YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**01: Introduction**

The young R. Shneur Zalman stands at a crossroads. In the distant future, he will be the renowned Alter Rebbe (Admor Ha-Zaken), author of *Sefer Ha-Tanya* and founder of Chabad *chassidut*. At the moment, he is deliberating whether to head for Vilna to study Torah, or to join the followers of the Maggid, R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, the disciple of R. Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov (the Besht), and learn how to pray. Ultimately, he chooses in favor of Mezeritch.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This vignette illustrates a rule that many people have long forgotten: “service of the heart” requires study. It is clear to all that Torah study is a serious, primary pursuit and that one has to learn. But when it comes to prayer, what is there to learn? It is simply a matter of opening the *siddur* and reciting the words! Was it really necessary, just for the sake of prayer, for the future Alter Rebbe to forgo the opportunity of studying in Vilna and to journey to Mezeritch instead?

Prayer, the service of the heart, and perfection of one’s character are some of the areas in which the Ba’al Shem Tov found it necessary to revive a tradition of study. In order to serve God with all of one’s physical and mental powers, and in order to achieve closeness to God and to experience *devekut* (cleaving) to Him, the study of the Talmud and *poskim* would not suffice. The Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples studied – through written texts and through oral transmission – how to pray, how to love God, and how to love one’s fellow man; how to achieve joy in one’s everyday life; how to deal with the evil inclination; how to achieve closeness to God; how to turn negative traits into vessels for receiving spiritual blessing; how to transform one’s mundane reality into an ongoing encounter with God, and more.

The Chassidic approach to Divine service encompasses many diverse approaches. One of them is that of Piaseczno. This path was developed by R. Kalonymus[[2]](#footnote-2) Kalmish Shapiro of Piaseczno, one of the luminaries produced by the later generations of *chassidim* before the Nazis annihilated Eastern European Jewry. He was a learned scholar, a *kabbalist*, and a *chassid*, a widely-admired rabbi, an outstanding leader who concerned himself with communal needs, and a gifted teacher imbued with a sensitive and poetic soul and a profound understanding of the human psyche. R. Kalonymus’s plan – which, unfortunately, was only partially realized – was to write a comprehensive handbook of Divine service as taught in *chassidut*. He wanted to present *Chassidut* in a series of books aimed at all ages, for the benefit of children and adolescents, yeshiva students and regular householders – anyone seeking to be uplifted spiritually. This initiative is unmatched in the history of *Chassidut*; even outside Chassidic circles, it is an exceptional vision. R. Kalonymus managed to leave quite an extensive corpus: *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, and *Benei Machshava Tova* are steps on the ladder of *Chassidut*, their aim being to teach Jews seeking to progress in their spiritual work to the point of realizing their prophetic potential.

This series of lectures, as its name suggests, seeks to introduce the reader to R. Kalonymus’s teachings. In fact, some of R. Kalonymus’s own books were written with a similar aim of introducing the reader to *Chassidut*.[[3]](#footnote-3) R. Kalonymus maintains that what our generation needs is not so much books of “*chiddushim*” (innovative teachings) about *Chassidut*, but rather a translation of the language of *Chassidut* into contemporary terms.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since his style of writing itself requires some mediation for the benefit of the modern reader, and since not everyone is familiar with the ideas and paths of *Chassidut*, this series seeks to make R. Kalonymus’s teachings on the major issues that he addresses more accessible to the general public. At the same time, I feel that it is important to include citations from the original works so that the reader may still feel a sense of direct contact and personal participation in studying R. Kalonymus’s teachings.

Of the many articles and studies that have been devoted to R. Kalonymus,[[5]](#footnote-5) most focus on his writing and activity during the Holocaust.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this series, I address central issues in his teachings, in which his innovative philosophy and Chassidic path are reflected. Most of his writing is from the period prior to the Second World War, but I also discuss his writing during the Holocaust, in the Warsaw Ghetto. It is my hope that familiarity with the topics I have chosen to focus on will equip the reader with the tools for further study of R. Kalonymus’s works.

Today, R. Kalonymus’s books are being printed and sold on an unprecedented scale, and many have even been translated into English. The growing interest in his teachings in our generation is not at all surprising. The rejuvenation of *Chassidut*, both in Israel and abroad, is manifest in social phenomena, educational influences, the publication of countless books, articles and websites, and in culture and art. The renewed interest in Piaseczno is part of this phenomenon. The factors underlying this renaissance of mysticism in general are beyond the scope of this discussion. However, the nature of R. Kalonymus’s books, his unique personality as reflected in his writing, and his extensive attention to practical methods and detailed instruction all serve to draw in those who desire an in-depth understanding of *Chassidut* and who seek works offering systematic study of its ideas.

Another, more fundamental cause of this phenomenon is articulated by R. Kalonymus himself. The dissemination of the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, the founder of *Chassidut*, and those of his disciples, is one of the signs of the redemption. We learn this from the tradition according to which the prophet Eliyahu appeared to the Ba’al Shem Tov and told him that the redemption would come “when your wellsprings are disseminated outward.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is no mere slogan. Clearly, the teachings of *Chassidut* offer a response to our generation’s great thirst for meaning and spiritual substance. The desire to understand that which lies beyond modern scientific theories and philosophical hypotheses; the existential angst arising from the uncertainty of a postmodern reality in which beliefs and values disintegrate before our eyes; the individual’s search for community within an alienated environment; the voyage in search of God, which in fact never ended, but has changed its character; the crisis of education affecting every part of society – for all of these problems and more, there is meaning, explanation, and direction to be found in the ideas of *Chassidut* in general, and in the teachings of R. Kalonymus in particular. We hope that readers who join us in this exploration of the path of Piaseczno will emerge enlightened and enriched.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. H. M. Heilman, *Beit Rabbi* (Berditchev, 1903), p. 2, n. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. His letterhead bore the title, “Kalonymis Kalmish Shapiro” (D.H. Zilberschlag and H. Frankel [eds.], *Zikhron Kodesh Le-Ba’al Esh Kodesh – Yovel Le-Aliyato al Ha-Moked shel Rabbenu Ha-Kadosh Ve-Hatahor Mi-Piaseczno, MOH”R Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro HY”D*, [Jerusalem 5754], p. 11). I have chosen to spell his name “Kalonymus,” as it appears on the title pages of his book *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, which appeared during his lifetime, and his other works. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As suggested by the titles, “*Mavo Ha-She’arim*” (Introduction to the Gates) and “*Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*” (Preparation of the Scholars). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We will discuss this point in a future *shiur* on his writing style. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an updated list of studies, see Z. Leshem, *Bein Meshichiyut Le-Nevua: Ha-Chassidut al pi Ha-Admor mi-Piaseczno* (Ph.D. dissertation, Bar Ilan University, 2007), pp. 33-55. I came across Leshem’s dissertation as I finished writing the original Hebrew version of this series. As one might expect, some of the topics that I cover are treated in his study as well. In some instances, I agree with his conclusions; on other issues, we disagree. Owing to the nature of this series, I have chosen not to enter into detailed academic discussion that would add substantially to the footnotes. In general, where I have relied on Leshem, I note this explicitly. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These will be noted in a future *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mavo Ha-She’arim*, p. 214; “*Iggeret Ha-Kodesh*,” *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (B. Mintz edition, Jerusalem, 5729), p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)