**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #12: God, the World, and Man**

Since ancient times, man has sought to understand the essence of the world,[[1]](#footnote-1) proposing many different theories along the way. R. Kalonymus has the following to say on the matter:

And what is the essence of the world? The Master of the world: “Know, therefore, this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord – He is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath; there is no other” (*Devarim* 4:39). Nothing exists except for God; all is the manifestation of His holiness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This idea that God is the ultimate essence of the world was not R. Kalonymus’s own theory. *Chassidut* throughout the generations, since the Ba’al Shem Tov began disseminating his teachings, has emphasized the concept of Divinity filling all of reality, citing as support the verse, “The entire earth is filled with His glory” (*Yeshayahu* 6:3), and the teaching in the Zohar, “There is no place that is devoid of Him” (*Tikkunei Zohar* 122b).[[3]](#footnote-3) This means that Divinity prevails everywhere, both within the world and outside of it, as *Chazal* summarize in their brief and precise formulation: “He is the place of the world; His world is not His place.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The idea of God’s presence within all of reality molded the chassidic approach in many areas. For instance, it underlies the chassidic principle that since God’s presence is everywhere, there is value to “Divine service within the material realm.” In other words, one may serve God and draw close to Him not only through Torah and prayer, but even through simple, mundane physical actions, so long as these actions are accompanied by the proper mindset and intention. As R. Kalonymus formulates it:

Even when a Jew is occupied with his mundane needs – commerce and work – if he engages in them in accordance with the way of the Torah, then such work is in accordance with the ways of *chassidut*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus’s position is that the world is “part of the Divine illumination that God constricted, creating the world out of it.” R. Kalonymus explains that this “illumination” is the light that shines from the very essence of its Source. Thus, if the essence of Divinity is called “*maor*” (light), then the world is created from its emanation.[[6]](#footnote-6)

He then goes on to conclude, after a long and well-proven discussion, that the only essence that exists is God:

We must believe and literally see that no independent physical entity actually exists; rather, the essence of every thing is part of Divinity. The physical aspect and garment are not foreign to that essence of Divinity, but rather are like a person’s fingernails: they appear to some degree extrinsic and to some degree not extrinsic, but they emerge from the person himself, like a grasshopper whose shell develops along with itself.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Just as a person’s fingernails are part of his body, so the world, which is a garment or covering for Divinity, is also Divinity. According to *chassidut*, just as the exoskeleton of the grasshopper and its body are not two separate entities, with one covering the other, but rather one and the same entity, the world itself is similarly Divinity, and not just a covering for it. As R. Pinchas of Koretz taught:

For all the world was created like a grasshopper, whose exoskeleton is part of itself. Thus, the world is the Holy One, blessed be He.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Similarly, the Maggid R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz wrote:

In order that you will not imagine that this garment is not actually God’s essence, *Chazal* taught, “Like a grasshopper whose exoskeleton is part of itself.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Let us explore this concept in greater depth, with R. Kalonymus’s help.

R. Kalonymus views the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov as the Torah that will hasten the coming of *Mashiach*. When the Ba’al Shem Tov engaged in his “ascent of the soul” in the year 5607 and reached the place of *Mashiach*, he asked *Mashiach* when he would come. *Mashiach* replied, “When your wellsprings are disseminated outwardly.” In simple terms, we might understand this as meaning that the revelation of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s teachings is the dissemination of the wellsprings of *chassidut* that has the power to hasten the redemption. But what is so special about the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov that was not revealed previously in the teachings of the *Zohar*, the Arizal, or other sages throughout the generations?

Various responses have been offered for this question.[[10]](#footnote-10) Let us consider R. Kalonymus’s answer:

The crux of the revelation of *Mashiach* is included in the verse, “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (*Yeshayahu* 11:9), and the foundation of the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov is to be found in his interpretation of the plain meaning of the verse, “the entire earth is filled with His glory” (*Yeshayahu* 6:3).[[11]](#footnote-11)

The simple interpretation of the verse, “For the earth shall be filled with knowledge of God,” is that in the future, recognition and knowledge of God will be common to all of mankind. According to this explanation, the word “earth” here refers to the human beings that live upon the earth. As R. Kalonymus understands it, however, the “earth” refers to “earthliness” – the physical, material world, which is all Divinity. As he explains it, the new knowledge that will be revealed at the time of the redemption is the knowledge – which will be universally known – that God resides in everything. The physical world, along with the garments and vessels themselves – are all Godliness.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Here we might raise a further question: The verse, “The entire earth is filled with His glory,” and the teaching of the *Zohar*, “There is no place that is devoid of Him,” were not introduced by the Ba'al Shem Tov. Indeed, R. Kalonymus would note that the main reason for the tremendous opposition that the Ba'al Shem Tov encountered was the claim that his teachings point to corporealization of God.[[13]](#footnote-13) But why was the Ba'al Shem Tov attacked for emphasizing a principle that existed already in the ancient sources? R. Kalonymus offers the following kabbalistic explanation:

