YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur#04: Biography (part 3)**

**Anecdotes**

In order to add color and depth to what might otherwise seem like a technical collection of biographical details about the Piaseczner Rebbe, we include below some anecdotes recounted by eyewitnesses who knew the Rebbe, illuminating different aspects of his personality.

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One of the elders of the Sokhatchov Chassidim recounts that in his youth, he studied in Grodzisk, and he would often pray in the *minyan* where little Kalmish’l, aged three and a half, recited *Kaddish* for his father. Once, the child insisted that he did not want to say *Kaddish*. His teachers asked him to explain, and he answered, “How can I say *Kaddish* when I can see my father right in front of me, next to the table?” The boy’s words made a profound impression on the *chassidim* who were present.[[1]](#footnote-1)

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A disciple who slept close to R. Kalonymus’s room reported that he would mumble in his sleep, “Master of the universe, I wish to be close to You!” and would repeat this over and over again. Afterwards he would say, “There is no reality like Your reality, and there is no reality except for Your reality, and the entire world is nothing but sparks from the radiance of Your holiness,” and this, too, he would repeat.[[2]](#footnote-2)

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R. Kalonymus issued strict instructions to his attendants that the visitors who came to him for advice and for blessings should be received graciously. Once, the attendants censured the women who were crowding him with their notes containing names and requests for blessings. The Rebbe rebuked the attendants using the words of the *midrash*:[[3]](#footnote-3) “Is this how you respond to those in anguish?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

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Whenever one of his students reached maturity, the Rebbe would marry him off. If the boy was poor, the Rebbe would take care of all his material needs.

It once happened that one of his students was about to be married, but the bride’s family was having second thoughts because the groom did not have an especially prestigious lineage. The Rebbe summoned the bride’s father and said to him, “Is it perhaps beneath your dignity to be related to me by marriage? This boy has me standing at his side!”[[5]](#footnote-5)

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When the Rebbe heard of some wondrous miracle that had been performed by a certain Admor, he said, “The greatest miracle is to make simple Jews into *chassidim*.”

Indeed, that is what he would do. Within a short time, Jews who had been alienated from their Jewish identity would become *chassidim*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

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The Rebbe of Radzimin fought for many years with the Bundists to persuade them that their kitchens should follow the laws of kashrut and Shabbat, but the more he tried, the more stubborn and aggressive they became, until eventually the matter reached the Rebbe of Piaseczno. He met with the Bundists on a few occasions to engage in debate and exchange information. Acquaintances of the Rebbe who were present at these meetings recall that the Bund leaders found themselves in a difficult situation. They were forthright enough to admit openly that they found themselves powerless to resist the overwhelming common sense and healthy logic, truth, and Jewish justice that the Rebbe exuded. At such moments they would say, “It is easier to deal with the stubbornness of the Rebbe of Radzimin than with the humility of the Rebbe of Piaseczno.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

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A man came to R. Kalonymus requesting some medication, claiming that the previous prescription had become illegible long ago and he was suffering from headaches. On the spot, R. Kalonymus wrote a prescription. The man took the note, inserted it under the lining of his hat, and breathed a sigh of relief, declaring, “Rebbe, I feel better already!” The *chassidim* who were present smiled, and the Rebbe explained that in modern parlance this was called the power of “suggestion,” while *chassidim*, who follow the path of the Ba’al Shem Tov, call it “simple faith.” The Rebbe then added, “The blessing of someone who is careful with his words and his thoughts can, in and of itself, effect a cure, but in order to clothe this phenomenon in the garb of the natural world, I write a prescription…”[[8]](#footnote-8)

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The disciples of R. Kalonymus cleaved to him and loved him dearly. When he received a *pidyon* from one of his *chassidim*, he would look into the eyes of the giver, gauging whether he was in fact able to give the money. He would always ask, “Is this not more than you are able [to give]?”

He had almost no benefit from this money. He sufficed with the most meager of rations from one Shabbat to the next, meanwhile distributing the money from the *pidyonot* among the poor. No one who came to him bemoaning his financial situation would leave empty-handed. He would give money secretly, so as not to embarrass the recipients. Often, he would say, “If a person comes to you asking you to show him some kindness, before you answer him, think for a moment about what would happen if the situation were reversed, and it were you who had to ask him for help. How would you want him to treat you?”[[9]](#footnote-9)

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“At the Rebbe of Piasceczno,” by Yitzchak Gerstenkorn, a Zionist *chasid* from Poland who was one of the founders of Bnei Brak and the city’s first mayor:

In the summer of 5683 (1923), I became extremely close to the Rebbe of Piaseczno. He was a luminous personality, a pure-hearted *tzaddik* of noble spirit, the scion of supremely holy ancestors who paved the way to the teachings of *chassidut*. He, for his own part, also had original insights into Chassidic teachings. The lessons he taught to his congregation of *chassidim* and admirers on *Shabbatot* were full of ideas of great profundity. Some of his teachings have been disseminated… in the form of the booklet, *Benei Machshava Tova*.

This booklet contains not only lofty ideas, but also practical guidance in serving God, perfecting one’s character, and purifying the psyche. The book *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, which has appeared in print, contains similar material, as well as the principles of *chassidut* and an introduction to kabbalah. The book is intended for yeshiva students.

[R. Kalonymus’s] love for the Land of Israel was profound and fundamental. He had assets in Poland, but he sold them and sent the money to Jerusalem, to his brother R. Yeshaya Shapiro, for the purposes of buying an in inheritance in *Eretz Yisrael*.

