**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #59: Practical Advice for Conquering the Evil Inclination and Improving One’s Character**

The presentation of practical methods for dealing with the manifestation of various desires is one of R. Kalonymus’s innovations. As in other areas that he addresses, here too we find in-depth, creative thinking that reflects a profound familiarity with the human psyche. A person has to know his inner world and all its inclinations:

In order for a person to be able to repair his thinking, his emotions, his character traits, and other proclivities and distortions of the mind using advice and strategies… he has to first know them, their nature, and their workings, and all the inclinations of the mind, in detail, just as a physician knows every detail of the human body.[[1]](#footnote-1)

R. Kalonymus offers practical advice that provides a person with tools – to use his terminology, “*segulot*” – that help him deal more effectively with his wants and desires. But this is not enough to definitively defeat the evil inclination:

Let it hereby be known, young man – by *segula* we do not mean to promise that by using it you will be able to defiantly challenge your evil inclination. For in reality there is nothing that can completely nullify the evil inclination and free choice. However, we can say that if you are not lazy but indeed put it to good use, then, with much help from God, it will be of useful benefit to you.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The main problem in the realm of character improvement and dealing with the evil inclination is that, powerless to completely uproot the evil from within himself, a person will usually resort to self-restraint and repression, his aim being to “treat the symptoms” and halt negative expressions.[[3]](#footnote-3) R. Kalonymus describes people who in their old age have trouble controlling their desires because in their youth they did not address the challenge properly:

There are people who are hounded by untoward thoughts, desires, and tendencies both during waking hours and in their dreams; even those thoughts that they would not consciously allow themselves find entry at unconscious times. In fact, several elderly people have bemoaned to me that even for things that they cannot anymore physically do; nevertheless, as if to spite, these thoughts still hound them. Some of these stories are so shockingly shameful, I would not quote them here in my journal.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As an example, R. Kalonymus cites the case of an elderly man who regularly felt the urge to cross himself, as Christians do, to be healed of his heart complaint. R. Kalonymus analyses his case:

An elderly peasant came to me crying and screaming; he has a weak heart, but that was not his complaint. Rather, whenever he gets palpitations, he gets a thought to cross himself and be healed. So compulsive becomes this thought that he can barely restrain himself.

I questioned these unfortunate souls and delved into their distant past. I found no wanton lives, contrary to what even they thought of themselves. Even now, they abhor these thoughts. However, their entire lives they worked only on their conscious thoughts and emotions to prevent their baser desires from taking control of them. Their very souls, though, they did not heal. So they were successful in that their infected souls did not spew up their desires into their minds and hearts, but this infection continued to fester inside. Now, when they are old and weak and have difficulty controlling themselves, the inborn drives of their souls explode into their thoughts and emotions.

This is what happened to that old peasant. In his youth, he had heard of many bluff miracle healings from gentile peasants. Even though he would never convert, nevertheless these stories resonated in his ignorant and simple soul. He was able to keep them out of his conscious mind and emotions, but they had affected – infected – the depths of his unconscious soul. Now in his old age, these phantoms are coming to haunt him. All the much more so with other old people whose present compulsive thoughts are natural human desires.

These elderly people now see themselves as great sinners… In torment, they now say:… My mind and inner world have become a den for beastly thoughts and a home for the underworld![[5]](#footnote-5)

A person has to contend with the blemishes of his psyche, and not just with their “symptoms” – his thoughts and feelings – in order not to end up in the same situation as this unfortunate old man.

So much for the problem – what about the solution? R. Kalonymus tells us that there is no single solution for the problem. A person has to take responsibility for himself, to seek guidance, and also to develop his own independent initiatives, rather than being like a beggar who is constantly dependent on others.[[6]](#footnote-6) Nevertheless, in his writings R. Kalonymus offers various pieces of advice. Let us consider some of them.

First of all, it is important not to act too hastily:

The Ba’al Shem Tov taught that a person should always act with a settled mind, not out of haste, and this is the meaning of, “… and you shall perish quickly (*ve-avadetem meheira*)” – [this should be read as,] “you shall cause haste to perish.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The problem that one wishes to address must first be considered and analyzed, with intellectual honesty, not deluding oneself.

