**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #60: The Inner World of R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro**

**Personal Writing**

The book *Tzav Ve-Ziruz* (*To Heal the Soul*) allows us a glimpse of R. Kalonymus’s inner world. It is a very personal work. While his other writings are addressed to the reader, discussing his world and his experiences, here R. Kalonymus focuses on his own perspective.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Did R. Kalonymus mean to publish this journal? And if so, for what reason does he expose in public his very personal self-reckoning, his weaknesses, failures, and crises?

Writing was an important value for R. Kalonymus, and he recommends it to his readers as well:

Record your inner life in a journal. This will not be something you do in order to earn immortal fame as an author, but rather to engrave your soul-portrait on paper. Write down all your inner struggles, your setbacks and successes, and grant them eternal life. This way your very essence, the personality of your soul, your spiritual attainments, your life’s inner treasures, will live on forever in the lives of your spiritual heirs as generations come and go.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When readers incorporate an author’s essence into their own lives by following his teachings and living his lessons, “the author’s very soul lives on for eternity,” explains R. Kalonymus in a footnote. For the writer himself, there is great value to articulating his spiritual challenges and victories. By means of writing, he organizes his thoughts and is more easily able to plan his progress.

However, it would appear that R. Kalonymus meant to share his journal with others,[[3]](#footnote-3) and so the revelations in it are conscious and deliberate. The title, “*Tzav Ve-Ziruz*” (literally, “A Command and an Urging”) would likewise seem to indicate that the intention had been to publish the book. R. Kalonymus apparently believed that this openness would allow the reader to be influenced by his way of thinking and his sharp, unsparing self-criticism, such that the reader could then apply the same thinking to himself and his own situation.

This is well-illustrated by a sermon that R. Kalonymus delivered to his students on the seventh day of Pesach in the year 5681 (1921). He talks about a man who came to him and complained about all his shortcomings. One of this man’s problems was that after praying, he would always feel a let-down. R. Kalonymus therefore tells his students:

It is well known and should be remembered that one cannot constantly be in a state of upliftment; there have to be ups and downs. Someone who thinks that he never falls from his level has obviously never risen to a state of spiritual upliftment…[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the middle of his sermon, he refers the students to his *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, in which one of the chapters deals with the challenge of reinforcing one’s motivation in the service of God. But the booklet also contains quite a few chapters dealing with the mood and mental state of the Rebbe himself. Of course, one might question the combination of guidance for the masses and recording the mood of the Rebbe. I believe that he meant to teach us that even the Rebbe has different moods; he, too, experiences ups and downs, doubts and crises. The reader can then arrive at the obvious conclusion: If even the Rebbe faces these challenges, then I have no need to worry that there is some problem with me. Let me see how the Rebbe approaches the difficulty, and I can try to implement the same solution.

Since such descriptions are rare among Chassidic leaders, they are of particular interest.

In addition to sections of self-accounting, *Tzav Ve-Ziruz* includes extensive advice in serving God, like R. Kolonymus’s other books. In this context, however, we shall focus only on his personal experiences and insights, reviewing some of his descriptions and paying attention to the inner torment reflected in them.

**Observation of the Passage of Years and Advancing Age**

Thank God, I am already in my fortieth year of life, and in a few months it will be my fortieth birthday. After that begins the decline of life, the beginnings of my old age. I am afraid. Very afraid. Not so much from the inevitable passing of my life but from the spiritual poverty of my years do I shudder; they are gone and past, empty and void, wasted on childish games.

“What will be with you, mortal creature!” I tell myself. “Your prime of life is gone, and now, when you’ve reached your decline, when the inevitable process of dying has begun, only now you remember your Creator?”

