**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #09: Background (Part I)**

**The Crisis in Polish *Chassidut* Between the Two World Wars**

In his works, R. Kalonymus records that he writes about the major pillars of his philosophy as a way of addressing the challenge of modern secularism, among other reasons. His philosophy is not disconnected from the influences of the historical events of his time. In order to address the foundations of his teachings, his motives, and his educational and Chassidic approach, we must first examine the formative events of his era, from the end of the 19th century to the mid-20th century.

David Assaf, a historian of *chassidut*, divides the years of R. Kalonymus’s life into two time periods. The first (1882-1918) he describes as a time of “immobility and struggle;” the second (1918-1945) he refers to as “flowering and withering.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He describes the first period as follows:

The trend of secularization in Jewish society that was heir to the Enlightenment was the great enemy of chassidism. Secularization drew its strength from the rise of modern Jewish nationalism, at the center of which was the Zionist movement, and from the rise of Jewish socialism… The changes in traditional economic patterns, accelerated urbanization, congestion, demographic growth within the Pale of Settlement… and acute poverty, all created a spiritual and social climate that was completely new, revolutionary, and a break with convention, igniting the tranquil atmosphere that had prevailed… The magical power of chassidism grew weaker. Wealthy courts of Admorim found themselves in financial trouble, and the old, traditional education was undermined and lost its attraction…[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second period, in between the World Wars, was a period of “flourishing and withering.” Polish *chassidut* boasted a number of major Chassidic courts that thrived in this period, such as those of Gur and Alexander, drawing thousands of followers. Even during this time, however, the trend of secularism and socialism continued, along with a surge of Zionism, which many of the Eastern European Jewish youth viewed as an ideal that could not be reconciled with the religious world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Warsaw, where R. Kalonymus settled after World War I, had a Jewish population of around 350,000 in 1931, out of a total of some three million Polish Jews. Warsaw was considered the capital of the Jewish people at the time.

The second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century witnessed a division and schism within Jewish society. In the cities, the wealthy class and members of free professions felt no compunction about intermarriage and made no effort to hide their desire to assimilate into Polish society. The traditional *cheder* and educational system were forced to contend with new trends. On the one hand, there were the *maskilim*, influenced by liberalism and the Enlightenment spreading throughout Europe; on the other hand, the socialist and Zionist movements were growing and attracting mainly the younger generation. The Orthodox educational networks “Chorev”[[4]](#footnote-4) (for boys) and “Beit Yaakov” (for girls) found themselves confronting new movements and new ideas that were sweeping through Jewish masses. The largest of these was the “Tarbut” elementary school network, belonging to the General Zionist and Po’alei Tzion Zionist movements, which produced the Zionist youth movements Ha-Shomer Ha-Tza’ir, He-Chalutz, Dror, and Gordonia. To the left of these was the Bund, a Jewish socialist movement that was opposed to the Zionists as well as the ultra-Orthodox streams and which worked to disseminate Yiddish culture. To the right of the Zionist movements was Beitar, the Revisionist movement created in 1923 by Zeev Jabotinsky.

Echoes of the crisis in the religious world and the schism in Jewish society are to be found in many places in R. Kalonymus’s works. The problem that he describes in the introduction to his *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* is the abandonment of Torah and the observance of commandments in his generation, and he presents the facts openly:

We should be heartsick, however, and our hair should stand on end when we see the way the younger generation has turned to heresy and has lost all spiritual discipline. They possess neither faith nor fear of God, nor knowledge of Torah. They have actually come to despise God and His servants, the people of Israel. The administrators and deans of the *yeshivot*, who are totally immersed in the life of the yeshiva and its students and encounter only the elite of our youth, are unaware of the gravity of this problem. They console themselves, saying: “Yes, it may be true that many of our young people have freed themselves of any commitment to Torah, but still, Israel has not been abandoned. There are still young men, sons of our people, outstanding in their Judaic scholarship, whose heart is steadfast with the Lord.” Poke your heads outside of the four cubits of your yeshiva! You will see the great mass of people who have broken from the observance of our faith, may God have mercy on them and us… Houses of study that were filled with Torah scholars have now become empty, and instead, groups and organizations whose goals include the dissemination of heresy and the rejection of Torah have been filled with members. In former good days, even the laborers and merchants who were not necessarily scholars were at least faithful Jews. Now their youth have denied Torah, have wandered and fallen into a great depth of spiritual darkness. Should we be satisfied with merely the handful of students who attend our *yeshivot*? Is this the entirety of the people of Israel?[[5]](#footnote-5)

