**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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**Shiur #49: Levels of Prophecy**

*Chazal* teach that “there were forty-eight men prophets and seven women prophets who prophesized for Israel” (*Megilla* 14a), but they also teach that “Many prophets arose in Israel, double the number of those who came out of Egypt” (ibid.). This suggests that there were not forty-eight prophets, but rather an immeasurably greater number, considering that *Bnei Yisrael* numbered six hundred thousand when they left Egypt.[[1]](#footnote-1) The *gemara* resolves the discrepancy by concluding, “Prophecies that were relevant for future generations were committed to writing; those that were not, were not committed to writing” (ibid.).

R. Kalonymus finds it difficult to accept Rashi’s explanation (ad loc.) that the forty-eight men prophets and seven women prophets studied teachings and *mussar* that would be needed for future generations, while the other prophets spoke about future events to their generations alone.[[2]](#footnote-2) Is it possible that all the other prophets did not also convey teachings and *mussar*? Surely not. Rather, argues R. Kalonymus, the function of the forty-eight men prophets and seven women prophets was to convey God’s word to all the generations, while the other prophets “enabled their own [respective] generations to receive and internalize God’s spirit.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

But why was there a need for so many prophets to prepare and enable the people to receive prophecy? R. Kalonymus refers us once again to *Sha’arei Kedusha*, where we learn of the complex path of service required to prepare for the Divine spirit – “unimaginable, endless *tikkunim* and preparations.” Not only is the preparation for prophecy a complex and protracted process, but a great number of teachers of prophecy were necessary, so that a special *tikkun* could be devised and adapted for each and every individual. No single prophet could prepare and train the entire nation. R. Kalonymus in fact describes academies in which many prophets taught throughout the generations,[[4]](#footnote-4) training people to receive prophecy.

R. Kalonymus goes on to explain that a distinction should be drawn between two types of prophets: The forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses “brought down the [Divine] light from the supernal worlds” into the physical, material world, while the other prophets of later generations concerned themselves with the repair and elevation of this world so that it would be ready for and capable of receiving the light brought down by the early prophets. Their method of impacting this world was by working to repair and prepare *Am Yisrael* to receive prophecy.[[5]](#footnote-5) R. Kalonymus expresses great longing when he writes that through the activity of both types of prophets, all of Israel merited to be affected and influenced by prophecy. Even “the simplest of simple people… could not fail to draw close to God with prophetically-inspired closeness and elevation.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Absence of Prophecy Today**

The reason for the absence of prophecy today is the simple fact that the gates of heaven have been shut tight,[[7]](#footnote-7) and “the prophets who existed throughout all the generations are sadly lacking.”[[8]](#footnote-8) However, what we lack today is more than just the experience of direct prophecy. Even the words of the prophets, handed down to us in *Tanakh*, are not fully accessible to us, because we lack the prophets who used to prepare *Am Yisrael* for prophecy. Thus, “we fail to grasp even the words of Moshe and the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses in the fullness of their illumination.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

**The Sages of the Oral Torah as Kabbalists and Prophets**

The end of prophecy does not mean a complete cessation of illumination to *Am* *Yisrael*. The light of prophecy passed to the masters of Halakha. The Men of the Great Assembly, the *Tannaim*, *Amoraim*, *Geonim*, and all the sages of the Oral Law, brought light from the supernal worlds into our material reality. R. Kalonymus bases himself in this regard on a teaching by R. Avdimi: “From the day that the Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to the Sages” (*Bava Batra* 12a). The wisdom of the Torah is not just a reflection of human intellect; it also contains Divine light.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Sages of the Oral Law were kabbalists. The Oral Law itself, although generally regarded as belonging to *nigleh* – i.e., the “revealed” teachings – is actually based on mystical traditions, as stated explicitly in a teaching of the *Zohar* quoted by R. Kalonymus: “The *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* [i.e., the Sages of the Mishna and the Talmud] – all their teachings are based on the [mystical] secrets of the Torah.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This fact has far-reaching ramifications, in view of the conventional perception that the “revealed” and “hidden” (i.e., kabbalistic) aspects are two distinct branches of Torah. Here we encounter the claim that the Oral Torah is in fact based on the hidden, inner teachings. At the same time, R. Kalonymus adds that although Kabbala was hidden within the Torah, and although the Oral Law was built on the foundations of Kabbala, R. Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues were permitted to create an opening for the study of Kabbala as a special branch of Torah.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The kabbalistic Sages occupy different levels. R. Kalonymus draws a distinction between those who “ascend with the [Divine] chariot” – i.e., those sages who entered the supernal “*pardes*” (literally, “orchard,” an abbreviation of the different levels of interpretation of the Torah) and “ascended to the firmament” and those (like R. Shimon bar Yochai and his colleagues) who effected a “drawing down” of Divine light, such that even those who are incapable of living on the spiritual level of those who rose up to the heavens could still study Kabbala and benefit from its illumination.[[13]](#footnote-13) R. Shimon bar Yochai and his generation merited the revelation of great and profound secrets that King Shelomo and his generation did not merit to understand, even though the time of Shelomo was a period of “the moon in its fullness.”

**Kabbala as the Continuation of Prophecy**

It is no coincidence that the appearance of Kabbala, the revelation of *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, and the flourishing of kabbalistic literature that followed took place after the cessation of prophecy. What in fact happened was that fundamental aspects of prophecy took on a new form in Kabbala.

R. Kalonymus maintains that there is a great similarity between the kabbalists and the prophets. Both the prophet and the kabbalist use the power of the imagination to express their visions. The prophet envisions the heavenly Chariot, the holy “*chayot*” and the Throne of Glory, while the kabbalist, from the *Sefer Ha-Zohar* onwards, describes the four worlds – *Atzilut*, *Beria*, *Yetzira*, and *Asiya* – as well as the “*partzufim*” and *sefirot*. Both schools describe supernal perceptions by means of images, and therefore “the kabbalists, too, perceived not only *Adam Kadmon*, *Tiferet*, and *Malkhut*, but also prophetic visions.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Elsewhere, in reference to the greatest of the kabbalists, R. Kalonymus writes, “The holy *Zohar*… is the revelation of real prophecy.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

However, not only the giants of Kabbala, but all those who study the inner teachings of the Torah may “merit the spark of prophecy that is in Kabbala – each individual in accordance with his level.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This is so because when one studies Kabbala, if he has prepared himself properly and purified his body and his heart, he may merit an elevated level of insight the likes of which he has not experienced before. R. Kalonymus describes this as “a sparkling before him of something of God’s greatness.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This is the number of adult men, without the women and children. See, for example, *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba* 3:4: “Six hundred thousand [males] came out of Egypt aged twenty and upwards.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the context of apprenticeship of prophets, it is interesting to note what Ramchal writes, although he is not cited by R. Kalonymus:

   It is important to know that the prophet did not achieve the most elevated level all at once; rather, he ascended stage by stage until he achieved full prophecy. It involved a process of learning, like any other wisdom or craft in which a person gradually acquires proficiency. This is the meaning of the term “the children of prophets” – they stood before the prophet, acquiring proficiency in the ways of prophecy and its requirements. (R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Derekh Hashem* [Jerusalem, 5738] 3:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, pp. 185-187. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Zohar, Ra’aya Mehimna, Pinchas* 244b. The same idea is expressed by various kabbalists; see R. Wacks, *Be-Sod Ha-Yichud: Ha-Yichudim Be-Haguto Ha-Kabalit-Chasidit shel R. Chaim ben Shelomo Tirer Mi-Tshernowitz* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)