And even now, can I be sure of myself? How many periods of inspiration and improvement have I already had in my life, and what always happened to them? They passed like snow on a summer’s day. This happened at previous transitions of life: before my bar mitzvah, before my wedding… I experienced then such a deep inspiration and felt so firm in my convictions. I said to myself that from then on I was certain to be God’s faithful servant. And who knows if even now, once I become accustomed to being past forty, that the past will not happen again; all the inspiration and aspiration will melt and disappear. As there is no trace left from my earlier inspirations, what will be left of this one?

But I dare not despair! My heart pounds from my impending fortieth birthday; my entire body shakes from my oncoming declining years. Still, I will try to muster all my strength to commit myself and my life to God. Perhaps, perhaps something will remain.

But to what shall I commit myself? To learn more? I think that as far as possible, I don’t waste any time. To abstain from physical pleasures? If my own desires are not fooling, me, thank God, I am not so attached to them. So what am I missing? Simply to be a Jew. I see myself as a self-portrait that shows all colors and features real to life. Just one thing is missing: the soul.

“God, Master of the world, Who sees my innermost secrets! Before You I confess. You I beseech! I feel so cast aside and distanced from You and from Your holy Presence! Help me – I want to become a simple Jew!

God, save me from wasting the rest of my years chasing the illusions of life! Draw me closer and bring me into Your innermost Presence! Bind me to You forever and ever in wealth of spirit and soul.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

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**Am I Ready to Leave this World?**

A terror came over me yesterday during *shalosh seudos* as the thought came to mind: What would happen if my demise were nearby? The *mishna* says to repent one day before one’s death (*Avot* 2:15). I wonder how I could do it. Just to refrain from forbidden behavior and thought by simply controlling oneself is possible, even at the prime of one’s life – just keep in mind your possible imminent demise. But to really change everything that needs change and to heal all wounds of my soul the way I know I really should and indeed want to – this is not so easy to do.

So when I think about what would be if I were suddenly called before God with all these blemishes on my soul, I become gripped by panic and terror. I am not nearly as afraid of death, even a premature one, as I am afraid of this specter.

But the truth is, why am I afraid to face God just in higher worlds with my blemished soul and not embarrassed to face Him on earth? Who knows? Perhaps God has already rejected my soul and banished it far out of His Presence.

There is nothing left for me to do other than to cry out to Him: “God! Save me because I’m drowning!”[[6]](#footnote-6)

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***Shalosh Seudos*: The Weekly Yom Kippur**

It has sometimes happened to me at a *shalosh seudos* that I don’t know where I’ve been until now. I feel as though I have been hidden away somewhere or that I have hidden myself from facing God, and suddenly here I am – standing before Him face-to-face. I feel that God is then looking straight at me, His awareness penetrating right through me. His penetrating vision seems to spot and bear witness to my every blemish.

I am gripped by shame and terror. I would try to hide myself among the crowd of people, maybe under the table, but where can I hide from God? Wherever I hide, there You are. My secret refuge is filled with Your Presence. And when I reach the singing of *Mizmor Le-David* (*Tehillim* 23) – “I shall not fear for You are with me” – my tongue freezes and is unable to continue. How dare I leave my shelter of shame to identify with God and say, “for You are with me”? I feel at that moment that God is looking upon me with such censuring pity that it eats up my heart and stings my entire body.

And then sometimes I am overwhelmed by such a shame that I almost lose all my spirits. I then clearly see my lowly state of being; whatever good points I may have are nothing when experiencing God’s Presence. I then feel like a lowly worm that brags about how strong and beautiful its holes in the ground are until it sees the palaces built by humans. What a joke all its underground tunnels are compared to the palaces of humans! Whatever holiness and purity of soul I am capable of attaining are nothing before the Ultimate Pure Being. How insignificant they are before Him to Whom even the heavens are unrefined.

Yet none of these feelings were new insights – I had known it all before. But then, I only knew. Now, at this *shalosh seudos*, it was real; there was God’s holy Presence right before me, pressing my very being. And in front of His dazzling Presence the peak of my enlightenment became darkened.

