**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 Israel Koschitzky z"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

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**Shiur #55: Education**

As a rule, education is effective – if not completely effective, then still highly effective. Even if a youngster is deficient, when he is educated in a good direction, he improves, and likewise the opposite… (*Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 461)

R. Kalonymus devoted his life to education and spiritual influence on his *chassidim*. His mantra was that “[Divine] service is the beginning and the essence of Judaism and of Chassidism,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and indeed, most of his writings emphasize the ways of Chassidic inward service of God. His surviving works paint a picture of a superb educator. At the beginning of his *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, aimed at young readers, he writes:

The purpose of this work is to penetrate into the depths of the student, to reveal his soul, to train him in Torah, Divine service, the ways of *Chassidut*, and to bind the soul to God. It also contains injunctions and warnings as to how to conduct one’s thought, speech, and deed.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But R. Kalonymus was not satisfied with educating only young children. He sought to educate adults as well. He wrote another book entitled *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim* aimed, as its name suggests, at young adults and guiding them in the paths of *chassidut*. His book *Benei Machshava Tova* sought to provide spiritual guidance to a special group of *chassidim* that R. Kalonymus gathered and nurtured.

R. Kalonymus’s approach is based on the quest to inculcate Chassidic values in his students, young and old. The uniqueness of his writings lies in their eminent practicality, providing step-by-step instruction as to the implementation of his teachings. R. Hillel Zeitlin described R. Kalonymus’s approach as follows:

There is a great innovation in his [R. Kalonymus’s] teaching of *chassidut*: He introduced order and method and provided an introduction on the basis of psychology and both theoretical and practical pedagogics, and he also garbed it in unique poetic form...[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Defining Education and its Goal**

R. Kalonymus’s book *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, published in Warsaw in 1932, had a great impact both amongst the Chassidic community and in the yeshiva world – Chassidic and Lithuanian *yeshivot* alike. Many study groups were dedicated to this work, focusing on educating and strengthening Jewish youth to overcome the difficulties that characterize adolescence and to grow spiritually: “R. Kalonymus once said that when he sat down to work on *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, he would not begin to write until he had the image of a young student fixed in his mind, as if he were standing in front of him.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed, the book addresses the youngster in direct language and with a profound familiarity with his world – a principle that underlies all of R. Kalonymus’s educational work. The book is introduced by a “Discussion with Teachers and Parents,” in which he sets forth his educational approach. Here we shall address the main points in this important introduction, in which R. Kalonymus defines the purpose of his book and, as we shall see, the aim of his educational philosophy in general:

Our goal here is not to teach the craft of pedagogy – how to utilize the student’s mind in various ways, how to broaden his understanding and knowledge of the meaning of the Torah. For what we are seeking now is not the student’s intellect alone; we are interested in the whole student. We wish to connect the *Nefesh*, *Ruach*, and *Neshama* of Jewish children to the God of Israel, so that they will emerge as Jews who revere the word of the Lord and direct all their desires toward Him.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first question that should interest anyone who occupies himself with education is: What is education? The etymology of the word “*chinukh*” and its meaning point to its essence.[[6]](#footnote-6) Many definitions have been offered for the term “*chinukh*,” each reflecting a different view of its purpose. R. Kook writes that “the purpose of *chinukh* is to train a person for his ideal form.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Tzvi Adar, another scholar of education, wrote that education is “deliberate action that seeks to change the student’s being, towards the realization of a predetermined purpose.” Some scholars have defined education as a process intended to prepare students for the life ahead of them, without constraining their life in the present beyond the minimum necessary (Akiva Ernest Simon). A different view maintains that education is the transmission of the values of the older generation to the younger generation (Yechezkel Kaufman). Of course, many other definitions have been offered, influenced by different philosophical perceptions of man’s essence and his purpose in the world.[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Kalonymus’s definition of “*chinukh*,” when referring to the education of children, is:

… stimulating the growth and development of what each child is suited for by his very nature. This quality or potential may be found in him only in very small measure, in total hiddenness, [and] the task of the educator is to uncover it. Since a Jewish child has the spirit of God, the breath of the Lord, hidden and concealed within him from the very moment of his birth, it is necessary to raise him and educate him to bring out and reveal this godliness and allow it to flourish. If this is done, the child will grow into a faithful Jew, a servant of God. He will have an independent desire for Torah and will not stray as he gets older…[[9]](#footnote-9)

The assumption from which R. Kalonymus proceeds is that the child is good by nature, the requisite qualities exist within him, and there is no need to inculcate characteristics that are foreign to him.[[10]](#footnote-10) The soul is divine, and the educator’s goal is to reveal it. The use of the expression “allow it to flourish” reflects R. Kalonymus’s view that “a teacher is a gardener in the garden of God, assigned to cultivate it and guard it from harm.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Just as all of a plant’s qualities exist already within its seeds and all that they require is the proper growing conditions, so it is with man: All he needs is the opportunity to realize his spiritual potential.

