**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chasidut**

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**Shiur #49: R. Yehuda ben Levi and Mashiach (3)**

**“When Will You Come, Master?” – and Mashiach in Chasidic Stories**

The two previous *shiurim* looked at the encounter between R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach, and the question of “When will you come, Master?” voiced in the *Bavli* (*Sanhedrin*) by R. Yehoshua ben Levi. This question is echoed in the Chasidic world in the story of an encounter between the Ba’al Shem Tov and Mashiach, which is recounted in a letter the Ba’al Shem Tov sent to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon of Kitov, while the latter was in Eretz Yisrael. The letter is considered one of the few extant sources written by the Ba’al Shem Tov himself (the majority of his teachings were committed to writing only after his death, by his disciples). The account maintains a very clear “dialogue” with the Talmudic narrative about R. Yehoshua ben Levi.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The letter describes an “ascent of the soul” by the Ba’al Shem Tov: his soul ascends and goes about in the “supernal worlds,” where he meets various figures. The following are some excerpts:

And I besought my master[[2]](#footnote-2) to accompany me, for the ascent to the Supernal Worlds is fraught with danger. From the day of my birth until now, I never experienced such an ascent as this.

I went up from level to level until I entered the Palace of Mashiach, where Mashiach studies with the *Tannaim* and *tzaddikim*, as well as the Seven Shepherds […]

I asked Mashiach, “When will you come, Master?” And he replied, “By this you shall know: it will be a time when your teachings become publicized and revealed to the world, and your well-springs have spread outward. [It will be when] that which I have taught you – and that which you have perceived by your own efforts – has become known, so that others, too, will be able to perform mystical unifications and ascents of the soul like you. Then all the *kelipot* [“shells,” concealments] will be destroyed, and it will be a time of grace and salvation.”

I was amazed at this and greatly troubled, since a long time must pass for this to be possible. But while I was there, I learned three *segulot* and three Holy Names which are easy to learn and explain. My mind was then set at ease, and I thought that with these teachings, the people of my own generation might attain the same spiritual level and state as myself. They would be able to elevate their souls and to learn and perceive just as I do. However, I was not granted permission to reveal this during my lifetime. I pleaded for your sake to be allowed to teach you, but I was denied permission altogether and took an oath to that effect.

Yet this I can tell you, and may God assist you, that your way may be pleasant to the Lord, and that you do not go astray (particularly in the Holy Land). Whenever you pray or study – and indeed with every utterance of your lips – have the intention of bringing about the unification of a Divine Name. For every letter contains worlds and souls and Godliness, and they ascend and combine and unite with one another. Then the letters combine and unite to form a word, and they are actually unified with the Divine essence, and in all these aspects, your soul is bound up with them. All the worlds become unified as one, and they ascend and bring about great joy and delight without measure. Consider the joy of a bridegroom and bride in this lowly physical world, and you will realize how much greater is the joy on such a lofty spiritual level. (“*Iggeret Ha-Kodesh*,” in Y. Mondschein, *Shivchei Ha-Besht*, Jerusalem 5742, pp. 234-235)[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Ba’al Shem Tov meets Mashiach, and the question he poses to him – as mentioned above – is exactly the same as that posed by R. Yehoshua ben Levi: “When will you come, Master?” Without doubt, the Ba’al Shem Tov wrote his letter with the story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi in mind. Nevertheless, there are very interesting differences between the two encounters. Even a cursory review is sufficient to reveal that in the Chasidic story, Mashiach is to be found in the “supernal worlds,” in the Garden of Eden, in the company of the *Tannaim* and *tzaddikim* – as in the opening image of the Talmudic story, where R. Yehoshua ben Levi encounters Eliyahu and Rashbi at the gateway to heaven, and apparently hears the voice of Mashiach, too. But while in the Talmudic story it turns out that Mashiach is also be found on earth, at the gates of Rome, in the Ba’al Shem Tov’s story there is no such description. Moreover, when Mashiach talks about everyone being able to perform “ascents of the soul” like the Ba’al Shem Tov, the impression is that even in the future, the encounter with him will take place only in the supernal worlds, when all of Am Yisrael – or perhaps all of humanity – will ascend there.