My being melts away. I have lost sense of selfness; I have no existence of my own. But my soul takes courage, come what may. I cry out: “Even in the depths of Hell I shall not fear, for You are with me!”

Like the retarded son of the king who calls to his father while playing with his kind – will not the king come to fetch him? He may not be worthy of royal treatment, but rather than risk royal shame, the king will respond to his cry. That’s how I feel. Whether You save me or not, my heart yearns to be close to You. To call You by name is so pleasant to me, my entire being cries out to You. My soul may be darkened, filled with impurity; still You, Father, will rush to my comfort. How can You stand by as Your Divine Name is shamed when from Hell resounds my cry, “FATHER!”

“Even in the depths of Hell I shall not fear, for You are right there with me!”

Each *shalosh seudos* is different. Sometime I only feel brokenhearted, sometimes also the ensuing self-encouragement. But when I get to singing *Ein ke-Elokeinu* – “There is none like our God” – my soul always becomes strengthened and contented, not out of any feeling of self-fulfillment, just out of the privilege to serve the Infinite Creator. He has appointed me, out of no merit of my own, to declare His Greatness and Oneness to Creation. My broken-heartedness is thus transformed into bliss and resolution as I declare it before all of Creation. To the heavens, the earth, to humans and lower life, even to the dust that is under my feet, I say, “Listen and I shall tell you: *Ein ke-Elokeinu*!”

And then at the peak of my bliss and resolution, the flames of my soul soar up before God: *Ata Hu Elokeinu* – “You are our Master!”

Finally, when the Shabbat has passed its climax and candles are brought to light up the night, I find myself a different person. I realize how necessary it all was: the broken-heartedness at the beginning and the bliss that came afterward are one process, one purification. So I continue to wonder why people do not get as excited about going to the weekly *shalosh seudos* as they do about going to *Kol Nidrei*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

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**The Rebbe’s Somersaults**

When a Jewish person reveals from within himself his inherent holiness with which to serve his Creator, then every act that he does for God, even self-initiated service, becomes for that time actually holy. And these physical acts, performed as divine service, will in turn sanctify his physical body.

How else can you explain why I became so enthused when I decided to somersault in honor of the *sefer Torah*? Why else did my whole body become so energized when I saw the place where I would dance and my whole body shook with excitement?

Frequently, a Jew’s yearning is ignited far beyond the normal level of his service. His soul then yearns to perform some great act for God, but his heart is broken from the reality of his normal service. And even when his soul is not inflamed to actual self-sacrifice, it yearns for self-transcendence: If only now I were able to perform some act that would lift me out of myself! If only now I were able to extract my very being from my normal self, I would soar up straight to the heavens.

When I started preparing myself to attend the *sefer* *Torah* dedication ceremony, my yearning already had begun to flare. The thought that such an awesomely holy and joyous occasion might come only once in my lifetime started to burn within me. I wanted very much to do something for God. “Right! I will rejoice in awe and dance with all my might. No, that may be nice, but my soul is still not pacified. This is not the great act suitable for such an awesome occasion.”

Then the idea came to me to somersault as the lowly peasants do for their masters. But a counter-voice spoke up within me: “What sort of service are you trying to do; what is the reason for it? Do you really think it matters to God whether or not you do somersaults? And perhaps you might even hurt yourself or damage your health. Will you not look like a fool doing somersaults in front of all those people?”

Then form the depths of my heart I screamed at this voice: “God destroy you, forces of evil! This is no time for second thoughts – the moment is great, it is unique, and it is passing. To do some act of self-sacrifice for God is what I want, and you have only helped me to find it. The very act that you seek to intimidate me from doing because of health or personal reasons, that is the act I choose to do and I now hallow myself in preparation.”

From that moment on, this self-contrived, unsophisticated act became for me a holy service. It was now very clear in my eyes, and I surrendered myself completely to it. My conscious thoughts had just begun to wonder how I would somersault, when the flames of my soul engulfed me to self-sacrifice. No more did I imagine any simple somersault, but now God’s altar shone before me. The place where the procession was about to pass became hallowed with the flames of holy fire. I felt as if my blood were bubbling while my tears were pouring forth.

