**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #54: Seeing God and prophetic kabbala**

The “prophetic *kabbala*” taught by R. Avraham Abulafia (1240-1292?) aspires, as its name suggests, to bring a person to the level of prophecy. This is a central stream of *kabbala*, and it had a significant impact on Chassidic philosophy over the generations, too.[[1]](#footnote-1) R. Abulafia’s approach is based on the “*kabbala* of Names”: combinations of letters comprising Divine Names, and entails pronunciation of the names, methods of breathing, bodily movements, and music, leading the *kabbalist* to a state of ecstasy and *devekut* and – ultimately – an experience of prophecy.

It is easy to identify the similarity between R. Kalonymus and the tradition of prophetic *kabbala* if we compare what R. Kalonymus writes about seeing God with an excerpt from the writings of R. Yehuda Albotini, who was among the conveyors of the prophetic *kabbala* tradition founded by R. Abulafia. In this excerpt he guides the reader through one of the stages of the process that leads one to experience *ruach ha-kodesh*. An examination of the two fragments side by side serves to highlight the similarity between them:

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| --- | --- |
| R. Kalonymus | R. Yehuda Albotini |
| “As he prays, let him imagine that he is standing before the blessed God, and before His Throne of Glory…[[2]](#footnote-2) Suddenly you will see yourself standing before His Holy Presence, among a huge camp of angels and holy beings; you yourself are one of them.”[[3]](#footnote-3) | “… He should prepare his true thoughts to imagine, in his heart and his mind, hat he is sitting on High, in heaven, before the Holy One, blessed be He, and in the midst of the radiance and glow and majesty of His Presence. And you see, as it were, the Holy One, blessed be He, sitting like a king, imposing and elevated, with the entire host of the heavens, and angels and *keruvim* and beings of holy spiritual energy all standing before Him in awe and fear and trembling…”[[4]](#footnote-4) |

A similar image is also to be found in R. Avraham Abulafia’s work, *Chaye Olam ha-Ba*:

“Prepare your true thoughts to imagine the blessed God, and with Him His angels on high, and imagine them in your heart as though they were people standing, or sitting, around you, and you are among them, as though their spokesman….”[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus, unlike the kabbalists, does not regard the visualization of the world of Beria (the Throne of Glory and the angels) as a privilege reserved for a select few individuals. He describes and recommends the experience even when he addresses young students. His advice is meant for the youngster at prayer, to give him a feeling of God’s closeness. The fervor required in prayer can be attained only if one senses that closeness of the Divine. The verse that became a Chassidic maxim – “the entire world is full of His glory”- must become a tangible experience. And that experience may be attained both through visualization of the supernal worlds and the figures that populate them (such as the angels), and through powerful thought – which, in this context, means internal conviction of Divine immanence. In his *Chovat ha-Talmidim*, aimed at young students, R. Kalonymus writes:

“You must think about how God’s glory fills the whole universe, and how you yourself exist within Him and His holiness, even though you cannot see Him. More than a single thought is necessary. The more you reflect on these matters of faith, over and over again, constantly, the easier it will become to stimulate your soul to speak to God – Who faces you at all times.

It may still be difficult for you to imagine that you are standing before God… Look then toward the sky and contemplate; focus your mind and think: I exist on this side, while on the other side of the heavens, there is another world, completely different from this one. There are angels there, and seraphim, the souls of the patriarchs and of the prophets and *tzaddikim*. The Throne of Glory is suspended in their midst, and God, great, holy and awesome, is present on the throne… Strengthen yourself, look, and think some more. ‘I stand on this side of the Divine, and I say, ‘Blessed are You, O Lord’ – it is You, Lord, the one toward Whom I lift my eyes, whether I see You or not; it is You that I bless. I shut my eyes and look at You, and bless You and speak to You.’”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The main conclusion that we may draw from this comparison is that certain aspects of prophetic *kabbala* – a realm restricted to select individuals – became, in R. Kalonymus’s teachings, part of the guidance for the masses. While R. Kalonymus does not deal with the complex techniques of prophetic prophecy, his aim is still to prepare and train people for prophecy. Once again, we note R. Kalonymus’s aspiration to train not only mature and learned adults, but even children. His aim of preparing “children of prophets” entailed starting training at a young age.

**“Clearly, not in riddles”**

The distinction that R. Kalonymus draws between “seeing” and “riddles” serves to clarify the way in which he understands the concept of “seeing God.”

In one of his sermons on *parashat Beha’alotekha*, R. Kalonymus talks about prophetic perception, noting a question that arises from a comparison of different verses in Tanakh. Concerning Moshe, we read that God tells him, “… and you shall see the back of Me, but My face shall not be seen” (*Shemot* 33:23). The prophet Yishayahu, in contrast, says, “…and I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated…” (*Yishayahu* 6:1). The Torah itself testifies that “there has arisen in Israel no prophet like Moshe, whom the Lord knew face to face” (*Devarim* 34:10), it is impossible that Yishayahu – or any other prophet – could have experienced prophetic perception on a level higher than that of Moshe. Therefore, *Chazal* draw a distinction between the quality of Moshe’s prophecy and that of the other prophets: “All the prophets saw [as] through a cloudy glass, while Moshe Rabbenu saw [as] through a clear glass” (*Yevamot* 49b). In other words, Moshe experienced direct, clear, and intelligible prophecy, while the other prophets experienced prophecy through riddles, such as the boiling pot and the almond branch described by Yirmiyahu (chapter 1) and the golden menorah described by *Zekharia* (chapter 4). God Himself says of Moshe, “I speak with him mouth to mouth, manifestly, and not in riddles…” (*Bamidbar* 12:8).

