**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

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**Shiur #19**

**1700 - Rav Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov, the Founder of Chassidut**

**Status of the Tzaddik**

The birth of Rav Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov in 1698 marks the beginning of one the greatest religious revolutionary movements in Jewish history.

The Besht (acronym for **B**aal **Sh**em **T**ov, which means "Master of the Good Name") was a healer and a mystic who travelled around the Jewish communities using conventional and non-conventional methods of healing. On his travels, he attracted disciples with his religious mystical messages. In his teaching, he focused on the power and meaning of prayer, relocating it in the hierarchy of Jewish observance and claiming that it is more important than Torah study. According to his teachings, *dveikut* (connecting one’s self to God) is the ultimate goal of the chassid.

His greatest student, Rav Dov Ber ben Avraham of [Mezeritch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mezeritch) (known as the [*Maggid*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maggid) *of Mezritch*), gathered even more followers. These charismatic rabbis developed their teachings, spread them to others, and became leaders of new communities called *chatzeirot* (courts), generally named for their native towns and villages.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Chassidut spread throughout the Jewish world. During the eighteenth century, strong opposition led by Rav Eliyahu Kramer (the Vilna Gaon or Gra) threatened the movement’s legitimacy. Despite the strong opposition of these *mitnagdim,* however, the number of followers grew throughout Europe and beyond.

Much has been written about the religious principles of the movement. Below, I will describe those that are shared by the followers of the various chassidic courts.

**The Tzaddik**

Among the values which were shared by all sects was the important place of the Rebbe in the sect’s hierarchy. This idea developed further into the creation of chassidic dynasties with the leadership being passed on from father to son.

The Rebbe, usually a charismatic figure, stood out in his religious conduct. Thus, he was given the title *Tzaddik*. This religious leader was not just the technical figurehead who led the community. Rather, he was the center around which the group revolved. The Rebbe was looked upon as a man of mystical powers, raised above regular mortals, and as an essential component of the chassid’s relationship with God. It is the responsibility of the Rebbe to connect heaven and earth. On one hand he uplifts man and connects him to God; on the other hand, he brings down the Godly *shefa* which includes *benei, chayei*, and *mezonei* (children, life, and sustenance)

According to this theory, the role of the *Tzaddik* in one’s religious life is crucial. This teaching was discussed in chassidic and mystical writings. Some chassidic masters like Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk, internalized this idea and turned it into one of the fundamental principles of Judaism. In his book, *Noam Elimelech*, he focuses on the role of the *Tzaddik* in *Avodat Ha-Shem* and explains that the *Tzaddik* serves as an intermediary between man and God and. Rav Elimelech argues that this idea is not a new one, invented by Chassidut, but rather that Adam and all our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, were all *Tzaddikim*.

Does this chassidic belief have sources elsewhere? Several *pesukim* and sayings of *Chazal* can serve as sources. The Torah records that following the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea, Am Yisrael reached a high level of faith: *Va-ya’aminu ba-Hashem u’ve-Moshe avdo*, and they believed in God, and in Moshe, God’s servant (*Shemot* 14:31). The Midrash explains the meaning of this belief in Moshe: “One who believes in the ‘true shepherd’ is as if he believes in Hashem.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Similarly, the Torah commands us to “cling to Hashem.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Our rabbis question the meaning of this commandment, as it is clearly impossible to cling physically to Him. The Gemara explains:

One who marries off his daughter to a *talmid chakham*, and does business with *talmidei chakhamim* and benefits them, is considered by the Torah as if he is cleaving to the *Shekhina*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The midrash on the verse in *Devarim* explains that this commandment to cling to Hashem means that one must cleave to the Sages and their students.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polonne questions the language of the midrash:

We must seek to understand why the sages explained the verse in a manner other than its plain meaning. For the scripture states “*and to Him thou shall cleave,”* literally to cleave to God. Yet they interpreted that to mean that we must cleave to the scholars?!

