**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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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l,

whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev.

May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM

be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of

Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #33: Chassidic Service of God (continued):**

**The Use of the Imagination in *Chassidut***

The power of guided imagery finds expression in the famous teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov: "Where a person's thoughts are, there he is wholly."[[1]](#footnote-1) This brief teaching encapsulates the essence of a person's inner Divine service. What it means is that the power of the mind is such that it can place a person in the upper worlds, in the presence of the angels:

In a single instant, as soon as he focuses his thoughts on the upper worlds, he is immediately transported to the upper worlds.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Chassidic approach to Divine service puts the imagination to use in many different ways, some of which we shall discuss below.

R. Kalonymus notes the practice of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, one of the main disseminators of Chassidismin Poland in the 18th century, to use imagery relating to self-sacrifice and sanctification of God's Name:[[3]](#footnote-3)

Throughout the work *Noam Elimelekh,* we see that where [R. Elimelekh] directs the reader regarding the thoughts that a person should think, he is generally not prescribing mere thought, but rather is talking about active, guided imagination. See ibid., Letter *Alef* in *Tzetil Katan*, where he writes: “And one should imagine and conceive an image of a great and fearsome fire burning in front of him, to the highest heavens, and he — for the sake of the sanctification of God's Name — breaks his natural impulse and throws himself into the fire for the sanctification of God's Name.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The excerpt in its context reads as follows:

At any time, any moment, when he is unoccupied with Torah — especially if he is sitting alone in a room, doing nothing, or lying on his bed unable to sleep, he should think about this positive commandment of “I shall be sanctified among the Israelites” (*Vayikra* 22:32).

He should imagine and conceive an image of a great and fearsome fire burning in front of him, to the highest heavens, and he — for the sake of the sanctification of God's Name — breaks his natural impulse and throws himself into the fire for the sanctification of God's Name. For a worthy thought is considered as an action by the Holy One, blessed be He, such that this person is not lying and doing nothing, but rather is fulfilling a biblically-ordained positive commandment.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk encouraged his Chassidim to use the power of imagination in other areas too, including thinking about God's greatness in order to arrive at love of God,[[6]](#footnote-6) and imagining himself, while at prayer, “as though he were actually standing in the Land of Israel, in the holy Temple, and to actually see everything with his mind's eye.”[[7]](#footnote-7) R. Elimelekh was the disciple of the Magid of Mezeritch, and he was the main disseminator of Chassidism in Poland.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Chassidic literature from Poland there are extensive references to his book, *Noam Elimelekh*, which is a foundational Chassidic work. We may assume that R. Kalonymus viewed himself as continuing the tradition of R. Elimelekh, and of Polish Chassidim in general, with regard to the use of the imagination.

He was not alone: many of the Chassidic masters encouraged their disciples to engage in guided imagery for various purposes. R. Avraham Dov of Ovruch enlists the imagination to achieve a sense of God's Presence:

One should always imagine himself as though he were standing before God, for the entire world is filled with His glory, and there is no place that is devoid of Him, so even if a person hides himself in a concealed place, God sees him there too…[[9]](#footnote-9)

R. Shemuel Bornstein of Sochaczew expresses a similar idea — a mental picture of the Divine Presence surrounding him:

And in truth this gives great strength to any person – to imagine at all times that no matter what the conditions may be, the Divine Presence rests upon him, and he himself is a chariot for the Divine Presence, as our Sages taught in Tractate *Ta'anit* (11b), “A person should always regard himself as though carrying holiness within his very innards, as it is written, ‘… the Holy One in your midst’ (*Hoshea* 11:9).”[[10]](#footnote-10)

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5767), *Parashat Noach*, 56; R. Mordekhai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, *Mei Ha-Shiloach* (Bnei Brak: 5755), Part I, *Parashat Bereishit*, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Sefer Ba’al Shem Tov al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: 5767), *Parashat Noach*, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The source of this particular guided imagery is to be found in the teachings of R. Yona Gerondi; from here it spread to other Zoharic and Kabbalistic literature. See R. Yona Gerondi, *Iggeret Ha-teshuva*, Y. Weinfeld edition (Jerusalem: 5738), pp. 193-194.

   For more on the dissemination of this custom, see Y. Haker, “*Klum Hu’atak Kiddush Ha-shem el Techum Ha-ruach Likrat Ha-eit Ha-chadasha*?” in Y. Gafni and A. Ravitzky (eds.), *Kedushat Ha-chayim Ve-cheiruf Ha-nefesh* (Jerusalem: 5753), pp. 221-232. This method is also mentioned in connection with the recitation of Shema with *mesirat ha-nefesh* (literally, [readiness for] giving up one’s life). See *Hakhsharat Ha-avrekhim*, p. 19; R. Wacks, *Be-sod Ha-yichud: Ha-yichudim Be-haguto Ha-kabbalit Chasidit shel Rav Chayim ben Shelomo Tyrer Mi-*Czernowitz (Los Angeles: 2006), “*Ha-yichud Ve-hamavet*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hakhsharat Ha-avrekhim*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), “*Tzetil Katan”* 1, p. 15; *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh,* p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. p. 20. Cf. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, p. 37. For more on this particular guided imagery, see below in the chapter “Imagining the Temple.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See A.Z. Eshkoli, *Ha-Chassidut Be-Polin* (Jerusalem, 5760), pp. 36-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Avraham Dov of Ovruch, *Bat Ayin* (Brooklyn: 5766), Part I, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Shemuel of Sochaczew, *Shem Mi-Shemuel* (Jerusalem: 5734), *Parashat Nitzavim* 5677. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)