Another description of the crisis in the Jewish home in Poland focuses on the corrupting influences of the popular parties and the distance created between father and son:

Our sons and daughters are threatened by Satan in the form of parties that would poison their souls and defile their bodies with heresy and other foul transgressions, may God have mercy.

There are homes in which the father, upon his return from the *mikveh* and prayers [at the synagogue], dressed in his Shabbat finery on Shabbat night, seeks to arouse within himself the joyous fervor of the sanctity of God and the sanctity of Shabbat by reciting the *Kiddush*, while his son, at the same time, is smoking a cigarette, may God have mercy, or reading the sort of novel that defiles the soul and the body alike, may God have mercy, or the boys are chatting with each other about the filth that they have read or watched at the cinema. Some or all of them leave their pure Jewish home at this time and go off to the cinema, to sin and to defile themselves and all of the Jewish people. And the father observes this; his heart contracts and his thoughts grow vacant. As time goes on he becomes accustomed to his diminishment and adapts to his abasement. Like a king’s son who is held captive for a long period by wanton, worthless drunks, he, too, loses his lofty spirit and uplifted wisdom, and is left like one who is stupefied, or a country simpleton, who is aware of nothing beyond his sustenance and his occupation – a man devoid of aspirations or lofty longings. And if at times he remembers the days gone by, when he was a Chassidic scholar, devoted to Torah, and he seeks to encourage and awaken himself, he sinks back once again, telling himself, “What am I, and what is my life? The weekdays, with their commerce, are hell, and this is the state of my home, my Jewish home?!”[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Kalonymus goes on to argue that the plague of heresy affects not only those who have left the world of the *yeshivot* and have rebelled against religious education. Even within the yeshiva world there are problems, and there is no guarantee that yeshiva graduates “a short time after having left the yeshiva … will not divest themselves of the commandments and, God forbid, cease to observe the Shabbat.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Another crisis that troubled R. Kalonymus, and which he mentions in many places in his writings, was the decline of *chassidut*. His pain is palpable in his words on the subject of the journey to the *tzaddik*:

Not only has there been a decline in *chassidut* itself, but also many of its customs have been forgotten. Not only the inner activities within the hearts and souls of the *chassidim*, hidden within them, but also many of the outward actions that they would previously perform in order to arouse their souls and their inner vitality, have also been forgotten. And of those that have not been forgotten, many appear to the *chassidim* of our generation to be unnecessary, and they pay no attention to them.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Service of God as part of a *chavura* is one of the most fundamental social values going back to the beginnings of *chassidut*.[[9]](#footnote-9) R. Kalonymus is saddened by the fact that among the *chassidim* of his generation, he does not see the *chavurot* that existed in the past:

And over this the heart of every *chassid* should be saddened: the inner activities of *chassidut* have lessened, and its external actions have ceased almost completely. But a great principle of *chassidut* that has disappeared altogether, and over which one should mourn exceedingly, is the holy *chevraya* [group]…[[10]](#footnote-10)

The decline of the social structure idealized in *chassidut* was expressed in the absence of chassidic gatherings with the singing, dancing, drinking, and words of Torah that characterized their fraternity. *Chassidut* had become nothing more than an ultra-Orthodox movement, with none of the most fundamental Chassidic features. To those who might shrug and question the significance of this shift – as though drinking and song were the essence of Divine service! – R. Kalonymus responds:

The partaking of strong drink and Chassidic discourse have become neglected, or almost halted completely as unnecessary. Many *chassidim* of our times think, “Can one not be a *chassid* without drinking alcohol and so on? Is it mentioned in the *Shulchan Arukh*? Even the books of *chassidut* mention no such requirement.” They do not know that even if these are not commandments in and of themselves, they serve to arouse Chassidic action within a person.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It must be remembered that drinking, dancing, and Chassidic discourse and discussion are integral to *chassidut*. Although they are not explicitly stated in chassidic works, they are part of the “oral Torah” that was passed from generation to generation, molding the movement’s character. Even in these areas there had been a lapse, according to R. Kalonymus, and he saw fit to note this deterioration:

The situation has reached a point where there are some *chassidim* who are indistinguishable from non-chassidic *chareidim*. Furthermore, they have no idea what *chassidut* requires of its followers. Is this the fulfilment of “your wellsprings shall be disseminated,” upon which the *Mashiach* conditioned his arrival,[[12]](#footnote-12) may it come speedily in our days?! Even Torah study has become diminished, for our many sins, and people no longer learn as they used to…[[13]](#footnote-13)

It is important to note that the crisis in the Chassidic movement was not simply a matter of R. Kalonymus’s perception of the situation. R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook expressed similar sentiments when he wrote (in Jaffa in 5666/1906) that *chassidut* had lost its way and its uniqueness, and that it had become “ordinary charedism” (ultra-Orthodoxy):

I must say… that even *chassidut*, which came into being entirely for the purposes of shining the Divine light in its richness and dazzling radiance into every heart and mind, has changed its character. It now follows the path of ordinary charedism, to the point where there is nothing at all that differentiates chassidism from mitnagdism.[[14]](#footnote-14)

R. Hillel Zeitlin, a well-known philosopher and journalist in Warsaw, was drawn to *chassidim* and lived at the same time and in the same place as R. Kalonymus. He, too, aspired to renewal of *chassidut* – not simply nostalgia for what once had been, but a desire to adapt *chassidut* to his era, which he viewed as the time of the “footsteps of *Mashiach*.”[[15]](#footnote-15) To his view, *chassidut* had drifted far from the path of the Ba’al Shem Tov, along the way losing the three great loves that the Ba’al Shem Tov had upheld: the love of God, the love of *Am Yisrael*, and the love of Torah. In response to the question of whether people still spoke of these three loves in his time, he states frankly:

Yes. Yes, they speak. But what are they doing? There are “*chassidim*” who have trampled the main idea under many issues of lesser importance. They engage in homiletical teachings and minutiae that conceal and cover up the most important thing; they make of *chassidut* something that is purely external; they study [Torah] and pray with no feeling; they pursue riches and honor no less than non-*chassidim* do; they admire and revere their rebbes while completely nullifying other rebbes and their *chassidim*; they establish dynasties of rebbes and sow strife between the various dynasties, creating unbearable friction and rivalry; they spend days and years on quarreling over rabbis, *shochetim* and other religious functionaries; they consider themselves holy and pure, while anyone who does not behave as they do in every way is considered evil and impure; they are overly zealous where not required to be, but deficient in pure love and fear of God; they persecute the youth over every matter, thereby distancing them and pushing them towards the socialist sects, towards destruction and heresy.