By whom and how did this simple act become hallowed for the moment? Why did my entire body shake with fervor and become then also hallowed? It must be my “sparks,” my potential spiritual energy, that were now being expressed in reality. The simplest Jew has such sparks. I greatly rejoiced later on to learn that King David also somersaulted before the Holy Ark (*Bamidbar Rabba* 4:20, *Etz Yosef*).

But maybe I did fool myself. Maybe my act did not become hallowed for the moment. Maybe it was all my own imagination. The truth is that I did not have the spiritual experience I anticipated and the state of being I felt so sure to attain, I did not. But God help me from such self-doubt; this is also a self-destructive maneuver, to question what one feels and sees. How can one deny a real inner experience? I know that every time I sit down to learn, I feel God’s Presence around me. It feels as if His Light is filling my mind, my heart, my very innards and even deeper. Was it not being moved by this feeling that I decided to sing *Adon Olam*? I was sure my ego would dissolve, my very being would melt, and I would become filled instead with God’s Presence. The entire world would then be for me just a spark of God, shining from His brilliance.

Yes, I did not attain what I felt sure I would. I guess I do not yet know myself. I may feel that I am aware of my lowly level, but I must be still ego-driven; I expected more than my capability. Nevertheless, what I did experience was real, because even the self-contrived service of the simplest Jew becomes hallowed for the moment.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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**Talking to Creation**

When I had left the Friday night Shabbat table I gave up – no one had been listening anyway. So I began to talk to the universe. I opened my window and I saw an entire world just waiting for someone to acknowledge its beauty. I was then about to recite the bedtime *keriat Shema*, so I spoke to the world and cried out to it, “*Shema Yisrael*… God is One!”

I continued reciting: “Enlighten the world with Your glory… Blessed be God by day, blessed is He by night… *Adon Olam*, Master of the universe, Who reigned before Creation… When all came into being through His will, then He was called the Ultimate King…”

The entire Creation seemed to be taking in each holy word and thought as I expressed it. I became greatly encouraged and all my insights and feelings returned to me.

Now, whether by myself or with people, whether or not anyone is listening, I speak instead to the world, to God’s world, rather than to people.

And when the world itself will reveal its holiness, perhaps then also its inhabitants will become hallowed with it. Then, from the far corners of the earth, songs to God will they all be singing.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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**The Illness, Recovery, and Death of the Rebbe’s Son**

[The following passage covers a period of a few years, starting with the illness of R. Kalonymus’s son, Elimelekh. Tragically, after finally overcoming acute illness, his son was killed in the war.]

The gall bladder stones that my son had suffered from for several years became worse after the summer of 5695 [1935]. From the Festival season onward, he hardly got out of bed. Then, on the 14th of Kislev [Dec. 10, 1935], we had to have him brought urgently to the hospital…

The doctors then said it was only a matter of hours, but praised be the Name of God, on the 28th of Tevet [Jan. 23], he improved again. Then he came down with other illnesses, among them pneumonia, but miracle of miracles, God in His mercy cured him of these illnesses as well. Everyone, even the atheists, saw the greatness of God and were forced to believe and to praise Him.

In order to give praise and thanksgiving to God, even as a token, for all His great mercy on us, I have written the following memoirs. The metaphors I have used to depict the suffering we went through are not exaggerations at all. Rather, our suffering was so great that it seemed to take physical form in my eyes, and it is those forms that I am describing…



[Picture: Invitation to the wedding of R. Kalonymus’s son]

Please, God, accept now my deep desire to praise You, as You accepted the songs of the prophets. May the pulse of my yearning heart be as sweet in Your ears as was the music played by the Levites in the Temple…

