**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur 58: Education** (continued)

In all his books, R. Kalonymus emphasizes the importance of serving God with one’s body.[[1]](#footnote-1) The body should not be rejected, nor afflicted in any way, but rather embraced as a full partner in one’s Divine service, together with one’s mental faculties.

R. Kalonymus draws an interesting comparison between *chassidut* and *kabbala* with regard to the status of the body and its faculties.[[2]](#footnote-2) He quotes from the book *Reshit Chokhma*, written by R. Eliyahu de Vidas, a disciple of R. Moshe Cordovero:

R. Yitzchak Daman of Acre, of blessed memory, wrote among the practices of the pious ones (*perushim*) that one who never experiences the desire for a woman is like a donkey, or even less. The reason is that from that which is sensory and tangible one is supposed to discern [and develop] the service of God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

R. Kalonymus notes that this excerpt would seem to underline the value of corporeal desires, for in their absence man would have no desire for holy matters either; he would be devoid of any motivation or aspiration. This sort of approach may be identified with *chassidut*, but there is still a difference between *chassidut* and *kabbala*. This difference becomes clear in light of an interesting story that is recounted in *Reshit Chokhma*:

The following story is recounted by R. Yitzchak Daman of Acre *z”l*: One day the king’s daughter was leaving the bathhouse when an idler spied her. He heaved a great sigh and said, “If only she was mine and I could do with her as I wish.” The king’s daughter answered him and said, “That will happen in the graveyard, not here.” He rejoiced at her words, for he understood her as meaning that he should go to the graveyard and settle himself there, and she would come and join him, and he could do with her as he pleased. This had not been her intention; what she meant was that the graveyard is a place where all are made equal – great and small, young and old, the scorned and the well-respected: “The small and great are there alike…” (*Iyov* 3:19) – i.e., they are equal there, but not here [in this life]. For [in our reality] it is unthinkable that the king’s daughter could be approached by one of the masses. So the man got up and went to the graveyard, and he dwelled there, and focused his thoughts upon her and had her likeness constantly in his mind, and out of his great desire for her he removed his mind from all of his senses and devoted it entirely to the likeness of that woman and her beauty. Day and night he sat in the graveyard; he ate there, drank there, and slept there, telling himself that if she did not come today, she would come tomorrow, and so he remained for a long time. And so far removed was he from all sensation, having wedded his thoughts to one single thing, meditating on it and desiring it completely, that his inner being began divesting itself of all tangible existence and was drawn back to pure ideas, to the point that it was divested of all sensory stimulation, including even the woman, and was drawn to the blessed God. After a time, his mind was drawn only to the idea of the Divine, and he became a wholehearted servant of God, a holy man of God, such that his prayers were heard and his blessings were effective for all who passed by there. Merchants and riders and pedestrians who went by would go to him and receive his blessing, and he became widely renowned.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This commoner desired the king’s daughter. She rejected him, but he failed to understand her words to him. He focused all his wants and desires on the king’s daughter, ignoring any physical object or being so that nothing else existed for him. His desire was refined and abstracted into thought, with no physical component, thereby elevating himself to the Source of the woman’s beauty. Thus, out of physical desire, this man achieved a supreme level of *devekut* and became holy.

Does this story accord with the Chassidic approach? R. Kalonymus argues that the approach suggested by this story does not sit well with the path of the Ba’al Shem Tov because it does not reflect the view that the body is fundamentally holy. Instead, the story teaches that sensory desires must be suppressed, overcome, and nullified. In contrast to R. Eliyahu de Vidas, the Ba’al Shem Tov maintains that the body must be enlisted along with every other part and aspect of ourselves in the service of God; it must certainly not be rejected or afflicted.[[5]](#footnote-5)

R. Kalonymus explains that the path of the Ba’al Shem Tov is “a new channel and a new revelation.” In other words, his personality and his teachings had an impact on the world, creating “a new manner of Divine service.”[[6]](#footnote-6) His path should not be regarded as being in conflict with *kabbala*, for it is a new path, previously unknown. The kabbalists maintained that the body is material and evil, that a person should “distance himself from everything material and suppress his inclinations,”[[7]](#footnote-7) and that the essence of Divine service is performed with the mind, through the *kavanot*. The Ba’al Shem Tov taught that since the entire body is holy – since even “garments” and “vessels” are full of Divine light, and the body is a garment for the soul – not only should the body not be repressed and regarded as an enemy, but all its desires should be viewed as “real holiness.” Of course, this is true so long as the person exerts himself and tries to break the power of his desires “until he reaches the ultimate holy purpose and root of everything that belongs to the material world.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

To explain the fact that a person is born with certain tendencies, R. Kalonymus invokes the concept of “*mazal*” and the four basic elements. The *gemara* in *Massekhet Shabbat* (156a) deals at length with the effect of “*mazal*” on one’s personality. Thus, for example, R. Yehoshua ben Levi states that a person who is born on a Monday will be contentious; one who is born on a Tuesday will be wealthy and lustful, and so on, with various qualities being related to different days of the week. Of course, this approach raises the question of a person’s responsibility for working on himself. If his character is determined in advance, he is justified in arguing that it is beyond his power to change himself. Therefore, R. Kalonymus brings support from the Rambam,[[9]](#footnote-9) who writes that one should pay no attention to the astrological theories according to which a person’s character is determined by the constellations and positions of the stars, emphasizing instead that every individual has the free choice to determine what sort of person he will be.