He answers:

However, this is not really a difficulty. For in man there exists a dwelling place for God, as it is written: “And I shall dwell among them.” It is the righteous man (*Tzaddik*) who is called “the temple of the Lord” and “the sanctuary of the Lord” in which the Lord dwells, as is well known from the writings of earlier sages. Now when a man attaches himself to the scholar in whom the *Shekhina* dwells, he is ipso facto attached to Him in actuality. [[5]](#footnote-5)

The Rambam derived from these midrashim that there is a positive mitzva to cling to the *chakhamim*:

The sixth mitzvah is that we are commanded to be close to the *chakhamim* and to associate with them. We should constantly be close to them and to be with them in all possible ways of friendship, such as eating, drinking, and doing business, in order to succeed in emulating their actions and learn from them the true beliefs [of the Torah].[[6]](#footnote-6)

We have seen how the chassidic community interpreted the concept of “believing in the rabbis” and developed it into the role of the *Tzaddik*. However, the original concept appears in Talmudic sources.

We will now explore other angles of this concept.

**Emunat Chakhamim**

Among the attributes and characteristics needed in order to acquire Torah, the Mishna lists *emunat chakhamim*, which translates as believing in the rabbis.[[7]](#footnote-7) How does the literal meaning of the term affect our approach to Torah studying? Does this principle contradict the importance of one’s own effort in learning the Torah? Does this idea mean that one should disregard his own input and personal understanding of the Torah?

As we will see, the meaning of this term was debated among the rabbis. Rav Yechiel Weinberg questions whether the principle of “*pilpul ha-talmidim*” (the students’ learning), which appears in the same list in the Mishna, contradicts our term of *emunat chakhamim*. Rav Nachum Rabinowitz, the former Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Ma’ale Adumim, explains that the opposite is true. Quoting several opinions, he explains that the importance of this principle is its demand that the Torah learner respect the interpretations of our rabbis and work hard to understand their teachings. On the other hand, it deepens the belief that it is possible for us to understand the rabbis’ teachings. This “belief” will ultimately create a deeper understanding of the Torah.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Da’at Torah**

In the twentieth century, much was written about the “modern” interpretation of the term *Da’at Torah*.[[9]](#footnote-9) In some orthodox communities, *emunat chakhamim* has been replaced by the concept of *Da’at Torah*, which serves as a rule obligating everyone to obey the great rabbis’ decisions in *all* matters including secular, social, and even political issues.[[10]](#footnote-10) The main claim of such communities is that rabbis have insight, knowledge, understanding, and even some sort of *Ruach Hakodesh* that obligate all to follow their decisions.

Rav Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953), a [*mashgiach ruchani*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mashgiach_ruchani) at the [Ponevezh Yeshiva](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponevezh_yeshiva), clearly saw both terms as interchangeable:

…we can derive the principle of *emunat chachamim -* “faith in our sages.” Whoever is prepared to trust them can make use of their clear vision and see the world through their eyes .In this way we can obtain extremely valuable insights both on outlook and on behavior … this is why the great Torah giants of our times, who have made it their life-task to continue, as faithful disciples, the thought patterns of our sages, often achieve an amazing clear-sightedness. It often happens that their mere unsupported opinion - even on non-Torah matters - possess a clarity and truth that border on the miraculous, and indeed we have the good fortune to see in our lifetime.**[[11]](#footnote-11)**

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein delivered a shiur on this topic, which has been summarized and published on the VBM. After his analysis of this complex issue, he stresses that the main component which is mostly missing nowadays is *da’at*. It is his understanding that this term includes broad knowledge in many disciplines as well as sensitivity, compassion, sympathy, and common sense.

Regarding *emunat chakhamim* he says:

To conclude, and to avoid any doubt, let us stress that the fact that we recoil from *Da’at Torah* in its contemporary context, does not pose the slightest conflict with the important principle of *emunat chakhamim.* Indeed, *emunat chakhamim* is required; the sole remaining question is how we know both “what” and “who” to believe in.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Rav Yehuda Amital discussed the importance of educating students to reach decisions of their own. He referred to the widespread custom of turning to rabbis with questions about personal matters. His opinion in this question is clear:

There are those who believe that, ideally, a person should turn to a rabbi for guidance in all matters; they see this as an elevated expression of fear of Heaven. In my opinion, this is a problematic phenomenon, one that contradicts what is expected of man.[[13]](#footnote-13)

To back up his opinion, he quotes Rav Shnuer Zalman of Ladi, the founding Rebbe of Chabad who argued with followers who sought his opinion in secular matters:

Come now and let us debate; remember the days of old, consider the years of every generation. *Has such a thing ever happened in days past? Where indeed have you found such a custom*in any of the books of the early or latter sages of Israel, that it should be the custom and established norm *to ask for advice in mundane matters, as to what one ought to do in matters of the physical world*[emphasis added]?[Such questions were not asked] even of the greatest of the former sages of Israel, such as the authors of the Mishnaand the Gemara*,* from whom no secret was hidden, and for whom all the paths of heaven were clearly illuminated. Rather, these questions were asked only of actual prophets …[[14]](#footnote-14)

It seems that even one of the greatest founders of chassidut was opposed to the current practice of *Da’at Torah* in many religious communities including the chassidic courts.

**Visiting the Rebbe**

A very important component of the chassid’s relationship with his Rebbe was the visit to the Rebbe’s court especially during the *chagim*. In his book *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, Dr. Aaron Wertheim explains the significance of these visits within the chassidic community:

Besides binding himself to the rebbi, which could even take place at a distance, and besides the spiritual infusion which the Hasid drew from his rebbi’s teaching when this was transmitted to him orally, and besides the times he was fortunate to see the rebbi when the latter visited his town, there was a holy obligation upon each Hasid to travel to the rebbi at fixed time intervals.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In fact, the periodic visit became so important that some even emphasized the journey **itself** as being as important.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This custom has precedents in halakha. The Gemara rules that a person who is traveling for the purpose of performing a mitzva is exempt from the mitzva of *sukka*.[[17]](#footnote-17) Rashi in his commentary suggests three examples of such a traveler: One on his way to learn Torah, one on a mission to redeem prisoners, and one who is on his way to visit his rabbi.

The tradition of visiting rabbis also appears in biblical sources. The Tanakh describes a barren woman who was promised by the prophet Elisha that she would be blessed with a child. The child dies and the woman rushes to Elisha to ask him for help. As she leaves, her husband questions her: “Why are you going to him today? It is neither Rosh Chodesh nor Shabbat.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The Gemara in the name of Rav Yitzchak derives from here that one is obligated to visit his Rabbi on the three *regalim*.[[19]](#footnote-19) The obvious question is how the Gemara derives from this *passuk* the obligation regarding Yom Tov, when only Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh are mentioned. Elsewhere, the Gemara describes Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi questioning Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta about why he has not visited him on Yom Tov, pointing out that that was the regular custom.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Rav Yechezkel ben Yehuda Landau (1713-1793) explains that the original obligation derived from the *passuk* in *Melakhim* was to visit your rabbi on the particular times mentioned, however, the Gemara arrives at an alternative ruling:

A Torah scholar is permitted to stand before his teacher only once in the morning and once in the evening, so that the teacher’s honor should not be greater than the honor of Heaven.**[[21]](#footnote-21)**

Due to this the rule, it is prohibited to visit one’s rabbi every week as there is no obligation to visit the Mikdash every week. Thus, the maximum requirement would be visiting your Rabbi three times a year, parallel to the mitzva of *Aliya La-Regel*. Accordingly, Rav Landau rules that nowadays, as there is no obligation to visit the Mikdash, there is no obligation to visit rabbis on *Yamim Tovim*.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Other *poskim* argue that the custom of visiting one’s rabbi does apply nowadays. It is their understanding that visiting rabbis is considered as visiting God, and thus the rabbis created this custom as an alternative to *Aliya La-Regel*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Rav Ovadya Yosef addresses those who wish to leave their homes over the *Yamim Tovim* to visit their rabbis. He writes that the mitzva to visit one’s rabbi applies only when the rabbi lives in proximity to the *talmid*. However, if this mitzva would require traveling a great distance and celebrating the *chag* without one’s family, then it should not be practiced. Such practice would conflict with the obligation of *Simchat Yom Tov*, which includes making one’s wife and children happy. Only if one’s wife adamantly persuades him to leave her over the holidays is one allowed to travel.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**Opposition to the Role of the Tzaddik**

The philosophies and religious customs of the Chassidim in general were widely opposed by the *Mitnagdim*, but the unique communal structure of the chassidic courts with their charismatic leaders at the center were the subject of much criticism in particular.

