**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #38**

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

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

**Visualizing God’s Name**

Visualizing God’s Name (the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-V-H) is an ancient practice based on the verse, “I have set the Lord always before me” (*Tehillim* 16:8), and the commandment of cleaving to God. It entails forming in one’s mind the letters of the Tetragrammaton in Ashurit script (the lettering used for writing *sifrei Torah*, *tefillin*, etc.) The kabbalist R. Yitzchak De-Min Akko – a disciple of the Ramban[[1]](#footnote-1) whose *Meirat Enayim* is a commentary on the esoteric teachings included in the Ramban’s commentary on the Torah – explains how one achieves closeness to God by means of this visualization:

And I, Yitzchak the younger, son of Shmuel (may the Merciful One watch over him and save him) of Akko, say that an individual or a group that seeks to know the secret of binding one’s soul to the upper world should attach his thoughts to God on High, such that he may, through that constant, unwavering concentration, attain the World to Come, and that the blessed God might always be with him, in this world and in the World to Come. He should visualize in his mind and his thoughts the letters of God’s Name, as though they were written before him in a book, in Ashurit script. And he should see each letter as immeasurably large. In other words, when you place the letters of God’s Name in your mind’s eye, your intellect should concentrate on them and your intellect and your heart should be towards the Infinite One. This is the secret of the true “cleaving” mentioned in the Torah, in the commands, “to cleave to Him,” “and to Him shall you cleave.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

By visualizing the letters of God’s Name, a person can fulfill the commandment of cleaving to God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The anthology *Shivchei Ha-Besht* includes a story about R. Nachman of Kosov, a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, who followed this practice. In a conversation with the Ba’al Shem Tov, they discussed this topic:

Our rabbi and teacher, R. Nachman [of Kosov] said: “Yisrael [Ba’al Shem Tov], is it true that you say that you know other people’s thoughts?” He answered, “Yes.” Then he said, “Do you know what I am thinking right now?” And [the Ba’al Shem Tov] answered, “Everyone knows that thoughts are not still; they wander to and fro, constantly changing form. If you focus your thoughts on one single thing, then I will know.” So our rabbi did so, and the Ba’al Shem Tov said, “The Tetragrammaton is in your thoughts.” And our rabbi said, “You could have known that anyway, for that is a thought that I should have in mind constantly, as it is written, ‘I have set the Lord always before me.’ Thus, when I set aside all other thoughts and focus on just one thing, it must necessarily be the Name of God that is before me.” To which the Ba’al Shem Tov answered, “There are many holy Names, and you could think of any one of them.” Our rabbi agreed that this was correct. And after that they spoke of secrets of the Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4)

One of the Chassidic masters who made use of this technique was R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk:

This is [the implementation of] “I have set (*shiviti*) the Lord before me always” – that it is an obligation on every Jew to visualize the Name of God, blessed be He, in his mind. But a perfect *tzaddik* who serves God and achieves *tikkunim* using the Name of God – for him it is always in his consciousness, and he has no need to visualize it further. This is as King David said: “I have set (*shiviti*) the Lord” – in other words, I have performed service and *tikkun* of God’s Name, to the point that He is constantly before me.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus offered similar guidance to his *chassidim* and the readers of his book:

Behold, the holy books speak of the greatness and holiness of the mental picture created when a person visualizes the Name of God in his mind, following the principle of “I have set the Lord before me always.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

This much is well known, both in kabbalah and in Chassidism. But R. Kalonymus goes on to add his own innovation – not with regard to the practice itself, but rather in the attention that he devotes to those who are unsuccessful in carrying out this visualization and his suggestion of tools to help them overcome the difficulty.

