**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

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Please pray for a refua sheleima for טובה מאטל בת חנה אטל

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**Shiur #20: Chassidic Service of God**

**Fervor in *Chassidut***

Service of God with fervor was one of the concepts that *chassidut* sought to revive. The concept and model of passionate service is known to us from the time of King David, when he danced before the Ark of the Lord:

And David leaped about before the Lord with all his might, and David was girded with a linen *efod.* (*Shemuel* II 6:14)

In chassidic teachings, fervor is emphasized as a central element in the service of God, in accordance with the instructions of the Ba’al Shem Tov:

Is it not well-known that the most important thing in the service of God is *devekut*[[1]](#footnote-1) and fervor…[[2]](#footnote-2)

The main thing… is to ignite fervor and longing and desire in one’s service of God…[[3]](#footnote-3)

The root of the word *hitlahavut* (fervor) is made up of the same letters (*l-h-v*) that form the word *lehava*, a flame. Thus, the reflexive form *hitlahavut* also describes a “bursting into flame.” A person who invests fervor in his service of God is like someone who ignites a flame within himself. *Hitlahavut* that expresses a desire to cleave to the light of *Ein Sof* is shared by the angels:

The kabbalists taught that the angels burn with fervor… desiring to cleave to the light of *Ein Sof*, as the nature of a flame is to reach upward, towards its source. And there they are dissolved in the presence of the light of *Ein Sof*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev invokes the same metaphor:

The main core of the service of the Creator is the fervor and desire that should burn constantly like a fire to perform God’s will.[[5]](#footnote-5)

And from R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk we learn:

A person should study with the fire of fervor and desire for the sake of the blessed God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Kalonymus’s grandfather, author of *Maor Va-Shemesh*, writes:

It is well-known that the main service in Torah study and prayer and in all the *mitzvot* is the love and awe with which he performs that *mitzva*. The greater the light of fervor of love and awe that he attains in performing the *mitzva*, the greater the *mitzva*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Fervor flows from action prompted by motivation, joy,[[8]](#footnote-8) conscientiousness, and a longing to carry out the desired action – whether the subject is engaged in performing a *mitzva*, praying,[[9]](#footnote-9) studying Torah, or any action defined as service of God. Fervor is a driving power that is capable of elevating man to the most elevated heights – but also to the nethermost depths:

He must penetrate to his soul, in order to lift it up and awaken it to feel passionately as it performs every *mitzva*, learns Torah, or prays. It should experience spiritual bliss and rejoice in this bliss. And when he connects his whole soul and the life of his body to God… the *mitzvot* and the divine service he performs become spiritually more elevated and holier.[[10]](#footnote-10)

And when he performs his service – holy service – with fervor… then he merits greater inspiration from on High. Therefore, if this is not all of *chassidut*, then at least [it may be said that] there can be no *chassidut* without it.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is impossible to serve God… without being a person who is passionate about holiness. For passion is all of the person: it draws him to the east, and he is pulled along after it; to the west, the north, or the south – he follows; to the abyss – he is drawn after it; and if it rises to the heavens, then once again he follows.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Fervor and passion stand in contrast to action that is devoid of motivation, laziness, and mental weariness. A person whose spiritual life is defined in this way is described by R. Kalonymus as completely apathetic towards the spiritual dimension in its entirety, like someone who has lost his joie de vivre:

People whose hearts are completely dulled… who never experience any passion, Heaven forbid, whose psyche is buried under a great heap of refuse, and who fail to extend even a finger of their hand to the outside… they are [like] a stumbling drunkard who rolls about in the refuse, with no will or desire for anything that is holy.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Of particular interest is R. Kalonymus’s comment concerning the Jewish tendency towards impatience (disquiet, nervousness, agitation). Seemingly, this is a negative characteristic that one should try to avoid, but R. Kalonymus – in typical fashion – examines the essence of the characteristic, seeking its positive aspect that can be channeled into Divine service.[[14]](#footnote-14) He argues that Jewish impatience indicates the potential to achieve prophecy:

By nature, Jews tend towards impatience… because fundamentally they are descendants of prophets. If they use this quality for [Divine] service, then they will thereby achieve elevated service, even Divine inspiration. If not, then they are like someone who is born with a very sharp mind: If he does not use it for wisdom, then he is at risk of going mad. The same passion that facilitates elevated service, self-nullification, fervor, and Divine inspiration can turn into insubordination and agitation, God forbid. This offers some insight into the meaning of the verse (*Melakhim* II 9:11) in which people seeking to scorn the prophet referred to him by this description [“madman”].[[15]](#footnote-15)

Agitation or impatience indicates active emotional capacity. A person who never gets angry or agitated may enjoy an advantage in terms of positive character traits, but he lacks a certain emotional capacity. Thus, it turns out, surprisingly enough, that it is specifically this negative trait that testifies to an ability on the part of Jews to experience fervor, passion, and prophecy. Of course, this does not mean that a person who is easily angered is praiseworthy; on the contrary, this is undesirable and to be condemned.[[16]](#footnote-16) Rather, it means that he should channel his emotions towards fervor in his service of God, and then he will be able to achieve a high level.

R. Kalonymus devotes a significant portion of his teachings to the challenge of self-perfection in this area – i.e., turning oneself into a person who is capable of arousing within himself and experiencing fervor and passion in his religious service. At the same time, it must be noted that the fervor and passion arising from the development of one’s emotional capacity is not limited to happy or uplifting experiences. For example, a person who has a well-developed emotional capacity will be shocked by an evil act and will experience this shock more profoundly than would someone else who merely perceives the act, in his intellect, as evil.[[17]](#footnote-17)

How does one develop his service of God in the emotional sphere? How does one arouse and manipulate his emotions so that they react differently from the way we would expect or want them to react? Before R. Kalonymus teaches us how to work with emotions, we must first familiarize ourselves with the psyche – the psyche of each and every one of us.

(To be continued)

1. Gershom Scholem notes the central place of *devekut* in the world of *chassidut*. Emotion and fervor are important as a means of achieving *devekut*. See G. Scholem, *Devarim Be-Go*, pp. 325-360. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Keter Shem Tov* (Kehat Edition: Brooklyn, New York, 5747), *ot* 208, p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., *ot* 286, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz, *Sefer Avodat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 5753), *Parshat* *Vayishlach*, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem, 5744), *Likkutim*, p. 658. Martin Buber (*Or Ha-Ganuz* [Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 5739], p. 13) offers a similar definition of *chassidut*: “Chassidic teachings are in fact an allusion to a life of fervor, a life of enthusiastic joy. But these teachings are not a theoretical matter with no regard for whether or not one actually lives in this way. It is a theoretical complement to a life that *tzaddikim* and *chassidim* actually lived.” See also Buber’s claim (ibid., pp. 15-16) that the path to generating such fervor requires a bond with a *tzaddik*. In R. Kalonymus’s teachings, we find that this is indeed one of the ways – but there are also others.

In chassidic sources, there are countless statements in praise of fervor in the service of God, indicating that this was an exceptionally important principle in the eyes of chassidic teachers throughout the generations. Chabad teachings similarly deal at length with the subjct of fervor and ways of attaining it, although here the term that is usually used is *hitpa’alut*. See R. Elior, *Torat Achdut Ha-Hafakhim: Ha-Teotopia Ha-Mistit shel Chabad* (Jerusalem, 5753), p. 150, and the index entries “*hitlahavut*” and “*hitpa’alut*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parshat* *Shemini.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem, 5748), *Parshat* *Nitzavim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Although the importance of joy in the service of God was not an idea that was introduced by the chassidic movement, it was given great emphasis in chassidic teachings. Furthermore, according to Azriel Shochat, there are two elements relating to joy that were indeed innovations of chassidism. The first is the importance of distinguished individuals rejoicing together with the masses, even though the masses are not always focused on spiritual joy. The second is maintaining a constant state of joy, at all times. See A. Shochat, “*Al Ha-Simcha Be-Chassidut*,” *Tzion* 16 (5711), pp. 30-43. Shochat cites several additional sources concerning the importance of joy in the service of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the role of fervor in chassidic prayer, see L. Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer* (London, 1993), 93-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 22 (*A Student’s Obligation*, p. 17). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We will discuss this futher in our discussion of the perfection of character. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 22 (author’s note). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Sages taught that a person who grows angry loses his prophetic ability: “Resh Lakish taught: Anyone who grows angry – if he is wise, wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet, prophecy departs from him…” (*Pesachim* 66b). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)