**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #52: Thinking about God’s Presence**

According to R. Kalonymus, a precondition for any spiritual progress is purification of one’s body and thoughts. In earlier generations, this task would be approached by first purifying the body (for instance, by denying oneself various bodily pleasures), and then moving on to purification of one’s thoughts. In our generations, characterized by weakness, there is no point in first addressing the body; rather, the mind must first be strengthened and purified by accustoming it to perceiving abstract, spiritual, holy images. It is for this reason that R. Kalonymus named his work “*Bnei Machshava Tova*” (literally, “People of Positive Thought”), asserting that “mindfulness is the tool we use to do our work; the basic principle and practice of our society is to expand and extend this capacity.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

As noted previously, what R. Kalonymus means by “mind,” “thought,” or “mindfulness” is the act of conscious thought. It is not the same as intelligence.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, the thinking that is needed to achieve fervor is not discursive activity (the logical thought that serves philosophers), but rather an act of profound concentration and meditation. Powerful thought means focused awareness, maintained over an extended period, regarding a certain object. Thinking that is fleeting or incidental is not powerful thought.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Previously, we focused on the function of the mind in exposing the soul and arousing emotion. Here, the role of the mind is to reinforce within oneself one of the main principles of *chassidut*: God’s immanence. As we discussed extensively,[[4]](#footnote-4) according to this principle, Divinity is to be found in everything. Chassidic philosophy – which makes extensive use of the expression from *Tikkunei Ha-Zohar*, “There is no place that is devoid of Him,”[[5]](#footnote-5) and the Biblical verse, “The entire earth is full of His glory” (*Yeshayahu* 6:3) – does not suffice with an abstract understanding of this concept, but rather demands that a person internalize it in profound depth. The following teaching from the *beit midrash* of R. Dov-Ber of Mezeritch, a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, is an example:

And one should think at all times that everything that exists in the world – it is all full of the blessed Creator.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Attention should be paid to the expression “think at all times,” which parallels the term that R. Kalonymus uses – “powerful thought,” meaning thought that is constantly sustained and focused. When a person internalizes the Presence of God in every place, he “sees” within everything the outpouring of God’s powers and His vitality and he experiences God’s Presence.

A similar teaching is offered by R. Meshulem Feibush of Zbarizh, who offers a fascinating metaphor for the way in which two people can look at the same object but “see” different things:

If a person does not think about the blessed God constantly, then even if he believes in Him, He does not truly have God before him at all times, for he always has the world before him, and not thoughts of God. But one who does not think about the world at all will think, in whatever he sees, about God and how that thing is dependent on Him, and he will do so with great passion. This may be compared to someone who looks at a woman’s beautiful clothes. A person who is mired in the desire for women, Heaven forfend, does not really pay attention to the intricate embroidery and golden weave of the cloth; rather, his heart is immediately drawn to the allure of the woman who wears it. But one who is not [so mired] and whose heart is cleansed of this allure looks simply at the garment. Thus, both look at the same thing, but each sees something different. In the same way (while drawing a huge distinction between impurity and impurity in matters of holiness), when a person is constantly drawn to God, in all that he sees in the world he perceives God, Whose powers animate it and give it life, as it is written, “and You give life to all” (*Nechemia* 9:6). This is not the case with someone who does not constantly yearn for God in his thoughts. All that he sees is the physical world. Even though, when asked and reminded, he would say that God gives life to all, nevertheless he is not constantly occupied with this thought. Understand well the message of this metaphor, which is very similar to the situation we describe.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A person who believes that God exists everywhere and gives life to everything strips away the “garments” of Creation and reveals God within it. Ultimately, he manages to “see” God’s presence. In contrast, there may be someone who believes in God’s immanence and even speaks about it, but he has not internalized it; he is unable to “see” God’s presence in everything.

It is most surprising that if we compare the metaphor and the lesson to be learned from it, the roles seem to be reversed: It is the habit and propensity of the individual who is consumed with desire to, in his mind, “strip” the woman of her garments; this expresses the more inwardly-developed and more worthy perspective, while the individual “whose heart is pure” looks at the garment in an external, objective, neutral way. This teaches us that the desire and longing for an encounter with God (which, on some level, may be compared with the desire for the woman) can arouse within us powers of imagination and abstraction, by means of which we are capable of removing the outer wrappings of our physical reality and attaining a glimpse of Divinity.