No previous Chassidic work had described any problem that might be encountered in carrying out the visualization, or any solution. We may assume that guidance in this regard was generally conveyed as a sort of “oral Torah” by Rebbes to their disciples. R. Kalonymus was the first to commit it to writing, and his teaching may reflect his own personal contribution. He describes the difficulty of a *chassid* who tries to follow this practice, but is unsuccessful:

It is a bad omen for him if he is unable to visualize [God’s Name], but what can this unfortunate individual do if he wishes to visualize it but is unable to? And to make it even more frustrating – the harder he tries to visualize the holy Name, the harder it becomes for him. Even the image of a single letter is difficult for him to imagine; he frets over this; his forehead is covered with perspiration, but he cannot manage it…[[7]](#footnote-7)

The description of frustration is surprising: Why does it matter if this individual is unsuccessful? Why he is “unfortunate”? This *chassid* is experiencing difficulty in following a kabbalistic practice – but there are surely many kabbalistic practices, *yichudim*, and *kavanot* that he is unable to follow!

R. Kalonymus goes on to explain the importance of this practice for students of Torah in his generation. It is not an esoteric custom for singular individuals; rather, it appears in halakhic literature as a technique that helps to develop fear of God. R. Yehuda Ashkenazi, who served as a *dayan* in Tiktin (Tykocin) in the mid-18th century, is the author of *Be’er Heitev*, which includes a commentary on the Shulchan Arukh and halakhic rulings and cites many sources from the Zohar and the writings of the Ari. In his commentary on the words of R. Moshe Isserles (the Rema), “‘I have set the Lord before me always’ is a great principle in the Torah and in the virtues of the *tzaddikim*,”[[8]](#footnote-8) he writes:

“I have set the Lord” – that one must always have God’s Name in one’s mind’s eye… and this is the secret of “I have set the Lord before me always,” and it is of great benefit in the realm of [developing] fear of God. [This is a teaching of] the Ari z”l.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This indicates that the practice is to be found not only in chassidic works, such as *No’am Elimelekh*, but also in halakhic literature. Thus, anyone who strives for punctilious observance of the commandments, including all the laws codified in the Shulchan Arukh and elaborated upon by the commentaries, will try to perfect this practice, too. This explains the frustration of a scholar who is unable to form the letters in his mind.

R. Kalonymus attempts to solve the problem by analyzing the causes of the difficulty. When a person tries to create a mental picture of something, even if the image is very familiar – say, for instance, the image of his father – he will generally find that the harder he tries, the harder it seems to visualize the image, to the point that he feels that it has escaped his mental storage system. There is a reason for this: “Since he is exerting his mind and his self-conscious intellect, his power of imagination is weakened and even drifts completely away.”[[10]](#footnote-10) When the conscious will imposes itself on the imagination, the thinking about the desired object fills the consciousness, and imagination dissipates and disappears.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There are some people who, owing to the more elevated sanctity of their bodies and souls, are more easily able to visualize God’s Name:

It is true for a person whose psyche and body are both holy and who works constantly on sanctifying his capabilities and tendencies will have no natural, bodily obstacles hindering his visualization of God’s Name as it is written, at any time that he chooses, for a holy spirituality dominates him, and all else is subservient to it. But for a person who is less dominated by holy spirituality, for he has damaged it – his evil inclination, which seeks to hinder his sanctification through this holy visualization of “I have set the Lord…,” clothes itself in and acts through that person’s own nature, and hinders him. And the more he tries to overcome it and bring the picture to mind, and the more he exerts his mind and his human intellect, the weaker his imagination becomes, and it is harder for him to visualize the Holy Name.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In previous generations of *Chassidut*, the *chassid* would sanctify himself through the journey to the Rebbe – both in terms of his preparations for the journey and by virtue of the actual encounter – and then he would be capable of visualizing God’s Name. But now, with the deterioration of the generations and the decline of *Chassidut*, a special remedy is required.

