**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #29: Chassidic Service of God (continued) –**

**Imagination in Kabbala**

The fact that the prophets made use of the power of imagination in their visions is of great importance for understanding Kabbala, which views itself, in many ways, as a continuation of the prophetic tradition. Kabbala makes extensive use of a well-developed system of metaphors and images to describe the upper worlds. It is impossible to understand most of the Zoharic literature and the Kabbala of the Ari unless one proceeds from the assumption that he is dealing with visionary literature – supernal revelation that takes various imagined forms, just as in the visions of Yishayahu, Yechezkel, and other prophets.

Let us consider the words of R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Ramchal), explaining how the prophet achieves these “prophetic visions”:

[It is written,] (*Hoshea* 12:11), “I have used similes at the hands of the prophets,” and concerning Moshe, our teacher, it is said (*Bamidbar* 12:8), “manifestly, and not in riddles” – implying that for other [prophets], God spoke in riddles [or metaphors]. And it is also written there, “and speak to him in a dream,” and our Sages applied to this the teaching (*Berakhot* 57a), “A dream is a sixtieth of prophecy.” And this is because the prophets are not permitted to behold the Supreme Glory as is; rather, the glory that is revealed to them introduces into their hearts prophetic visions, which are like garments and metaphors for the ideas that should reach their intellect – like all metaphors and riddles in the world. However, their perception is not the same as the natural way of human perception; rather, it is a [form of] perception that is imbued in them and a knowledge that is impressed upon them, such that it admits of no doubt, nor need for investigation, nor signs to prove it. Rather, it is clear to them beyond question that that it is the Glory of God that is revealed to them and which speaks with them and that it is He Who has introduced these prophetic visions into their hearts. And they are likewise impressed with the knowledge that they can arrive at the interpretation of the vision and the riddle and can perceive that which the Holy Lord wishes to reveal to them. This is as the Rambam wrote in chapter 7 of his Laws of the Foundations of the Torah (law 3): “When a prophet is informed of a message in a vision, it is granted to him in metaphoric imagery. Immediately, the interpretation of the imagery is imprinted upon his heart, and he knows its meaning.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

All the prophets, with the exception of Moshe, received their prophecy through visions and riddles. Their prophecy was “certain” in the sense that the prophet had no doubt that the prophecy came from God. Also, the prophet did not make up the images himself, but rather received them as a Divine message. Images were necessary since the prophet could not perceive and understand God’s word without an earthly “garment.”

Ramchal draws a distinction between two types of metaphors that appear in prophecies, “metaphors of attributes,” which depict Godliness and its manifestations in the world, and “metaphors of actions,” which describe God’s actions in the world. In the “metaphors of attributes,” the prophet understands immediately the meaning of the image that he sees, but when it comes to “metaphors of action” he sometimes needs some help:

A distinction should be made between metaphors of attributes and metaphors of action. In other words, there are metaphors in which God’s glory is depicted in terms of His attributes and [general] behavior, and there are metaphors that depict the [specific] action that He performs. For example, when the blessed God wishes to reveal Himself to the prophet as beneficent and compassionate, He will reveal Himself as an old man, as it is written (*Daniel* 7:9), “and an Ancient of Days sat…” When He wishes to reveal Himself as a mighty victor over His enemies, He will reveal Himself as a warrior, as our Sages taught (*Mekhilta*, *Yitro* 20:2), “He revealed Himself at the [Reed] Sea as a strong young man, and revealed Himself at Mount Sinai as an old man” (*Chagiga* 14a) – for a young man is suited to war, while an old man is suited to sitting and studying. The metaphors depicting His actions, on the other hand, are like Yirmiyahu’s vision of the almond staff and of the boiling pot, Yaakov’s ladder, Yechezkel’s scroll, and Zekharia’s *efa* measure, and the golden menorah. With regard to the metaphors of attributes, when God’s glory is perceived by the prophet through these images, their meaning is immediately clear to him. But metaphors of action are not always understood by the prophet until they are interpreted for him, as we find in some instances, such as (*Zekharia* 4:5), “Then the angel… said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ And I said, ‘No, my lord,’” and as the Rambam explains in this regard.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The language of prophetic images is continued in kabbalistic literature. Thus, for example, in Ramchal’s explanation of the essence of the *sefirot* – the building blocks of kabbala – he argues that the *sefirot* are revealed in prophetic imagery:

It was the will of the Supreme God that [the *sefirot*] be perceived as illumination, and through prophetic imagery, appearing in the forms by which we refer to them – meaning, as faces, worlds, garments, ascents and descents, and the like. But as we know, this is not what these forces are in actuality, heaven forfend; rather, they appear such in prophetic imagery, for as it is written, “I have used similes at the hands of the prophets,” meaning that the blessed God conceals the contents of His profound thought in these prophetic metaphors.[[3]](#footnote-3)