It is worth noting that in the time of the Ba’al Shem Tov, a description of Mashiach as dwelling in lowly places of impurity would have touched a very sensitive nerve. Am Yisrael was dealing with the catastrophic fallout of Sabbateanism – and its later incarnation, Frankism – which had idealized the concept of practical “descent” to places of sin and impurity by a “Mashiach” figure (Shabbetai Tzvi / Yaakov Frank) and his followers. It may be for this reason that, in that period, Mashiach appeared to the Ba’al Shem Tov as dwelling only in the “supernal worlds.”

Indeed, some scholars have read the stories of R. Yehoshua ben Levi and the Ba’al Shem Tov as representing very different perspectives on Mashiach. Some have even argued that in the wake of the crisis caused by Sabbateanism, the Ba’al Shem Tov chose to forgo Messianism as part of the religious and spiritual world of *Chasidut*.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, I prefer the direction taken by Netanel Lederberg in his book about the Ba’al Shem Tov:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Prior to his encounter with Mashiach, the Ba’al Shem Tov presumably believed that he was to be found – as per R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s description – in the earthly realm, and he anticipated his revelation. To his surprise, he finds him the upper realms, in the joyful companionship of the “Seven Shepherds” and all the *tzaddikim* – an idyllic picture reflecting a perfect reality, contrasting sharply with this world. The Ba’al Shem Tov learns from his conversation with Mashiach that he expects humanity to elevate itself to his lofty level; he has no intention of descending to the earthly realm, and certainly not to the depths of impurity…

The manner in which Mashiach is revealed to the Ba’al Shem Tov relates to the substance of his response to the question, “When will you come, Master?” Mashiach makes his appearance conditional on “When your wellsprings are disseminated” – in other words, when the Ba’al Shem Tov’s teachings spread outward and are widely embraced. How is this supposed to happen? Mashiach speaks of two central elements in the Ba’al Shem Tov’s religious path: *yichudim* (unifications) and *aliyot* (ascents). The latter refers to the “ascents of the soul” undertaken by the Ba’al Shem Tov to the supernal worlds, such as that described in his letter and others that are described in other sources. Of course, the Ba’al Shem Tov immediately dismisses the possibility that this sort of religious practice could become widely adopted. He understands that this would be impossible by definition: the “ascents” involve, inter alia, knowing secret Holy Names; there is no real possibility of sharing them widely. As he writes in the letter, he cannot reveal them even to his brother-in-law. The significance of this situation is that the revelation of Mashiach in this world becomes an impossible objective, at least for the foreseeable future, and this causes him great sorrow.

However, there is also the second element – the *yichudim*. Lederberg explains:

Following the sorrow over Mashiach’s words concerning the postponement of his arrival, there comes the understanding that the significance of this event is the establishment of a new form of Divine service: a *tikkun* (repair) that is not the responsibility of singular individuals who are capable of reaching the supernal worlds, but rather a process that is dependent on identifying a simple manner of service that allows everyone to actively participate in the revelation of Divine inner unity, expressed in God’s presence in the supernal and lower worlds alike. The significance of this insight is not a quantitative increase in the number of those performing unifications through dissemination of the teachings of *Kabbala* in its familiar format, but rather a shift in understanding the content and manner of influence of those *yichudim*. It is this understanding that underlies the Ba’al Shem Tov’s worldview, the basis upon which his teachings and directions to his disciples, with regard to prayer, Torah study, and Torah observance, are forged. The Ba’al Shem Tov understands that Mashiach is not going to come down and redeem the lowly earthly reality as it currently exists; it must reveal its oneness with the supernal world, through action that involves all of humanity in the process of repair. Promoting this oneness is man’s mission; this will be the realization of redemption, and it stands in contrast to the descriptions of Mashiach’s arrival and process of repair via intentional descent to places of impurity and *kelipa*.