God! Merciful and benevolent! Since my childhood, my life has been full of pain. While still a young child, my enemies – worries and troubles – had already broken my strength and spirits. I was a little child when I was orphaned; I barely knew my father, the *tzaddik* that he was. I did not merit that my father, this holy and saintly man, should raise me. But God! Despite this I have no complaints or resentment toward You. You are righteous in all that You do, and if not for Your consistent kindness throughout my troubles, I would surely have been lost in my sorrows…

I look again at the child. Is it movement or, God forbid, the throes of death? His condition is worsening, his breathing heavier; my entire being trembles and disintegrates. My heart feels as if some hand is squeezing it without mercy – just squeeze a little harder and my heart will stop…

Now I sit still and silent. The intensity of pain is beyond bearing – I am broken beyond repair. After receiving God’s gracious gift, our dear and beloved son, a sincere and outstanding Torah scholar, wise and straightforward, noble and refined, deeply attached to me at the soul level (he would have been ready to sacrifice his life for me), after God saw our dire plight and returned us this dear gift by healing our son from his serious illness, it was decreed in Heaven a harsh decree, a very bitter one, to take him from me in 5700 [1939] at the outbreak of the war. On the 12th of Tishrei [Oct. 7], during the bombing, he was mortally wounded; he was standing near me. A few days later, on the second day of Sukkot, the 16th of Tishrei [Oct. 11], he returned his pure and holy soul to his Maker.

Also at that time, my daughter-in-law, his wife, was killed while standing outside the hospital. That was on the 13th of Tishrei [Oct 8]. Her name was Gittel, daughter of R. Shlomo Chaim of Balichav. All hope for myself and my soul both in this world and the next was aborted with their premature deaths. And my own future in them through their continued spiritual growth was also destroyed for me. The tragedy is too great to bear – only You, God, can sustain and encourage me with Your wonders.

“Kindness is Yours, God, and the shame is mine” – my own misdeeds have brought this on me. Compassionate Father, You know the heart of a father toward his beloved son… Nevertheless, I now take courage to thank You for this precious gift You gave us. You even added nearly four full years to his life after his illness. I praise You and extol You for this beloved treasure that You gave us for thirty-one years. How happy I was then – the sun’s rays dimmed in my eyes compared to the pure shine I saw in his face…

Master of the universe! Call a stop to our suffering! May these dear departed souls, together with all the past suffering of the deceased and the living, atone for all our sins. Have mercy from now on, God, on each of us and on the Jewish People – grant us only good things from now on. May I myself be included with all my family and friends among the Jewish People to receive Your kindness. Grant us right now the eternal redemption, rebirth of the dead, and a complete physical and spiritual salvation. Amen.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. For more on the journals of Jewish mystics at the time of R. Kalonymus, see S. Cherlow, “*Ha-Nisgavot Mevakshot Lamo Milim: Yomanim Ishi’im shel Mistikanim Yehudim Be-Me’ah Ha-Esrim*,” *Da’at* 63 (5768), pp. 103-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, p. 321 (= *To Heal the Soul*, pp. 1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In a letter that he wrote to a yeshiva student, he included an excerpt from *Zav ve-Ziruz* (*Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 448); likewise, in a talk that he gave to his disciples on the seventh day of Pesach in 5681, he mentions *Tzav Ve-Ziruz* as a familiar source that may be quoted (*Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 449). This would seem to suggest that R. Kalonymus had intended to publish the booklet, including the personal portions of it, for his manuscript offers no indication of any distinction between different parts of the book. His family members, who had the book published, would seem to have reached the same conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Derekh Ha-Melekh*, p. 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tzav Ve-Ziruz*, pp. 337-338 (= *To Heal the Soul*, pp. 45-46). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., pp. 335-336 (= Ibid. 41-42). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. pp. 341-343 (= ibid. 61-63). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., pp. 343-345 (= ibid. pp. 65-68). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 387 (= Ibid. pp. 147-148). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 367-377 (= Ibid. pp. 103-118). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)