**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #51: Developing the Imagination as Preparation for Prophecy**

Another aspect of R. Kalonymus’s aspiration and activity to prepare “children of prophets” in his generation was his engagement of the imagination. As noted previously, one of the central characteristics of the service of prophecy is the use of the imagination.[[1]](#footnote-2) In all of his books – in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, meant for students of school age; in *Chovat Ha-Avrekhim*, meant for young men; and in *Benei Machshava Tova*, meant for a select group of *chassidim* dedicated to inner work – R. Kalonymus offers instruction in using the imagination. Renewal of this capacity and skill, he maintained, would be one of the central preparations for the training of “children of prophets.”

R. Kalonymus has the following to say about this training:

These *tikkunim* [in preparation to receive prophecy] are not always the same. For every generation – and indeed, every person – must progress in accordance with his own nature, physical condition, and positive and negative attributes, and in accordance with the strength of his mind, his imagination, etc., and thus his *tikkunim* will be specific to himself… And so it is with the nation as a whole: Although their aim was not to become great prophets, but rather to be God’s people, the people of the prophets, they needed this sort of *tikkun*. And since these *tikkunim* are not preparation for regular, mundane service, but rather are preparation for prophecy and for drawing down *ruach ha-kodesh*, therefore only prophets were able to set the *tikkun* for this nation.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Here, R. Kalonymus asserts that the preparation required for each person is individual, dependent on his personality, and it was the prophets who were responsible for this preparation. This does not mean to suggest that all of *Am Yisrael* were prophets; rather, they were “people of the prophets” – in other words, capable of receiving God’s word (prophecy) via the prophets.

R. Kalonymus’s vision of developing “children of the prophets” to achieve their destiny appears not only in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, intended for younger readers. His work *Benei Machshava Tova*, intended for a select group that sought an especially high level of sanctity, offers instruction as to how, through use of the imagination and focused thinking, a person is able to experience visions of Divinity. R. Kalonymus directs members of the group to perceive Divinity everywhere in existence. One might question this: Are we then all prophets? Are we all capable of seeing Divinity? R. Kalonymus answers:

We have formed this community in order to transform each of our members into a person of spirit and mindfulness, to convey a new way of thinking and perceiving. Your mind will observe with new depth and clarity. As you resist the distractions of your physical surroundings, a sense of focused spiritual concentration will unfold within you. When you recite, “Blessed are You, Holy One, Master of all creation,” you visualize the “You” and you visualize the “Master of all creation.” Your eyes observe the Presence of God, which animates and surrounds everything, including yourself… What you see in the Holy Presence of God…

Now, do not resist our ideas by rationalizing that we plan to make a prophet out of you and move you out of the realm of reality. Hillel the Elder has already taught us about this (*Pesachim* 66b). Every Jew, even if not a prophet, is the descendant of prophets. Even among the prophets there are levels. Moshe, our teacher, reached a point at which he was told: ‘Man cannot see me and live’ (*Shemot* 23:20). But *Yeshayahu* and *Yechezkel* both claimed, “I would see the Lord” (*Yeshayahu* 6:1). There are levels upon levels. What our teacher Moshe wished to see, a man cannot see and survive. At a lower level, Yeshayahu and Yechezkel perceived God, and after many more steps and permutations, you, a simple Jew, can come to perceive as well.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Elsewhere, R. Kalonymus writes:

When a person with developed awareness has moments of powerful, clear perception, he can see what the Israelite prophets saw: that we are in the palpable presence of God, be He blessed.[[4]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus believe that in our generation, everyone can be a *chassid* – a “child of prophets.”[[5]](#footnote-6) Not everyone can be a prophet – in other words, a *chassidic* *tzaddik* – but everyone is capable of receiving and implementing the vision of the Ba’al Shem Tov and of his holy disciples. Thus, every individual, in accordance with his level, can discover within himself that he is a “son of the prophets.”

**Breaking Through the Veil to See God**

It is natural that a believer desires to see God. A believer who serves his Creator by performing His commandments, who turns to Him in prayer, and who involves Him in all that happens in his life – his celebrations as well as his pain – desires to see the “face” of God and to award Him the most tangible presence. The psalmist, whose soul yearns for God, seeks to behold Him: “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?” (*Tehillim* 42:3). Although this verse may be interpreted as expressing the wish to go up to Jerusalem, to the Temple, the place where God resides, the plain meaning of the verse remains: A person seeks to “meet” God, face to face.

But is it possible to see God? Moshe asked to behold God and was told, “You cannot see My face, for no man shall see Me and live” (*Shemot* 32:20). Instead of seeing God’s “face,” Moshe was permitted to see a certain aspect of Him: “I will take away My hand and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen” (*Shemot* 33:23). Elsewhere, however, we read about Moshe and Aharon and seventy of the elders of Israel who did merit to see, seemingly with no constraint or barrier:

And they beheld the God of Israel, and there was under His feet the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness. (*Shemot* 24:10)

Further descriptions of seeing God appear in various books of the Prophets. Yeshayahu describes, “I saw the Lord sitting upon a Throne, high and elevated, and His train filled the Temple” (*Yeshayahu* 6:1). Yechezkel describes the heavenly Chariot and the Divine Throne: “And upon the likeness of the throne there was a likeness as the appearance of a man above it” (*Yechezkel* 1:26).

