**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #17: Rules for Membership**

As noted previously, the unique feature of the *Bnei Machshava Tova* group was the target membership – merchants and artisans, people who were not necessarily full-time Torah scholars, but rather regular householders who yearned to progress in their spiritual growth. Later on, however, R. Kalonymus decided to expand his program to include those who were involved exclusively in Torah. The detailed program for this group is set down in the book *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*. Here, too, R. Kalonymus defined the guidelines for acceptance to the group and for its activities:[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. There shouldn’t be one big group, but rather a number of smaller groups. A group should be established for every Rebbe to whom *chassidim* travel.
2. The group should not be involved in communal matters. The aim of the group is solely to engage in spiritual work. Of course, every member of the group could be involved in mundane affairs and community matters, but he would represent himself as an individual, rather than the group.
3. Once the group is established, members should not leave the *shteiblach* (chasidic prayer congregations), so that the attendance there will not thin out. Likewise, members should not separate themselves from other *chassidim* or from other Jews in general. On the contrary, they should influence their environment.
4. The *chavura* would not include any sort of high office or position of honor – no chairman, secretary, etc. Everyone is equal and everyone can help and encourage his companions, but not out of a position of authority. (Of course, there is no contradiction between this rule and the fact that the *chavura* was connected to the *tzaddik*, to whom they travelled on regular occasions.)
5. Although every Jew should be encouraged and welcomed to engage in Torah study and Divine service, if there is someone who is a negative influence, he should not be brought into the midst of the group. Thus, the *chavura* should be made up only of *bnei Torah* – regardless of their level of or time spent in scholarship.
6. A person who is impulsive or fickle, or someone of unstable mind, should not be accepted into the group.
7. Someone who is a chronic liar or cheat should not be accepted into the group.
8. Anyone accepted to the group should view himself as having dedicated himself to God and should exert all his efforts to perfecting himself.
9. Every member of the group should view himself as a singular individual with great abilities, and as one of the “sons of the prophets.”
10. The group should gather every day in the *shteibel*, or some other regular meeting place, to engage in chasidic study and practice.
11. Meetings should not be spent on worthless matters; rather, the members should engage in Torah, each studying whatever he chooses, while a weekly joint study session should be established, to learn whatever is agreed upon by the majority of members – preferably from chasidic works, including from the works of R. Kalonymus, “if they feel that they are of benefit.”
12. The study should be carried out calmly and in depth, and there should be discussion as to how each member intends to implement the material in his own life. This is an important point: R. Kalonymus wanted to be sure that the Torah that the group studied would be internalized; purely external, intellectual study would not suffice.
13. Every member, even the least learned, would have the opportunity to express his opinions, since “sometimes even the impoverished bear pearls.” No one needs to ask permission to speak; anyone who has something to teach the group can simply say it, but not simply for the purpose of making his voice heard and “showing himself to be clever.”
14. It is good to drink alcohol together from time to time – not to become inebriated, but simply in order to stimulate the psyche. Anyone who has trouble drinking alcohol can mix his drink with water and thereby join the rest of the group.
15. After partaking of drink, the group should sing an inspiring *niggun* (chasidic melody), and if they feel like dancing, they should go ahead – so long as the whole meeting will not consist solely of drinking, singing, and dancing.
16. All chasidic works are worthy of study. Nevertheless, each member of the group should try to find a book that influences him in a positive way.
17. All members of the group must study the “*tzetil katan*,” a collection of customs of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk.
18. The encounter at *seuda shlishit* (the third meal of Shabbat) is of special significance, as a sort of “Yom Kippur of the week,” when the soul is exposed with all its aspirations and challenges and when it needs extra encouragement and support.
19. The meeting place should be regarded by the group as a holy place, like a Garden of Eden within this world.
20. Although fraternal love should prevail among all members of the group, each should choose himself one particular friend before whom he can expose his deepest joys and concerns. The friend should listen, console, and offer advice.
21. The members of the group should maintain a humble attitude and not publicize their belonging to the group, just as the kabbalists throughout the generations kept quiet about their knowledge.
22. It should be emphasized that the purpose is not the existence of the group for its own sake, but rather the progress of each of its members in his Divine service. Thus, even if someone is unable to join the *chavura*, for whatever reason, but continues his endeavors alone, this is still of great value. Likewise, someone who cannot join the group but works on himself alone can and should use the guidelines as far as possible, and take upon himself “virtual” membership, so that he can be part of the group in spirit.
23. Every member has to make a declaration of belonging to the group. In so doing, he takes upon himself the chasidic self-work whose aim is to imbue his life with holiness. His declaration includes the prayer that God help him not to stumble in his thought, speech, or actions, and that he should merit to make complete repentance. He also commits himself to taking particular care with his thoughts, speech and action, as befitting someone seeking to sanctify himself. The formal declaration concludes with a prayer that God help him, his family, his *chavura*, and the entire Jewish People, in both the spiritual and the material realms.
24. The Rebbe warns anyone joining the group not to think that he is unworthy of joining such a *chavura*, which is seemingly beyond his level. This feeling is a tactic of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination), which seeks to weaken a person. On the contrary, the level of each and every Jew is far beyond what he is able to imagine.

As we can see, the list of guidelines as set down in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim* is longer and more detailed than that appearing in *Bnei Machshava Tova*. We may assume that the addenda reflected the need to update certain issues and answer questions that had arisen in the wake of R. Kalonymus’s experience in establishing the first *chavura*. Thus, for example, in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim* he stipulates that the size of the group should not be too large, and he advises that a *chavura* should be established around every *tzaddik* (in all the diverse existing chasidic courts).

The establishment of the *chavura* creates the danger of a mixing of the *chavura* with local politics, since the *chavura* builds social power that could theoretically be channeled in directions other than the group’s stated spiritual aims. For this reason, R. Kalonymus emphasizes explicitly that there must be no involvement of the *chavura* qua *chavura* in communal affairs, although each member could participate in his individual capacity. Likewise, there is a danger of the *chassidim* seeking to establish special *minyanim* (prayer congregations) guided by the spirit of the *chavura*, and this could cause a general exodus from the exiting *shteiblach*. R. Kalonymus counters this danger by stating that *chassidim* should not leave their existing *minyanim*.

Other new guidelines that appear in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim* include studying R. Elimelekh’s *tzetil katan*. R. Kalonymus, humble as always, recommends that his own booklets be studied only if the members of the group feel that they are beneficial to them. In addition, mention is made of the joint *seuda shlishit*, indicating an extension of the group’s activities to include Shabbat, too. The “acceptance declaration” required of each member joining the *chavura* appears here in exactly the same form as in *Bnei Machshava Tova*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, pp. 145-155. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)