If this is so, and such fundamental concepts of kabbala as *sefirot* and *partzufim* are prophetic images, then we are led to conclude that R. Shimon bar Yochai and the Ari experienced visions – and there are indeed kabbalistic masters who stated this explicitly. For example, the author of *Chemdat Ha-Yamim* refers to R. Shimon bar Yochai as “Rashbi the prophet,”[[4]](#footnote-4) and R. Naftali Bachrach, in his work *Emek Ha-Melekh*, similarly refers to the Ari as a prophet: “by means of a prophet, such as the Ari… who conveyed, through Divine inspiration, all the secrets of reincarnation.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin, one of the greatest masters of *chassidut* and kabbala, concludes that the language of Lurianic kabbala, with all its many concepts and images, cannot be understood in any manner other than as prophetic vision:

For it is known that [the Ari] did not invent metaphors in which to garb his words, for if he had, why would he choose these particular metaphors? Furthermore, it would certainly require a tremendous amount of time for one to think about how to clothe a message in a metaphor such that the meaning would be clear. Rather, all his thoughts were arrived at through seeing hidden things, and he saw all this vision in the same way that Yechezkel had his vision of the Heavenly chariot… which is a mode of perception that contains something of Divine inspiration and prophecy.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This tells us that the language of imagery and visions is common to both prophecy and kabbalistic language, and in both cases the images have their source in prophetic vision.

Importantly, R. Kalonymus also views the visionary descriptions in kabbala as prophecy: “Kabbalists, too… perceive visions of prophecy.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The marshalling of concentrated thought combined with imagination is fundamental to kabbalistic service. R. Pinchas Eliyahu of Vilna writes in his *Sefer Ha-Brit*:[[8]](#footnote-8)

Do not regard the matter of thought and imagination as unimportant, for all the great actions performed in the upper worlds are all achieved through the *kavvanot* and *yichudim* of the lower [worlds], and they are simply the work of thinking… For thinking has greater power than does speaking, and speaking has more power than action. The entire dimension of Divine inspiration is likewise drawn down through thought… Prophecy, too, is performed only through thought and imagination, as it is written, “and I have used similes at the hands of the prophets” (*Hoshea* 12:11).[[9]](#footnote-9)

This sheds light on an important area of kabbalistic Divine service throughout the generations: the use of thinking and the power of imagination. The entire service of *yichudim* (unifications)[[10]](#footnote-10) and *kavvanot* is based on thought and its ability to influence the upper and lower worlds, as well as man himself – in contrast to the layman’s perception that action is more important than thought. In fact, all prophetic communication and the entire reality of Divine inspiration are created through the use of focused thinking and imagination.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Da’at Tevunot*, Friedlander edition (Bnei Brak, 57350, *siman* 180. Translation of Rambam taken from Eliyahu Touger, <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/904991/jewish/Yesodei-haTorah-Chapter-Seven.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. The reference to the Rambam here is to his words in the Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 7:3: “When a prophet is informed of a message in a vision, it is granted to him in metaphoric imagery. Immediately, the interpretation of the imagery is imprtined upon his heart, and he knows its meaning. For example, the ladder with the angles ascending and descending envisioned by the patriarch Yaakov was an allegory for the empires and their sujugation [of his descendants]. Similarly, the creatures that Yechezkel saw, the boiling po, the rod from an almond tree envisioned by Yirmiyhau, the scroll Yechezkel saw, and the measure seen by Zekharia [were all metaphoric images]. This is also true with regard to the other prophets.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ramchal, *138 Pitchei Chokhma*, Friedlander edition (Bnei Brak, 5752), *petach* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Chemdat Ha-Yamim* (Jerusalem, 5763-64), *Chag Ha-Shavuot*, ch. 1, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Naftali Hirtz ben Yaakov Elchanan Bachrach, *Emek Ha-Melekh* (Jerusalem, 5763), *sha’ar* 14, *perek* 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin, *Sefer Ha-Zikhronot*, in *Divrei Sofrim* (Lublin, 5673), *mitzva* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mevo She'arim*, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Late 18th century. *Sefer Ha-Brit* is a commentary on R. Chaim Vital’s *Sha’arei Kedusha*, and it makes frequent mention of the imagination and its connection to prophecy. R. Kalonymus refers many times to *Sha’arei Kedusha*, but not to *Sefer Ha-Brit*. For more on this work, first published in 5557, see M. Piekarz, *Chasidut Breslov* (Jerusalem, 5756), pp. 249-252. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Pinchas Eliyahu of Vilna, *Sefer Ha-Brit Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 5750), p. 584. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Regarding *yichudim* in kabbala and *chassidut* and the way in which they are accomplished, see R. Wacks, *Be-Sod Ha-Yichud: Ha-Yichudim Be-Haguto Ha-Kabbalit-Chasidit shel R. Chaim ben Shlomo Tirer of Chernowitz* (Los Angeles, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)