**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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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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In memory of David Yehuda Ben Shaul z”l (Mr. David Goldstein)

whose *shloshim* fell this week

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**Shiur #48: Prophecy**

**Introduction**

Although *Chazal* teach that prophecy ceased among *Am Yisrael* upon the deaths of the last of the prophets – Chaggai, Zekharia and Malakhi[[1]](#footnote-1) – over the generations there have been individuals who have attempted to attain prophetic vision and to revive prophecy.[[2]](#footnote-2) The consensus, based on many different sources, is that prophecy will return in the future. Moreover, *Chazal* taught that while in the past prophecy was limited to individuals, in the future it will be part of everyone’s experience.[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Kalonymus dealt extensively with the subject of prophecy, its essence, and the connection between it and *chassidut*. His main contribution lies in the fact that he not only spoke and wrote about prophecy, but also instructed his *chassidim* in practical methods for renewal of “the service of prophecy.” These methods, previously known only to prophets, kabbalists, and other select individuals, were now addressed to the layman. R. Kalonymus sought to restore the Jewish People to their status as “sons of prophets.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The “Service of Prophecy”**

Even R. Kalonymus notes that, sadly, “for a long time the gates of heaven have been locked, and we have neither prophets nor seers.”[[5]](#footnote-5) All that remains of the words of the prophets has been codified in the holy books, with the accepted principle that prophecies that are relevant for future generations were committed to writing. But what were the functions of a prophet? Did he serve as a sort of “fortune-teller,” predicting the future; was his role to help search for lost donkeys, as Shemuel helped Shaul?[[6]](#footnote-6) Was he supposed to bring blessing and supply flour and oil,[[7]](#footnote-7) or was he charged with instructing the nation in anticipation of going out to battle? From the verses in *Tanakh*, we can learn something of the actions undertaken by the prophet, but we have no access to his essence, just as we cannot know the essence of a “*tzaddik*,” but rather only observe his actions,[[8]](#footnote-8) since the *tzaddik*’s greatness is so far beyond what the congregation of *chassidim* is capable of grasping. However, study of the inner teachings of the Torah – the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic works – allows us to characterize the essence of the prophet.

Prophecy is a level of Divine service. Just as there are levels of a “*chassid*,” of a “*tzaddik*,” and of a “*chakham*,” there are levels of a prophet:

In other words, it is not the performance of wonders or the foretelling of the future that is the essence of a prophet, but rather his closeness to God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The main service of a prophet is his aspiration for closeness to God, and he achieves this through purification of his body and soul to the point that he attains *devekut*. Here R. Kalonymus bases himself on the teachings of R. Chaim Vital, the disciple of the Ari, in the introduction to his *Sha’arei Kedusha*. R. Chaim Vital claims that there are exceptional individuals who seek ways to achieve complete *devekut*, like the early prophets:

So says the small one, Chaim the son of R. Yosef Vital of blessed memory: I have seen exceptional people (*bnei aliya*) – and they are few – who yearn to ascend, but the ladder is hidden from them. So they contemplate the books of the early Sages to search and find the path of life, the road upon which to travel, and the actions to do, to elevate their soul to its root above, and to cling to the blessed God. For this is everlasting perfection, similar to the prophets, who cleaved to their Creator all their lives. And by virtue of this clinging, the holy spirit settled on them, showing them which path leads to light and enlightening them in the secrets of the Torah, as King David prayed: “Open my eyes that I may gaze at the wonders of Your Torah” (*Tehillim* 119:18). They would be led along a straight path, prepared by the men of *aliya*, to reach the place of civilization awaiting them with the *bnei aliya*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

It should be noted that the fact that R. Kalonymus bases his idea on R. Chaim Vital in *Shaarei Kedusha* is highly significant, since the whole point of *Shaarei Kedusha* is the attainment of the level of *ruach ha-kodesh*. As the book explains, this is attained through working on one’s character, observing all of the Torah and the *mitzvot*, *teshuva*, sanctifying oneself, meditation, and visualization. According to R. Chaim:

With our own ears we have heard and with our own eyes we have seen singular individuals who have attained the level of *ruach ha-kodesh* in our times.[[11]](#footnote-11)

R. Kalonymus concludes, on this basis, that there is a difference between prophecy and “the service of prophecy.” Even though prophecy proper ceased with the destruction of the First Temple, “the service of prophecy continues to this day.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Therefore, even in our times, “even a person who does not merit to have God speak to him through prophecy still serves [Him] through the service of prophecy.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

What is “the service of prophecy,” according to R. Kalonymus? The main requirement of a prophet, before he can receive prophecy, is to pursue *devekut* with both his body and his soul. He cannot suffice with elevating his soul to holiness, but rather must “remove the boundary between the holy and the profane”[[14]](#footnote-14) and sanctify his body as well.

