**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 #50: Kabbala, *Chassidut*, and Prophecy**

R. Kalonymus devotes lengthy discussion to the Ba’al Shem Tov’s innovative teachings with regard to Kabbala. This discussion may aid us in understanding the connection between prophecy and *chassidut*, as R. Kalonymus understands it, since Kabbala is a way-station (both historically and in terms of its essence) between the generations of the prophets and the appearance of Chassidism.

Whereas the kabbalistic teachings of the Zohar and the Ari set forth the hierarchy of the *sefirot* and *partzufim*, the Ba’al Shem Tov emphasized the concept of “the entire world is full of His glory” (*Yishayahu* 6:3) – in other words, God is to be found everywhere, literally:[[1]](#footnote-1) “The foundation of the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov, of blessed memory, is encapsulated in the simple meaning that he revealed in the verse, ‘the entire world is full of His glory’.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The verse indeed seems quite straightforward, R. Kalonymus notes, and seems to be making a clear statement, so why did the Ba’al Shem Tov face such fierce opposition and suffer such persecution for the crime of “corporealization of God”? The reason is that the Ba’al Shem Tov taught not only that Godliness is to be found everywhere, even within the physical, material world, but also that the physical world itself – the “garbs” and “vessels,” in kabbalistic language – are manifestations of Divine illumination. Even before the Ba’al Shem Tov’s appearance, the idea that God infuses all of Creation with life and its very existence was fundamental to Jewish faith. The claim that aroused such opposition – and which represents the essence of the Ba’al Shem Tov’s contribution – is that even the “vessels” are themselves Divine light: “Even physicality itself is the illumination of God’s holiness.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This assertion offers us a very clear understanding of the innovation that *chassidut* represented in relation to Kabbala. Until the appearance of the Ba’al Shem Tov, a person seeking spirituality and closeness to God approached his body and physical needs and desires as an all-out war. The strategy for achieving victory over the body and its base qualities was through repression and self-affliction. The aim was to arouse a sense of holiness from the depths of the soul and to “draw down Divine illumination” through the performance of *mitzvot*, prayer, and *kavanot*. The core of Divine service was located in the mind and was therefore mainly the province of the *tzaddikim*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Chassidut* taught that the vessels also need to be sanctified. All the body’s inclinations – even those viewed in a negative light – are to be enlisted in serving God. Thus, *Chassidut* placed the emphasis on serving God with one’s body and one’s character. *Kavanot* and *yichudim* were set aside in favor of fervent and passionate prayer.[[5]](#footnote-5) “By means of arousal of the senses, too, one is able to achieve holy passion.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here R. Kalonymus raises the familiar question: How is it possible that we are given commandments that entail emotions, such as loving God and fearing Him? How can we be commanded to change something that we feel? He explains, in light of all of the above, that there is no real question here, and indeed *chassidut* awards it no serious treatment. If a person had no feeling at all, then the question would be a legitimate one. But since a person has many reasons and opportunities to arouse within himself feelings of love and fear with regard to this-worldly matters and to develop emotions such as anger and hatred towards earthly phenomena, such that he is able to apply his emotions as he wishes, there is no reason why he cannot enlist them in his service of God as well.

**Chassidism and the Service of Prophecy**

From R. Kalonymus’s words above, it would seem that Chassidism is identical, in terms of its manner of Divine service, to the service of prophecy. R. Kalonymus defines the service of prophecy as bringing one’s soul and body to cleaving to God,[[7]](#footnote-7) and Chassidism has the same aim, as explained above in our previous discussions. Thus, R. Kalonymus leads us to the conclusion that the goal of *chassidut* is essentially renewal of the service of prophecy.

The similarity and identification of *chassidut* with prophecy are mentioned in several places in R. Kalonymus’s writings. We will review some examples.

In discussing the status of a simple, regular person in the eyes of prophecy and in the eyes of *chassidut*, he notes the great similarity:

This shows the similarity between *chassidut* and prophecy. In the case of prophecy, even a simple person who did not [stand] before the prophets – if he wanted to draw close to them and enjoy their illumination, he could himself become a different person and prophesy with them. And even if he did not prophesy for himself, and his prophecy ceased when he grew distant from them, in body and soul…. Likewise in the case of Chassidism. Even regular people – if they are God-fearing, wholehearted in their observance of the commandments, and possessing faith, they become *chassidim*, in accordance with their level, when they cleave to their Rebbe, even though *chassidut* is a very high level.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is interesting that Kabbala is different from Chassidism and prophecy with regard to this attitude towards regular, simple people. Kabbala – the study of the inner teachings of the Torah – is not available to the masses. “Not so prophecy, and certainly not *chassidut*, whose entire essence is to broaden and spread the light of God’s holiness even to the furthest places.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In describing the encounter between the *chassid* and his Rebbe, R. Kalonymus states that the Rebbe’s teaching is like prophecy: “The conveying of the [Rebbe’s] teaching and instruction is a glimmer of prophecy, and in prophecy, too, in accordance with the [level of the] people and in accordance with their needs, such prophecy is God’s word to the prophet”[[10]](#footnote-10) – since, according to R. Kalonymus’s explanation, the prophet would devise a private, individualized *tikkun* for every individual in accordance with his level.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The path of the Ba’al Shem Tov should be viewed as prophetic revelation. The appearance of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his interpretation of the verse, “the entire world is full of His glory,” effected new revelations. R. Kalonymus explains a fundamental principle relating to the manner in which Kabbala is transmitted: The vessel determines the nature of the revelation of light, since Divinity existed everywhere even before the Ba’al Shem Tov started talking about it, and obviously there is no disagreement between the Ba’al Shem Tov and the early kabbalists in this regard. However, the revelations of the Zohar were received in vessels of perception that were suited to previous generations; the same can be said for the Kabbala of R. Moshe Cordovero, and certainly the Kabbala of the Ari. When the Ba’al Shem Tov came along and revealed that the vessels themselves are brimming with Divine light, he thereby facilitated the revelation of that which was already known, in certain circles, but in “new vessels.” Thus, a seemingly “new path” in Divine service was created, and “the holy Zohar and the path of the Ba’al Shem Tov merged and united, and they manifest themselves in the same revelation.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

When R. Kalonymus emphasizes the importance of Divine service and sanctification in order to achieve the level of *chassidut*, he identifies *chassidut* with prophecy:

For it is not in the mind or the intellect that one draws down Chassidic revelation, like prophecy, but rather by sanctifying one’s entire self, and this requires effort.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Just as prophecy cannot be acquired purely through the application of the mind (at least according to R. Kalonymus), so *chassidut* cannot be acquired solely by means of the intellect. One has to internalize its values so that they become part of his personality, his character, and “all of his essence.”

“**And Your Sons and Daughters Shall Prophesize**”

We cited previously R. Chaim Vital’s description of people in his generation who merited prophecy.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to R. Kalonymus, the same can be said of our own generations. In support of this claim, he cites a fascinating teaching by R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, who quotes his great teacher, the Maggid of Mezeritsch:

We see that in our times, while we are in bitter exile, there are individuals who achieve *ruach ha-kodesh* more easily then was possible in the times of the prophets, when, as we know, it was necessary to engage extensively in vows and meditation in order to achieve prophecy and *ruach* *ha-kodesh*. The great Maggid offered a wondrous and beautiful parable in this regard: The situation may be compared to a king who is in his glorious home, in his courtyard, in his palace, and one of his trusted subjects comes by, seeking to invite him [the king] to a meal at his home. The king would certainly become angry at him, for it is not befitting the king’s honor to depart from his palace and go to someone else’s home, even if the meal were to be a great banquet. One could not invite the king to his home without making all extensive preparations and appointing respected intercessors and attendants to find favor in the eyes of the king, so that he would come to the meal. But when the king is on the road and wishes to sleep over somewhere, then if he finds suitable accommodation in a clean inn – even if it is in a village – then so long as it is clean, he is willing to stay over there. The meaning of the parable is clear: While the Temple stood and the Divine Presence resided in the Holy of Holies, if a person wished to imbibe *ruach ha-kodesh* or prophecy, he had to invest great effort – as we find in the case of *Simchat Beit Ha-Shoeva*, where they would literally draw out *ruach ha-kodesh*. But now, during our bitter exile, even the holy *Shekhina* is in exile along with us, and for our many sins it must roam and wander, and it yearns greatly to find a place in which it can reside. If it finds a resting-place in the form of a person who is merely clean of sins and transgressions, then there it will reside.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Thus, paradoxically, it is precisely the deterioration of the generations since the destruction of the Temple and the exile that makes it easier for a person to encounter the King of the universe.