Seemingly, the Rambam is contradicting the *gemara* and rejecting the idea of any influence of *mazal* on a person’s behavior. R. Kalonymus – who, in his typical fashion, gives respectful consideration both to *Chazal* and to the Rambam – seeks to resolve these two approaches. He suggests that both *Chazal* and the Rambam would agree that a person is born with a certain nature and certain proclivities and that the stars do have some effect on his nature, but his actions nevertheless depend solely on his choice, and a person can actualize his inborn qualities in a positive or negative manner.[[10]](#footnote-10) R. Chaim Vital, in his *Sha’arei Kedusha* – a source that R. Kalonymus relies on heavily – likewise agrees that there are elements in a person’s psyche that produce negative inclinations: The element of fire is the source of pride; the element of wind is the source of meaningless chatter, flattery, and negative speech; the element of water is manifest as the need for earthly pleasures; and the element of earth is the source of melancholy.[[11]](#footnote-11) This being the case, R. Kalonymus points out, even without invoking *mazalot* – which we don’t fully understand anyway – there is a basis for the concept of negative inborn tendencies simply on the basis of the elements.[[12]](#footnote-12)

What this suggests is that every person is born with certain traits and qualities, some of them possibly negative. A person must know is how to channel them, as in the teaching of R. Elimelekh, cited by R. Kalonymus:

It is impossible for a person to break all of his inborn qualities. What he needs to do is to elevate them to holiness. For instance, someone who has the quality of anger should keep himself from extraneous anger, reserving it to feel anger towards the wicked; and likewise regarding all qualities…[[13]](#footnote-13)

R. Kalonymus emphasizes that the channeling of one’s innate qualities in the direction of Divine service must apply to all aspects of a person, both physical and mental. If one works on the perfection of his inner self but represses the body or simply leaves it out of the process, the body may assert its needs later on, at which point all the work on one’s character traits will turn out to have been of no value. Moreover, if a person does not include his body and all his inner energies and capacities in the service of God, then those aspects that have been suppressed will reassert themselves even more powerfully – because that is what repressed energies do.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Work on one’s character can be undertaken in one of two ways. The first is by force, battling and overcoming a negative trait. For example, if a person is angry but he overcomes his anger, he has “conquered” himself in this regard and has repressed the quality of anger. The other way is the complete reversal of the negative trait, going to the opposite extreme. For example, if a person identifies that he is stingy, he will become generous. In the language of the Admor Ha-Zaken of Chabad, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first method is called “*itkafia*” (forcing), while the second is called “*it’hapcha*” (transformation). R. Kalonymus engages in an interesting dialogue with the Chabad tradition and its concepts, attempting to integrate them into his teachings.[[15]](#footnote-15)

R. Kalonymus’s path is unquestionably a quest for *it’hapcha*, which is on a higher level than the repression of *itkafia.* But implementing *it’hapcha* is not a simple matter, and the Admor Ha-Zaken reserves the task of transforming evil into good for exceptional, singular individuals.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to *Sefer Ha-Tania*, the “*benoni*” (literally, “average person,” defined in *Sefer Ha-Tania* as a person who is defined neither as a *tzaddik* nor as a *rasha*) is one who never allows evil to overcome his Divine soul and lead him into sin[[17]](#footnote-17) – and this is not an easy level to achieve. Far more difficult is the level of the complete *tzaddik*, who manages to actually transform evil into holiness. Concerning this level, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi writes:

But concerning the level of a “complete *tzaddik*,” R. Shimon bar Yochai said, “I have seen *bnei aliya*, and they are few…” It is for this reason that they are called *bnei aliya,* for they transform evil, elevating it to holiness.[[18]](#footnote-18)

From the perspective of *Sefer Ha-Tania*, then, R. Kalonymus’s teaching regarding the need to extend sanctity over all a person’s faculties, including his body, seems like an impossible quest – except for singular, individual *tzaddikim* in each generation.

To resolve this difficulty, R. Kalonymus refers to a teaching of the Admor Ha-Zaken in *Likkutei Torah*,[[19]](#footnote-19) where he argues that there is a level of *it’hapcha* that is available even to regular people:

Since he thereby transforms the bodily faculties into holiness, he thereby subjugates the evil inclination and vanquishes it, to the point where it may be referred to as *it’hapcha*, even though the evil itself has not yet been transformed into good, as in the case of the greatest *tzaddikim* described in the *Tania*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In other words, R. Kalonymus’s approach does not seek to meet evil head-on; it confines itself to dealing with man’s faculties and his “bodily sensations,” distancing them from evil. The *tzaddikim* of *Sefer Ha-Tania* transform actual evil into good – but this is not what R. Kalonymus’s teachings are aimed at doing.