The emanations and unfolding that had progressed up until then – expanding ever outward and downward – concerned development only within the vessels. The unfolding and revelation of the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples, in contrast, was new: it was emanation even inside the very walls of the vessels themselves, such that they, too, were transformed into light. In fact, this was not really a transformation, but rather the revelation of their light. For insofar as God had created them from light, they were, in essence, God's light.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Two of the most central concepts in kabbalah are “light” and “vessels.” “Light” usually signifies the Divine abundance – "the light is essentially lovingkindness"[[15]](#footnote-15) – while the “vessel” is what contains the light.[[16]](#footnote-16) Each of the ten *sefirot* comprises both light and vessel.

The light within the vessel is like the soul that animates and activates the body; the light animates the vessel. However, it must be emphasized that the vessel need not necessarily be physical, as one might mistakenly think. Rather, any form of concealment, limitation, or constriction of light creates a vessel. At the same time, of course, in our lower world, there are also material vessels. The Tetragrammaton is the source of the light, while the Divine Name *Elokim*, signifying strict justice, is the source of the vessels. The Divine light emanates from the light of *Ein Sof*, unfolding all the way to the physical world (*olam ha-asiya*) by means of the lights and vessels. The further the vessels “descend” from the upper worlds to our earthly sphere, the more corporeal they become, to the point that we recognize them as physical vessels that we are able to perceive.

R. Kalonymus explains that the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples effected two actions: *hamshakha* (“drawing down”) and revelation. They drew down the light into the very walls of the vessels of our physical world. This “drawing down” is an active, deliberate action that is performed by means of *kavanot* and *yichudim*, based on the presumption that a person has the power to draw down the light:

All the holy ones [the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples] not only addressed the plain level in their holy teachings, but also engaged in drawing down actual souls [into the vessels].[[17]](#footnote-17)

If we pay close attention to his wording here, we see that R. Kalonymus is also saying something else. Not only was the light “drawn down” by virtue of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples; it was also “revealed” by them within the vessels. This was the second major contribution of *chassidut*.

Sometimes, the “light” is defined in the sense of the inner content of something, while the “vessels” are regarded as garments for this inner content. On the basis of this definition, one might be misled into thinking that the light is more important than the vessels. However, this cannot be the case, if only for the simple reason that without the vessels, the light could not be manifest. In addition, it must be remembered that the existence of the vessel itself flows from the light. However, according to R. Kalonymus, there is yet another consideration. The kabbalah of the Arizal taught that the source of the vessels of the physical world is very high – higher than the source of the light of the physical world. The reason for this is that the purpose of Creation was to reveal God’s light specifically in the lowest of places.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The conclusion we draw from all of this is that this world, in all its physical, material vulgarity and coarseness, has greater importance than might be imagined by those who attach value only to spiritual essences. Likewise, we learn a lesson about the value of the human body, which, although considered a “vessel” in relation to the soul, nevertheless has a very elevated source. Moreover, “The essence of *chassidut* is to reveal the light that is in lowliness, which is also holy.”[[19]](#footnote-19) These revolutionary ideas taught by the Ba’al Shem Tov attracted fierce controversy.

It is important to emphasize that the question of God’s place in relation to the world is not regarded as a merely philosophical discussion – neither in *chassidut* in general, nor in the writings of R. Kalonymus in particular – since it entails practical ramifications for Divine service. As one example, R. Kalonymus discusses the issue of seeing (perceiving) God.

Chasidism sought to achieve closeness to God, and the knowledge that “the entire earth is filled with His glory” helps a person in his quest. R. Kalonymus, too, seeks to bring man closer to God. The world itself, by virtue of the Divine reality residing within it, allows us a peek from within at God’s Presence, as well as an opportunity for an encounter with it:

For it is known that the Ba’al Shem Tov taught that when you look at the world, the Holy One, blessed be He, looks at you, and you are looking at the Holy One, blessed be He.[[20]](#footnote-20)

We, too – if we will just look and gaze at the world and its doings – we will see that “the Lord – He is God in the heavens above and upon the earth beneath; there is none other.” Not only is there no other god but Him, but there is nothing that exists at all other than His light and illumination, for nothing in the world has any independent existence; it is all the illumination of His Divinity.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In truth, everything is Godliness, and one only needs eyes to see and a body that is sanctified; then, when one looks at the world, one is looking at God, and God [is looking] at him…[[22]](#footnote-22)

The goal that R. Kalonymus presents to us, following in the footsteps of the early chassidic masters, is to seek the encounter with God. One of the main ways of achieving this is to perceive God within the world. Of course, this does not refer to “seeing” with our physical eyes; rather, what is required is a “transcendent seeing.” R. Kalonymus guides the reader, step by step, to accustom himself to removing his “spectacles” and taking a new and fresh look at the world, seeking to penetrate behind the mask and to encounter God.

