**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #53: The Problem of Corporeality**

R. Kalonymus’s words about imagining God and the Throne of Glory bring us face to face with a problem: Does such visualization not tread into the dangerous waters of corporealization of God? R. Kalonymus is well aware of the problem, and he even notes the Rambam’s formulation of the prohibition on imagining any bodily form in relation to God.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Without any doubt, any reference to “seeing” in R. Kalonymus’s teachings is not a reference to sensory sight, “with human eyes,” but rather a higher form of vision, seeing “with the heart.” Although this is so self-evident as to require no proof, in order to remove all doubt we will cite two examples.

When R. Kalonymus discusses the fundamental principles of Kabbala, he writes explicitly as follows:

The Written Law speaks of God using human language – referring, for example, to God’s eyes, hands, feet, etc. The prophet Yechezkel goes so far as to declare that he saw that upon the likeness of the [Heavenly] Throne he saw a likeness of a man, and the commentators explain that one must not, God forbid, understand this as meaning that the Divine holiness takes the form of physical limbs. The Torah already notes, “For you did not see any likeness…” The Torah and the prophets use such language only in order to convey the message in terms that can be understood. But on High there are in actuality no such things.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As for the meaning of “seeing with the heart,” R. Kalonymus asserts that this is not sensory seeing. Likewise, when he discusses the question of proofs for God’s existence, he argues that the “external” proofs, such as those arising from the order of Creation and the sophistication and intricacy of Nature, are superfluous if a man looks deeply into his own soul, for he discovers that he can “see” God, and “the heart sees and knows”:

Certainly you have heard of or seen the books that deal with the existence of God. For those who find it hard to believe, they try to prove that there is a God. They bring their proofs from Creation itself, its inherent wisdom and almighty nature. But woe for you if you need their proofs. Have you not felt, have you not seen, how your soul is so sure it sees God? You speak to Him in second person, both in formal and informal prayer, because the truth is that your soul does see Him present, right there before you… because who needs proof beyond personal experience…[[3]](#footnote-3)

This indicates that the “seeing of the heart” is not sensory seeing, but rather inward meditation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The problem arises, however, when a person seeks to create a picture of God in his mind – a picture that will necessarily include material components, such as the likeness of a man or of a throne. R. Kalonymus recounts how one of his disciples approached him with an unusual request: to permit him to imagine a corporeal form for God during prayer:

[He] explained it to me this way: “When I pray, I would like to be aware that I am standing in the presence of the Almighty and I am completely in His hands. I find it very moving to imagine that God enlivens the whole world. But since I am not allowed to envision any image in prayer, I only have this idea. The idea alone, with no mental associations, has no resonance or power to motivate me to a higher awareness. Sometimes, a moment of inspiration will descend on me from above, but I cannot create it for myself. I cannot even sustain it by my own efforts.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The difficulty is acute, for a person is a bodily creature, and any task that he tries to undertake seriously requires some focus. If he is talking to his friend, then he will focus on the sight of his friend or the sound of his voice. If he is talking to his friend and doing something else at the same time – reading a book, for example – then his friend will likely notice his lack of concentration. In terms of our discussion, who do we stand before in prayer? Who are we addressing? So long as the Temple stood, Jews would turn their faces and their hearts towards the Temple, and specifically to the Holy of Holies. Since the Destruction, Halakha determines that we face eastward. In a synagogue, one turns towards the Holy Ark. R. Yosef Karo rules in the *Shulchan Arukh* that a worshipper must imagine himself standing in the Temple and should direct his heart heavenward:

He should lower his head slightly, so that his eyes face downward, towards the ground, and he should think of himself as standing in the Temple, and in his heart he should aim heavenward.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Apparently, none of this satisfied the disciple who appealed to R. Kalonymus, feeling that he needed something more tangible.

Quite surprisingly, R. Kalonymus permits him to do as he wishes, relying on the opinion of Ra’avad, who disagreed with the Rambam with regard to the principle of God’s corporeality.[[7]](#footnote-7) Raavad did not think that someone who imagined God in some bodily form should be called a heretic. According to R. Kalonymus’s interpretation, what Raavad meant was that while God is unquestionably incorporeal, if someone has a need to visualize some sort of image – for example, the Divine Throne or the host of heavenly angels – in order to be able to direct his prayer properly, then this is acceptable, so long as it remains within the realm of thought and is not realized in the form of a graven image or picture:

We need a material image to help us reach toward ideas that are lofty and transcendent. With the help of God, we will eventually expand our minds to the point that we can comprehend imageless thought… Since you have such a pressing need to imagine an almost physical image, relying on the Raavad… 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.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It is interesting in this context to compare an excerpt from the writings of R. Kook, who also notes the view of the Raavad and rules in a similar manner that as long as the corporealization is not garbed in material form – i.e., a statue or picture – it does not represent rejection of the principles of Jewish faith:

Even though misunderstanding of concepts relating to the Divine is extremely detrimental, the main harm that arises from distorted perceptions is not actualized to the point that causes the spiritual death of those who maintain them, until such perceptions are realized in action – or, at least, until they are embodied in thoughts and actions that will necessarily become manifest in action. But so long as these perceptions remain in abstract form, they do not constitute an essential uprooting [of faith]. In this matter, our position is close to that of Raavad, who disagreed with the Rambam’s designation of anyone who believed in a corporeal existence for God as a heretic. We would agree [with Raavad] that so long as a person who holds such an image in his mind creates no picture or graven image, he has not taken the thought to its completion, and it still remains within the realm of the mind, such that it cannot be considered heresy and a rejection of religious belief.[[9]](#footnote-9)

What is it that prompts R. Kook to address this question? Why does he adopt a more lenient approach than does the Rambam? We may surmise that R. Kook is responding here to dilemmas similar to the one raised by R. Kalonymus. Nevertheless, even after he shows himself to be inclined in the direction of Raavad, R. Kook still considers the idea of God’s corporeality to be a “misunderstanding of concepts relating to the Divine” and “extremely detrimental.” It would therefore seem that R. Kook would not have been as accepting as R. Kalonymus was of one of his disciples imagining God.

Returning to R. Kalonymus – not only did he permit the student in question to visualize the Throne of Glory, but he extends this permission to the readers of his book who face a similar difficulty:

Now, dear friend, since your need is so pressing, imagine in your mind that you stand before Him, be He blessed. As a son comes to his father, so you come to God: “Father, have mercy on me. It is painful to realize just how far we are from our souls, how desperate our plight is! You have sent me here, and I cannot find You.” Unless you are made of stone, this image will soften you. You will stand like a burning flame in the presence of God, begging for yourself, your family, and your fellow Jews.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Initially, an artificial image will form in the mind – and there is benefit in that. However, at a later stage, following practice, one’s thought is no longer influenced by the senses and is cleansed of all forms and images:

All the advice we have given already provides the gradual steps to our true goal. We intend to transcend imaginative thought altogether. We wish to reach our core perception – a consciousness so profound and truthful that we see God in everything. At this level, the senses to do dominate your attention; they do not summon he mind to follow their meandering impressions… At the level of pure mindfulness, perception is not carried in images and pictures….[[11]](#footnote-11)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 14 (= *Conscious Community*, p. 16). The issue of God’s incorporeality is not at all a simple matter, since both in *Tanakh* and in many of *Chazal*’s teachings we find anthropomorphic descriptions (for instance, references to God’s outstretched hand, to His eyes, etc.). Many centuries ago there were profoundly religious Jews who understood these descriptions literally – although, of course, many others, including the Rambam, were vehemently opposed to any such interpretation. The very fact that the Rambam waged all-out war against corporealizing God and taught in his books how anthropomorphic teachings in the various biblical verses and *midrashim* should be understood indicates the prevalence of such perceptions. The same impression arises from his famous “Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead,” in which the Rambam describes a Talmudic sage who has in his mind a humanized image of God (see *Iggrot Ha-Rambam* [Y. Shilat ed., Jerusalem, 5747], vol. I, p. 341). This subject is addressed extensively by Yair Lorberbaum, who offers a comprehensive review of the relevant sources and studies in *Tzelem Elokim: Halakha Ve-Aggada* (Jerusalem, 5764), pp. 27-101. For more on the many rabbinical figures of Ashkenaz who maintained a literal interpretation of the anthropomorphic descriptions of God, see ibid. p. 31, f. 18. E. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 3-4. notes that Jewish mysticism is characterized by the tension between the perception that God has no physical existence and cannot be seen, on the one hand, and the visionary experience in which one “sees” figures that belong to the Divine world, on the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, p. 333 (= *To Heal the Soul*, pp. 33-34). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the “seeing of the heart,” see A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 18 (= *Conscious Community*, p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Raavad presents his view on the subject in his gloss on the Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:7. For more on Raavad’s approach, see Z. Harvey, “*She’elat i-Gashmiyut Ha-El Etzel Rambam, Raavad, Crescas Ve-Spinoza*,” in SO Heller-Wilensky and M. Idel (ed.s), *Mechkarim Ve-Hagut Yehudit* (Jerusalem, 5749), pp. 63-78. According to Harvey, Raavad’s criticism of the Rambam should not mislead us into thinking that Raavad himself believed that God was in any way corporeal. He had no objection to the Rambam’s assertion that God’s incorporeality is a metaphysical conclusion arising logically from belief in God’s Unity. What he did object to – vehemently – was the Rambam’s halakhic ruling that anyone who denied this conclusion was a heretic. In other words, he believed that to be a good Jew, one does not have to be a philosopher (ibid., p. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, *Shemona Kevatzim* (Jerusalem, 5764), *kovetz* 1, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 20 (= *Conscious Community*, p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 25 (= *Conscious Community*, p. 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)