R. Kalonymus bases his definition on the principle set down by King Shelomo:

Educate a youth in accordance with his way, and even when he is old he will not depart from it. (*Mishlei* 22:6)

If the educator succeeds in penetrating the child’s world and revealing the holy Jewish spark residing within him, then even when the child grows up and lives his own independent life, he will follow the path of Torah and *mitzvot* and will not abandon them.

There is an educational approach that takes the form of “training.” For example, if a student is disturbing the class during a lesson, the teaching may say, “If you behave nicely, you’ll get a reward; if you keep disturbing, you’ll be punished.” There is an approach that is based on habituation: making the student accustomed to waking up on time to pray in the morning, placing a coin in the charity box each day, or fulfilling commands: “Do this, do that.” R. Kalonymus does not rule out the use of such methods, and they certainly have their place as tools, but they cannot be the main thrust of education:

To truly educate is not just a matter of getting a child to follow your commands, or even of accustoming a child to do good deeds. True education is a much greater and more galvanizing process. Commanding and habituating children to a certain way of life are merely tools that must be used when educating them in the path of God…

Someone who is trying to educate through command and habituation need not pay attention to his child or student – to his nature, to the way he thinks, or to his other distinguishing characteristics. The command itself – do this or do that – is all that is needed. Nor is it necessary to deal with each student separately. A single command can suffice for an entire age group…[[12]](#footnote-12)

Education demands special effort by the educator. It requires him to relate to each child individually. It is easier to instruct the entire class – like a military commander – to perform some action; it is far more difficult to tailor the instruction to each child, in accordance with his essence. But that is what a Jewish educator must do.

**Addressing Oneself to the Student’s Level**

An educator must come down from his perch to the level of the child or youth. Of course, this descent is metaphorical; it means getting to know the child’s nature, his abilities, his qualities, and his conceptual world, and addressing him “eye to eye” (rather than talking down to him) with sensitivity and love. R. Kalonymus was apparently familiar with educators who were not sufficiently committed to this approach:

It is up to us to bring our minds down toward him, toward his personality, in order to be able to grasp hold of him and influence him toward holiness before he is transformed into our enemy. Moshe, our teacher, the prophets, and all the *tzaddikim* similarly adapted themselves, descending from their high spiritual levels to concern themselves with even our physical needs. Would we not be sinning were we to abandon these children without adapting ourselves to each and every child, in order to educate them according to their own path while they are still at the critical point when it will be determined whether they become faithful servants of God or, God forbid, sinners? We must adapt ourselves and speak their language, practically turning ourselves into children in order to speak to them according to the way they think and the level they are on.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The idea of the educator bringing himself down into the child’s world has its source in the Chassidic principle of the “descent of the *tzaddik*.” One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Chassidic leadership in comparison to the Rabbinate in Eastern Europe was its emergence from the ivory tower of Torah study in order to become involved in the lives of ordinary Jews, taking care of their physical needs and, as an outgrowth of this activity, also tending to their spiritual needs. R. Elimelekh writes that in order to influence another person, one first has to know what he needs:

The *tzaddik* brings all three of these [gifts] to Israel: progeny, good health, and sustenance. But when he seeks to bring this goodness, the *tzaddik* has to come down slightly from his cleaving [to God] and incline himself to observe what people need.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A great Jewish leader does not sit all day in the *beit midrash* studying Torah. He must go about among people and speak their language – for this serves to bring them closer to their Father in heaven.

