**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #35**

**Chassidic Service of God (continued):**

**The Imagination in the Teachings of R. Kalonymus**

**Imagination as the artistic faculty of the psyche**

Based on *Tikkunei Zohar*, R. Kalonymus defines the human faculty of imagery, which is referred to in the *Zohar* as the “*nefesh ha-metzayer*” (artistic/ creative/ imaginative psyche).[[1]](#footnote-1) This ability to create images is one of the parts of the psyche, although in essence the psyche is a single integrated entity.[[2]](#footnote-2) The “artistic psyche” is listed in *Tikkunei Zohar* after the “thinking psyche”, which is the “faculty of perceptive comprehension”, indicating the order of their functioning — and also, apparently, their importance.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The logic behind this is readily apparent in the case of prophetic revelation. As we know, most of the prophets (with the exception of Moshe) experience visions which included various images: a staff, a menorah, an almond branch, etc. How are we to explain these images? Why do the prophets require these riddles? If prophecy is essentially a spiritual revelation, why is there a need for them to see physical objects?

R. Kalonymus’s answer helps us to understand the role of the imaginative faculty and its relation to the faculty of thinking. The above-mentioned section of *Tikkunei Zohar* relates to prophetic revelation. The prophecy is experienced by means of the imaginative faculty of the psyche. During the prophecy, the imagination gives rise to pictures of material objects, too, so that the prophecy has relevance in the material world, too, and not only in abstraction:

The prophets sanctified themselves to the point where they could draw the [Divine] illumination even lower, such that even the imaginative psyche, which is lower than the thinking psyche, was worthy of having prophecy revealed through it. And they also sanctified everything in the world such that things of this world — a staff, a lamp, etc. — could be depicted and seen in a prophecy. It was not just a matter of their perceiving the prophecy in their imagination, but their imaginative psyche was a chariot upon which prophecy could come to rest from on High, and through this they would perceive via their senses — in real sound that they heard, and seeing the prophetic visions with their very eyes, since they, their imagination, their senses, and also the artifacts of the world were sanctified and were worthy of having prophecy rest upon them and be clothed in them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Although the power of thinking is higher than the power of imagination, it is through the imagination that prophecy is revealed. This is an expression of God’s word descending to the level of worldly reality — the important principle propounded by R. Kalonymus, teaching that the vessels themselves are also a manifestation of Divine sanctity, not just the Divine illumination that fills them. The imagination shows images that belong to the physical reality (the staff, the lamp, the pot) and thus God’s word descends into the world of *Asiya* (Doing) and is revealed.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**The products of the imagination can arouse emotion**

R. Kalonymus attaches importance to the use of emotion and the attainment of fervor in one’s Divine service.[[6]](#footnote-6) In order to arouse fervor and passion in one’s Divine service, a person needs powerful thinking: thinking that will inculcate in his psyche the religious content with which he is occupied. Thus, for example, if someone wants to arouse passionate fervor within himself concerning Shabbat, then during Shabbat he must think about its significance; this will cause a sense of sanctity to be aroused in him. However, powerful thinking is dependent on the imagination: “There can be no powerful thinking without imagery…”[[7]](#footnote-7) Thought and imagination have their source in the same faculty of the psyche. The imagination uses images, while thought deals with ideas that have no form:

Powerful thought and imagination are of one and the same kind, except that which one is able to conjure in his imagination — such as the form of a house, man, etc. — is conceived in the imagination, while that which has no form, such as speech, is conceived only in powerful thought.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Therefore, if a person seeks, for example, to intensify his thinking about Shabbat and to arouse a sense of sanctity and fervor within himself, it is not enough for him to think “that the festival and Shabbat are holy — for he will not be able to sustain that thought, or to intensify it. Rather, he has to fill his thinking with pictures and images, and to think about them intensively.”[[9]](#footnote-9) For instance, he might imagine the angels accompanying him home from the synagogue on Shabbat eve; or, when he sits at *se’uda shelishit,* the third meal in the afternoon, near the end of Shabbat, he might imagine what is happening amongst the angels:

You approach, step by step, that time of supreme desire [a Kabbalistic concept pertaining to the special quality of *se’uda shelishit*][[10]](#footnote-10) in your mind, in your heart, even in your physical senses…

You approach that obscurity “where God is;” you have sought and found that which your soul loves. It draws close to Him and melts in His holiness. The whole room is full of the heavenly angels, and you push through the entire holy company towards the Holy of Holies, your soul desiring to enter the innermost chamber and to reach the place “where God is.” “I seized Him and would not let Him go” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 3:4)…[[11]](#footnote-11)

Therefore, the more detailed one’s conceiving of the image, the stronger one’s thinking will be, and the greater its impact on one’s emotions. Another reason for the need to depict as detailed a picture as possible is because one cannot sustain thought that focuses on a single detail and thereby arouse emotion. Further details must enrich the mind’s image, in order to reveal the psyche.

We shall now focus on several themes that R. Kalonymus recommends as the focus for the use of one’s imagination.