R. Kalonymus offers his own description of the mindfulness required of a person concerning Divine immanence:

The whole world and everything in it is Divine in origin and substance… Even I am full of God. The very sand under my feet is a manifestation of Divine Names. The whole world is utterly comprised of and dependent on God. Now I, of my own free will, have come to think of myself as a free and independent agent; I have exiled myself from the sense of the presence of God.

When you constantly think and fix in your heart and your mind the thought that the entire world is full of Divine Names, then you cannot help… but have your mind exposed to a holy perspective… You may not always carry this perspective, but you will certainly experience many fine moments of understanding.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The “Divine Names” referred to here are the different permutations of the Hebrew letters that are the basis of all that exists, according to well-known kabbalistic teachings. We will briefly dwell on this idea, since it sheds light on what “seeing God” means for R. Kalonymus.

R. Kalonymus is addressing the pessimistic disciple who is reading his book but doubts his own ability to perceive the world in its Divine unity, to perceive the spiritual dimension, to see the holy Names comprising all of existence:

We are aware that you will still harbor doubts, even though you may want to believe what we say. You cannot quite accept the fact that you can rise to the level of a man of spirit – that you can see the underlying, sustaining patterns in reality. This kind of observation both includes and transcends normal sense perception. You will not simply know in your mind that God’s guiding presence sustains the universe. You will be able to see and perceive holiness, souls, and Divine Names.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The problem is that we are accustomed to thinking in tangible terms:

This is the main challenge confronting us when we attempt to open our awareness to ideas that are not easily represented in physical forms. When we think, our mind naturally identifies images that correspond to known phenomena. We tend to not even notice a “thought” unless it corresponds to a form in some way.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We are chained to sensory thinking and are not used to thought that is abstract and unrelated to the physical world. Thought that has no tangible expression in the physical world is dismissed by the mind as “specious,” according to R. Kalonymus: “It is denied and ignored until he becomes quite certain that such a ‘silly idea’ would never occur to him.”

He goes on to offer some fascinating arguments in support of this assertion.[[11]](#footnote-11) One of these arguments is very similar to the wax metaphor proposed by Descartes in the 17th century. Descartes writes:

Let us take, for example, this piece of wax: It has been taken quite freshly from the hive, and it has not yet lost the sweetness of the honey which it contains; it still retains somewhat of the odor of the flowers from which it has been culled; its color, its figure, its size are apparent; it is hard, cold, easily handled, and if you strike it with the finger, it will emit a sound. Finally, all the things which are requisite to cause us distinctly to recognize a body are met with in it. But notice that while I speak and approach the fire, what remained of the taste is exhaled, the smell evaporates, the color alters, the figure is destroyed, the size increases, it becomes liquid, it heats, scarcely can one handle it, and when one strikes it, no sound is emitted. Does the same wax remain after this change? We must confess that it remains; none would judge otherwise. What, then, did I know so distinctly in this piece of wax? It could certainly be nothing of all that the senses brought to my notice, since all these things which fall under taste, smell, sight, touch, and hearing are found to be changed, and yet the same wax remains.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Descartes engaged in an epistemological debate (i.e., concerning how we perceive the world around us). He argues that we must surely “know” wax (or any other object or substance) by means of our intellect, rather than our senses, since the sensory characteristics of wax are susceptible to change and thus are not integral to it, but nevertheless we identify wax as such. We “know” wax through the fact of its extension in space, and this is grasped by the intellect.

R. Kalonynus offers a similar intellectual exercise:

Take straw as an example. It is cut and composted and returned to the field. Compost enriches the soil and increases the produce; the compost works its way into the vegetation. Thus, rotted straw becomes soil, which is transformed into vegetables, which are, in turn, consumed by a person, becoming the flesh and life energy of a human being, who is in the likeness and image of the One – a cycle of straw to rot to vegetation to humanity.

So what are these things at their core? What actually is water? What is true straw?... Perhaps several essences coexist in each material?

