**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 *le-zekher nishmot***

**Amelia Ray and Morris Ray
by their children Patti Ray and Allen Ray**

**on the occasion of their twelfth *yahrtzeits***

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**Shiur #40: Prayer**

**Quieting Extraneous Thoughts (continued)**

What is the “separation from one’s material state” referred to by the *Tur* as a state that was achieved by the “pious ones”? R. Chaim Vital explains in his *Sha’arei Kedusha*:

The “separation” referred to here, as one finds discussed in all the books that discuss prophecy and Divine inspiration, is not a literal separation whereby the soul actually leaves the body, as in sleep. For if this were the case, it would not be prophecy, but rather a dream like any other. Rather, Divine inspiration comes upon a person when the soul is within the body, in a state of wakefulness, not when it leaves. Rather, the matter of “separation” is that a person removes all thought from his mind and stops his imagination – which is the power that flows from his most fundamental living spirit – from imagining and thinking and contemplating any matters of this world, as though his soul had left him. Then his power to imagine his thoughts will turn to imagining and visualizing himself ascending through the upper worlds, to the roots of his psyche that comes from there.[[1]](#footnote-1)

R. Kalonymus was very familiar with *Shaarei Kedusha* and quoted from it in his writings. Attention should be paid to some important points here. The process of achieving prophecy demands a “separation from one’s material state,” which means removing all thoughts, emptying one’s consciousness, and diverting the activity of the imagination from matters of this world to visulaizing the roots of his psyche in the upper worlds.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hence, the emptying of the consciousness is a most important process in attaining prophecy (as we shall discuss at length in our discussion of prophecy).

The Sages devote much attention to the importance of ridding himself foreign thoughts. The Shelah ha-Kadosh writes:

One should prepare his heart in order to focus. How does one prepare his heart? Before standing to pray, he should first sit motionless and silent and remove all thoughts. He should start to think about the greatness of He Who spoke and the world came into existence, and the wondrous, astoudning, mighty, and compassionate acts that He did for His people. And he should think about the goodness and kindness that He has shown in His compassion, treating those who have sinned with beneficence; [he should consider] from how many troubles God has saved him, from how many illnesses He has healed him, treating him with beneficence from His own goodness, while he has not repaid God in kind, for God has shown him goodness, while he has repaid Him with evil. And he should think about his own lowliness and worthlessness in comparison with his Creator, for of what worth is he – a leaf blown about, a dried-up piece of straw. He should think that now he intends to stand before the King, to plead before Him, to set his questions and requests before Him. By rights he would not be entitled or worthy to stand before Him, were it not for the great compassion and wholeness of the Creator, Who permits him and commands him to do so, even though he serves Him only briefly.

After this, he should stand and pray, and this is what *Chazal* taught (*Berakhot* 30b): “One should only stand in prayer with due seriouness. The early pious ones would wait a while and then pray, in order to focus their hearts towards their Father in heaven.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Note that although the Shelah emphasizes the need to empty one’s mind of thought, he does not elaborate on how this is done.

R. Elazar Azcari, author of *Sefer Charedim* and a contemporary of R. Chaim Vital, likewise offers no explanation of how one is to remove foreign thoughts from his mind, although he, too, regards this as an important technique:

Our Rabbis taught that during prayer there should be nothing in between the worshipper and a wall, alluding to the Divine Presence – meaning that one should remove any evil thought (or even a thought that is not evil) from his heart and focus only on the meaning of the words that he expresses with his lips.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The kabbalist R. Meir ben Yehuda Leib Poppers recommends passing one’s hand over his forehead three times in order to remove improper thoughts:

One should beware of improper thoughts and take care to rectify them. I have tried passing the right hand over the forehead three times and remaining silent for a while; this, too, removes thoughts and cancels any other focus.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It seems that the action of passing one’s hand over one’s forehead in a movement recalling cleansing helps to remove unwanted thoughts.

Chassidic teachings similarly proposed different techniques for addressing “foreign thoughts” with a view to achieving purity of thought, since cleaving to God and service of the mind and thoughts occupy a central place in chassidic thought. It is said that the Ba’al Shem Tov would tell his *chassidim*, “If people tell you that so-and-so is a respected individual and it is worth learning his path in serving God, ask him if he experiences foreign thoughts. If he answers in the negative, know that it is not worth learning from him, for he is not telling the truth.”