R. Yaakov Yosef, a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov, emphasized the importance of the *tzaddik*’s involvement with people, along with the simultaneous need to remain cleaving to God, since any descent to the masses poses a risk to his spiritual level:

This explains the verse, “These are the generations of Noach.” Noach [in Hebrew, literally “amenable”] was agreeable to the [dwellers of the] upper [worlds] and agreeable to the [dwellers of the] lower world – meaning that he was not separate and aloof from the rest of the people, but rather mingled with them, and this leads to fraternal love… And in case you might think that his mingling with people distracted him from focusing his thoughts on God at that time, the Torah goes on to state that “he was a perfect *tzaddik* in his generation” – [meaning that] even when he went about in the town, among the people of his generation, he remained a *tzaddik*, observing [the principle], “I have placed the Lord before me at all times” – which is an important concept in the elevation of the *tzaddikim*, as R. Moshe Isserles writes (*Orach Chaim* 1). And thus, “Noach walked with God” – he would first meditate in order to connect himself and bind himself to God, before going out into the midst of the town… And therefore even when later on he was involved with people, he did not break with his cleaving to Him. Understand this.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This approach is also reflected in the sphere of education, as illustrated in the following teaching of the Maggid R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch:

When a teacher wishes to convey to his student his broad insight, but the student is unable to receive it, then the teacher compresses his insight into words and letters… and thereby becomes able to receive the broad insight of the teacher.[[16]](#footnote-16)

An educator cannot remain distant from his student and expect him to receive Torah from him. He must constrict his intellect in order that the student will be able to understand him. This principle of constriction originates with God, Who, according to kabbalistic tradition constricted Himself in order to create the world,[[17]](#footnote-17) constricted His wisdom into the Torah, and also “brought down” His Divine Presence into this lowliest of worlds to dwell amongst *Am Yisrael*.[[18]](#footnote-18) From this we can deduce that R. Kalonymus’s educational approach is deeply rooted in the teachings of Kabbala and Chassidism.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the title page of the original Hebrew edition (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. xlvi). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. Zeitlin, “*Admor – Oman Pedagogi*,” in H. Zeitlin, *Sifran shel Yechidim* (Jerusalem, 5740), p. 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As noted in Sorasky’s biography of R. Kalonymus in *Chovat Ha-Talmidim* (Tel Aviv, 5752), p. 282 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. xxxv). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, pp. 9-10 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Our intention here is not to discuss the semantic meaning of the term, since many different interpretations have been offered. However, it is worth noting that R. Kalonymus bases his thesis on Rashi’s interpretation of the word “*chinukh*” as connoting a “beginning”; see Rashi, *Bereishit* 14:14; *Devarim* 20:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook, *Iggerot RAY”H* (Jerusalem, 5722), *iggeret* 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See s.v. “*Chinukh*” in *Encyclopedia Ivrit*, pp. 617-618; *Encyclopedia Chinukhit*, Jerusalem 5724. The scholars referred to above are discussed in these sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. viii (= *A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 4-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This view stands in contrast to two mutually contradictory approaches: One agrees that man does have an inborn nature, but it is essentially sinful and evil. Such a view characterizes Christianity, with its concept of Original Sin, according to which sin is instinctive, man is corrupt, and he will ultimately end up in Hell (*Encyclopedia Chinukhit*, part IV, p. 303). On the other hand, R. Kalonymus’s approach is also a contrast to the view that man is born as a *tabula rasa* with no inborn qualities and all is acquired through experience. This view was propounded, for example, by the 17th century English philosopher John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “Let us supposed the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence come I by that vast store, which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience.” Many scholars have been profoundly influenced by Locke – for instance, John Watson, the 20th century father of behaviorist psychology, who believed that any infant could be molded “to order.” However, in light of modern science, the *tabula rasa* theory has been called into question. See S. Pinker, *Ha-Luach He-Chalak: Al Hakchashat Tiv’o Ha-Molad shel Ha-Adam Be-Yamenu* (Tel Aviv, 5765). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. x (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, pp. vii-ix (= *A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 3-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 19 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 14-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R. Eliezer of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parashat Vayera*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe, *Ben Porat Yosef* (Warsaw, 5643), *Noach* 16d-17a. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Maggid Devarav Le-Yaakov* (Brooklyn, 5732), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For the concept of constriction (“*tzimtzum*”) in the teachings of the Ari, see R. Chaim Vital, *Etz Chaim* (Jerusalem, 5670), *Sha’ar* 1, *anaf* b. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “R. Shemuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, He desired that there be a dwelling place for Him in the lower world, just as there is in the upper world… The Holy One descended from the seventh firmament to the sixth. Yitzchak was ready; he exposed his throat upon the altar – and God descended from the sixth firmament to the fifth... Moshe was ready, and He brought it down to earth, as it is written (*Shemot* 19), ‘And the Lord descended upon Sinai”, and it is written (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 5), ‘I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride’ – when? When the *Mishkan* was built.” (*Tanchuma*, *Naso* 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)