**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur 57: Education** (continued)

One of the difficult tasks that a person must contend with throughout his life is working on negative character traits. Such flaws as arrogance, stubbornness, miserliness, and jealousy require work to correct, and the aspiration to achieve humility, amenability, generosity, and contentment has been at the center of *mussar* literature for generations. This is the basis of the education and cultivation of a Jewish child, youth, and adult. The question is what the best path is to improving one’s character. R. Kalonymus establishes a fundamental principle in education: There is no negative characteristic that cannot be corrected and no “bad” child who cannot be influenced:

Neither the nature nor any particular quality of a Jewish child is absolutely evil. This is what the holy Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples have taught us. What is necessary is just to know how to use these qualities and how to help them develop and grow.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A brief introduction is necessary in order for us to understand this assertion. R. Kalonymus maintains that this principle is a direct continuation of the teachings of the Ba’al Shem Tov and his disciples, rather than an innovation of his own. And indeed, *chassidut* from its inception defined the perfection of character as elevating deficient qualities to their Divine root.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Ba’al Shem Tov does not view good and evil as a duality, as two polar opposites. Rather, they are a single continuum: When evil is brought close to its spiritual root, then it is good, and it finds its correction and perfection, as R. Yaakov Yosef writes in the name of his teacher, the Ba’al Shem Tov:

“And Pharaoh drew close…” (*Shemot* 14:10) – I learned from my teacher that when [something] evil causes [something] good, then it becomes a seat for that goodness, and it is all entirely good – almost a discarding of the “shell”; somewhat like in the time to come.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This teaching suggests that evil should not be rejected outright, but rather elevated. From the Divine perspective, evil is not an entity. Everything is good, since everything flows from God, both good and bad; at their source, they are one. When goodness is sifted from evil and elevated to its source, the vitality of evil is nullified and it can no longer exist. In light of this we can understand the paradoxical situation whereby it is specifically a negative trait that is capable of bringing a person to a higher level. Indeed, this is the message that emerges from a teaching of R. Nachum of Chernobyl, one of the great Chassidic masters and a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov and the Maggid of Mezeritch:

Let me reveal a great lesson in this matter. As you know, if it happens at some time that a person feels within himself that he has fallen during that time into bad character traits, and especially if he has fallen into the evil of love, and specifically the desire for sexual relations – even in conditions where this is permissible, then he should know that God desires to lift him up to a high level, with the qualities that are inborn in him, and to open his heart to the love of the blessed God, such that he might merit the aspect of the giving of the Torah from on High, as it is said on High, and prior to this lifting up comes a drawing down… When he falls to a place of improper love, God sees him standing on that lowly level and strengthening himself with an arousal of this improper love to conquer the evil inclination [and stop it] from carrying out its will to fulfill his desire, and to experience that same arousal of love towards the Creator… He is therefore uplifted to a great level, and he thereby elevates all the fallen loves, for the sake of whose upliftment he descended – to raise them to the highest possible level: the world of love, and he thereby ascends to the most supreme level…[[4]](#footnote-4)

Let us consider for a moment this person, who faces the test of unperfected desire. He could fail and fall, but he succeeds in overcoming his evil inclination and directs the power of his desire – whose origin and root is the power of love – to its source in the “world of love,” thereby elevating not only his lowly, deficient love to the level of supreme love, but also all the deficient, broken, distorted desires and loves that have fallen low, and which, by virtue of his achievement, attain their most supreme level. Thus, the idea is to direct every flawed trait to its source on High. The same approach is adopted with regard to elevating foreign thoughts to their root (although in the generations after the Ba’al Shem Tov, this was discouraged as a practice for the masses).

The Torah uses a surprising term to define incestuous relations between a man and his sister: “It is *chesed* (lovingkindness).” The question is asked, what sort of “lovingkindness” is this? It is completely forbidden! It is an abomination! But R. Yaakov Yosef explains:

For example, if a person finds himself thinking lustfully about women, it comes from *chesed,* as it is written, “[And if a man] takes his sister… it is *chesed*” (*Vayikra* 20:17). He should understand that the source of this lust is in a Divine spark within him, and he should cleave to the source of that pleasure, for that [source] is a pleasure that is priceless and without limit…[[5]](#footnote-5)

When a person overcomes this desire he must direct himself to the source from which this forbidden love emerged and cleave to that source. He will thereby not only avoid transgressing any prohibition, but will also elevate himself and merit the infinite pleasure that comes from cleaving to the source of pleasure.

R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen of Lublin offers an eloquent formulation of the Chassidic approach to perfecting one’s character:

It is well-known that the repair of character traits is to elevate them to their source. Thus, the repair of *gevura* that comes from the *kelipa* is through “*gevura* of holiness” – zealousness against those who transgress His will. And the repair of desire that comes from the *kelipa* is in desire of holiness – desire and longing for God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

If, for example, a person needs to correct his trait of jealousy, he should channel that jealousy into zealousness for the sake of Heaven, directed against those who transgress God’s will. And if a person experiences desire for that which is forbidden to him, he should direct that same powerful desire in the direction of holiness. The principle is one of sublimation of the trait requiring repair by redirecting and rechanneling it in a positive direction.