This seems to me to be an accurate analysis of the meaning of the letter. The Ba’al Shem Tov embarks on disseminating the Divine service of *yichudim* immediately, in this very letter, as he writes in the final section:

Yet this I can tell you… Whenever you pray or study – and indeed with every utterance of your lips – have the intention of bringing about the unification of a Divine Name. For every letter contains worlds and souls and Godliness, and they ascend and combine and unite with one another…

Indeed, *yichudim* are a central element in *Chasidut* – the teachings that the Ba’al Shem Tov introduced to the world. They are the connections between the *Shekhina* (God’s presence) and different aspects of our earthly world. They are an attempt to perceive God – not in the sense of physical sight, but rather the quest to encounter Him, to make His presence felt within this world. The principles that “there is no place that is devoid of Him” and “the earth is full of His glory” are fundamental axioms that the Ba’al Shem Tov disseminated in his teachings, which became *Chasidut*.[[6]](#footnote-6) This sort of religious worldview, and its implementation in daily life, does not require extraordinary mystical insights; it can be shared by the masses, by anyone willing to make this consciousness of God’s presence in everything a significant part of their lives and their religious service.

What is the relationship between the Talmudic story and the story about the Ba’al Shem Tov? While the Ba’al Shem Tov unquestionably introduced a new path in Divine service, I am not sure that the description in his letter necessarily needs to be read as countering the description in the *Bavli*. Instead, it might be read as a kind of exegesis of it, taking the *Bavli*’s story in a slightly different direction from its plain sense – not telling a different story that replaces *Chazal’s* story about R. Yehoshua ben Levi, but rather presenting a new reading of that story. The Ba’al Shem Tov does not describe Mashiach as dwelling on earth, physically, in places such as Rome. However, we might say that the Ba’al Shem Tov reads the description of him sitting at the entrance to Rome allegorically, and integrates that into the new Torah approach that he introduces. In his reading, there is an ethereal figure of Mashiach who dwells in the supernal word and provides a glimpse of the upper realms of heaven. In addition, there is the description of Mashiach sitting with the sick and afflicted at the gates of Rome, which may be read as indicating God’s presence, too, in, those places. Recognizing God’s presence in such places is supposed to be the task of all people, and this itself brings about Mashiach’s appearance, as Lederberg writes. Noting God’s presence even where the sick and afflicted sit echoes the Ba’al Shem Tov’s manner of leadership, which reaches out to the margins of Jewish society – the simple folk, the destitute, and those who have not had the opportunity to study Torah. Mashiach’s continuous and continual movement of untying and retying his bandages – revelation and concealment – in the *Bavli*’s story can be translated into a continuous process of revealing God’s presence in the world, in every phenomenon, which is not necessarily a continuous, one-directional process. Life in this world, as the Ba’al Shem Tov sees it, is a constant “running and returning,” from a state of concealment and separateness to one of revelation and a perception of the unity of God in all of Creation.

The main significance of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s innovative teachings is his focus on this world and the understanding that what happens here is important. He believes in immanent Divine presence and meaning in this world, and he directs our main religious activity towards this world and what is happening “here and now.” This direction sits well with the ideas arising from the analysis of the story in the *Bavli* that was discussed in the previous *shiurim*, which diverts R. Yehoshua ben Levi from the supernal worlds towards this world, including its lowest places, and from “the time to come” to “today.” This is achieved in the *Bavli*’s story by locating Mashiach, as a concrete figure, within this world, while the Ba’al Shem Tov introduces the idea that every person who learns to “see” God’s presence in the world, and who works to improve and repair this world, is in fact carrying out a messianic act. Thus, it seems to me that the experience the Ba’al Shem Tov recounts in his letter does not present an alternative to the Talmudic story, but rather presents a new reading of it, in light of the new path of Torah that he is trying to disseminate to the world. Obviously, this new reading is a fascinating innovation in and of itself. In any event, what is common to both stories is the message that what happens in this world has religious significance and should be at the focus of religious activity.