Let us consider some examples of the many ways in which *chassidim* dealt with foreign thoughts, as reflected in chassidic literature.

R. Mendel of Lisk, for example, proposes using one’s imagination to exchange the letters of the word that creates the unwanted thought with letters that create a positive word, and then to visualize the letters of the positive word.[[6]](#footnote-6)

R. Nachman of Breslov proposes raising one’s voice as though weeping:

When foreign thoughts come to a person, he should lift his voice as though he were weeping, and this will cause the thoughts to leave him.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Let us now return to R. Kalonymus’s advice concerning quieting the mind. The essence of the testimony documented by the *chassid* in this regard was that the thoughts that disturb a person resemble a crazy jumble within one’s mind; they have no logic or order and are a tangle of fantasies and chaotic thinking. Without quieting one’s mind, it is impossible to achieve inspiration from on High. It is specifically when one is at prayer that such thoughts arise, since the psychological movement is one of self-nullification, emptying of the consciousness, and an expectation that the vacuum will be filled with a spiritual abundance from on High. When one is studying Torah, on the other hand, there are no such disturbances, since the “I” is fully present in one’s consciousness.

The essence of R. Kalonymus’s unique contribution is his detailed practical guidance as to how to deal with unwanted thoughts. No similar guidance is offered in earlier sources. The purpose of quieting the thought is to work on one’s character, to seek and receive inspiration. Although he does not write this explicitly, we may assume that the same technique may be used to deal with an unsettled mind during prayer, as we shall see below.

As a first stage, one should contemplate his thoughts, until he feels them swirling about more slowly and eventually disappearing.

Then he should focus on a verse that he has chosen – perhaps “the Lord your God, truth.” In this way, one focuses on a holy thought that occupies the space left in one’s emptied consciousness. Another way of clearing one’s thoughts is to focus on the hour-hand of a clock. This technique is reminiscent of hypnosis, as well as Buddhist meditative techniques, which focus the consciousness on a certain object in order to attain a calming of one’s wild thoughts.

Quieting, according to R. Kalonymus, can bring “inspiration.” What he means here is an opening of the consciousness to receive a higher level of spiritual abundance and insight than he could achieve when the consciousness was full of the “junk” of superfluous thoughts.

Once the consciousness is clear and one’s thinking is focused on holiness, a person can start working on his character. If, for example, he wishes to work on his faith, he should repeat over and over a statement that expresses faith – such as, “I believe with perfect faith that the Creator is the sole Being…” Through this technique of auto-suggestion, he will internalize the substance of the statement and arouse the faith that lies within himself.

The teaching about “quieting” was recorded by the *chassid* who heard it from R. Kalonymus, but in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim* we find a short excerpt that expresses a similar technique, based on examining one’s thoughts in order to clear the consciousness during prayer:

Even the regular stream of thought – not of [forbidden] desires, but rather of everyday matters – that whirl within you during your prayer and confuse you, can be swept away and dispensed with. When you stand in prayer and these wild thoughts romp about unceasingly in your mind, then if you strongly wish to remove them, I am doubtful whether you will succeed against them. Sometimes, they will bother you even more. Therefore, take a short break from your prayer and calm yourself; if it is permissible for you to sit during that portion of the prayer then do so; if not, lean on something and calmly contemplate your thoughts. Train your mind on the fluidity of these transient thoughts – the way in which one thought connects to the next, and one jumps in and interrupts another. Suddenly, the thought of something from several years ago comes to you, etc. It is truly like the capering and prancing of animals.

You will be amazed at this technique… In the end, as with a broom, you will have cleaned up your mind.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Prayer is “disturbed” not only by “foreign thoughts” – in the sense of prohibited, impure matters – but also by thoughts that are technically “kosher” but not part of one’s prayer. For instance, “After I finish praying, I need to go to the store to buy some bread and milk,” or, “I need to call the bank and make a change in my investment plan.” There is nothing inherently evil about these thoughts, but they interrupt one’s concentration and do not allow one to pray as one should. Sometimes a thought about something from the past floats into one’s consciousness. A friend of mine once recounted how astonished he was when one day during his prayer he suddenly thought about an advertisement that he had seen as a child; he is now in his forties!