As a second stage, R. Kalonymus notes a rule of human behavior – a principle that, once known to us, can be used to “strip a soiled and horrid garment from the mind.” The principle is that if a person experiences some movement of the psyche – imagination, will, feeling, love, awe, etc. – there are two ways of relating to it. The first is to address the psychic movement directly, with the result that the movement will be encouraged and intensified. The second way is to treat it indirectly, “from the outside,” and such thinking will weaken it.

R. Kalonymus illustrates the distinction with examples. Bring to mind the image of someone you know well, whom you see often. The more you think about him, the clearer the mental picture becomes, for you think about this person in all his detail: how he eats, what he talks about, etc. But if you think about this person in a different way, and instead of imagining his image you think “about” him – i.e. you think about whether or not to create a mental picture of him in your mind – then “the very act of trying to look at that mental picture will serve to blur it, and the more you try to hold on to it, the further it will slip away and you will find yourself unable to conjure a picture of this most familiar figure at all.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In this way, you are able to weaken the influence of unwanted thoughts and images, to look at them and treat them “objectively,” from an impersonal distance.

The same applies to the psychic movement that we call love. When we have a beloved friend, we seek to benefit him, we occupy our thoughts with how to make him happy, what gifts to give him, how to do favors for him, and what will happen when we next see each other. Each time we think in this way, the feeling of love is reinforced and strengthened. But if we divert our thought in a different direction, and instead of thinking about the beloved friend, we think about the love we feel for him – asking ourselves, “Do I really love him? Why do I love him, rather than someone else?” – the very act of thinking “about” weakens the movement of love and blurs the feeling. In contrast to the previous example, which described a mental picture, here we are talking about an actual feeling, and a feeling is more firmly planted in the psyche than a picture created in the mind. Thus, it may be more difficult to weaken the feeling – especially if it starts off very strong. However, if we need to weaken a feeling, this is the way to do it.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus we are able to control and weaken negative feelings that we want to get rid of.

This strategy of diverting a person’s focus from the object itself to a discussion “about” it is not easy to implement, and it requires skill and practice. R. Kalonymus does not deny there is a danger of people focusing “on the [psychic] movement and the desire itself, out of lust and stimulation of the evil inclination, while believing that they are thinking “about” it – and they will not know why the method is not working and why the desire is not becoming weaker.[[10]](#footnote-10) He cites R. Asher of Stolin, who said that someone who shouts about his evil inclination along with his evil inclination does nothing to help his situation, but if he shouts about his evil inclination with God, the evil inclination flees. In other words, if a person tries to rid himself of unwanted thoughts and desires by means of thoughts of unwanted desires, he is only reinforcing the problem, rather than solving it.[[11]](#footnote-11) If he cannot manage to separate himself from the unwanted thoughts, in order to be able to think “about” them, he should tell himself, “I will take a 20-minute break from thinking about this improper thought,” and during that time he can observe it without being immersed in it. If he is altogether unable to break his thoughts away, R. Kalonymus suggests thinking about something that he really likes or really dislikes – something that is highly pertinent to him, such as his dealings at work. This new thought might push aside the unwanted thought, allowing him to think “about” it rather than “of” it.

Since a person wants to be the master of himself and to control his feelings, R. Kalonymus offers additional suggestions for developing such control. If, for example, a person is presented with two types of meat, and one appeals to him more than the other, he should take the second kind, not the first. One should utilize such opportunities to exercise his inner forces on minor issues, so as to build up the inner strength needed for greater and more important battles.