R. Kalonymus sums up his view by stating that any person who seeks to sanctify himself is capable of achieving *it’hapcha* through separating his faculties and his body from evil and drawing them to sanctity, although he accepts the view of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi that only *tzaddikim* are capable of injecting “the primordial light of Mashiach even into vessels,” thereby separating them from evil, bringing them to holiness, and bringing about the *it’hapcha* described in *Sefer Ha-Tania*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Here R. Kalonymus poses a question that challenges his own approach: If the Divine service that we perform through *itkafia* and *it’hapcha* is not as it was in previous generations and does not address evil directly, one might argue that there is no value to such service. After a person has worked on perfecting his faculties, strengths, and qualities and then rests from his efforts, “the evil inclination will once again enlist them for evil purposes, Heaven forfend… for he has not vanquished the evil inclination itself.” In other words, if evil is not uprooted and conquered altogether, what is the use of channeling one’s strengths in the direction of holiness? If the evil inclination can rise up again at any given moment, then what have we achieved by our efforts?

R. Kalonymus offers two answers. One is that someone who has not reached the level of a “*tzaddik*” as defined by *Sefer Ha-Tania* does indeed live with a constant threat of the evil inclination reasserting itself – but this is not a reason for a person to sit idly and do nothing to improve himself. If he is conscientious in subjugating his physical, mental, and spiritual faculties to God, then he will slowly but steadily approach the level of the “*benoni,*” who does not sin. Constant work will also help him subjugate his evil inclination to holiness.

The second answer that he gives sums up the discussion:

There is order and regularity at the basis of man’s physical powers, emotions, and thoughts. If a person is aware of and works in step with the principles and rules that govern the functioning of his body and mind, he will be able to control them and drive them. If he is not aware of these principles and how they work, then not only will he not be able to control and drive them, but it is highly unlikely that they will ever obey him and perform as he wishes them to…

This knowledge of the principles and rules governing his body, his emotions, and his mind is the very purpose of this book, with the help of He Who teaches Torah to His people, Israel.[[22]](#footnote-22)

A person’s awareness of his physical powers, his feelings, and his thoughts, and the way in which they operate allows him to control them and guide them in accordance with his will. In the absence of such knowledge, a person has no control over himself or over his life. This would seem to suggest that if a person follows R. Kalonymus’s path and comes to know himself well, he will be able to deal appropriately with his desires. Even though it is always possible that his evil inclination will rise up and challenge him, the chances of this happening recede as the person progresses in his efforts and his Divine service.

The fundamental assertion here is that a person cannot guide his various faculties in the direction of their proper purpose without a sound knowledge of all the elements of his physical and psychological makeup. It is to this end that R. Kalonymus wrote his book, *Mevo Ha-She’arim*.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, pp. 218-220. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., pp. 291-293. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Eliyahu de Vidas, *Reshit Chokhma*, *Sha’ar Ha-Ahava*, end of chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 296-297. It should be noted that in contrast to the discussion in the introductory section of our discussion of education, R. Kalonymus makes no mention of the concept of “elevating attributes to their Source.” instead, he speaks of “transforming his desires and his physicality into holiness” (ibid., p. 296). I believe that this distinction is not coincidental, and although there is no disagreement about the manner of Divine service, there are differences of emphasis. The Ba’al Shem Tov emphasized the spiritual “roots” of every aspect of reality, and many of his disciples adopted his approach, according to which the quest for “perfection of character” is oriented towards contemplation of its spiritual root. R. Kalonymus emphasizes the Divinity of even the “garments” of reality, such that we do not necessarily need to identify and reveal the root of every action in the upper worlds, but rather to subject it to the Divine holiness that exists by definition within everything in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Shemoneh* *Perakim*, *Hakdamot Ha-Rambam La-Mishna* (Y. Shilat edition, Jerusalem, 5757), chapter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Rambam’s view of *mazal* is also open to different interpretation, but the scope of our present discussion does not allow for elaboration. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. R. Chaim Vital, *Sha’arei Kedusha* (Jerusalem, 5745), part I, *sha’ar* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Parshat Tzav*; *Mevo Ha-She’arim* p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Mevo Ha-She’arim*, p. 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., pp. 303-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The source of the term “*it’hapcha*” is in *Sefer Ha-Zohar* (part I, 4a). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Likutei Amarim Tania* (Kfar Chabad, 5753), chapter 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., chapter 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Likkutei Torah* (Brooklyn, 5766), *Shir Ha-Shirim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Mevo ha-She’arim*, p. 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)