**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #47: Prayer in the Ghetto**

**Prayer That Makes God a Presence**

Thus far, we have focused on R. Kalonymus’s teachings about prayer in a normal context. We will now address some of his teachings in *Esh Kodesh*, which was written during the Holocaust, in the Warsaw Ghetto. We will try to understand how the unfolding reality influenced prayer and its place and role in the lives of the Rebbe and his *chassidim*. The teachings included in *Esh Kodesh* are dated from Rosh Hashana 5700 (September 1939) to Av 5702 (August 1942).[[1]](#footnote-1)

On Yom Kippur 5701 (October 12, 1940), during the *Ne’ila* prayer, a radio announcement in German ordered all Jews in Warsaw to move into the ghetto. On November 16, the ghetto was closed, the property of thousands of Jews remaining outside its boundaries. The Jews, who comprised 30% of the city’s population, were now crammed into 2.4% of its area.

The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest of the ghettos created during WWII, at one point holding some 450,000 Jews. Living conditions were hellish: The lack of basic sanitation bred sickness and disease; the lack of any employment possibilities other than the German slave-labor enterprises, as well as the difficulty in procuring basic foodstuffs, led swiftly to widespread and acute starvation. Entire Jewish families languished along the sidewalks, bloated with hunger. At curfew time, when the streets were quiet, the cries of young children could be heard begging for bread. The best that their parents or compassionate neighbors could offer were crumbs. In the morning, the sidewalks at the ghetto gates were piled with bodies – mostly of children – covered with paper; during the night, their clothing had been taken. In addition to all of this, the terror sowed by the Nazis and their periodic forced roundups for transport to the death camps made it all the worse.

In R. Kalonymus’s sermons from this period, we hear an echo of the terrible decrees, the death and the mourning that occupied such a central place in ghetto life. Even during these dark times, R. Kalonymus continued to encourage his *chassidim* and maintained his faith in the power of prayer to achieve closeness to God.

The utter incomprehensibility of a horrific reality can bring a person to turn away from God, whether out of a sense of abandonment by God or out of a religious belief in the inscrutability of the Divine decree, such that God is perceived as infinitely distant and unreachable. R. Kalonymus emphasizes that even in the harshest reality, God is close by, anguished along with *Am Yisrael* and weeping with them:

This is the difference: The weeping and pain that a person experiences by himself, alone, may have the effect of breaking him, to the point that he is incapable of doing anything. But when one weeps together with God, that strengthens him. He weeps – and he is strengthened; he is broken – but nevertheless exerts himself to study and to serve Him. It is difficult to raise oneself up, time and again, from the tribulations, but when one really tries, stretching his mind to connect to the Torah and Divine service, he enters the Inner Chambers,[[2]](#footnote-2) where the Blessed Holy One is to be found; he weeps and wails together with Him, as it were, and even finds the strength to study Torah and serve Him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Kalonymus teaches his *chassidim* that the only consolation for their suffering is the knowledge that God has not forsaken them and they are not suffering alone; He is with them in their pain:

What encouragement can one give oneself… at a time of such dismal disintegration? First of all, through prayer and the conviction that it is impossible that God, the merciful Father, would cast away His children from before Him to such a degree…

But how shall we console ourselves over the martyrs who have already been killed?... And how shall we uplift ourselves even slightly in the face of the terrifying rumors, both old and new, that tear us apart and crush our hearts? Through the knowledge that we are not alone in our suffering; rather, God suffers along with us, as it were – “I am with them in trouble” (*Tehillim* 91:15).

R. Kalonymus seeks God’s closeness for himself and for his *chassidim*. He seeks the intimacy and comfort of joint weeping, of mutual empathy and consolation, and asserts that prayer is an effective way to achieve this closeness.

In his sermon for *Parashat Ki Tetzei* 5700 (1939), he chooses to talk about the intimacy that a person is able to achieve in prayer. He cites a teaching of the Maggid of Mezeritch, that the fact that man is granted the possibility of being able to say, “Blessed are You” is itself a Divine mercy. R. Kalonymus elaborates and explains that the very fact that the Men of the Great Assembly enacted that our prayer is recited partly in the second person unquestionably affects

the manifestation of Divinity, to the point that God is a tangible presence for us, and we are truly able to say “You,” and it is not a blessing uttered in vain, heaven forfend.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Let us dwell for a moment on this assertion: When a person says “You” in relation to God, this in itself helps him to effect a revelation of Divinity. Moreover, if it were not possible to attain the presence of God through prayer, the Men of the Great Assembly, with their prophetic inspiration, would not have formulated the blessings in this way, for we would be reciting blessings in vain!

