**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 #31: Chasidic Service of God (continued)**

**The Uses of Creative Imagination**

So far, we have seen how the imagination mediates between God's word and man, among prophets and Kabbalists alike. However, the imagination can also create a reality under man's own direction. In other words, when a person wants to achieve a certain goal, he can activate his imagination and actively create an imaginary reality in which he directly influences his own consciousness — a process referred to today as "guided imagery.”

In his *Sefer Ha-Kuzari*, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi describes the *chasid*, the ideal figure worthy of emulation. One of the attributes of the *chasid* is his active and deliberate use of imagination. He directs his imagination to conjure up the formative scenes of the Jewish nation, such as the *Akeida* (the Binding of Yitzchak), the Revelation at Sinai, the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and its sacrificial service, and the Temple in all its glory:

Thereafter the *chasid* charges his imagination with producing, in his mind's eye, the desired divine matter; the most splendid scenes preserved in his memory… such as the Revelation at Sinai, and the scene of Avraham and Yitzchak on Mount Moriya; and the *Mishkan* built by Moshe, and the sacrificial service and God’s Presence in the Temple, and so on. (*Sefer Ha-Kuzari* III:5)

Since the *chasid* has not been physically present at any of these events, he has to imagine how they looked and sounded, based on the tradition that he has learned or heard. R. Yehuda Ha-Levi's technique of using the imagination is also evident in his songs describing these formative biblical events.[[1]](#footnote-1)

R. Elazar Azikri, author of the well-known liturgical poem *Yedid Nefesh*, lived in the period of flourishing Jewish scholarship in France, in the time between the Ari and R. Yosef Karo. In his *Sefer Charedim*, in which he lists the commandments and categorizes them in parallel to the parts of the human body, he describes the technique of the early *chasidim* for achieving closeness to God, as described (according to his own testimony) in an old booklet that he found:

"The early *chasidim* would pause for a while and then pray, so as to direct their hearts towards God” (*Mishna, Berakhot* 5:1).

The commentators explain: They would clear their minds of matters of this world and attach their thinking to the blessed Master of all, in fear and in love…

And they would imagine the radiance of the Divine Presence above them as though it was spread all around them and they were sitting within it. This is what I found written in an old booklet of the early pious ones. And then they would dance in nature, rejoicing over that trembling…[[2]](#footnote-2)

These early *chasidim* would create a mental picture of divine radiance, and then dance and rejoice to the point of trembling, which is a physical expression of taking in so much divine abundance that the body is not able to contain it, and it begins to tremble. The prophets of Israel would manifest this ecstatic state when they experienced prophecy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The excerpt seems to be from a manuscript entitled *Sha'ar Ha-kavana La-mekubalim Ha-rishonim* (The Gateway to Focus of the Early Kabbalists). The guidance presented in it speaks of imagining radiance for the purposes of achieving some measure of the level of prophecy:

Therefore, if you pray, or if you wish to truly focus on something, imagine yourself to be radiance, and all your surroundings to be radiance, from every corner and every direction, and within this radiance there is a seat of radiance, and upon it is the likeness of the radiance of *noga* (brilliance)*,* and facing it is another seat, upon which is the radiance of *tov* (beneficence)…

And this is one of the paths of prophecy, such that a person who accustoms himself to it will ascend to the levels of prophecy…[[4]](#footnote-4)

R. Chaim Vital, the greatest disciple of the Ari, makes extensive use of imagery to achieve *ruach ha-kodesh* (divine inspiration). In his book *Sha'arei Kedusha*, which is entirely devoted to the attainment of ever-higher levels of *ruach ha-kodesh*, he directs the reader to ascend, rung by rung, to this end.

It should be noted that the fourth chapter of the book, which we shall discuss below, was not printed until hundreds of years after it was written. The reason for this was that it was viewed as inappropriate for matters meant for outstanding and singular individuals to be made accessible to the general public. In recent years this fourth chapter has been published — along with countless other Kabbalistic works — to meet the huge demand for the "inner" teachings of Torah (i.e. *Kabbala*) in our generation. The fourth chapter of *Sha'arei Kedusha* consists of a collection of advice and guidance gathered from previous books of *Kabbala*.

In the teaching we address here, appearing under the heading "practical ways of achieving [prophetic] awareness," R. Chaim Vital directs the reader step-by-step from the stage of purification to the unification of the Divine Name.

[To be continued]

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. See *Shirei Ha-kodesh Le-Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levi*, Dov Yarden edition, I-IV (Jerusalem, 5735-5746), p. 417. For the use of the imagination in R. Yehuda Ha-Levi’s works, see A. Chazan, “*Al Chasid She’altikha, Lo al Moshel*,” *Mayim Mi-dolyav* 1 (5750), pp. 239-240. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Elazar Azikri, *Sefer Charedim* (Jerusalem: 5769), Chapter 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In his *Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:2), the Rambam writes (translation based on <https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/904991/jewish/Yesodei-haTorah-Chapter-Seven.htm>):

When any of [the prophets] prophesy, their limbs tremble, their physical powers become weak, they lose control of their senses, and thus, their minds are free to comprehend what they see, as it is written concerning Avraham, “And a great, dark dread fell over him” (*Bereishit* 15:12). Similarly, Daniel states, "My appearance was horribly changed and I retained no strength” (*Daniel* 10:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As cited by R. Chaim Vital (see above), pp. 15-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)