**Imagining the Temple**

R. Kalonymus advises a person in prayer to imagine himself standing in Jerusalem, in the Temple, so as to infuse his prayer with greater fervor:

For you are an Israelite, and in those times, when the Temple stood, there were Israelites; just as you exist now, so you could have lived then, and may God have mercy that we might merit the rebuilding of the Temple, speedily in our days. Focus your thoughts with intensity as though that were indeed the case: that you are standing in the Temple, before God, praying. With what great *kavana* (focus), willingness and passion you would pray.[[12]](#footnote-12)

His guidance here is based on a teaching of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk:

We find it written in the Gemara, “One who is outside of the Land of Israel and prays should direct his heart towards the Land of Israel. And one who is in the Land of Israel should direct [his heart] towards Jerusalem. Thus, all the prayers of [the People of] Israel enter via a single gate” (*Berakhot* 30a). A person who wants his prayer to be heard must focus himself as though he was praying in the Land of Israel, with the Temple standing, and the altar in its proper place, and he is [as if] in the Sanctuary, and it is as though he were living right now in the Land of Israel. Through this he will achieve clarity and complete closeness, to pray with wholehearted *kavana*, with fear and love of God, as though he were standing in the Holy of Holies. This is an example… that a person should regard himself… as though he sees it all right in front of him. So he should imagine it in his mind, when he is at prayer, as though he were actually in the Land of Israel, and in the Temple, and seeing everything right in front of him…

He should imagine that he is standing in the Land of Israel, and through this he will achieve clarity in his prayer.[[13]](#footnote-13)

According to R. Elimelekh, a person at prayer imagines himself standing in the Temple in order to achieve “clarity”[[14]](#footnote-14) in prayer. To what sort of clarity does he refer?

One possibility is that prayer in our times is to some degree dulled, since the subjects of prayer that pertain to the Land of Israel and the Temple are not clear and tangible to us. By way of comparison, if a person is consumed with worry because he has to somehow procure the funds for a dowry for his daughter’s marriage, it is easy for him to focus clearly on what it is that he is asking for in prayer. In contrast, it is more difficult to focus properly on the words, “And may our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy,” because for a Jew in Warsaw, in New York, or even in Tel Aviv, “rebuilt Jerusalem” is a somewhat abstract concept. However, if he enlists his imagination, he can conceive a clear, shining picture of the Temple and Jerusalem in his mind’s eye.

Another possible way of understanding the concept of clarity is that it applies to all of one’s prayers, not only those portions of the prayers that relate to Jerusalem and the Temple. According to this understanding, R. Elimelekh is teaching us that creating a mental picture of these places, and the experience of standing in the Temple, enables one to illuminate prayer in its entirety. When prayer is “illuminated,” it flows. The words are full of light and meaning, the heavens and the heart are open, and there is a heightened sense of closeness with God. So it was at the time when Israel would visit the Temple, when the Divine Presence was openly manifest, and so it can be even now: the Temple, even if only in one’s imagination, has the power to create clarity in one’s prayer.

However, it seems that there is yet another aspect to the importance of having in one’s mind a picture of the Land of Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple. R. Elimelekh lived in Lizhensk, Poland — i.e., far removed from Jerusalem not only geographically, but also a great distance in time from when the Temple stood. It is this distance that he seeks to close through the power of his imagination. When a person creates a mental picture of the Temple while he prays, he places himself within a different reality, and can pray from a different psychological “place” than the spot where he is physically standing. He can pray upon the Temple Mount itself.

One might wonder how R. Elimelekh arrived at the idea of using one’s imagination during prayer. However, a review of the teachings of Tanna’im and Amoraim relating to the proper intentions and focus in prayer show that R. Elimelekh did not “invent” this idea, but rather offered an interpretation of their meaning.

Indeed, there are various teachings by Tanna’im and Amoraim that describe praying with one’s thoughts focused towards Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple.[[15]](#footnote-15) The following is just one example:

Our rabbi taught us: To where should a worshipper direct his heart? Thus said our Sages: “A person should direct his heart towards the Holy of Holies” (Mishna, *Berakhot* 4:5).

Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov said: If he is praying outside of Israel, then he should direct his heart towards the Land of Israel. If he is praying in the Land of Israel, he should direct his heart towards Jerusalem. If he is in Jerusalem, he should direct his heart towards the Temple. If he is praying in the Temple, he should direct his heart towards the Holy of Holies.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We need to understand what exactly is meant here. Are we speaking of “directing” in the geographic sense alone? If so, what does the “heart” have to do with it? Surely it would be more appropriate for the text to read, “he should direct his face…” — as indeed it appears in the Tosefta, for example (*Berakhot* 3:16-17).