Further on in this teaching, R. Kalonymus explains that while the Torah belongs to the entire Jewish nation and God “teaches Torah to His people, Israel,” there is also an aspect of God teaching every individual and speaking to each and every one. In order to achieve the level of personal tutoring with God, as it were, one has to make God present in one’s life, and this is made possible only through prayer:

How does one achieve this? Through prayer; by saying “You,” and thereby effecting a Divine revelation for himself. At that moment, God speaks to him and teaches him Torah individually; He addresses him similarly in the second person…

In order for our words of direct address to effect a presence, the individual who is praying must first reveal his own self in the words of his prayer. In other words, his own essence must be present in the words. Then, “as in water, face answers to face” (*Mishlei* 27:19), so a reciprocal mirroring of God’s presence is effected…[[5]](#footnote-5)

A person has to yearn for God’s closeness in order to receive Torah from Him. This want leads him to reveal himself, his essence, before God, in prayer. Then, and only then, will God reveal Himself to the individual.

R. Kalonymus adds a comment that reflects the tribulations of the times:

Even if a person’s heartfelt prayer is prompted by catastrophe, heaven forfend, nevertheless since he pours out his heart in words of prayer, it has the effect of eliciting a direct personal revelation to him.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Why does R. Kalonymus add this “even”? Because a prayer that emerges from distress – even such terrible suffering as in the Holocaust – would seem to be of a lower level than prayer that flows purely and wholly from a desire to achieve closeness to God and to learn Torah from Him. Nevertheless, R. Kalonymus insists, even such a prayer can have the effect of making God present so that one can learn Torah from Him.

**When One Cannot Cry Out Loud**

From one Shabbat to the next, from one festival to the next, the situation deteriorates, and this is reflected in R. Kalonymus’s *derashot*. He delivered his sermon for *Parashat Nitzavim* in the year 5700 in hiding with his disciples, and he spoke of the “inner cry.” From the content of the sermon, we understand that prayer with a *minyan* was forbidden, and so groups of Jews gathered to pray in secret. Obviously, they had to pray quietly, and no part of the service could be recited aloud. This need to pray silently was oppressive and difficult, since – as R. Kalonymus himself had written in his *Haksharat Ha-Avrekhim* prior to the war – praying aloud is important for achieving fervor and passion. Testimonies of students who studied at his yeshiva also indicate that R. Kalonymus encouraged praying aloud;[[7]](#footnote-7) he would also sing and thereby inspire the congregation:

One who prays out loud, powerfully… grows passionate in his prayer, and as we find in the holy books: the voice elicits *kavana*…[[8]](#footnote-8)

And when one prays out loud, and with *kavana*, such that every letter and every word is a fragment of the upper world and a piece of the Supernal Chariot, then he is filled with fervor as he utters every letter and every word, and he rejoices and is awed at the pieces of the Supernal Chariot that emerge from his own mouth.[[9]](#footnote-9)

We can well understand the difficulty and pain experienced by the *chassidim* who were forced to change their style of prayer from passionate, vociferous expression to silent supplication that was entirely inward-directed. The lack of any possibility of giving voice to the cry of pain, bewilderment, fear and helplessness that cause one to turn to God only made it harder. R. Kalonymus offers the following advice for coping with this difficulty:

A Jew prays to God and cries out to Him, blessed be He, regarding any calamity that befalls him. And when the trouble is even greater, heaven forfend, he cries out even more, as it is written (*Esther* 4:1), “And Mordechai cried a great and bitter cry.” Even when there is no impending calamity, we pray to God because prayer itself is closeness to God. When we pray, we pray with a full voice, as it is written in the holy books, “The voice awakens *kavana; kavana* awakens the voice.” But what shall we do now that we are not permitted to cry out, nor even to congregate for prayer, and we are forced to pray in secret, and every Jewish heart must lament this alone? At least in the depths of his heart, every Jew must shout out to God over this.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The transition from an outward cry to an inward one, in the wake of the Nazi decrees, demands that R. Kalonymus and his *chassidim* change not only a habit but also a whole way of thinking, since they are accustomed to fervent prayer that is recited aloud. R. Kalonymus offers an insight into this situation which demands that one pray “from the depths of his heart.” He focuses on the verse, “From the depths I call out to You, O Lord; Lord; hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to the sound of my supplications” (*Tehillim* 130:1-2) and notes the seemingly redundant repetition of “Lord” and of what follows: Once we have asked “hear my voice,” does God really need our request that He be “attentive to the sound of my supplication”? He answers:

For this we pray, “From the depths I call to You, O Lord” – [I call] only from the depths of my heart, not aloud. “Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive…” please make Your ears attentive, as it were, so You will still hear me. Take note that they do not allow me to pray, I can only do so in secret, so I must pray in a whisper. And for the anguish that this alone causes me, “Save me.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The prohibition on praying aloud leads a person to prayer that is more profound, from his very depths. He beseeches God to hear him even though he can no longer give voice to his prayer.

