**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #10: Background (Part II)**

**Causes of the Crisis**

The causes of the manifestations of secularization, according to R. Kalonymus, were the changes that had occurred in the psychological structure of the youth, resulting in early maturation: “The simplest and most important reason is that today’s youth consider themselves grown-up before their time.”[[1]](#footnote-1) R. Kalonymus notes that such a situation, characterized by rebellion against parents and teachers, was viewed by *Chazal* as part of the process of the future redemption: “In the time preceding the coming of the Messiah, arrogance will be rampant” (*Sota* 49). However, this foresight on the part of *Chazal* in no way diminishes the responsibility of those engaged in education; they must find ways of dealing with the challenge. R. Kalonymus offers his own solutions, which we will elaborate upon below.

The problem of early maturation demands attention and a change in existing educational approaches. In previous generations, the child was passive, “like a clean sheet of paper,” and he would progressively absorb the values of the Torah, stage by stage, until he grew up. Now, with the child growing up so quickly, he permits himself to think about and express his views on subjects that his psyche is not yet sufficiently mature to handle, and he is negatively affected by them.[[2]](#footnote-2) R. Kalonymus refers here to the leisure activities of the early twentieth century in Poland – the “outside world,” which, “in all its folly, its crassness, and its wantonness, he begins to see as beautiful and good.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

However, it is not in the recreational culture that R. Kalonymus locates the blame. The blame lies with the educators who fail to adapt their educational approach to the changes wrought with time, continuing to teach as they always have.[[4]](#footnote-4) Here R. Kalonymus gets to the root of the matter. The recreational culture is a given fact, but if a youth is more enthusiastic about the theater than he is about Torah study, this indicates that what he has found in the *beit midrash* has not stirred his heart in any way. Therefore, educators must take the initiative and teach the youth to arouse feeling inside themselves out of matters of holiness, and to embark on education towards such feeling and enthusiasm from a young age. We will address the necessity of feeling and enthusiasm in Divine service, and the way to achieve them, in our later discussion of *chassidut*.

**Sermon to the “Great Assembly”**

In his undated “Sermon to the Great Assembly of the Committee for Aid to Save the Yeshivot of Poland and Lithuania,” delivered at some point in the years preceding the Holocaust, R. Kalonymus addressed the poor spiritual state of his generation. The assembly included *Admorim* and rabbis from Poland and Lithuania, and the attendees attested that the sermon left a powerful impression on the audience. Along with his description of the crisis, R. Kalonymus spoke about its source and ways of addressing it. Owing to the importance of this sermon, a “spiritual accounting” presented to the religious leadership of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry, we will review selected passages from it and discuss its significance:

This gathering includes *Admorim*, rabbis, *gabba’im* and communal representatives, who are the leaders of the Jewish People and captains of the ship, and it is appropriate that we turn our attention and make some sort of accounting for the entire sorry state of the Jews at present… But right now there is unfortunately no need for such an investigation and examination, for when we have a look at the *batei midrashot* and the *shteibelach* – places in which the sound of Torah [previously] never ceased and which are now desolate – there is hardly a student or *avrekh* studying in them. When we have a look at the main street on Shabbat, Jewish stores are open. When we have a look at Jewish homes, we see how they have become desolate, how the purity and modesty of Jewish women has been destroyed. All in all, when we look at the younger generation and see how sons and daughters have distanced themselves from Torah and have abandoned the God of Israel, may God have mercy, and how Jews despise the service of God, we see on whose account this evil has come about…

It is an iron-clad rule that education is the answer – if not the whole answer, then at least a major part of it. Even a bad youth, when educated towards goodness, improves – and likewise the opposite. How, then, can we justify our neglect of education? For had we not neglected and abandoned it, but rather invested our hearts and souls in it, the generation would not be in this pitiful state. If we wished to convey [good education], then truly many of them would accept.

**However, I believe that we have made a mistake in this generation. The mistake is that we did not immediately take note of the change that has come over our education.** Up until the war [World War I], we were accustomed to easy education. The *batei* *midrashot* and *shteibelach* were full of Torah scholars, and a boy who left the *cheder* did not cause his father too much concern, since he would enter the *beit midrash* or the *shteibel* of his own accord and study among the other Torah scholars, accustoming himself to the house of the servants of God, and after some years the father would see before him a young man who excelled in Torah and fear of Heaven. Not so now that the houses of Torah are empty. A father who wants to ensure a strong Torah foundation for his son much invest hard work – almost beyond his ability – and the youth are left without Torah, nor a whiff of fear of Heaven. At the same time, our opponents have opened liberal schools in which they teach blasphemy and contempt. Is it any wonder that a spirit of heresy, Heaven forfend, has wreaked such destruction amongst the younger generation? Therefore, Jewish salvation, both spiritually and physically, depends on the yeshiva. The yeshiva will receive your children and, after some years, return them to you full of Torah and fear of Heaven.

