**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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In loving memory of Rabbi Dr. Barrett (Chaim Dov) Broyde ztz"l

הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפֹעֵל צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֶת בִּלְבָבוֹ​

Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise

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**Shiur #30: Chassidic Service of God (continued):**

**Imagination as a Negative Element**

Welcome back to our readers, if you are a new subscriber the previous segments for this series may be found on our website: <https://etzion.org.il/en/topics/piaseczner-rebbe>

So far, we have seen that imagination is an important capacity in prophetic revelation and in *kabbala*. At the same time, it can have negative effects insofar as it can easily lead a person to undesirable places. All the sinful thoughts that plague a person on a daily basis (*Bava Batra* 164b) have their source in the imagination, and as we know, sinful thoughts are worse than sin itself (*Yoma* 29a).

In our discussion of imagination and prophecy, we noted the importance of the imagination in the prophetic process, as described by the Rambam. We saw that according to the Rambam, the imagination is of value when it is used in conjunction with rational thought. Imagination alone is on a lower level:

David therefore commands his son Shlomo these two things… For he says, "And you, Solomon my son: Know the God of your father, and serve him with a perfect heart . . . " (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 28:9). This exhortation refers to the intellectual conceptions, not to the imagination, for the latter is not called "knowledge," but "that which comes into your mind" (*Yechezkel* 20:32). (*Moreh Nevukhim* 3:51)

When you are alone by yourself, when you lie awake on your bed, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God – i.e., to draw close to Him and to serve Him in the true manner which I have described to you, not in imaginary conceptions. (ibid.)

What is the disadvantage of the imagination? The Rambam explains, "The imagination can conceive only of bodies or forces residing in bodies" (ibid. II:12). The imagination is altogether occupied with tangible entities, in contrast to the intellect, which can conceive of non-physical entities and properties. The superiority of the intellect lies precisely in its separateness from and transcendence of the physical realm. The Rambam goes so far as to call the imagination the "evil inclination":

The imagination is also, in fact, identical with the evil inclination. For any defect in our thinking or character is the work of the imagination or flows from its activity. (ibid.)

R. Yosef Kaspi, one of the commentators on *Moreh Nevukhim*, writes:

For the imagination is the power of the material… Therefore, it makes no difference whether we speak of the imagination, the material, or absence.[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to the Rambam, Adam's sin originated with him turning his gaze to the objects of the physical senses and the imagination. His longing for these prevented him from using his intellect. He gave preference to the creations of the imagination over the creations of the intellect, and for this he was punished.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Rambam also identifies the imagination with Samael and Satan[[3]](#footnote-3) – certainly a very negative view of a capacity that plays a role in prophecy!

Hence, the same faculty that aids prophecy is the same faculty that can also lead man to sin. Ultimately, as in the case of many other powers, capacities, and faculties that man possesses, he has to choose how to use it. By means of his imagination, he can achieve closeness to God – or, heaven forfend, fall to the lowest depths.

In the teachings of R. Nachman, we similarly find a tension between the strengths and weaknesses of the imagination.[[4]](#footnote-4) On the one hand, the imagination is the source of faith and of prophecy:

Through the spreading of prophecy, the essence of the power of imagination is clarified and repaired, in the manner hinted to in the verse (*Hoshea* 12:11), “and used similes at the hands of the prophets.” For the crux of the repair and clarification of the imagination takes place when it is “at the hands of the prophets,” and when the imagination is repaired, this brings about a repair of holy, true faith, and false faiths are nullified. For the essence of faith depends on the power of the imagination. For faith has no place in matters that the intellect can understand. Faith is essentially to be found where intellectual understanding ends, and one cannot understand the matter through the intellect; it is there that faith is needed, and when a person cannot understand something with his intellect, then there remains only the realm of the imagination, and that is where faith is needed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Shagar explains that according to R. Nachman, the source of the imagination lies outside of man, as spontaneous inspiration, and therefore it is the source of faith.[[6]](#footnote-6) The intellect and philosophical investigation are bound within the constancy of logic – a constancy that stands in opposition to faith, since in the realm of faith God is not bound by any laws, frameworks, or constancy.