The special qualities and advantages of the literary genre are manifest here once again. The story in the Ba’al Shem Tov’s letter does more than just make a theoretical statement about the coming of Mashiach. The Ba’al Shem Tov himself undergoes a transition – from viewing his goal as leaving this world and ascending to the supernal worlds, to viewing it as elevating the world itself, including the lowliest parts, and seeing God’s presence even in them, as part of the act of redemption.

It seems to me that the Ba’al Shem Tov also provides a new reading of the verse that Eliyahu addresses to R. Yehoshua ben Levi, the verse that Mashiach had alluded to: “Today, if you will obey Him.” Clearly, the plain meaning of the verse refers to “listening to God’s voice,” obeying Him by observing His commandments. But in the Ba’al Shem Tov’s reading of it, we also hear a call to hear God’s voice speaking to us from within the reality of this world. And this happens “today.” The Ba’al Shem Tov proposed a service of *yichud* that invites every individual, every day, to hear God’s voice calling to him that day, wherever he is. Perhaps we can also understand the verse as hinting at the idea of hearing the “voice of today” – i.e., hearing what this day is telling me and where God is speaking to me through this day.

It is interesting to see that this idea, molded by the Ba’al Shem Tov, also echoes the earlier source of the story in the *Bavli* – the parallel *sugya* in the *Yerushalmi*. As demonstrated in the previous *shiurim*, in the version of the story that originated in Eretz Yisrael, the presence at the gates of Rome is not Mashiach but rather the Divine Presence:

R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: If someone says to you, “Where is your God?” – say to him, “In the great city of Rome.” What is the source for this? “A call to me from Se’ir” (*Yeshayahu* 21:11).

R. Shimon ben Yochai taught: Wherever [the people of] Israel were exiled, the Divine Presence was exiled together with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence was exiled with them… They were exiled to Rome, and the Divine Presence was exiled with them.

What is the source for this?

“A call to me from Se’ir: Watchman, what of the night?” (*Yerushalmi Taanit* 1:1)

The story in the *Bavli* remolds this narrative and situates Mashiach at the gates of Rome, following his brief appearance at the gateway of heaven, at the entrance to the cave of Rashbi. But the innovative teaching of the Ba’al Shem Tov, as expressed in his letter, leaves the specific figure of Mashiach in heaven while restoring the quest for God’s presence in the world – “Where is your God?… in the great city of Rome.”

**Where is the place of His glory?**

As a postscript to the above, we might also trace the way R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s words are used in another Chasidic context. R. Nachman of Breslav, great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov, developed and elaborated on the path of his great-grandfather, and in one of his better-known teachings, *Ayeh* (“Where?”), he cites the words of R. Yehoshua ben Levi in the *Yerushalmi*:

And this is the concept of: “If someone says to you, ‘Where is your God?’ – say to him, ‘In the great city of Rome.’” (*Yerushalmi, Taanit* 1:1, p.3a). There, too! Although it is filled with graven images and idolatry, the Blessed One is found in concealment, even there!

This is the rule: When a person falls into there, God forbid, then when he consequently begins to ask, “Where is the place of His glory?” he thereby revives himself with the life-force of holiness. For the life-force of the *kelipot* comes only from the concealment, from the fact that God is so thoroughly concealed there that people are completely unaware of Him.

But the moment a person asks, “Whereis the place of His glory?” – it indicates that he at least knows that God exists, only that He is concealed and hidden, and this is why he inquires, “Where is the place of His glory?” And with this in itself he revives himself in the place to which he has fallen…. Through his quest and his seeking “Where is the place of His glory,” he merits afterwards to ascend altogether from there to the essence of holiness. (*Likkutei Moharan Tinyana*, 12)