Let us now turn our attention to what R. Kalonymus has to say about the perfection of character. While no trait that exists in a Jewish child is categorically negative, we still have to know how to deal with a child who demonstrates negative traits. For example, if a child is stubborn and the teacher has trouble teaching him as a result, he might try to repress the child’s stubbornness by force. But this approach is misguided. R. Kalonymus suggests seeking the positive side of stubbornness; when the child grows up, he will be “stubborn” in his commitment to Torah and will not allow himself “shortcuts” when things are difficult.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The same applies to the trait of anger. A child who expresses anger is likely to be criticized by his parents and teachers for being “bad-natured.” But R. Kalonymus explains:

It is impossible to predict ahead of time how great a benefit may emerge, through the efforts of the principal or teacher, from the very anger of the angry child. One must penetrate into his inner life, bring him close, and ignite his heart and his soul until they are dedicated to God. Then his anger will be transformed into a fire from above. All of his acts of devotion will burn like fiery coals, and all the words that he will speak to God, in prayer and in Torah, will thunder from a voice of fire…[[8]](#footnote-8)

Towards the end of his *Mevo Ha-She’arim* (chapter 9), R. Kalonymus addresses the perfection of character, which he defines as “our ultimate purpose in writing this book.” In this chapter, he expands on the conceptual foundations of his approach to character improvement.

In our earlier discussion of “God, the World, and Man,” we discussed the Ba’al Shem Tov’s teaching that Divinity fills everything, and that even this-worldliness, with its “concealments” and “vessels,” is full of Divine light. The conclusion drawn from this is that one has to serve God with one’s very body, not just by performing *mitzvot*. This principle, which is known in *chassidut* as “*avoda be-gashmiut*” (service through corporeality),[[9]](#footnote-9) means that one has to serve God through each and every aspect and component of reality – through eating just like through putting on *tefillin* and through one’s work just as through shaking a *lulav*. Some Chassidic thinkers argued that service of God through corporeality is not less worthy than observance of the commandments, but rather more precious.[[10]](#footnote-10) As R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz, R. Kalonymus’s grandfather, writes in his *Sefer Avodat Yisrael*:

There are many ways of serving God. One is the simple, straightforward path of engaging in Torah and Divine service all day, and the rest of the commandments, and afflicting oneself so as to be removed from all [earthly] pleasures and enjoyments. But there is another path open to those seeking to sanctify themselves, and this is to sanctify oneself even through eating and drinking… Certainly, one who is able to sanctify himself even through earthly things and desires, whose table is like an altar – his sanctity is even greater and more wondrous. For unquestionably so long as a person is involved in Torah or prayer, his evil inclination does not have much power to tempt him and to deflect him from the good path onto an evil path, for one who observes a commandment will suffer no harm. But when a person falls from his spiritual level and experiences a powerful desire to eat, and he breaks this impulse so as not to eat and drink like an animal, but rather eats in the proper measure so that he will be able to serve God, and so that he will be content and able to concentrate properly on his Torah study, and other such lofty intentions, then the power of his [Divine] service is increased, and he brings a thousand-fold gratification to God.[[11]](#footnote-11)

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. x (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on this see H. Zeitlin, *Be-Pardes Ha-Kabbala Ve-Ha-Chassidut* (Tel Aviv, 5742), pp. 33-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (Jerusalem, 5733), *Parashat Bo* 8; *Keter Shem Tov* (Kehat edition, Brooklyn, NY, 5747), p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Nachum of Chernobyl, *Maor Enayim* (Jerusalem, 5728), *Parashat* *Lekh-Lekha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoe, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (Jerusalem, 5733), *Parashat Ekev*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. R. Tzadok Ha-Kohen Mi-Lublin, *Kometz Ha-Mincha* (Lublin, 5699), #16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. 11 (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For more on *avoda be-gashmiyut*, see R. Wacks, *Be-Sod Ha-Yichud: Ha-Yichudim Be-Haguto Ha-Kabbalit-Chassidit shel R. Chaim ben Shlomo Tirer Mi-Tshernowitz* (Los Angeles, 2006), pp. 221-228. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “All that a person engages in, in matters of this world – eating and drinking, commerce, everything – is the glory of the blessed Creator… And in everything there is Torah” (R. Nachum of Chernobyl, *Maor Enayim* [Jerusalem, 5728], p. 428). Elsewhere he writes, “Even when one has to fulfill the *mitzva* of timely conjugal relations, as set forth in the Torah, it should not be purely out of love for the blessed Creator, like all the *mitzvot*, such as *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, [but also] so that there should be no division or discord between them, and so he would not act just to satisfy his desire. If he does so, then he is thereby elevated to a great level” (Ibid., p. 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. Yisrael of Kozhnitz, *Sefer Avodat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 5753), *Parashat Vayigash*. (This excerpt is quoted in *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 294.) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)