On the other hand, R. Nachman also teaches that the imagination is the source of all sin:

And when a person follows the imagination of his heart – in other words, his desires, heaven forfend, which arise from the imagination – this is truly animalistic behavior, since an animal, too, has an imaginative capacity. Therefore, when a person sins, heaven forfend – and all sins come from the imagination, for it is from there that all desires extend – he must bring an animal sacrifice…

After [R. Nachman] uttered the above teaching, in which he identified all the desires of the evil inclination with the imagination, he said: We should call our subject, the evil inclination, by some other name; we should no longer refer to it as the “evil inclination,” but rather “the imagination.” And although he said this in jest, I understood that he meant a whole notion by this, but I was not able to understand what he had in mind.[[7]](#footnote-7)

R. Nachman defines “knowledge” (*da'at*) as the ability to perceive the unity of opposites – for example, when a person grasps that God is responsible both for the “good” things that happen and the “bad” and that everything comes from God. When a person denies God's connection with the “bad” things in his life, and consequently they anger him and he is unable to contain them, this is the result of a deficiency in “*da'at*.”[[8]](#footnote-8) When “*da'at*” eludes a person, the imagination is empowered and he becomes more like an animal. When things in life do not work out as a person would like them to, instead of trying to draw closer to God and to understanding what He is trying to teach him through this turn of events, he will sometimes stop loving God, instead following his imagination as it starts to wander in undesirable directions:

For the power of imagination is the animal power; animals, too, possess it. One who finds fault falls to the level of the animal, and therefore the imagination, which is the animalistic essence, prevails over him… When “*da'at*” leaves a person, he falls from the love of God into the love that is of animalistic essence…[[9]](#footnote-9)

How are we to understand these strongly opposing views of the imagination – on the one hand, the capacity for faith and prophecy, on the other the danger of sensuality and animalistic drive?

R. Nachman resolves this question with a fascinating teaching about the power of song and of joyfulness. He asserts that a person has to examine and sift through the power of imagination, to control it, and to allow his “*da'at*” to guide it:

The imagination is subdued through the aspect of “*yad*” (hand), as hinted to in the verse (*Hoshea* 12:11), “and used similes at the hands of the prophets.” And “hand” hints to joyfulness, as hinted to in the verse (*Devarim* 12:7), “And you shall rejoice in all the work of your hand.” And this hints to musical instruments, which one plays with the hand, for it is through this [the playing of musical instruments] that prophecy rests upon the prophets, as it is written (*Melakhim* II 3:15), “But now bring me a minstrel…”

Thus, through playing a musical instrument with one's hand, a positive [joyful] spirit is distinguished from a negative [unhappy] one, and this [former one] is the spirit of prophecy, as explained above. And all of this hints to the subduing of the imagination, which represents a negative spirit, a spirit of folly, which seeks to spoil and confound the aspect of the positive spirit, the spirit of prophecy. But it yields and is nullified by means of the joy that comes at the hand of the minstrel, as explained above. For the essence of the surging of the imagination is through melancholy, for the imagination is identified with a melancholy spirit, a negative spirit, which confounds the positive spirit, the spirit of prophecy, which is identified with memory, as explained above... Therefore, the spirit of prophecy – *ruach ha-kodesh* (literally, “the spirit of holiness”) can be attained only through joy, which is associated with the playing of music with the hand, as it is written, “And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him…” (ibid.), as in, “… he shall play with his hand and you shall be well” (*Shmuel* I 16:16).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Joyfulness has the power to clarify and crystalize the positive aspect of the imagination – the powers of prophecy. Melancholy causes a surging of the negative aspect of the imagination, which distances man from prophecy, leading in turn to sin and to animalistic behavior. Ultimately, then, man can choose whether his imagination will be a key instrument in his quest for prophecy, or the opposite, heaven forfend – a key factor in his descent in the direction of his animal nature.

To be continued

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Quoted by S. Klein-Breslavi, *Perush Ha-Rambam Le-Sippurim al Adam Be-Parashat Bereishit* (Jerusalem, 5747), p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, pp. 80-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this context, we are discussing aspects of the imagination in the teachings of R. Nachman. For a comprehensive discussion of the place of the imagination in Breslov philosophy, see Z. Mark, *Mistika Ve-Shiga'on Be-Yetzirat R. Nachman Mi-Breslev*" (Tel Aviv, 5764), chapter 5. Mark identifies parallels between R. Nachman's approach and that of the Rambam – for example, on the subject of imagination and joyfulness (see ibid. pp. 94-95). In our discussion of R. Nachman's attitude towards the imagination, we have adhered to Mark's analysis. For more about imagination in Breslov, see A.Y. Green, *Ba'al Ha-Yisurim: Parashat Chayav shel R. Nachman Mi-Breslev* (Tel Aviv, 5756), pp. 334-336. Green argues that R. Nachman's denunciation of the imagination emerged during his youth, while his teachings that present it in a more positive light were from his later years. To his view, R. Nachman's use of his *Sippurei Ma'asiyot*, which testify to his well-developed literary and creative imagination, flows from the need to contend with the imagination, in light of the recognition that there is no way of forcing it entirely into submission. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Likkutei Moharan* *Batra*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. S.G. Rosenberg, "*Al Emuna, Omanut Ve-Dimayon*,” in Z. Maor (ed.), *Nehalekh Be-Regesh* (Jerusalem, 5768), pp. 256-257. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Likkutei Moharan Kama*, *siman* 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ibid., *siman* 21, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, *siman* 54, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., *siman* 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)