclination.

The teachings of *chassidut* reiterate this distinction over and over, albeit using different terminology. For instance, Chabad teachings draw a distinction between “sadness” and “bitterness”. *Chassidut* does not negate the value of soul-searching, in which a person makes an accounting of his situation and, if he finds that he is spiritually “unhealthy,” he will certainly have trouble feeling joy; he will be inclined towards sadness. Therefore, the Admor Ha-Zaken emphasizes that when a person is engaged in a process of inner reckoning – for instance, while reciting *Tikkun Chatzot* – then he is permitted to be in a state of “bitterness” and “broken-heartedness,” for then he is breaking the power of his evil inclination and his pride, and the spiritual movement is from crisis to repair and growth. However, there is no room for sadness, which is a movement of despair and helplessness.[[12]](#footnote-12)

R. Nachman draws a similar distinction. Since the Breslov practice of *hitbodedut* (solitary prayer) requires an hour of personal communion with God every day, including profound introspection and contemplation of one’s behavior, one can easily become disheartened:

The general principle is that one must exert every effort to be joyful at all times. For a person’s nature drags him towards melancholy and sadness owing to the vicissitudes of time, and every person experiences much suffering. Therefore, one must force himself mightily to be joyful at all times and to arouse joy within himself in every way that he can – even with jokes. Although a broken heart is also very good, nevertheless it should be only temporary. It is proper that a person schedule an hour for himself in the day to pour out his heart and speak before God, as we have taught, but throughout the [rest of the] day he should be joyful. For it is easier for a broken heart to lead to melancholy than it is for joy to lead, Heaven forefend, to licentiousness, for it is more natural to move from broken-heartedness to melancholy. Therefore, one must always be joyful and have a broken heart only during the designated hour.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There is value in a broken heart, but only with caution, and in proportion.

This recalls the teaching of R. Tzvi Elimelekh Shapira of Dinov, who asks: If remembering the day of death is such a good and useful technique, exceeding even the study of Torah and the recital of *Shema* in its effectiveness, then why not use it all the time? The answer that he gives – like R. Kalonymus – is that a constant consciousness of one’s approaching death causes sadness. Therefore, this is to be used only where all else fails, and not as a routine solution:

“If not, let him remind himself of the day of death” – If this is a more effective remedy [for his evil inclination] than is the *Shema* or Torah, then why should he not recall it immediately, and thereby save himself from all evil? [The answer is] that is it certainly not proper to arouse this bare terror, which leads to sadness, unless it is absolutely necessary and he sees that nothing else is working against his evil inclination. In this case it is better that he come to sadness, rather than violating the Torah by acceding to his evil inclination. But so long as it is possible to stand up to the evil inclination using some other scheme, he should keep himself far removed from fear of punishment and recalling the day of death, so as not to become sad, for through this his heart will be pained and he will not serve God with joy, and the holy spirit will leave him.[[14]](#footnote-14)

According to R. Kalonymus, self-accounting is one of the most important tools in Chassidic service of God, and a person should set aside time every day to contemplate his actions. In order to arouse oneself to *teshuva* – a central ingredient in self-accounting – a person needs to be in a state of broken-heartedness, bitterness, and weeping, but one must take care not to wallow and sink into sadness.

After a detailed explanation as to how one undertakes soul-searching, R. Kalonymus sums up the “moods” that a *chassid* experiences during the day. Attention should be paid to the transitions between joy, lowliness, humility, and broken-heartedness, but there is no mention of sadness. In this context it is important to note an innovative teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov concerning the combination of joy and lowliness:

We thus conclude that one should have three moods:

When engaged in Torah, prayer, and other forms of Divine service, there should be no inner accounting – only joy, longing, and aspiring towards God, and service with passion or fervor…

When engaged in soul-searching, one should be profoundly broken-hearted.