This tradition of *ruach ha-kodesh* and prophecy residing in the generations from the beginning of *chassidut* is interwoven in the teachings of Polish Chassidism. R. Kalonymus cites proof of this from *Maor Va-Shemesh*:

And it is known – and I have seen it myself – that the great *tzaddikim*, who cleave to the upper worlds, are divested of the garb of physicality; the Divine Presence rests upon them and speaks from their throats, and their mouths utter prophecy. And these *tzaddikim* are unaware, afterwards, of what they said, for they cleave to the upper worlds, and the Divine Presence speaks from their throats.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In his famous *Iggeret Ha-Kodesh*, the Ba’al Shem Tov, trailblazer of the path of *chassidut*, describes the ascents of his soul to heaven. His disciples, following his wondrous example, left many sources indicating that *chassidut* viewed itself as reviving or renewing prophecy.[[17]](#footnote-17) Hence, we might conclude that what R. Kalonymus writes about the connection between Chassidism and prophecy is not as radical as we might have thought.

However, this conclusion would be mistaken. Although in terms of the connection between Chassidism and prophecy, R. Kalonymus tells us nothing new, his innovation in relation to his predecessors lies in the setting down of a detailed program to revive and restore the “service of prophecy.” R. Kalonymus sought to bring back the service of prophecy not just to select individuals and *tzaddikim*, but to each and every Jew. He viewed this as an aim that pertained not only to adults; children, too, should be educated and habituated in the service of prophecy.

R. Kalonymus writes this explicitly in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, his Chassidic *mussar* work that is unique in that it addresses younger readers directly. He writes:

If you are discouraged because your immediate ancestry is undistinguished, lift yourself up and gaze beyond, deeper into your past. You are descended from holy men and women, from prophets, from the sages of the Mishna and Talmud, from great rabbinic masters and *tzaddikim*. The Talmud states (*Pesachim* 66a) that the people of Israel, if they are not prophets themselves, are at least the children of prophets. It is clear from the context that the Talmud is not referring to the distant past, but means to suggest that even now a spark of the prophetic power of his ancestors is to be found within every Jewish child. All you have to do is dig for it and you will discover it within you.[[18]](#footnote-18)

These words, I believe, encapsulate the essence of R. Kalonymus’s great vision: exposing the prophetic potential of each and every Jew. R. Kalonymus uses the rest of the book to provide guidance to the reader as to how to bring this idea to realization.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For more on this concept see the earlier *shiur* on “God, the World, and Man”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For discussion of this subject in the teachings of R. Kalonymus, see R. Sacks, “*Ha-Hitragshut Ve-Ha-Hitlahavut Be-Mishnato Ha-Chinukhit shel R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro Mi-Piaseczno*”, *Hagut Be-Chinukh Ha-Yehudi* 5-6 (5763-5764), pp. 71-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See our earlier discussion on “The service of prophecy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See our previous discussion of “The Service of Prophecy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parashat* *Vayeshev*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. Kalonymus Kalman Ha-Levi Epstein, *Maor Va-Shemesh* (Jerusalem, 5748), *Parashat* *Vayigash*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See “*Iggeret Ha-Kodesh*," *Shivchei Ha-Besht* (Mintz edition, Jerusalem, 5729). The prophetic Kabbala of R. Avraham Abulafia played a central role in this. See M. Idel, *Ha-Chassidut – Bein Ekstaza Le-Magia* (Jerusalem-Tel Aviv, 5761), p. 111, and s.v. “*nevua*” (prophecy). There are some important sources quoted in R. Schatz, *Ha-Chassidut Ke-Mystika* (Jerusalem, 5748), chapter 8, esp. pp. 121-122. These sources indicate the possibility of the realization of prophecy in light of the idea of God’s presence in Creation, and the fact that the Divine Presence speaks through the throats of those who have prepared themselves for this. For prophets from pre-*chassidic* groups with links to Chassidism, see Y. Weiss, *Chavurat Pneomatikanim Kedam-Chassidit*, in D. Assaf (ed.), *Tzaddik Ve-Eda* (Jerusalem, 5761), pp. 96-97, who presents additional sources relating to individuals who prophesized in the context of Sabbateanism. See also G. Scholem, *Shetei* *Ha-Eduyot Ha-Rishonot al Chavurat Ha-Chassidim Ve-Ha-Besht*,” *Tarbitz* 20 (5710), pp. 228-240. Ben-Tzion Dinur views the Ba’al Shem Tov’s efforts to reach *Eretz Yisrael* as the beginning of “the preparation of the generation for redemption through the restoration of *ruach ha-kodesh* to Israel, which would follow this move [to Israel].” See B.Z. Dinur, “*Reshita shel Ha-Chassidut Ve-Yesodoteha Va-Sotziali’im Ve-Ha-Meshichi’im*,” *Tzion* 10 (5705), p. 162. In his article, Dinur cites several Chassidic texts that discuss prophecy and *ruach ha-kodesh*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 32 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 26-27). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)