The prophet essentially serves as a point of contact between the Divine and the material. The question of the possibility of such contact arises at the very creation of the world. How could the infinite Divine light descend from its supernal lofty heights to the lowest, coarsest of worlds? Kabbala deals with this question at length, setting forth a system of descending, unfolding, and constricting. Ultimately, however, after all the progressive concealment of the Divine light, a person exists in this material world and cries out for closeness to God. Can he actually encounter the Divine light, or is he condemned to living his life in a world that is dark, bereft of God’s presence?

R. Kalonymus explains that there are places that offer a point of contact between the material and the spiritual. At these places, the physical and spiritual are one, and there a person can encounter the Divine light.[[15]](#footnote-15) Mount Sinai was one such place; there God “brought the heavens down to the mountain.” The *Mishkan* was similarly a place where “the earthly and the heavenly kissed”[[16]](#footnote-16) – the spiritual essence of the Mishkan was discernible even in its material form. The Temple likewise featured an interesting phenomenon, whereby the windows were narrow on the inside and wider on the outside, so that the light from within the Temple could illuminate outwards.[[17]](#footnote-17) What effect would the windows have on the dissemination of the light of holiness? Is Divine holiness limited by the angle of the windows? R. Kalonymus explains that this teaches us that “in the Temple, boundaries are erased and there is no difference between the physical and the spiritual.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Now we can understand better the essence of the prophet: Since the way of the prophet’s service was to purify his body and to cleave to God, there was no distinction in him between the material and Divine holiness: “And he himself became a place where the earthly and the Divine met.” Via the prophet, the Divine light would spread amongst Israel, filling their bodies and souls with light. Not only God’s word was conveyed to Israel via the prophet, but also the will and desire to fulfill God’s word.

The prophets should therefore not be viewed solely as disciplinary figures who spouted rebuke, seeking to prevent the people from stealing and other crimes. They wanted to see all of Israel elevated to the level of prophets, as Moshe had said: “If only all of God’s nation were prophets” (*Bamidbar* 11:29). The prophets worked on improving and preparing the nation for the illumination of prophecy, and by virtue of their efforts, God was able to “dwell and be one with all of Israel.”

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. Tosefta, *Sota* 13:3; *Sanhedrin* 11a. For further discussion, see E. Urbach, “*Matai Paska Ha-Nevua*,” *Me-Olamam shel Chakhamim* (Jerusalem, 5748), pp. 9-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Many sources attest to aspirations to experience Divine inspiration (*ruach ha-kodesh*), heavenly voices (*bat kol*), revelations in dreams, meetings with Eliyahu, and even prophecy itself. See A.J. Heschel, “*Al Ruach Ha-Kodesh BieYemei Ha-Benayim Ad Zemano shel Ha-Rambam*,” *Sefer Ha-Yovel Le-Khvod Alexander Marx* (New York, 5710), pp. 175-208, including a special chapter on the Rambam’s attitude towards prophecy. Heschel maintains that the Rambam believed that he had achieved prophecy, since prophecy is a natural experience that comes to anyone who is worthy of it. See A.J. Heschel, “*Ha-He’emin Ha-Rambam She-Zakha Le-Nevua*,” *Sefer Ha-Yovel Le-Khvod Levi Ginsburg* (New York, 5706), pp. 159-188. See also Heschel’s comprehensive work on prophecy, A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Evanston: New York, 1962). For manifestations of prophetic revelations in modern times, see E. Schweid, *Nevi’im Le-Amam Ve-La-Enoshut: Nevuah U-Neviim Be-Hagut Ha-Yehudit shel Ha-Me’ah Ha-Esrim* (Jerusalem, 5759). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tanchuma*, *Miketz* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Concerning the appellation “sons of prophets,” which R. Kalonymus uses often, R. Yehuda Ha-Levi writes, in *Sefer Ha-Kuzari* III:1:

When the Divine Presence was still in the Holy Land among the people capable of prophecy, some few persons lived an ascetic life in deserts and associated with people of the same frame of mind. They did not seclude themselves completely, but they endeavored to find mutual support in the knowledge of the Law and in holy and pure actions which brought them near to that high rank. These were the “sons (or disciples) of the prophets.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Shemuel* I 9:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See *Melakhim* I 17:1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p 174; Rav Chaim Vital, *Shaare Kedusha* (Jerusalem, 5745), Introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., part III, *sha’ar* *shevi’i*, p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Mevo Ha-Shearim*, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Bava Batra* 83a. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As recorded in *Bamidbar Rabba* 15:2:

When a person builds a house, he makes windows that are narrow on the outside and wide on the inside, so that the light can come in from outside and illuminate inside. When Shlomo built the Temple, he did otherwise: He made windows that were narrow on the inside and wide on the outside, so that the light would emerge from the Temple and illuminate outward, as it is written (*Melakhim* I 6), “And he made for the Sanctuary windows that were narrow within and wide without [literally, ‘transparent and opaque’]” – indicating that it [the House] was all light, and there was no need for the light of the windows. And why did [God] command you [concerning them]? For your merit. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)