R. Kalonymus asserts that even today, people have the ability to see “[as] through a clear glass”, just as there are those who see “as through a glass that is not clear” (or “riddles”), since, as the Zohar teaches, “the impact of Moshe lasts in every generation.”

“Thus, one who sees the world as a physical, material entity, and who perceives God’s greatness and wisdom only after contemplation, understanding the greatness of God’s work through hints and thereby arriving at knowledge of God and being aware of Him – this may be compared to seeing at the level of riddles, which he must solve.

But this is not the case for someone who perceives the ‘perfect, pleasing Radiance of the world’ within the world; he perceives God directly, and not through riddles. And it is not only great *tzaddikim* who are capable of perceiving the light of God within every detail of the world. Rather, every individual, on his own level, is capable of this.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

There are two types of seeing. The first is based on awe and wonder at the wisdom of Nature, leading the observer to a realization of God’s work and to knowledge of Him. There is, however, another level: a person who perceives the ‘perfect, pleasing Radiance of the world’ (as God is described by R. Elazar Azkari in his liturgical poem, *Yedid Nefesh*)[[8]](#footnote-8) experiences a direct, unmediated encounter with the essence of the world, through mystical seeing:

“There are times when [such a person] distances himself from this world, and his mind is immersed in holiness Then, when he observes the world – the trees, the grass, the sky, the stars – his soul stirs and he sees something of the illumination of the ‘perfect, pleasing Radiance of the world.’”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Each of these types of encounters with God has its advantages and disadvantages. The first type is based on intellectual observation; its advantage is that it allows for development through kabbalistic study, but its weakness is that it is sometimes emotionally sterile. A person can study *kabbala* mechanically, without ever reaching the essence and without ever feeling anything. Unmediated perception, on the other hand, brings a greater measure of fear and love of God, for there is a direct link between that which is perceived and the person’s inner consciousness. The disadvantage here is that there is no possibility of achieving a vision that is beyond one’s level, as is the case with intellectual perception based on study. Nevertheless, it remains possible that if this person elevates his spiritual service, he will “see more”:

“Seemingly, there is an advantage to seeing solely by means of the intellect, for one is able to ascend higher: first he takes not of the world that God has created and that He guides; then he studies the holy texts [*kabbala*] in order to know its roots – the holy names and the hints conveyed by each element, retracing their process of unfolding all the way back to the world of ‘*atzilut.’* One who observes the essence itself, on the other hand, sees little. The reason for this is that one who perceives either the hints in this world or the realities of the upper worlds via his intellect, is not seeing the essence of the light; rather, he is seeing the fact that there is light, and that there is a world of *yetzira*, of *beria*, and of *atzilut*… and that one is the source of the next, developing and unfolding. Such a person may be far removed from any personal connection to all this, and this [may be compared to] a glass that is not clear, riddles, and hints. Therefore, he sees more of what we might call the ‘face.’

The situation is different when it comes to actual ‘seeing,’ where one’s soul perceives God’s radiance in everything that exists in the world, leading him to greater love and fear of Him, in accordance with his own level… As he ascends higher, is able to see more, and this may be called a ‘clear glass,’ embodying the principle of ‘I have placed God before me always,’ which exists in every person.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

R. Kalonymus concludes by saying that his sermon on the *parasha* of Beha’alotekha, teaching about the prophecy of Moshe and the other prophets, is aimed at clarifying the Divine service required of us. Indeed, as we have seen above, R. Kalonymus sought to make such perception of God practically accessible to every Jew willing to invest spiritual effort.

R. Hillel Zeitlin, a Polish *chassidic kabbalist* and philosopher who was a contemporary of R. Kalonymus, wrote:

“People think that revelation is something reserved for singular, extraordinary human beings – the most select of the select. This mistake, which is common to almost all of those with superficial faith, originates in a misunderstanding of the true essence of revelation. Its effect on faith is almost as dangerous as that of faith’s enemy – heresy. Because of this mistake, people become accustomed to distancing Divinity from man – which means simultaneously distancing man from Divinity.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Both R. Hillel Zeitlin and R. Kalonymus seek to bring man closer to the Divine, and to bring God closer to man. Both were killed during the Holocaust in Poland, both clinging to a burning faith that even within the greatest concealment, God’s face can be seen by those who seek Him.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. M. Idel, *Ha-Chavaya ha-Mistit Etzel Avraham Abulafia*, Jerusalem 5762. Idel’s book discusses R. Avraham Abulafia’s teachings and his method for achieving prophecy. For more on prophetic *kabbala* and *chassidut*, see ibid. pp. 173-174, as well as M. Idel, *Ha-Chassidut Bein Ekstaza le-Magia*, Jerusalem-Tel Aviv 5761, pp. 98-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Benei Machshava Tova*, p. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Yehuda Albotini, *Sefer Sulam ha-Aliya*, Y.A. Porush edition, Jerusalem 5749, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 108. Quoted by M. Idel, *Ha-Chavaya ha-Mistit Etzel Avraham Abulafia*, Jerusalem 5762, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Chovat ha-Talmidim*, pp. 86-87 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 72) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Derekh ha-Melekh*, p. 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Elazar Azkari, *Sefer Charedim*, Jerusalem, 5769, chapter 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Derekh ha-Melekh*, p. 140 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. H. Zeitlin, *Al Gevul Shenei Olamot*, Tel Aviv 5736, p. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)