In his youth, Rav Soloveitchik learned with a Chabad rabbi. He testifies that the experience instilled in him a “special fondness for the Lubavitch movement” and that “*a strand of Chassidut is buried deep within me*[emphasis added].”**[[25]](#footnote-25)** Yet, he speaks out against the placement of any religious figure in the center of one’s religious world:

The thrust of halakha is democratic from beginning to end. The Halakha declares that any religion that confines itself to some remote corner of society, to an elite sect or faction will give rise to destructive consequences that far outweigh any putative gains. A religious ideology that fixes boundaries and sets up dividing lines between people, borders on heresy. If a religion declares that God is close to Reuven (on account of his lineage, profession, or priestly role) and remote from Shimon, it is gravely culpable.

No person according to the Halakha needs the aid of others in order to approach God. A person needs no advocates or special pleaders. Every individual is assured by the Halakha that whenever he will knock on the gates of heaven they will be opened before him. [[26]](#footnote-26)

We have seen that the place of a religious leader in Jewish tradition, as introduced by Chassidut, is not merely a technical appointment, but rather an integral part of the religious observance expected of every individual Jew and every Jewish community. The question of how far to take this idea has remained a contemporary challenge.

1. *Mechilta* *Beshalach* Parasha 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Devarim* 10:20 and 11:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. TB *Ketubot* 111b [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Sifri* *Devarim* 11:22 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polonne*, Tzafnat Pa’aneach* p.128. The translation appears in Rabbi Dr Norman’s Lamm’s *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, Yeshiva University Press, p.306. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Sefer HaMitzvot,* Mitzva 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mishna Avot* 6:5. For a list of the various interpretations for this term see Simcha Friedman, “Faith in the Sages,” *Tradition* 27,4 (1993) as well as Lawrence Kaplan, "Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority", pp. 46-50, in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, published by Jason Aronson, Inc., Orthodox Forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Mesilot B’lvavam*, Machon Ma’aliyot p.106 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi Amichai , Techumim 11, pp.24-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rabbi Alfred Cohen, *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, Spring 2003 pp.65-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Strive for Truth*, Feldheim, Vol. 1 p. 177. In the Hebrew addition it appears in *Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu* I (Bnei Brak, 1977), 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. An unauthorized translation of this article appears at [www.zootorah.com/RationalistJudaism/DaatTorahLichtenstein.pdf](http://www.zootorah.com/RationalistJudaism/DaatTorahLichtenstein.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The article appears online at [www.etzion.org.il/en/independent-decision-making](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/independent-decision-making). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Aaron Wertheim, *Law and Custom in Hasidism*, trans. Shmuel Himelstein, Ktav Publishing House, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rav Nachman of Breslov*, Sefer Ha-Midot*, Ot Tzadik, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sukkah 25a [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. II *Melakhim* 4:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. TB *Rosh* *Hashana* 16b [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. TB *Shabbat* 152b [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. TB *Kiddushin* 33a [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Noda Biyehuda* *Tanina OC* 94. Rav Aryeh Pomarenchick in *Amek Beracha* p.93 argues that *Rishonim* like the Ritva did not agree with this interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This opinion appears explicitly in Rav Yonatan Eivshetz’s *Yaarot Devash*, 1:12. It is also the Malbim’s understanding as it appears in his commentary to II Melachim 4:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Chazon Ovadia*, Yom Tov, pp.100-101 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. In a letter published in *Community, Covenant And Commitment: Selected Letters And Communications* (Meotzar Horav),Edited by Rav [Natanel Helfgot](https://www.amazon.com/Nathaniel-Helfgot/e/B0076URNH0/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_2), pp.289-291 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Halakhic Man*, JPS, p.43 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)