Another example would be food that is not needed for nutritional value – the person is not hungry – but rather merely tempting. The solution here would be a form of auto-suggestions, in which the person persuades himself that there are better and more important reasons not to eat the treats than to give in to temptation:

If you are presented with sweets and treats that are more tempting, and your desire for them is strong and it is more difficult for you to refuse them, and in order to justify this sin to yourself you wish to make light of it and brush it off – “What does it matter whether I eat this or not; everyone is eating it” – then do as above: Start to observe your desire and ask yourself: “It is true that I have a great desire for this food. I do not wish to debate whether it is proper to eat of it or not; there may be no transgression involved right now. But what I do know is that I am consumed with desire, to the point where it is difficult for me to refuse this food. After all, I won’t die if I don’t eat any of it. Still, how strongly drawn I am to it!” Observe yourself and your desire, and keep telling yourself: “I know I’m no *tzaddik*, but to think that I am so pathetic and so consumed with desire that I am vanquished and overpowered by this food…!”

Consider your desire and repeat this to yourself a few times, and you will be amazed at how, with God’s help, your desire will be weakened and even disappear.

Thus you should do when it comes to food, and thus you should do with regard to your other desires, as well…[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the event that a negative character trait makes itself manifest – jealously, for example, or hatred towards someone – and it is difficult to assuage, a person should tell himself, “Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Another *segula* that R. Kalonymus cites is brought in the name of R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, as recorded in a book about his practices:

Whenever a negative trait began to awaken within him, Heaven forefend… such as stubbornness or shame that arise from pride, laziness or lethargy that lead to apathy, or the like, he would immediately declare, with all his strength: “The Canaanites, the Chittites, the Emorites, the Perizzites, the Chivvites, the Jebusites, and the Girgashites” – and he was saved.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It should be noted that there is no magical act involved here. R. Kalonymus’s approach is based on a broad understanding of psychology, and this *segula* may again be explained as a diversion of the mind, focusing it on content that is meaningful and holy. The meaning of the verse, “Fire shall be kept burning…” in this context is the burning away of desire, while the meaning of the verse, “The Canaanites, the Chittites…” is the banishing of thoughts of hatred, etc. R. Kalonymus adds that this tactic should be used sparingly, not all the time, for after a while it loses its effectiveness through habit.

If some unwanted and forbidden thought enters a person’s mind during prayer or some other holy activity that cannot be halted midway, R. Kalonymus suggests making use of one’s imagination and envisaging the thought in the form of a predatory beast:

Observe the thought and see how this cruel, detestable, filthy beast has invaded your mind and is now trampling all that is holy within you, with its filthy feet, opening wide its terrifying jaws, to devour every fiber and sinew of your body and soul.[[15]](#footnote-15)

He adds an important comment recalling the guidance above – that one should not think the forbidden thought itself, in order not to be drawn into it and thereby reinforce it, but rather to think “about” it, in a more distant, objective way:

Take care and guard yourself not to think the improper thought itself, only about that thought, and about the evil beast that consumes you, body and soul alike, Heaven forefend.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A person sometimes feels, after eating, that his spirit becomes arrogant, sometimes angry, sometimes melancholy. R. Kalonymus suggests that this person try to discover when exactly the change in his mood comes about and what happened after that: Is it because of his eating that his mood changed? If he discovers what causes it, and he feels shame and says, “Can something so idiotic influence my mood,” then he will nullify its effect and impact. The sign of this is that if he has identified the cause of the negative effect, then immediately upon thinking about it, its effect will dissipate and he will feel relief. If he does not feel this, then the cause is something else.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, pp. 324-325 (= To Heal the Soul, pp. 9-10). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 326 (= Ibid. p. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ba’al Shem Tov al Ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 5767), *Parashat Ekev* #62; *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Hakhsharat ha-Avrekhim*, pp. 122-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Shelah Ha-Kadosh writes: “I found a manuscript of the holy R. Moshe Cordovero, who writes: ‘A certain elderly man taught me how to eliminate an [unwanted] thought: He should repeat several times the verse, ‘Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out’ (*Vayikra* 6:6). It seems clear to me that the old man was the prophet Eliyahu, who did not want to reveal himself out of his great humility.” See R. Yeshaya Horowitz, *Shenei Luchot Ha-Berit Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 5753), *Sha’ar Ha-Otiyot*, *Lev Tov* #7, p. 310. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *No’am Elimelekh* (Jerusalem, 5752), *Tzetil Katan* #5. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Hakhsharat Ha-Avrekhim*, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)