The above instruction seems to be essentially similar to the teaching on “quieting” as documented by the *chassid* who heard it from R. Kalonymus, even though the word “quieting” is not mentioned. In both sources, the idea is to concentrate on one’s thoughts with a view to weakening them. The latter teaching indicates that R. Kalonymus’s technique for quieting of the thoughts and “sweeping” of the mind is also suitable for use in prayer, since prayer is a time when a person is inundated with thoughts that interfere with concentration. At the same time, the teaching concerning “quieting” contains several additional elements, including the recitation of a verse and a repetitive declaration, like a sort of mantra.[[9]](#footnote-9) Also, in that teaching R. Kalonymus recommends looking at the hour-hand of a watch. It seems that R. Kalonymus was constantly working to develop these tools, and that the teaching on quieting was a later and more developed version of the idea presented in *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*.

The words “quiet” and “quieting,” which are scattered throughout this teaching, express the need to avoid the sense of noise that is generated by the routine traffic of thoughts. Perhaps the source from which R. Kalonymus learned about the concept of “quieting” – or at least from which he borrowed the term – was *Iggeret Derekh Hashem*, written by R. Moshe Mi-Trani, known as the Mabit. In this source, the matter of quieting thoughts is discussed as a preparation for prayer:

Therefore, a person should take care that his prayers and blessings [that he recites] each day should be [recited] with concentration, especially the ending of blessings that contain God’s Name, and all blessings of enjoyment, and blessings over *mitzvot* and thanksgiving, which mention God’s Name and His Sovereignty. A person should focus his thoughts when he prays and recites blessings and turn his thoughts away from profane matters, and even from Torah-related matters, so that he will be able to concentrate. Before praying, he should sit for a while to quieten his thoughts, and he should think about how he must concentrate in prayer, and [only] afterwards pray or recite the blessing. If any thought should come to him in the midst of his prayer, he should remain silent until he removes it from his heart. If he clears his hearts of all thoughts that prevent concentration, he should make some sort of bodily signal at the end of each blessing, so that he will remember to concentrate. Since a person places his right hand over his left during prayer, he can press with his right thumb upon his left one at the end of each blessing, or sway as though trembling at the mention of God’s Name in the conclusion [of the blessing], in order to remember to concentrate in the blessing that follows, and to think about his prayer.[[10]](#footnote-10)

As we have seen, R. Kalonymus uses quieting not only in the context of prayer, but also for working on one’s character, to strengthen one’s faith, to ready oneself to receive Divine inspiration, and, we may assume, also to prepare oneself for the spirit of prophecy. In the context of *ruach ha-kodesh*, this is not stated explicitly, but R. Chaim Vital does speaking of quieting in this context, and we have already noted that R. Kalonymus’s teachings about prophecy show the very clear influence of R. Chaim Vital. In addition, the term “*hashra’ah*” (inspiration) can be understood as a type of prophetic endowment.

Attention should also be paid to the *chassid*’sclosing words of the teaching about quieting, which speak about R. Kalonymus: “And he exhorted us greatly to implement this advice.” R. Kalonymus develops and improves different techniques of self-work, exhorting every individual to develop his own creative paths in Divine service:

For our holy teacher, the Ba’al Shem Tov, told us that one has to use all sorts of schemes in order to escape the clutches of the evil inclination and to draw closer to God’s service and *chassidut*.[[11]](#footnote-11)

R. Kalonymus exerts himself to create, develop, enhance, and teach these technqiues, and he asks his *chassidim* to internalize them in order to progress in the service of God.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Chaim Vital, *Shaarei Kedusha* (Jerusalem, 5745), part 3, *sha’ar* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on visualization in the teachings of R. Chaim Vital, see our previous discussion regarding the imagination. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Yeshayahu Horwitz, *Shenei Luchot Ha-Brit Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 5753), vol. III, *Massekhet Tamid, Perek Ner Mitzvah* 9, pp. 308-311. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Elazar Azcari, *Sefer Charedim* (Jerusalem, 5769), ch. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hanhagot Tzaddikim* I (Jerusalem, 5748), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., *Hanhagot Tovot Mi-R. Mendel of Lisk.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Nachman of Breslov, *Sefer Ha-Middot*, "Thoughts." [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, pp. 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Kalonymus made use of this technique of repetition, as evidenced by the testimony of his student who overheard him repeating his mantra during sleep. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. R. Moshe Mi-Trani, *Iggeret Derekh Hashem*, with afterword by M. Benayahu (Jerusalem, 5748). The Mabit, a contemporary of R. Yosef Karo in Tzfat, wrote his book for a group of pietists in his generation. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)