The solution is to try at first to concentrate not on forming the letters of God’s Name, but rather on a broader scene, and then, as part of that scene, to visualize the Tetragrammaton. As an example, R. Kalonymus proposes that the person imagine himself sitting amongst the congregation in the synagogue during the reading of the Torah, and his name is called for an *aliya*. He ascends the *bima* and recites the blessings over the Torah, and the reader begins to read. He follows along with the verses in the Torah scroll, reaching the words, “And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying…” He gazes at the verse, which includes God’s Name, “and in this manner he visualizes the entire verse, including the Name of God, in his imagination, without being hindered by his evil inclination.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

This “remedy” plays a trick on the person’s nature, as it were, in order to achieve the desired result, and is an example of R. Kalonymus’s efforts to find different solutions for various problems faced by the *chassidim* of his generation. At the same time, he did not regard such “remedies” as a full and complete solution:

The imagination itself also needs to be strengthened, and one has to study, for how can a person imagine the image of God’s Name… if his power of imagination is weak…?[[14]](#footnote-14)

One needs extensive practice to develop the imagination, along with a profound familiarity with the recesses of the psyche, allowing one to develop other ploys that facilitate control over the mental and imaginative processes.

**Use of the Imagination in Personal Development and Character Refinement**

In his book *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, which includes a spiritual autobiography, brief thoughts on the meaning of life, and practical advice in Divine service, R. Kalonymus writes:

If your life’s aim is to serve God with constant improvement and to reach age seventy beyond your bar mitzvah level, then here is the thing to do: Each year, clarify a goal and envision the actualized “you” of next year. Visualize who this “you” will be: his attainments… his daily life… his character… and his inner essence. Use this envisioned “you” also as a gauge to know how far you still have to go. Is your present daily progress enough to create the reality of that envisioned future “you”? But if next year comes and you have not actualized that “you,” it is as if your life has been cut short. The new “you” was aborted; it is not alive now. You are still an old “you” of perhaps years ago. This is the meaning of, “And Avraham was old, advanced in years” (*Bereishit* 24:1): The Avraham of this year was the advanced Avraham of this year, not the Avraham of the past.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This advice reflects R. Kalonymus’s approach in enlisting the imagination as part of one’s personal character development. One should contemplate a vision of oneself for the future, and then direct his path and his actions towards that vision. The use of the imagination in this context allows one to escape the boundaries of the static reality in which “I am who I am” and to generate real change. The imaginary “me” is a sort of ideal or dream that I have for my life, and thus my imagination facilitates growth towards a better reality.

The main innovations of this teaching are, first, the idea of envisioning a future, improved version of oneself, and second, guidance as to dealing with the gap between that ideal and the current reality. The gap is unsettling, and it goads one into constant spiritual work to achieve one’s imagined vision.

In a similar manner, R. Kalonymus teaches us that imagination can be an effective tool in dealing with anger:

Perhaps you harbor feelings of hatred toward one of your companions. You wish you could rid yourself of these feelings, but you are unable to do so… This is what you should do: Write him a letter. Don’t send it to him; hide it somewhere in your home. In the letter, insult and shame him as much as the serpent of anger in your heart desires. For some days, read the letter aloud and imagine that you are standing right in front of him, taunting and abusing him with all the expressions of the letter. After some days, you will find your anger has dissipated, and, if you are a sensitive person, you may discover yourself running to reconcile with him.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The fact that R. Kalonymus recommends directing one’s anger (and even actual insults and abuse) towards an imaginary representation of another person indicates that in this context, he does not seek to identify the imagination with the reality. In addition, it is worth noting that R. Kalonymus attaches importance to the expression of negative feelings, rather than suppressing them – but only in a manner that will not hurt the other person in any way.

**Fantasizing**

The danger of employing the imagination is that a person will become accustomed to living in an imaginary reality, enjoying his illusions and perhaps forgetting their real purpose. With this in mind, R. Kalonymus adds a general comment concerning the use of one’s imagination. He makes it clear that the main, important goal is to reveal and connect with one’s psyche; the mental images are not an end in themselves:

Do not be mistaken into thinking that we mean that when the time comes for the third meal of Shabbat, you should detach your mind and start to seek things to think about and to imagine. This is certainly not the case. The essence of the third meal is to connect oneself with God and to pour out one’s heart before Him; that should consume your attention. And more generally, too, our intention is not to reveal just the objects of the imagination, but rather the psyche that creates them.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There is something else that concerns R. Kalonymus: the possibility that encouraging the use of the imagination will lead to fantasies and dreamy illusions. To combat this danger, a person must practice his self-control and self-regulation in relation to his thoughts, rather than allowing them complete freedom. R. Kalonymus emphasizes that there is no need to create artificial visions, which have their source in the external wrapping of the intellect. Rather, the images should arise naturally from within the person:

Listen well and make no mistake: We have already stated that our intention is not that whenever you feel some or other feeling, you start searching your mind to find which image suits that feeling. Certainly not.

