**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #15: The *Chevraya***

**The Purpose of the Group**

From the outset, *Chassidut* emphasized the importance of spiritual service as a group (a *chevraya*, in R. Kalonymus’s terminology) engaged collectively in Torah study and spiritual self-improvement.[[1]](#footnote-1) The existence of groups that engage in and devote themselves to spiritual work beyond the accepted norm is not in itself an innovation of *Chassidut*. Such groups are well known throughout Jewish history, going back to biblical times – from the “group of prophets” (*Melakhim* II 15); via the “pious ones” during the period of the Mishna and the Talmud; the disciples of R. Shimon bar Yochai, as mentioned in *Sefer Ha-Zohar*; the pietists of Ashkenaz; the Ari and his disciples in Tzefat, and R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto’s group in Italy.[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Chazal* teach that the group setting is a precondition for acquiring Torah: “Make groups upon groups and engage in Torah, for Torah is acquired only within a company” (*Berakhot* 63b). But a group is necessary not only for Torah study: “Likewise, for any additional service of extra holiness that they sought to take upon themselves, our holy teachers would create a group.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Each member of the *chavura* is called a *chaver.*

R. Kalonymus bemoans the state of *Chassidut* his generation, which had regressed in several different areas.[[4]](#footnote-4) Among other things, he expresses sorrow over the lapsing of the *chavura*, in whose absence it is impossible to maintain *Chassidut*:

A major principle of *Chassidut* that has ceased altogether, and which should be greatly mourned, is the holy *chevraya* – yes, this specific entity, without which *Chassidut* cannot be maintained for even the shortest time in the manner in which it should exist. The Rebbe cannot be the Rebbe of *Chassiddut* as *Chassidut* demands, nor can the *chassidim* be *chassidim*, without the *chevraya* – and it is specifically this that has ceased completely…”[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus seems to press this point with particular insistence. If the *chavura* is indeed a foundation without which the edifice of *chassidut* cannot stand, and the *chavura* has in fact “ceased” and is no longer to be found in chasidic courts, then *Chassidut* in R. Kalonymus’s generation – the chasidic movement – is nothing but a pale imitiation of itself.

We can therefore understand why R. Kalonymus calls to rehabilitate this institution: “The *chevraya* must be restored and renewed.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Even though many different chasidic courts existed in R. Kalonymus’s time, none of them – to his view – could be defined as a *chavura*. The question, of course, is what one would find in a *chavura* that was not to be found in the chasidic courts of Warsaw and its environs in the early twentieth century. To answer this question, we must take a closer look at the essence of the *chavura*.

R. Kalonymus quotes his grandfather, R. Kalonymus Kalmish, author of *Maor Va-Shemesh*, concerning the difference between the early generations of *chassidim* and those that came after the Ba’al Shem Tov:

We see that in the generations that preceded ours, before the illuminating path of the Ba’al Shem Tov began to spread in the world, at this season, from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* onwards, anyone who was God-fearing and who trembled in anticipation of the High Holy Days would close himself up in a room to be alone with no human company, in the synagogue or at home. Some would fast and afflict themselves and separate themselves from all human contact. And while what interests the Merciful One is man’s heart, and any action that a person does for the sake of God alone is good in God’s eyes, this is not the main way of serving Him.

The main element, the foundation upon which everything stands and the substance of the paths of proper repentance, is to be found in fraternal love and friendship and drawing closer to the *tzaddikim* of the generation, and it is through these means that a person achieves complete submission. For he sees the [spiritual] work of his companions, and the extent to which their hearts are ablaze with enthusiasm to serve the blessed Creator, and through this he learns to do as they do, and he recognizes his misdeeds and returns in complete repentance. And even though he imagines that when he meditates in solitude he can arouse his heart to greater heights of repentance and cleave to God to a greater degree than than when he is in the company of loving and attentive companions, for their company can come between him and that closeness, nevertheless it is better and more proper to maintain fraternal love and to bring his companions close to the way of God, for in this way he can draw down ongoing illumination through his drawing them close to God’s worship, while in solitary service his action is effective only for its time.

It is also recorded in the *Tikkunim* that the holy Divine Presence is referred to as a “bird’s nest,”[[7]](#footnote-7) since the bird is an allusion to the souls of Israel, and wherever Jewish souls gather together to serve God, whether in Torah or in prayer, the Divine Presence rests among them, spreading wings over them like a mother bird over her young.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In earlier generations, isolation and seclusion away from other people, along with fasting and self-affiction, were the main means of *teshuva*, but the Ba’al Shem Tov introduced a different approach. He encouraged spiritual work within a company of like-minded servants of God, as a setting offering several advantages. A person who deals with his challenges in Divine service alone loses out on the benefit that is to be gained by learning from the ways of service of his companions and from their rebuke when necessary. The mutual influence, born of the shared goal, contributes to every member of the group. Common work also serves to reflect a person’s situation back at him. When one is part of a group, he needs to help the others, and through this he discovers strengths and qualities within himself that will remain part of him and influence him for much longer than they would if he was alone. The dwelling of the Divine Presence in any place where Jews gather in Torah study and prayer is another important reason to belong to such a company.