* According to what you say, are those who now call themselves *chassidim* not worse than those who are not *chassidim*?
* No! I never said such a thing. I was talking only about some of those who call themselves *chassidim*, not all the *chassidim* of our times. For that reason I said, “There are *chassidim*… There are some like those whom I have described, but there are others who still have burning in their hearts – even if only in its innermost recesses – sparks of the fiery love of R. Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov. Moreover, even those *chassidim* who have diminished the essence of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s teachings – even they still have in their hearts some remainder of the great light with which the Ba’al Shem Tov illuminated the hearts of Israel, some sort of “*reshimu*” [impression], and that impression makes them – with all their faults – better than those who are completely removed from *chassidut*.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We have quoted from R. Kook and R. Hillel Zeitlin for the purpose of showing that the crisis of *chassidut* was a problem of which everyone was aware; it was not a matter of R. Kalonymus’s personal perception. At the same time, although there are common elements in the way the three figures present the problem, there are differences when it comes to diagnosing the problem and the sort of solutions that are proposed. It is therefore important to note that in relation to R. Kook and R. Zeitlin, R. Kalonymus has a different view of the roots of the crisis and the ways in which it should be addressed.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. D. Assaf, “*Heibetim* *Histori’im* *Ve-Chevrati’im* *Be*-*Cheker* *Ha*-*Chassidut*,” in D. Assaf (ed.), *Tzaddik Ve-Eda* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 9-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 20. See also M. Piekarz, *Chassidut Polin*: *Megamot Ra’ayoniot Bein Shetei Ha-Milchamot U-Ve-Gezerot 5700-5705 (Ha-Shoa)*, pp. 17-23. In chapters 2-4 and 8, Piekarz discusses the different strategies adopted by *chassidut* to deal with these challenges. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Assaf, ibid., pp. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on this educational network and the movements mentioned above, see Z. Sharfstein, *Toldot Ha-Chinukh Be-Yisrael Be-Dorot Ha-Acharonim* III (New York, 5709), pp. 125-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* pp. 12-13 [*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 8]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 13 [*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 9]. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. We will discuss this further in an independent chapter about the *chavura*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. When the Ba’al Shem Tov once ascended to heaven (*aliyat neshama*), he met *Mashiach* and asked him when he would come. *Mashiach* answered, “When your wellsprings are disseminated.” (See our Introduction, n. 9.) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Mevo She’arim*, p. 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, *Iggerot RAY”H* *I* (Jerusalem, 5722), letter 132, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. H. Zeitlin, *Sifran shel Yechidim* (Jerusalem, 5740), p. 43. For more about R. Hillel Zeitlin’s messianic expectations and his writings on this subject, see Y. Meir, “*Rabbi Nachman Mi-Breslev: Tza’ar Ha-Olam Ve-Kissufei Mashiach – Shetei Massot*,” *Yeri’ot* 4 (5766), pp. 19-22. Meir notes, quite correctly, that these two philosophers, so close in time and place and also in their spiritual world, nevertheless differed in their view of what path of action to follow. He argues that R. Kalonymus sought a renewal of chassidism, while Zeitlin envisioned effecting a change amongst the nation as a whole through chassidism. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Zeitlin (above, n. 15), pp. 45-46. The dialogue here is a literary device, not a transcript. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For Zeitlin’s solutions to the crisis, see Y. Meir (above, n. 15), pp. 32-33. Regarding R. Kook, I am not aware of any specific attention on his part to the crisis of *chassidut*, but he certainly did address the crisis of faith, placing special emphasis on the study of faith and a return to the works of Jewish philosophy, including Chassidic works. R. Kook, in contrast to R. Kalonymus, emphasized the repair of thought. The crisis of faith in general arose, to his view, from a lack of in-depth study of the roots of Judaism, and accordingly he believed that the repair would come about through such study. He wrote, “The foundation of this sickness is the mind, the power of thought… The reason for all the ills of this generation is nothing more than thought… Therefore, it is necessary to teach the living Torah from the living Source…” (R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, *Eder Ha-Yakar*, Jerusalem, 5742, pp. 110-115). The word “thought” (*machshava*) is used in a different sense by R. Kalonymus than it is by R. Kook. For R. Kook, *machshava* focuses mainly on intellectual comprehension, broad understanding, and a profound grasp of the fundamentals of Jewish faith. For R. Kalonymus the term “*ha-machshava he-chazaka*” (powerful thought) is a type of meditative contemplation (as we will discuss in the future). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)