For your feeling will thereby pass away, and the images that arise from [conscious] searching are merely the work of the intellect. What we want is for God to help us to see from the perspective of the psyche, which is higher than the intellect. The intellect invents a sort of analogy that makes something seem similar to something else. What we want is to reveal a spark of the perspective of the children of prophets, which is inside us. And to this end we must expose and bring out powerful thought and imagination of holiness… Not empty fantasies, which are worthless and far from a psyche of holiness… let only the imagination of the psyche and visions of holiness arise in you.[[18]](#footnote-18)

What is the right way to use one’s imagination, without slipping into fantasy? How can one achieve mental images that arise from the psyche rather than foreign “imports” introduced by the intellect?

R. Kalonymus explains that every person experiences imaginary images in accordance with his own character. Some people experience brief, transient mental pictures; others imagine longer scenes. Every person imagines within his own inner world, and the images that are produced are influenced by the pictures he carries inside him. Thus, for example, the images that arise in the mind of a carpenter will be different from those of an artist or a merchant, since each of them will experience mental visions that relate to his sphere of work and involvement. However, each of them uses his imagination not only while they are actually engaged in their work, but also later on; even in their old age, when their inner world is aroused, they will experience mental pictures relating to the reality with which they are familiar. The idea is, then, that there is no need to exert oneself in an effort to “invent” images; rather, one should allow them to float to the surface of his consciousness, without actively seeking them. This is the demand that is made of a Jew, whose imagination is “the perspective of the children of prophets” and whose holy psyche is capable of producing “holy thoughts and visions.”

The practical conclusion that R. Kalonymus proposes is to allow the products of the psyche to emerge on their own:

Therefore, when you feel any holy fervor, do not seek out images and analogies; simply wait, contemplate your holy fervor, and goad it further; the thoughts with visions of holiness will arise on their own, so long as you have strengthened and broadened your thinking with your holy imagination.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. The Chida, in his *Shem Ha-Gedolim*, describes him as a disciple and colleague of the Ramban. His writings include several important kabbalistic traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R. Yitzhak of Akko, *Sefer Meirat Enayim* (Erlanger edition, Jerusalem, 5738), *Ekev*. For the development of this practice, see M. Idel, *Kabbalah: Hebetim Chadashim* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5753), pp. 67-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Yitzchak of Akko complements the Ramban’s teaching concerning cleaving to God (and indeed, his interpretation relates directly to the Ramban’s words). According to the Ramban (see his commentary on *Devarim* 11:22), cleaving is achieved by keeping one’s thoughts directed towards God, while R. Yitzchak teaches that any person can employ the technique of visualizing the letters in order to be connected with God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (B. Mintz edition, Jerusalem, 5729), p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parshat* *Teruma.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chaim* 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Beer Hetev*, ad loc. A similar formulation is presented by R. Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen of Radin (better known as the Chafetz Chaim) in his Mishna Berura (ad loc, 4), among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. Kalonymus notes (*Mevo Ha-She’arim,* p. 315) that this is a partial explanation of the difficulty of imagining the Tetragrammaton; there are also other contributing causes. He indicates that further elaboration is to be found elsewhere – seeimingly in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim* – but this text is unfortunately not extant. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. pp. 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Mevo ha-She’arim*, p. 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, p. 122 (*To Heal the Soul* [New Jersey, 1995], pp. 3-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 95 (*A Student’s Obligation* [New Jersey, 1991], p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)