Clearly, there are also disadvantages to working on one’s spiritual progress as part of a group. Sometimes the group can hinder a person’s essential development. At the same time, there is much to be gained from personal work, too. Our sages noted the benefits of solitary service,[[9]](#footnote-9) and the Baal Shem Tov himself, in his early days, engaged extensively in solitary meditation in the Carpathian mountains.[[10]](#footnote-10) Nevertheless, there is an overall emphasis on the *chavura* in *Chasidut*, since it is always possible to combine limited solitary, personal work as well.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The *chavura* that R. Kalonymus seeks to establish is not a new phenomenon. Rather, he seeks to renew an institution that had existed in the earlier generations of Chasidism. In R. Kalonymus’s generation in Poland, chasidic courts existed in the sociological sense – i.e., there was membership in communities that defined themselves and were identified by others as chasidic. However, in terms of real substance and character, these communities lacked most of the elements of the *chavura* as a group of people that consolidates iself with the aim of engaging in intensive spiritual work and self-improvement.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The concept of a “group” (*chavura*) appears in the *Iggeret Ha-Kodesh* penned by the Ba’al Shem Tov (*Shivchei Ha-Besht*, B. Mintz edition [Jerusalem, 5729]), where he recounts: “I discussed with my *chavura* the recital of the *ketoret* [sacrificial incense] at dawn, to cancel the strict decrees…” The grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, R. Efraim of Sadilkov, explains the importance of the group: “It is good that they always be unified as a single group, for then even those who are on a lesser level contribute to their companions becoming sanctified with tremendous holiness” (R. Efraim of Sadilkov, *Degel Machaneh Efraim* [Jerusalem, 5746], *Parashat* *Yitro*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an historical review of the groups in Tzefat in the 16th and 18th centuries and the *chavura* that consolidated itself around the Ba’al Shem Tov, see E. Etkes, *Ba’al Ha-Shem* (Jerusalem, 5760), pp. 163-216. For more on mystical societies, see S. Cherlow, “*Chug Ha-RAY”H Ke-Chavura Mistit*,” *Tarbitz* 74 (5765), pp. 270-271, [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 142; see ibid. chapter 11, which is devoted in its entirety to the subject of the *chevraya*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See our previous discussion about the crisis in Polish Jewry between the two World Wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Tikkunei Zohar* (Jerusalem, 5746), 21a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem, 5748), *Parashat Ki Tetzei*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See, for example, R. Avraham ben Ha-Rambam, *Ha-Maspik Le-Ovdei Hashem* (Jerusalem, 5733), pp. 177-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (see above, n. 1), p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Sefer Tzevat Ha-Ribash*, Kehat edition (Brooklyn, 5758), *ot* 80, which originated in the court of the Maggid of Mezeritch, describes the virtue of solitary meditation: “How do they merit to cleave [to God]? Through isolation [*hitbodedut*] from all human company….” However, it is clear that there is no contradiction between the value of solitary meditation and work within a company, since it is possible to pursue both. The complete isolation from human company recommended here involved only limited periods of time – during prayer, for example, or other defined periods. In addition, meditation can be undertaken even in the presence of others, with the individual focusing his thoughts on God. The author of *Maor Va-Shemesh* expounds at length on the advantage of a spiritual fellowship over solitary meditation: “The ways of God, which a person must follow in order to serve Him, are many, but the essence of the service of God is that it must be out of love, in order that a person might thereby achieve closeness to God. Now, there are people who think that the way of serving God in order to achieve closeness is to seclude himself completely, studying alone in a room inside another room, neither speaking to nor seeing anyone. But this is not the complete truth, for a person can seclude himself for years on end, not speaking to anyone, and yet not arriving at the truth. Indeed, I once heard from the Admor, the famous R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, of blessed memory, an interpretation of the verse, ‘Can anyone hide himself in secret places, that I shall not see him? says the Lord’ (*Yirmiyahu* 23:24): a person might close himself up in a special, secret place, believing that this is the essence of Divine service, but God says, ‘I shall not see him’ – meaning, Even I, God, will – as it were – not see him. Rather, the essence of Divine service is that a person should connect himself with righteous, upright Jews, and thereby he can achieve true sevice of God by learning from their positive behavior. For the essence is seclusion in one’s thoughts – to constantly meditate on the greatness of God. Even when one is surrounded by a great crowd, he should focus his thoughts constantly on God, as the author of *Chovat Ha-Levavot* writes in *Sha’ar Ha-Perishut*, the essence of *perishut* [separating oneself from mundane affairs] is that a person who is in a place that is full of people should imagine it to be empty. In other words, he should attach himself in thought to his Creator, such that he is almost unaware of having anyone around him. And especially when at prayer he should attain intense closeness, so that he is not consciousness of anyone but God; this is the essence of *hitbodedut*” (R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh*, *Parashat* *Kedoshim*). In addition, it must be emphasized that R. Kalonymus himself speaks about the value of *hitbodedut* for set times and in particular situations. Even in Breslov *chassidut*, which extols the value of *hitbodedut*, the idea is to spend only a specific portion of the day – generally about an hour – in solitary meditation, while at the same time there is also praise for the institution of the *chavura*, as R. Natan, the closest disciple of R. Nachman, writes: “For wherever the souls of the *chaverim* gather and are powerfully connected with love, there is exceedingly great joy” (*Likkutei Halakhot* [Jerusalem, 5730], *Hilkhot Birkat Hoda’ah*, law 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)