As much as people used to have to exert themselves so that even boys who left the *cheder* would still study Torah, we now have to make even more of an effort. Because **previously, it was necessary that they would continue to study in order that they would be Torah scholars; now this is necessary in order that they will remain Jews.** For we see that the vast majority of those who do not continue their Torah studies further end up outside of the system, Heaven forfend – with shaven faces, desecrating the Shabbat, etc.

This should in no way be taken to mean that I believe that if the yeshiva students alone will be Jews, that will suffice. For can we say that it is enough that in each town only the Rabbi, the *shochetim*, and the *shamash* will be Jews, while all the rest are not?!

Think what this means: The ten thousand who are currently Torah students, out of millions of Jews, *bli ayin ha-ra*, in Poland and Lithuania – what if only they will remain faithful Jews? Are we looking merely to supply rabbis and *shochetim* for every town? We need *Klal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish population, to be faithful to God and to His Torah. But we hope that the students will bring sanctity to the entire generation, strengthening them in Torah and Divine service…

And now that American generosity has ceased, the yeshivot are in danger of closing, Heaven forbid, and all of Polish Jewry is in danger, Heaven forbid. These *yeshivot* are the foundation and pillar of the entire house of Israel. And how do we treat that pillar of Judaism, those students who are the Jewish army that protects the entire house of Israel from annihilation and extinction? How oppressed and afflicted they are! I believe that there is no nation – even the cruellest among them – whose most oppressed members suffer like these guardians of Israel. They have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep; they have no clothing and no rest. How does the Jewish People, merciful descendants of merciful forefathers, allow these future spiritual giants to suffer so?!...

Therefore from this place we address all of Polish Jewry: Whoever is for God, let him join us! Strengthen and support the Committee of Yeshivot in its holy work; contribute not only out of your goodwill, but also out of your obligation to God and to Israel… Hurry to save the situation in time, and may God speedily bring deliverance, Amen.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus presents the crisis in very stark terms, speaking of *batei* *midrash* and Jewish homes that are desolate and of abandonment of the God of Israel. He demands that the religious leadership take responsibility for the situation and view this acute reality as the result of its neglect. The approach to education that existed up until WWI had been suited to raising Torah scholars and faithful Jews, but after the war there had been changes that the religious leadership had failed to note, and the necessary educational adjustments had therefore not been made. The only element that could now halt this current was the yeshiva: “It will be the yeshiva students who will save this generation and all of Jewry.” Therefore a financial appeal was needed to strengthen the yeshiva world, and everyone was urged to take part. This sums up the essence of the sermon.

When we compare R. Kalonymus’s words here to the explanations that he offers in his books for the crisis facing Judaism – as, for example, in the introduction to his *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* – the difference stands out quite clearly. In *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, the reasons that R. Kalonymus gives pertain to the psychological makeup of the youth and the lack of enthusiasm and drive in serving God. In the sermon, he speaks about the deficiency of education, the increasingly powerful trend of heresy, and the economic crisis facing the *yeshivot*. In the solutions he proposes, we find a similarly conspicuous discrepancy: In his books, he offers solutions focused on building character, a return to *chassidut*, and inner work, while in this sermon he emphasizes the value of the yeshiva and the importance of ensuring economic support for it.

The reason for this difference appears to be simple: The sermon was delivered not only to *Admorim* and rabbis, but also to “*gabba’im* and community representatives,” and this was not the proper forum in which to urge his listeners to engage in inner spiritual work. In this forum, R. Kalonymus’s aim was to address the material, financial dimension and to raise funds to strengthen the *yeshivot*. In his books, which aim to bring Jews closer to God, his focus is on ascending the spiritual ladder of *chassidut*.

The sermon casts R. Kalonymus as a superb leader who takes upon himself the responsibility of dealing with the challenges facing the Jewish People. His sermon is well thought-out and direct. He is not afraid of placing the blame for the situation on the assembly of leaders sitting in front of him (including himself among them, obviously), which in itself indicates a fair measure of courage. The sermon also reflects an ability to adapt his message to his audience.

Let us return for a moment to R. Kalonymus’s conclusions arising from this crisis, as discussed in his books: It is crucial to become familiar with the qualities of genuine *chassidut*, as it was lived and practiced in the early generations, among the Ba’al Shem Tov and his followers, and to return to that path, which for various reasons has been abandoned and forgotten.

According to R. Kalonymus, there is a need to create a system of measures that will arouse a profound emotional experience within a person in his service of God, to help him internalize the values of the Torah and the commandments. (We will address this subject in later discussions of *chassidut* and prayer.)

Likewise, R. Kalonymus argues that both youth and adults must be strengthened in their awareness that they are descendants of prophets, and they must be taught to expose and work with this potential. (We will discuss this point in a later discussion about prophecy.)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 15 (*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 11). It is interesting and important to compare Rousseau’s words on this matter: “The blemishes of the body and the spirit that we find in children only come to them because we wish to grow them up before their time” (Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*). It appears that R. Kalonymus was familiar with this classic work on education. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 16 (*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 21 (p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Concerning the proper path in educating the generation, see our later discussion, “The Educator Brings Himself to the Level of the Student.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, pp. 460-462. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)