**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #27: Chassidic Service of God (continued)**

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

***Niggunim* and Dancing**

The place and importance of *niggunim* and dancing in *chasidut* are well known.[[1]](#footnote-1) Both are forms of Divine service for all intents and purposes, and accordingly they are worthy of in-depth attention.

It is proper that after drinking alcohol, a certain amount of time should be devoted to *niggunim* and dancing:

After you drink a bit, sing a moving song, perhaps *Yedid Nefesh*, *Adon Olam*, *Mizmor Le-David Hashem Ro'i Lo Echsar*, etc. If you feel moved to dance – dance! So long as you take care not to pass all your time just drinking, singing, and dancing.[[2]](#footnote-2)

R. Kalonymus, a man of great sensitivity who was also a gifted musician – playing the violin and composing melodies that became popular among his masses of followers – expounds at length on the world of music and singing. He asserts that "the world of music is exceedingly elevated" and that a melody has great power and influences a person even if he is ignorant of how this happens. At the same time, R. Kalonymus explains a different idea concerning the power of music.

A song reveals and rouses a person; it may be viewed as one of the “keys” to the psyche or the soul. This being so, how is it possible that there are *chazanim* and others who sing but who are nevertheless far from God? His answer is that the *niggun* has the effect of exposing the soul, but the effect of this exposure and discovery on his behavior is dependent solely on the person himself. Some people channel the experience in the direction of partying and decadence, while others enlist the spiritual arousal in their service of God.

There is a correspondence between the psyche and music. The nature of a tune is that it rises and falls, grows stronger and weaker. There are more relaxed parts and more energetic ones; sometimes it is happy and at other times it expresses sadness. R. Kalonymus argues that this innate nature of music corresponds to the movement of the psyche, which is likewise characterized by ups and downs, joy and sadness, etc.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Are there special songs that are especially worthy of singing? R. Kalonymus writes, "You do not necessarily need to compose your own songs. If someone wanted to drink wine, you would not say that he needed to plant a vineyard.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Existing *niggunim* are fine; there is no special need to compose new ones.

Since the same passage also makes mention of melodies originating with other nations, we might perhaps conclude that according to R. Kalonymus it is possible to make use even of “non-Jewish” melodies, so long as they are directed towards Divine service. His advice on how to use a *niggun* in one's Divine service is as follows:

Take some musical phrase, turn to a quiet and private place – or simply close your eyes – and remind yourself that you stand in the presence of God. With your heart trembling, you are here to pour out your soul to God using music and voice, singing from the depths of your being. Inevitably, you will begin to feel the emergence of your soul, her great joy and delight. At first it was you singing to your soul – to wake her up – and now you feel the soul singing her own song.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A feeling of “slumber” is quite common in religious experience, even though here R. Kalonymus is referring specifically to the Divine service of music. At first, a person feels that he is standing “apart” from himself. He feels his mouth moving and shaping the words of the song; he feels his body moving to the rhythm of the music, but nothing is awakened in him. He has to work hard in order to overcome this “split personality” and create unity between his inside and outside; then he “feels the soul singing her own song.” Therefore, one should not be discouraged if in the early stages of his Divine service he feels a lack of identification with what he is doing. Sometimes *hitragshut* needs to be aroused “artificially” (as discussed previously in the context of dancing.)

The outpouring of the soul and communication with God is usually conducted with words, but music is also a language, and a person should be aware that he is able to talk to God by singing a song. Sometimes the song expresses a cry, at other times a request, but it can also express a caressing longing, like a young child nestling by his father, driven simply by the desire for closeness:

In the whole area of expressing the soul, we have much to learn from children. Children behave with a total absence of artifice and pretense. The child’s very soul is expressed in each of his activities. He is transparent. His soul shines through in everything he does, including this rapprochement we described, this flowing soul from father to son. Sometimes, when you sing you will have this experience. There are no words, there is nothing to say, there is nothing that you need. Still the soul is overcome with joy; she softly chants, “Oh God, oh my God.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, it is not only in of longing that one is able to uncover the psyche and speak with God. The same is possible through joyous *niggunim* and through dancing.

When singing *niggunim*, one should focus on elevating the soul. There is no need to raise one's voice; even a soft murmuring can be heard on High:

When you are with your fellows, as they pray or eat or sing at some occasion, sing with them… You want to use your voice… to raise up your soul. The Torah describes it thus: “When the musician played, the spirit of God came upon him” (*Melakhim II* 3:15). Or, to translate it slightly differently: When the musician becomes the music, the spirit of God is upon him. At this level, song is like a bridal canopy under which the bride and groom unite. (I can only hint at these matters.)[[7]](#footnote-7)

A *niggun* has the power to join together a bride and groom. The simple understanding of this idea is that at a wedding, the bride and groom are surrounded by their loved ones, who are rejoicing with them in their moment of supreme joy, and dance with fervor, adding to the joy of the couple and their love for each other. According to the inner meaning of the idea, the music can bring about unification between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhina*.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this context, it is interesting to note a teaching of R. Nachman concerning the unifying power of music, both in terms of the rejoicing of the wedding couple, as discussed above, and in the fraternal bond amongst those gathered around them, singing and dancing:

The essence of music and musical instruments was introduced into the world by Levi, as taught in the Zohar (*Shemot* 19a): … “Leah said, 'This time my husband will be joined (*yelaveh*) to me' (*Bereishit* 29:34). At this time, now that Levi had been born, it would be through him that the dimension of music and musical instruments would be introduced into the world. Undoubtedly, ‘This time my husband will be joined to me’ – for the joining of two entities comes about through music and musical instruments.” Understand this. And this is the significance of the instruments that are played at a wedding.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For more on music in *chasidut*, see M.S. Gishuri, *Negina Ve-Chasidut* (Jerusalem, 5712); R.S. Zalmanov, *Sefer Ha-Niggunim* 1 (Brooklyn, 5745), pp. 13-42. For more on dancing in *chasidut* in general and in the teachings of R. Nachman of Breslov in particular, see M. Fishbein, “*Machol La-Tzaddikim: Torat Ha-Rikkud Etzel Rav Nachman Mi-Breslov*," in E. Etkes et al. (eds.), *Be-Ma'agalei Chasidim – Kovetz Mechkarim Le-Zikhro shel Professor Mordechai Vilansky* (Jerusalem, 5760), pp. 335-349. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 114 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 115 [*Conscious Community*, p. 69]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thus, for example, R. Ephraim of Sadilkov, grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, writes: "A wise person perceives things correctly. He looks and he acts always for the purpose of unifying the groom and the bride – which means unification of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhina*" (*Degel Machaneh Ephraim*, *Parashat* *Teruma*). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Likkutei Moharan*, *siman* 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)