The scope of our discussion does not allow for a full and detailed analysis of this teaching of R. Nachman, but a few words are in order.[[7]](#footnote-7) R. Nachman is relating here to a situation in which a person feels that he is in a lowly place, far removed from God. It may be that he has fallen into sin, or that his life has fallen into a place of banality, with a profound sense of meaninglessness, which translates into a feeling that God is absent from his life. Such places are symbolized by "the great city of Rome." R. Nachman goes further here than the Ba'al Shem Tov in his letter, and speaks of God's presence even in places of impurity and sin. One of the innovations of this teaching is the idea that one can encounter God not only in any place in the world, but even in the depths of sin and doubt, in the lowly depths to which a person may have sunk, where no faith exists. What might still exist there is the question or cry of "Where (*Ayeh*)?" that arises from the subject's sense of God's absence. Obviously, R. Nachman is offering exegesis of the phrase from the *Yerushalmi*: "If someone says to you, ‘Where is your God?’" Deviating from the plain meaning, he describes someone who finds himself in such a place, and asks, "Where is your God?" From that place, he maintains, the tiny movement of asking "Where?" – in other words, the mere expression of a sense of deficiency and seeking – is enough to evoke God's presence in that place, because in truth He is present even there, although in concealment. The very question, the search for God, is a step in revealing His presence. This presence gives the person the strength to elevate himself from sin, to effect repair, and to draw closer to holiness. This, then, is another innovative reading of the words of R. Yehoshua ben Levi concerning God's presence in Rome – as a private, personal realm.

**Redemption and repentance**

I will conclude with the continuation of the *sugya* in *Massekhet Sanhedrin*, which discusses the prerequisite of *teshuva* for redemption, with a brief story about R. Yisrael of Ruzhin's teaching as to the proper order of events:

[R. Yisrael of Ruzhin] said: It is said that “the Grandfather of Shpoli” [R. Yehuda Leib of Shpoli, a disciple of the disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov] once said, “Mashiach, why do you not come? I swear to you by my grandfather that the Jews will not repent!” To this I say: of course Israel will do *teshuva*! Of course, I am not disagreeing, heaven forfend, with “the Grandfather of Shpoli.” Rather, [what is meant is that] first there will come the redemption, and afterwards they will do *teshuva*! As we find in the decree of the Covenant Between the Parts: first came the decree, "They will enslave them and afflict them" – before there was any sin! Thus, it is only fair and proper that there should be redemption before there is repentance!" (*Irin Kadishin Tinyana*, Bartfeld, Yosef Meir Bleier, 5667, 23b)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Over the generations following the time of *Chazal*, the Talmudic story of R. Yehoshua ben Levi and Mashiach inspired a great many theological statements and stories, and was often at the center of polemic debates between Jews and Christians. For a partial review, see A. Berger, “Captive at the Gate of Rome: The Story of a Messianic Motif,” *PAAJR* 44 (1977), pp. 1-17. Berger’s study ends with the Ramchal; he does not continue up to the time of the Ba’al Shem Tov. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The prophet Achiya ha-Shiloni (from the period of Yarovam ), whom the Ba’al Shem Tov regarded as his main teacher. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The letter is cited here in accordance with what is considered the earliest of the various versions of it. For the versions and the relationship between them, see N. Lederberg, *Sod ha-Da’at: Demuto ha-Ruchanit ve-Hanhagato ha-Chevratit shel Rabbi Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov*, Jerusalem 5767, p. 260, fn. 152, and his references there. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, G. Scholem, “The Neutralization of the Messianic Element in Early Hasidism,” *JJS* 20 (1969-1970), pp. 45-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See above, fn. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, the concept of *yichudim* is far broader and more complex, centering around the kabbalistic idea of “unifying the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence,” which is worthy of extensive discussion in its own right and lies beyond the scope of this *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For extensive discussion of this teaching, see, for example, Rav Itamar Eldar, “*Targil Atzmekha Ledaber Lifnei Hashem Yitbarach ve-Az Tukhal Ledaber Imi Gam Ken*," *Ha-Olam Yesh Lo Rav: Mifgashim im Rabbi Nachman mi-Breslav* (ed. Moshe Nachmani and Da'el Rodriguez), Tel Aviv, 5771, pp. 119-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)