These ideas are neither possible nor true. The true essence of a material is beyond your vision; it is not visible to the eye. What you observe are the shifting shapes and outer forms of an object…. Why does it seem strange to you that the kabbalist sees the reality and the truth? He sees the creative powers of the letters and the spiritual forces that energize physical reality.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Thought has the power to penetrate the inner essence of things and to grasp their unchanging essence. Just as a chemist identifies the elements that comprise water (hydrogen and oxygen), a kabbalist identifies the spiritual element that underlies all of existence: Divine vitality, as expressed in the phrases “and You give life to all” and “the entire world is full of His glory.”

Let us take this metaphor a step further. Imagine a group of friends sitting at the top of a mountain, surrounded by the beauty of nature. One member of the group is a musician; he hears the sounds that nature produces, and he feels a melody forming inside him. Another member of the group is a chemist. He examines the natural substances around him, and his mind fills with different formulas. A third participant is a physicist, who is awed by the interplay of forces at work in nature. A fourth is a painter, who is altogether absorbed in the range of colors and hues that he sees around him. The last companion is a poet, and as he gazes at the panoramic scene he starts to string together words and phrases that express his wonder. We could go on and add further examples from different disciplines, each representative “seeing” something different in the scene. This may help us to understand the inner world of the “kabbalist *chassid*” (i.e., a *chassid* who studies *kabbala*), who “sees the creative powers of the letters and the spiritual forces that energize physical reality.” The map or key of the world and all its composite parts, as set forth in Zoharic *kabbala*, and especially in the detailed teachings of the Ari, allows him to understand the spiritual connections between the spiritual building-blocks of existence in the upper worlds and the way in which they are reflected in our reality, the lowest of all worlds. We might say that the kabbalist *chassid*, as described by R. Kalonymus, is someone who has developed his “spiritual intelligence” to the point that he has a sort of “super-sensory” vision. This spiritual intelligence is what R. Kalonymus refers to as prophecy, and an individual Jew who has the potential for prophetic perception is counted by him as one of the “sons of the prophets”:

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. Each sees according to his level of awareness, but even afterwards, after the moment of inspiration has passed, he can maintain the former perception and clarity… With this capacity for mindfulness and attention, he can reawaken the initial inspiration at any time.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The development of this capacity allows a person to feel the presence of God whenever he so wishes. Unquestionably, there are differing “levels of awareness,” but with study and practice, it is possible. The perception or awareness that is described here is not sensory, but rather an inner seeing. The purpose of the imagination is to bring forth within a person this inherent ability, and once he develops it, he may merit actual visions. A person must believe that he has this ability, and he must exert himself to attain it:

There resides within you a way of knowing that you have never used before. With this new way of knowing, you will come to perceive this greater perspective. We are not talking about fantasies or delusions. We do not describe anything extraordinary, nothing above or beyond material reality, nothing that is visible only to highly evolved people. This vision is sure and true. Any sincere seeker can discover these things, if only he will persevere.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Here we find the tool of imagination used together with powerful thinking, and both together facilitate the spiritual work proposed by R. Kalonymus – to see God.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 12 (= *Conscious Community*, p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In our discussion of “God, the World, and Man.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tikkunei Zohar* (Jerusalem, 5746),122b [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Sefer Tzava’at Ha-Ribash* (Kehat ed., Brooklyn, 5758), p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Yosher Divrei Emet* (Avraham Yitzchak Kahn ed., Jerusalem, 5734), #12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 30 (= ibid. pp. 45-46). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 17 (= ibid. p. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., pp. 30-32 (= ibid. pp. 46-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge University Press, 1911). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Bnei Machshava Tova*, p. 31 (= *Conscious Community*, pp. 46-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 13 (= pp. 13-14). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 26 (= pp. 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. Kalonymus’s writings provide further attention to the possibility of a person seeing God even if he is not a prophet, for example, in his interpretation of the verse, “And Israel saw the great hand … and they believed in God and in Moshe, His servant,” where he analyzes the nature of a person’s “seeing”. See *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, 7th day of Pesach, 5690, pp. 373-378. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)