**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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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families

in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,

whose yahrzeit is 21 Tammuz. Yehi zikhro barukh.

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**Shiur #28: Chassidic Service of God (continued)**

**The Role of Imagination**

Imagination is the ability to create images in the mind, to conjure up in one's thoughts the different entities and qualities that he has perceived through his senses. The imagination also allows us to create new images – things that do not exist in reality. According to the Rambam, imagination is the composition of pictures based on the range of senses:

The imagination is that faculty that retains impressions of things perceptible to the mind after they have ceased to affect directly the senses that conceived them. This faculty, combining some of these impressions and separating others from one another, thus constructs out of originally perceived ideas some of which it has never received any impression and which it could not possibly have perceived.[[1]](#footnote-1)

If, for example, a person see a bird in flight and he preserves this image in his mind, and later on he sees an iron ship and he saves this image in his mind as well, his imagination will allow him to combine the two pictures and he will be able to imagine the ship flying in the air. He might wonder, “Why, indeed, should an iron ship not fly?” and this picture might lead him to develop some sort of model of an airplane. This sort of process characterizes the thinking of inventors and other creative individuals whose fertile imagination leads them to create and produce new things.[[2]](#footnote-2)

 However, the imagination inspires more than just scientific discoveries. It occupies an important place in all areas of creativity and art, architecture, design, music, and literature. The products of the imagination is reflected in prophecy and in the literature flowing from it – i.e., all areas of Torah. The briefest look at the teachings of *Chazal* reveals the rich world of images that they created.[[3]](#footnote-3) In fact, in every area in which the imagination is stimulated it leaves an impression and impact.

A person is able to imagine himself walking about in a distant land even if he has never actually been there. He can “visit” the Temple, even though it is no longer standing and he has never seen it, solely on the basis of descriptions of its dimensions and appearance. Examples of this are to be found in paintings or models of the Temple that artists have created to show how it looked. We will discuss this example at length below.

**Why does R. Kalonymus devote discussion to the imagination?**

Imagination occupies an important place in the teachings of R. Kalonymus, with special emphasis on the use of guided imagery – i.e., using one’s imagination consciously and deliberately in order to create different images for various purposes. The imagination is a means of revealing the soul and achieving *hitragshut* and *hitlahavut*, whose importance in Divine service has already been discussed. The use of imagination is also an important part of the cultivation and training of Jewish prophets, and since R. Kalonymus aspires to provide guidance in “the service of prophecy,” he views the use of the imagination as a critical skill for the Jewish people, “children of the prophets.” (We will discuss this further in our discussion of prophecy.)

In this *shiur*, we will address the idea of the imagination in Jewish philosophy before R. Kalonymus’s time. R. Kalonymus’s extensive and wide-ranging use of the imagination might surprise the reader unfamiliar with this realm. The following overview will hopefully shed light on the attitude of many Jewish scholars towards the imagination and the teachings from which R. Kalonymus gleaned the building blocks of his approach.

**The Imagination in Jewish Thought**

Imagination first makes an appearance in our sources in the descriptions of prophecy, where it plays an important role.[[4]](#footnote-4) As the prophet Hoshea declares:

I have also spoken by the prophets, and I have multiplied visions, and used similes [or “images”] by means of the prophets. (*Hoshea* 12:11)

The commentators note that God reveals Himself to the prophets through different images, as Radak explains in his commentary on this verse: “‘And have used similes by means of the prophets’ – like the simile proposed by Yishayahu, ‘My beloved had a vineyard….’” Similarly, the Malbim teaches, “Imagination is where the prophet perceives images that symbolize his prophecy, such as an almond branch, an overflowing pot, or a basket of summer fruit.” Only Moshe experienced a unique level of prophecy, in which he did not prophesy by means of images, but rather in direct and unmediated communication from God, as God testifies concerning him:

“With him I speak mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in dark speeches…” (*Bamidbar* 12:8)

Rashi explains that this means that Moshe could both perceive and understand directly what God conveyed to him. Our Sages use the metaphor of a mirror or sheet of glass to illustrate the distinction between Moshe’s prophecy and that of the other prophets:

What differentiates Moshe from all other prophets? There was a difference of opinion in this regard between R. Yehuda bar Ilai and the Sages. R. Yehuda said: The [other] prophets would perceive [their prophecy] [as] through nine panes of glass, as it is written (*Yechezkel* 43:3), “And the appearance of the vision which I saw…”, while Moshe perceived [his prophecy] [as] through a single pane of glass, as it is written (*Bamidbar* 12:8), “manifestly and not in dark speeches.” The Sages said: All the [other] prophets perceived [their prophecies] [as] through a dirty glass, as it is written (*Hoshea* 12:11), “and I have multiplied visions, and used similes [or ‘images’] by means of the prophets,” while Moshe perceived [his prophecy] [as] through a polished glass, as it is written (*Bamidbar* 12:8), “and the likeness of God does he behold.” (*Vayikra* *Rabba* 1)

Although the prophecy of Moshe, which was superior to that of all the prophets who followed, did not involve images, symbols, or similes, there is no denying or belittling the fact that all other prophecy was perceived using the imagination.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to the Rambam, with regard to anyone except for Moshe, man’s highest perfection is perfection of the intellect along with perfection of the imagination. Intellectual perfection might be the level required of a philosopher, but perfection of the imagination is necessary for a prophet, so that he can perceive the intellectual concept or Divine wisdom visually, in a dream or vision. This enables him to fill the role of instructing and guiding the masses, which, as we know, involves the use of similes and metaphors to illustrate concepts, ideas, and messages.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Shemonah Perakim*, ch. 1. Translation taken from *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, edited, annotated, and translated with an introduction by Joseph I. Gorfinkle (NY: Columbia University Press, 1912). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. the Rambam's view in *Shemonah Perakim* (above, n. 1), maintaining that a flying iron ship is an impossibility in reality (the modern airplane still several centuries away in his time), but can nevertheless be conceived through the power of imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Even in purely halakhic discussions we find the workings of the imagination, when the *gemara* postulates strange and unlikely legal and halahic situations and addresses them in halakhic terms. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Of the studies that have focused on imagination in Jewish thought, special mention should be made of the comprehensive and thorough work by E. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1994), which focuses mainly on early Kabbala and on Jewish philosophy during the Geonic period and early Middle Ages. Prof. Haviva Pedaya also lays a conceptual foundation for the discussion of imagination in the prophetic vision; see H. Pedaya, *Ha-Mareh Ve-Ha-Dibbur: Iyyun Be-Tiv’ah shel Chavayat Ha-Hitgalut Be-Mistorin Ha-Yehudi* (Los Angeles, 5762). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Rambam teaches, “The imagination has no place in the prophecy of [Moshe], of blessed memory; rather, God endowed him with prophetic knowledge without its mediation…” (Guide of the Perplexed, ch. 2.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Y. Levinger, *Ha-Rambam Ke-Filosof U-Ke-Posek* (Jerusalem, 5750), p. 26. See also *Guide of the Perplexed* II:36. The kabbalist R. Yehuda Chait offers a different explanation for the proliferation of metaphors and images among the other prophets: Owing to the overwhelming radiance of the Divine illumination, man – even prophets – can only perceive Him through many levels of protection (somewhat like the need for special equipment in order to look at the sun). The number of barriers that a person needs depends on his spiritual level, and likewise the extent of reliance on metaphors and symbols depends on the level of the prophet.See *Ma’arekhet Ha-Elohut im Perush Minchat Yehuda* (Jerusalem, 5768), *Sha’ar Ha-Adam*, ch. 10, pp. 239-240. (See also R. Chaim Vital, *Sha’arei Kedusha*, part IV, in *Ketavim Chadashim Le-Rav Chaim Vital z”l* [Jerusalem, 5748], p. 11.) For more on the Rambam’s view of the imagination, see H. Kreisal, “*Chakham Ve-Navi Be-Mishnat Ha-Rambam U-Bnei Chugo*,” *Eshel Beer Sheva* 3 (5746), pp. 149-169. See also Haim Kreisal’s all-encompassing book on prophecy, with discussions about the imagination and its place in prophecy among different schools of Jewish philosophy during the Middle Ages: *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)