**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #25: Chassidic Service of God (continued)**

**Ways of Achieving *Hitragshut* (continued)**

**Intense Thought**

Thought is an important tool in achieving *hitragshut*. In R. Kalonymus's view, “thought” is not merely intellectual activity: "Thought is not intellect."[[1]](#footnote-1) Rather, the term is related to the activity of the imagination, and it arises from a person's character and inner qualities. R. Kalonymus defines “thought” and its relationship with imagination as follows:

One should not be mistaken into thinking that the “thought” we refer to here as arising from the spirit and the psyche means human understanding. For understanding is the broadening and internalizing of wisdom, but it concerns only matters of wisdom. “Thought,” in contrast, concerns things that are not just matters of wisdom. A person's thought, as we refer to it here, is a type of imagination; it refers to matters of form that one may construct in his imagination, such as the form of someone's house, etc., that one sees in his imagination. And he may think [even] about things that have no form, such as whether to show kindness towards a certain person, or something that his friends said.

And even in his dreams, when certainly most of his intelligence is at rest and asleep, still his thought and imagination are active within him... And usually, a person's dreams are in accordance with his character – especially those dreams that are from the thoughts of his heart. And when he has no awakening of any quality [in his Divine service] then his dreams, too, are weak or entirely absent. For the attributes awaken thought, and thought awakens attributes, at their source, all the way to the psyche. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Daniel Reizer offers the following formulation:

Thought and imagination are two sides of the same coin, with the distinction between them being the substance of what is imagined… There is no difference between thought and imagination, for there is no object of imagination.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Imagination” refers to that which one might draw in pictures, such as the form of a house or people, while “thought” refers to that which has no form, such as doing a favor for one's neighbor or what one's friend said.

Elsewhere, R. Kalonymus reformulates his definition using the term “intense thought”:

Intense thought and imagination are one and the same, except that those things that a person can draw in his imagination, such as the form of a house, a person, etc., he sees in his imagination, while those things which have no form – such as spoken words – are conceived of solely in intense thought.[[4]](#footnote-4)

R. Kalonymus emphasizes that there is no separating “intense thought” and “imagination,” since "there can be no intense thought without its forms."[[5]](#footnote-5) We can understand this better by applying these two elements to the situation of a story: The characters and pictures are the “imagination,” while the plot is the “thought”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Service of “Thought” Among the Great Chasidic Leaders**

Many Chasidic teachers emphasized service through thought. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk composed a special prayer that “all our thinking be pure, transparent, clear, and intense.”[[7]](#footnote-7) According to R. Nachman of Breslov, a person can achieve anything through thought. For example, a person can experience giving up his life in his thought, as, for example, during the recital of *Shema*; when he reaches the words, “with all your soul,” he is required to view himself as dying in sanctification of God's Name.[[8]](#footnote-8) A person should therefore take special care while directing his thoughts in this way, so that his soul does not actually leave him:

Know that thought has great power, and if one strengthens and intensifies his thought concerning anything in the world, he can make it happen. Even if one intensifies his thinking greatly about having money – he will certainly have it, and likewise with anything else.[[9]](#footnote-9) But this thinking has to nullify all feeling. The thinking has to be so intense that one is able to actually give up his life in thought – i.e., he is actually able to experience the pain of death – by accepting upon himself in thought that he is quite willing to give up his life in sanctification of God’s Name, through any form of death. And it is possible to strengthen and intensify one’s thinking to the point that, when he accepts in thought that he is willing to give up his life and die in sanctification of God’s Name, he actually feels the pain of death.

And this is as R. Akiva taught (*Berakhot* 61): “All my life I was troubled by this verse [‘and with all your soul…’]: when would I be able to fulfill it? Now that it…” This means that whenever he recited *Shema*, R. Akiva would accept upon himself the four types of death meted out by the *beit din*, and he accepted upon himself to give up his life with such powerful and intense thought that he actually suffered and actually felt the pain of death, as though he were actually being stoned and burned, in the most literal and direct sense. And this is meaning of, “All my life I was troubled… when would I be able to fulfill it?” In other words, the very fact that I contemplated and accepted in my mind “When will I be able to fulfill…,” to give up my life in sanctification of God’s Name – this alone caused me to be troubled and to feel and suffer the pain of actual death. Now that it has actually come about, shall I not fulfill it? For I have always experienced this very pain, from the mere acceptance [of death] in thought alone.