Jewish philosophy throughout the ages has grappled with this question of the possibility of an encounter between man and God. The scope of our discussion does not allow for comprehensive treatment of the range of views that have been offered in this regard. (Interested readers are referred to *God in Search of Man*, by R. Dr. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel.)

The possibility or impossibility of seeing God is connected to several fundamental questions, the most important of which concerns the nature of God – or, as the question was formulated in the Middle Ages, whether God is tangible or abstract. The second question flows from the first and focuses on human consciousness: Is man capable of perceiving God through his senses, through his intellect, or through some other faculty?

The third question concerns the nature of the reality in which we live and the connection between God and this world. For in plain terms, we cannot see God. In *chassidut*, the word “*olam*” (world) is understood as an allusion to “*he’elem*” (hiddenness) – the idea that God is hidden within Creation: "Truly You are God Who hides Himself" (*Yeshayahu* 45:15). The story is told of a child who came crying to his father, a chassidic leader, telling him that he was playing hide-and-seek with his friends, but they did not find him. His father had trouble understanding his misery: "But that's good; it means you hid well!" His son answered miserably, "But they didn't even come and look for me!" His father exclaimed, "That is exactly how God feels! He hides so that we will seek Him! The fact that He is 'God Who hides Himself' does not mean that He doesn't exist; it means that He wants us to exert ourselves to find Him! Sometimes we forget to see Him; we leave Him in His concealment….”

If God is indeed "hidden,” is there any way we can overcome this concealment and expose Him? Plato's metaphor of the dark cave prompted philosophical debate surrounding the idea of the dual nature of our reality, comprised of the world of the senses and the world of ideas. The metaphor describes a group of prisoners in an underground cave. The chains around their legs and necks do not allow them to turn and see behind them. The people living on the outside pass by the entrance to the cave, riding their donkeys and carrying their work implements, casting shadows on the inner wall of the cave. Thus, all that the prisoners know of the outside world is the shadows that they see moving on the wall. Those who were born into this situation and have never seen the world outside of the cave believe that what they see is the real world. In reality, it is a very partial and limited reflection. Only someone who has freed himself of his chains and has emerged from the cave to see the sunlight can encounter the real world. Plato maintained that the real world was the world of ideas and that man is capable of encountering this reality through his intellect. What the senses offer, in contrast, is not true knowledge, but rather a partial likeness of the intangible, concealed ideas. But we become convinced that what we see, hear and touch is real, just like the prisoners in the cave.[[6]](#footnote-7)

R. Kalonymus maintains, in a similar way, that a person's life is covered by a screen, and he must find a way to see behind it. However, while Plato sought to reveal the world of ideas, R. Kalonymus seeks God:

Our true goal is quite different. In a single, powerful moment, you can remove the veil that blankets your perception of reality. You will see, in an unmistakable, unshakable flash, that you are standing in your place in the great chain of creation, among a huge camp of angels and holy beings. You yourself are one of them.[[7]](#footnote-8)

With these words, R. Kalonymus expresses the duality of existence, comprising both "actuality" and "nothingness.” "Actuality" refers to that which appears real to mortal eyes, while "nothingness" refers to the Divinity that is clothed in "actuality" and gives it life. *Chassidut* demands that a person seek and expose the "nothingness,” constantly looking for God's hidden presence. In order to train his *chassidim* in this task, R. Kalonymus sets forth a practical program, based on group work in the framework of the "*chavura*.”

**Purpose of the *Chavura* – To Perceive God**

As we have seen, R. Kalonymus views the institution of the *chavura* as one of the ways to revive *chassidut* and restore it to its original glory. His writings on this subject include a special booklet that he intended for a group of select individuals, entitled *Bnei Machshava Tova*. The booklet, which addresses regular working people rather than full-time scholars, presents a program for spiritual development for anyone who feels “far from God.” The book would appear to be based on an actual group that was active with R. Kalonymus, as evidenced in the first-person plural formulation, such as, for instance, “our holy company,” “our society.”

The clearly-stated purpose of the group is to “see God”:

We have formed this community in order to transform each of our members into a person of spirit and mindfulness, to convey a new way of thinking and perceiving. Your mind will observe with new depth and clarity. As you resist the distractions of your physical surroundings, a sense of focused spiritual concentration will unfold within you. When you recite, “Blessed are You Holy One, Master of all creation,” you visualize the “You” and the “Master of all creation.” Your eyes observe the Presence of God, which animates and surrounds everything, including yourself. As you look around at all the physical world, what you see is the Holy Presence of God, pulsating and shimmering in everything. ‘You are the Master of all creation’; you are sept up in the pleasure of this understanding.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

What is the meaning of this level of perception? How it is achieved? How does R. Kalonymus relate to the Rambam’s famous statement that anyone who attributes a bodily existence to God denies one of the central tenets of our faith, for God has no body and no bodily form? In order to understand R. Kalonymus’s approach, we must go back to two of the central tools that he employs: the mind and the imagination.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For more extensive discussion see our discussion of “The imagination and prophecy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, pp. 32-33 (= *Conscious Community*, pp. 49-50). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., p. 13 (= p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. R. Kalonymus reiterated this idea of “the children of prophets” in his public sermons. An example is his sermon from Shabbat *Parashat Beha’alotekha* in the year 5690. See *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 154-155, where he explains at length and in detail what it means to “see God” and how this may be achieved. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. A modern representation of the dual nature of human experience and reality can be found in the film *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 25 (= *Conscious Community*, pp. 34-35) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 32 (= Conscious Community, pp. 49-50) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)