This is a very ancient teaching, and there is a general consensus among scholars that the R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov referred to here is the first R. Eliezer ben Ya’akov, who lived before the destruction of the Second Temple. R. Shaul Lieberman proposes that R. Eliezer adds to the words of the first Tanna in this *mishna*, who maintains that it is sufficient that a person maintains the thought in his heart: “That a person imagines himself praying in the Holy of Holies.”[[17]](#footnote-17) R. Eliezer comes to contribute that in addition to this thought, he should also actually, physically, turn his heart towards these places — in the geographical sense. Either way, it is clear that merely orienting oneself geographically towards Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple is not enough; one has to also conjure a mental picture such that he prays with these places in mind. Otherwise, what possible meaning could there be to “directing one’s heart,” aside from and in addition to geographical orientation?[[18]](#footnote-18) Levi Ginzburg, who engaged in thorough research of these questions, reaches the following conclusion:

Directing one’s heart towards the Holy of Holies is meant literally – that one should imagine that he is standing before the Holy of Holies. A person is able to conjure this mental picture even after the Temple has been destroyed, since the site of the Holy of Holies is known to us, as are its form and layout.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The Rambam, too, speaks of using the imagination in orienting one’s heart towards Jerusalem during prayer. He maintains that Daniel, in Babylon, would use the open window to imagine that he was standing at the Temple in Jerusalem, based on *Berakhot* 34b:

R. Chiya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: A man should not pray save in a room which has windows, since it says, “Now his windows were open in his upper chamber towards Jerusalem” (*Daniel* 6:1).

In his *Responsa*, the Rambam is asked about this.

Question: …How is it that we find many places in which people gather to pray which have no windows? And what is the importance of windows in relation to prayer?...

Response: Synagogues and [other] places devoted to communal prayer are not fitted with windows, and one does not look through them. These words… apply only to an individual who is praying in his own home, as Daniel would do, for it behooved him, in order to arouse his concentration, as well as to face towards a window open to the air, in order that he might imagine in his mind that he was facing Jerusalem, as though there were no barrier between him and [Jerusalem], nor any wall or beams. For he spoke of windows that a person could look through, and see through the air and through space. And there is no doubt that this imagery and description require intense concentration; so it appears to me…[[20]](#footnote-20)

The idea is codified as follows by R. Yosef Karo in *Shulchan Arukh*, in the ruling concerning the proper intention in prayer:

He should bow his head slightly, so that his gaze is downward to the earth, and he should think of himself as standing in the Temple, and his heart should be directed upwards, to the heavens. (*OC* 95:2)

Once again, we see that there is no possibility of carrying out the direction to think of oneself as standing in the Temple without using the imagination.

Thus, we see that the concept of using the imagination in relation to the Temple is prevalent already in the Tannaitic and Amoraic literature, and later also among the Rishonim. Thus, R. Elimelekh certainly had a solid basis upon which to develop this instruction.

It should be noted, incidentally, that this example serves to show how the teachings of the Chassidic masters, which sometimes appear, upon initial and superficial reading, to be their own inventions or creative interpretations, in fact arise from in-depth reading of Torah and the teachings of *Chazal*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Sefer Tikkunei Zohar* 126a:

"אמון מופלא דאשתמודע בכלהו, חד שריא בנפש הזיכרון, ותניינא בנפש המחשבה, ותליתאה בנפש המצוייר [נ"א המצייר], דאינון תלת מוחין י' י' י', ריהטא." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Hakhsharat Ha-avrekhim*, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mevo Ha-she’arim*, 202 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 202-203 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We discussed this previously, in Chapter Four, in the section “The world and man”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the beginning of Chapter Five. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Hakhsharat Ha-avrekhim*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Hakhsharat Ha-avrekhim*, p. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For discussion of this special hour, see *Zohar,* *Yitro* 88b; also R. Wacks, “*Ratzon, Hekhrei’ach U-vechira Chofshit Be-haguto shel R. Yitzchak Mei-Radvil”*, *Mayim Mi-dolyav* 14 (5763), p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 77, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem: 5752), *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In Chassidut, extensive use is made of the term clarity (*behirut*). “The term ‘*behirut’* means that they shine and become pure/ clear…” (*Degel Machaneh Efrayim* [Jerusalem: 5746], *Parashat Re’eh*). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See the comprehensive discussion by U. Ehrlich, *Kol Atzmotai Tomarna: Ha-safa Ha-lo Milulit shel Ha-tefilla* (Jerusalem: 5763), pp. 64-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Pesikta Rabbati,* *Anokhi, Anokhi, Parasha* 33, Ish-Shalom Edition, p. 149b. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-fshutah* I (New York: 5715), p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. E. Orbach, too, speaks of “orienting the body and directing one’s thoughts” (E. E. Orbach, *Chazal: Pirkei Emunot Ve-de’ot* [Jerusalem: 5746], p. 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. L. Ginzburg, *Peirushim Ve-chiddushim Bi-Yrushalmi*, New York, 5701, *Berakhot*, p. 403. See also Ehrlich, ibid., who concludes that we must assume that the expression “towards the Holy of Holies” entails use of the imagination. He maintains that this is an “experiential religious image of being inside the Temple, beholding the Divine Presence that rests in the Holy of Holies.” The Rambam offers a similar understanding: “He should fix his thoughts and imagine in his mind that he is before the Holy of Holies” (*Peirush Ha-Mishna*, *Berakhot* 9:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Responsa of the Rambam*, Blau Edition (Jerusalem: 5718-5721), Ch. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. There are a great many more examples, and I intend to write on this subject in the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)