And when one intensifies this thought with such great self-sacrifice, a person can actually die from this pain, just as though he had actually died that actual death, for there is no difference between actual death and the pain that he feels from the death [that he accepts] in thought. Therefore, the moment one feels that his soul is about to leave him, he should distance himself and not remain there, in order that he not die before his time, God forbid.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is interesting that R. Nachman illustrates the power of thought specifically by means of worldly issues such as money and life, rather than using examples pertaining to the spiritual realm, such as the power of thought in prayer. Perhaps he wants to emphasize that even though thought is perceived as something abstract, it can impact even worldly phenomena, such as wealth and life.

R. Nachman teaches that this intense thought must “nullify all feeling” if a person wants to maximize its power. What is the meaning of this requirement? Through a comparison of this teaching with a prayer composed by R. Natan (R. Nachman’s scribe and closest disciple) in *Likkutei Tefillot*, based on R. Nachman’s teachings,[[11]](#footnote-11) we see that what he means is to concentrate his thought on death in sanctification of God’s Name, to the point that all other feeling is transcended and obliterated:

“To You, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” – Master of the universe, allow me, in Your mercy, to truly give up my life (literally, “soul”) in sanctification of [Your Name] at all times, and especially at the time of recitation of the *Shema*, when accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, that I might declare the Oneness of Your Name every day, continually, evening and morning, with true self-sacrifice for the sanctification of [Your] Name with all [my] heart, with happiness and great joy. May I merit to truly accept upon myself all four death sentences of the *beit din* – stoning, burning, slaying with a sword, and suffocating – when I declare the Oneness of Your Name each day, that I might be truly and wholeheartedly willing to die all of these deaths and to undergo all suffering and torture for the sake of the sanctity of Your great Name. Help me, with Your great strength and your manifold mercies, that I might succeed in intensifying my thought concerning true self-sacrifice, in intense and potent thought, with all the power of the inner and outer realms, and to imagine in my mind all the [forms of] death and suffering in all their detail, with intense and potent thought, with nullification of all feeling, so I might experience, in my thought and my mind, the actual pain of death and suffering, as though I were being killed and made to actually suffer through these forms of death and suffering for the sake of Your great and holy Name, to the point that my soul almost leaves me, God forbid. And let there be no distinction for me between the suffering of actual death and the imaginary suffering in my thoughts and accepted in my heart, such that I should have to overcome myself and halt this thinking when I see and discern that my soul is close to actually departing from me, God forbid, so that I should not die before my time, God forbid. And may You help and deliver me, and guide and teach me to conduct myself in this matter truly in accordance with Your good will, to accept the self-sacrifice with true love for the sake of sanctifying [Your] Name…[[12]](#footnote-12)

These excerpts illustrate the use of the expression “powerful/intense thought,” and R. Kalonymus may indeed have been inspired by these texts to use this term. Also, we see here the use of the term “thought” in the context of service through the imagination. We will elaborate further on this in the sections that follow.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 13. For discussion of this topic see Daniel Reizer, *Ha-Mareh Ke-Marah*, pp. 111-113. His conclusions are integrated in the paragraphs that follow here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 186-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reizer, *Ha-Mareh Ke-Marah*, pp. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Reizer, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk (chapter 1, n. 17), p. 26 ("A Prayer Before Praying"). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, R. Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen of Radin, the Chafetz Chaim, writes the following: One should have the intention, when reciting the *Shema*, of accepting upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven – to give up his life in sanctification of God's Name – for this is meaning of “with all your soul” – “even if He takes your soul.” Therefore, the verse says, “For Your sake we are killed all the day” – for it is with this orientation that one should recite it, with fear and trembling. (*Mishna Berura*, *Orach Chaim* 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “The Secret,” a film by Ronda Byrne (later followed by a book by the same name) has enjoyed tremendous success worldwide, including in Israel. Byrne argues that through thought alone, a person can “draw” anything – negative or positive – towards himself. According to Byrne, the power of positive thinking can be enlisted in different areas of one’s life, including relationships, money, and health. There is no question that many sources in Kabbalah and *Chasidut* support the concept of the power of thinking, as we illustrate in this chapter (and especially in the quote from R. Nachman). However, there are some fundamental differences between the approach advanced by Byrne and the attitude towards the power of thought in Kabbalah and *Chasidut*. Some of the way Byrne presents the matter is misleading, but the scope of our discussion does not allow for further elaboration. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Likkutei Moharan* (Jerusalem, 5753), *Kama*, *siman* 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In keeping with R. Nachman’s teaching to turn teachings into prayers: “When one makes a teaching into a prayer, this creates great delight on High” (*Likkutei Moharan*, *Batra*, *siman* 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Natan of Rimanov, *Likkutei Tefillot* (Jerusalem, 5749), part I, prayer 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)