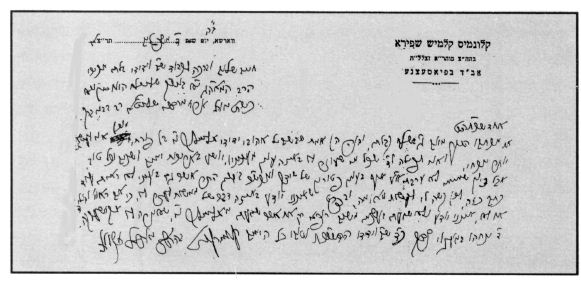
I was once invited to a meeting with the Rebbe, together with the Rebbe of Strikov, R. Mendel Landau *ztz”l*. In his words, he expressed the lofty, eternal longing of the Jewish soul for Zion and for its rebuilding. His words made a tremendous impression and exerted their influence for a considerable time…[[10]](#footnote-10)

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“In the Warsaw Ghetto” (Description of the “Workshop of the Admorim” in the ghetto):

I am here in Schultz’s workshop. I’ve come at a time when the company is hammering away and reciting *Hoshanot*… Here sits… the Rabbi of Koziglov… the former Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chakhmei Lublin… From time to time, he addresses the Admor of Piaseczno, author of *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, who sits opposite him. A quiet Torah dialogue develops between them. The teachings of the Talmudic Sages and the *poskim* hover in the air.

Within a short time, the shoemakers’ workshop is joined by… Raavad and the Rambam. Who cares about hunger and siege and oppressors? Their location is not the workshop at 46 Novolipia Street, but rather the Chamber of Hewn Stone, where they sit among the Sanhedrin.[[11]](#footnote-11)



*A letter that R. Kalonymus sent to R. Aryeh Mordechai Rabinowitz*, *Rabbi of Bnei Brak*

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One of the young scholars who came into contact with the Rebbe during the war recounts:

When the war broke out, I hired two cars, organized drivers, and obtained gasoline (in occupied Warsaw, ordering a taxi involved three separate problems – a car, a driver, and gas). One car was meant for the Rebbe, and the other for my family. I proposed to the Rebbe that we travel together from here to Russia, to flee from the persecution. The Rebbe rejected my offer unequivocally, saying, “I am not leaving; I don’t intend to abandon the front – and, especially, I cannot part from Polish Jewry.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

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A *yeshiva* student recounts:

On Yom Kippur eve in the year 5700 (1939), the Nazi bombardments intensified, and there were explosions everywhere. We were a small group of yeshiva students and married scholars, and we decided that we would not leave the Rebbe’s door until morning. When dawn came, I heard the Rebbe reciting the morning blessings, and when he reached the words, “[May] You accustom us to [following] Your Torah and attach us to Your commandments,” he repeated them with wondrous devotion for some twenty minutes, with all his might.[[13]](#footnote-13)

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The second visit of the *yeshiva* student was to the Rebbe’s *beit midrash* on Simchat Torah eve. In the intervening time, the Rebbe’s only son, the holy R. Elimelekh *Hy”d*, and his wife, the *rabbanit*, had been killed, as well as his wife’s sister, Channa’leh, daughter of the Rebbe of Kozhnitz. The student recounts:

The *hakafot* were held hurriedly, everyone anxious to get home, the mortal danger outside matched by the terror indoors. Al of a sudden, the Rebbe stood on the *bima* and launched into the well-known melody for *Eshet Chayil*, with burning fervor. We forgot everything. The Rebbe was altogether removed from the world, and we were drawn along in his fervor, forgetting all about the Nazi demon dominating the scene; we forgot about the bombardments and those who had been killed, and it seemed to us that we were all ascending together with the flame that burst forth from the Rebbe’s heart. I will never forget those moments of joy.[[14]](#footnote-14)

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All the members of the Rebbe’s family were killed in the German bombardments during the first days of the siege of Warsaw. Despite his enormous personal tragedy, the Rebbe remained strong and continued holding gatherings for his *chassidim*, encouraging them and inspiring hope in their hearts. He told them, “When the Jewish masses see me maintaining the regular schedule customary in my family, they are comforted by a sense that the world is still continuing.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. L. Bein, *Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai Chasid*, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Sorasky, “*Toledot Ha-Mechaber shel Ha-Ga’on Ha-Kadosh Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro ztzk”l Hy”d Ha-Admor Mi-Piacezsna Ba’al Chovat Ha-Talmidim*,”p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “‘And Yaakov’s anger burned against Rachel, and he said…’ – The Holy One, blessed be He, said [to Yaakov]: Is this how you respond to those in anguish?! By your life, your sons will one day stand before her son” (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:1, Theodor-Albeck edition, p. 831). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sorasky, p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., pp. 279-280. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 281 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. L. Bein, “*Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno*”, p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. L. Bein, “*Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*,” p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. L. Feingold, “*Ha-Admor Mi-Piaseczno*,” in D.H. Zilberchlag and H. Frankel, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Y. Gerstenkorn, *Zikhronotai al Bnei Brak*, part I, 5681-5684 (Jerusalem, 5702), p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E. Farbstein, *Be-Seter Ra’am*, p. 434, citing H. Zaidman, *Yoman Geto Varsha* (New York, 5727), pp. 64, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. L. Bein, “*Mi-Pinkaso shel Itonai-Chasid*,” p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Aharon Ha-Levi Pichnik, “*Esh Tamid*,” in D. H. Zilberschlag and H. Frankel, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. L. Bein, “*Ha-Admor mi-Piaseczno*,” p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)