And in general, when one is engaged neither in Torah and prayer nor in soul-searching, then he should be humble, meek, and lowly – and yet joyful out of self-assurance. Know that you have many deficiencies that require fixing, and you should think how to fix them… One of the wonders of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples… is that they introduced and inculcated both [states] jointly into the hearts of their followers – humility and extreme meekness, together with self-assurance and joy, which is the true joy: “I shall greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall be joyful in my God” (*Yishayahu* 61:10)…[[15]](#footnote-15)

In light of the above, a further note is in order regarding the “atmosphere” of R. Kalonymus’s writings. A reading of certain chapters might put off a reader who is deterred by rigorous *mussar* teachings calling for stringent and exacting self-examination. The author does not refrain from candid and merciless rebuke of the reader for his laziness, his evasion and avoidance of serious service, etc. – all of which might bring the leader to broken-heartedness. Indeed, this is R. Kalonymus’s stated aim and his way of arousing a person from his spiritual slumber. At the same time, his ultimate aim is to bring a person to fervor and passion in his Divine service out of joy and wholeheartedness.

Since we are speaking of serving God out of joy, it is appropriate that we consider how, in the conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto, this question arose in its most powerful form. How was it be possible to serve God with joy under those conditions? In his sermon for *Parashat Beshalach* in the year 5702 (1942), R. Kalonymus reminded his flock that a prophet receives prophecy only when he is in a state of joy, and therefore they too should be joyful. What did they have to be joyful about? R. Kalonymus proposed rejoicing over the situation not being even worse: “This is an important principle for us: in all [situations of] suffering in which there is no basis for self-encouragement, we must strengthen ourselves and be happy, since things could, Heaven forefend, be even worse.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Time went by and things did indeed get worse, and in his sermon for *Parashat Ha-Chodesh* in 5702 (1942), the Rebbe discussed in his sermon how manifestations of faith bring a person to joy; hence, if he is sad, this means that he is deficient in his faith. Furthermore, he says, since joy is one of the preconditions for prophecy and God’s pervading presence, we must ask how it is possible to draw close to God in our present situation, with growing and increasing troubles. He finds his answer in the life story of Moshe Rabbeinu, who received prophecy even when he was anguished over the suffering of *Bnei* *Yisrael* in Egypt, and even when he was facing persecution by Pharaoh: “… For He [God], too, is with them in their suffering and anguish, and He was revealed to the prophet despite his anguish…”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In other words, there is mutual identification between man and God, such that even when a person is in agonizing pain, he is able to hear God’s word and to be uplifted. When a person weeps and suffers alone over his troubles and pain, he is paralyzed and falls into helplessness and inaction. But when he weeps together with God, he is strengthened: “But when he weeps and howls with [God], as it were, together, then he is strengthened; he studies Torah and performs His service.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The Stoic sage Epictatus taught a similar idea – that by keeping death in mind, a person is saved from thinking lowly thoughts and will not have too strong a desire for anything. See Z. Levy, *Machshavot al Ha-Mavet Be-Filosopia U-Ve-Hagut Ha-Yehudit* (Tel Aviv, 2008), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, 90-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “R. Levi b. Hama says in the name of R. Simeon b. Lakish: A man should always incite his good impulse [to fight] against the evil impulse. For it is written: ‘Tremble and sin not…’ (*Tehillim* 4:5). If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him study the Torah. For it is written: ‘…Commune with your own heart…’ (ibid.). If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him recite the *Shema*. For it is written: ‘…upon your bed.’ If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him remind himself of the day of death. For it is written: ‘…and be still, Selah’” (*Berakhot* 5a). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Sichot Ha-Ran* (Jerusalem, 5745), 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example, *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, 22, concerning the importance of joy and enthusiasm in one’s Divine service. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Shabbat* 30b. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Likkutei Amarim Tanya* (Kfar Chabad, 5753), chapter 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Likkutei Moharan* (Jerusalem, 5753) *Batra*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R. Tzvi Elimelekh Shapira of Dinov, *Igra De-Kalla* (Jerusalem, 5753), part I, 130a [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Esh Kodesh*, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)