We will discuss the concept of “seeing God” when we approach the idea of prophecy, at which point we will further elaborate on this issue.

Another topic that rests upon the foundation of “the entire world is full of His glory” is that of “Divine service within the material realm,” which we will address further in our discussion of “perfection of character.”

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The Greeks attempted to arrive at a single principle that would explain everything. See S. Shkolnikov, *Toldot Ha-Pilosofia Ha-Yevanit: Ha-Philosofim Ha-Kedam-Sokratiim* (Tel Aviv 5741), p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. Zeitlin, *Be-Pardes Ha-Kabbalah Ve-HaChasidut* (Tel Aviv, 5742), pp. 11-14. For more on this principle in *chassidut*, see R. Elior, “*Yesh Ve-Ayin – Defusei Yesod Be-Machshava Ha-Chassidit*,” in M. Oron and A. Goldreich (eds.), *Masuot Mechkarim Be-Sifrut Ha-Kabbalah U-VeMachshevet Yisrael, Mukdashim Le-Zikhro shel Prof. Efraim Gottlieb z”l* (Jerusalem, 5754), pp. 53-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Bereishit Rabba* 68:9. This concept is not limited to *chassidut*. A similar position is presented by R. Chaim of Volozhin, disciple of the Vilna Gaon: “This is the meaning of the verse, ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ (*Yirmiyahu* 23:24). The idea is stated even more explicitly in *Sefer Devarim*: ‘Know, therefore, this day… that the Lord – He is God in the heavens above and upon the earth beneath; there is none other’ (*Devarim* 4:39), and also, ‘To you it has been shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is none else beside Him’ (*Devarim* 4:35). This is meant quite literally: nothing exists but God; no separate, independent entity exists anywhere in the upper or lower worlds or among all beings; there is only the essence of God’s simple unity. This is the deeper meaning of *Chazal*’s teaching in *Devarim Rabba* 2: ‘For the Lord, He is God’ - … in all the universe. And this is also what *Chazal* meant when they taught that God is the place of the world, while the world is not His place…” (*Nefesh Ha-Chaim* [Vilna, 5634], *Sha’ar* 3, *chapter* 3).

One of the points of disagreement between R. Chaim and the worldview of *chassidut* concerns the practical implications regarding Divine service arising from this view of God’s place in Creation. For more on this question, see S. Rosenberg, “*Torat Ha-Kabbala Be-Nefesh Ha-Chaim*,” *Shana be-Shana* (5758), pp. 357-370. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 137. The source of the expression is *Bereishit Rabba* 21:5 – “‘Behold, man has become like one of Us…’ Our Sages taught: Like Gavriel, as it is written (*Daniel* 10), ‘and behold, a certain man clothed in linen’ – like a grasshopper, whose exoskeleton is part of itself.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Pinchas of Koretz, *Sefer Imrei Pinchas* (Bnei Brak, 5748), p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz, *Sefer Avodat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 5753), *Parshat Devarim*, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See the answer of R. Zvi Hirsch of Ziditshov, *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5767), introduction, p. 57; M. Idel, *Ha-Chassidut Bein Ekstaza Le-Magia* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5761), pp. 379-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Mevo Ha-She'arim*, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. R. Moshe Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim* (Jerusalem, 5722), *Sha'ar* 23, *“ohr*.” However, “light” also connotes strict justice, as we find, for example, in the kabbalah of the Arizal in the idea of “reflected light” that is “from the back,” representing strict justice. See R. Chaim Vital, *Etz Chaim* (Jerusalem, 5670), 27a, column 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In the writings of the Arizal, the light is sometimes referred to as *atzmut* (essence), since the light originates in God's essence. R. Chaim Vital elaborates on this in his *Etz Chaim* (see above, n. 15), *Sha'ar* 2:3: "Thus, the matter of this ‘essence’ concerns the inner light that shines forth within the vessels, just like the soul, which is within the human body and shines forth within him, as it is written, ‘The candle of the Lord is man’s soul.’ Remember that wherever we have used the term ‘light’ in this composition, we refer to the inner soul, and not to the vessels themselves. Do not forget this rule, for we cannot repeat it each time.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Mevo Ha-She’arim,* p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 215; source in *Etz Chaim* (above, n. 15), 16b-18a. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)