The verse “From the depths I call to You, O Lord” assumed additional significance on *Shabbat Shuva* of the year 5700 (1939), in between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The fervent hope on the part of the Rebbe and his *chassidim* that their prayers would help to nullify the Nazi decrees were dashed, and R. Kalonymus addresses the value of these prayers and the reasons why “we are not answered… and our troubles are only increasing.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

On this Shabbat, the Rebbe acknowledged to this *chassidim* that he had thought that since their troubles were growing, their prayer would be more intense “and hearts would be poured out like a stream of water.” It turned out, however, that as time passed, people had less and less strength left to pray, and the passion that had characterized their prayers in previous years during the *Yamim Noraim* was gone. R. Kalonymus notes that he is not alone in sensing this change; other *chassidim* had noted it, too. Aside from the physical weakness, he attributes this phenomenon to the fact that the worshippers do not feel that their prayer is having any effect: on the contrary, “our troubles are only increasing,” and hence “a person’s heart falls and is not aroused in his prayers.” Another explanation that he offers is that the Jews in the ghetto are exhausted and weakened not only physically, but also spiritually; their faith and their joy are ebbing away. Nevertheless, R. Kalonymus does not lose faith in the power of prayer. He finds meaning in the words of King David that speak to their situation:

The same applies to spiritual arousal in prayer. A Jew may fall; he may be crushed, such that there is no-one left to be aroused in prayer. But King David says, “From the depths I call to You, O Lord” – not from one “depth,” but from “depths,” in the plural. This indicates that after I fell to the first depth and called to You, not only was I not answered and not saved, but I fell even further, to a depth within a depth. Nevertheless, I am gathering my strength and once again calling to You.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The word “depths” assumes additional significance here, over and above what it meant in the sermon discussed above. Here the “depths” express the fathomless troubles; the compounded suffering and anguish. Nevertheless, even within these depths R. Kalonymus finds the strength to call to God, thereby teaching his *chassidim* to do the same.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. R. Kalonymus *Hy”d* was killed on 4 Cheshvan, 5743 (November 2, 1943). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Chazal* teach that there is a place where God weeps and suffers anguish over the pain of *Am Yisrael*: “The verse states: ‘But if you will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret [*be-mistarim*] over your pride’ ([*Yirmiyahu* 13:17](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Jeremiah.13.17)). R. Shmuel bar Inya said in the name of Rav: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place where He weeps, and its name is Mistarim. What is the meaning of ‘over your pride’? R. Shmuel bar Yitzchak said: God weeps due to the pride of the Jewish People, which was taken from them and given to the gentile nations. R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said: He weeps due to the pride of the kingdom of Heaven, which was removed from the world. But how can we speak of weeping with regard to the Holy One, blessed be He? Did R. Pappa not say: There is no sadness before the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is stated, ‘Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and gladness are in His place’ (*I Divrei Ha-Yamim* 16:27)? There is no contradiction here. The former statement [that God weeps] is referring to the innermost chambers, where He can weep in secret, whereas the latter statement [that He does not weep] is referring to the outer chambers” (*Chagiga* 5b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Esh Kodesh*, *Parashat Ha-Chodesh*, 5702, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Esh Kodesh*, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Note should also be made of the influence of Karlin Chassidism on the teachings of R. Kalonymus, and to this day Karliner *chassidim* are known for their loud prayer. At the same time, *chassidut* also offers other models. For example, R. Dov Ber, the “middle Admor” of Chabad, among others, was known for praying quietly. In the book *Tzvaat Ha-Ribash* we find: “A person has to learn and practice praying – even the songs of praise – in a low voice and to shout in a whisper, whether he is singing songs of praise or studying Torah with all his might. This is as it is written (*Tehillim* 35:10), ‘All my bones shall say…’” (*Sefer Tzvaat Ha-Ribash*, Kehat edition, Brooklyn 5758, *ot* 33). Here prayer sounds quiet, but is in fact a powerful cry that is subdued and squashed. When one cries out inwardly, without any outward sound, the soundwaves are closed up inside the body, to the point that one feels the cry echoing in one’s bones. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Esh Kodesh*, *Parashat Nitzavim* 5700, p. 62 ( *Sacred Fire: Torah From the Years of Fury 1939-1942*, Translation by J. Hershy Worch, p. 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 63 (=p. 125). For the inner cry in the teachings of R. Nachman of Breslov, see *Likkutei Moharan* *Tanina*, 5. This teaching addresses a person who has experienced such a great and steep fall that crying aloud is of no benefit. R. Nachman proposes that he cry out from the heart, and as proof he cites the verse, “From the depths I cry out to You, O Lord.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Esh Kodesh*, *Shabbat Shuva* 5700, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)