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## POURING OUT YOUR HEART: RABBI NACHMAN'S *HITBODEDUT* AND ITS PIASECZNER REVERBERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

### R. SHAPIRA: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY<sup>2</sup>

**R** Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira was born in Grodzisk Poland in 1889 to Rabbi Elimelech of Grodzisk, who was known at the time as the “elder rebbe of Poland.” He was descended from many of the greatest Polish rebbes, including R. Elimelech of Lyshensk, the Seer of Lublin, the Maggid of Kohznitz, and R. Kalonymus Kalman ha-Levi Epstein of Krakow (the author of *Maor va-Shemesh*), after whom he was named. All of the above rebbes had a major influence upon his thought and practice, as did the writings of the Chabad and Karlin schools. Orphaned at a young age, he assumed the role of rebbe in Piaseczna in 1909 and shortly thereafter was appointed as the town rabbi as well. During his lifetime he was active as the rebbe of a Hasidic court, as a *rosh yeshiva* and educator, and in the public realm. Following World War I he moved his court to Warsaw, although he continued to maintain a presence in Piaseczna as well, living there several months each year. He established Yeshivat Daat Moshe in 1923 and headed it until his death. In

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a chapter in my dissertation, *Between Messianism and Prophecy: Hasidism according to the Piaseczner Rebbe* [in Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2007), 253-260. For *hitbodedut* in earlier Kabbalistic sources, see 253-254. Thanks to Elie Leshem for editorial assistance.

<sup>2</sup> Based on *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 1-4, and the sources cited there in nn. 1-11. As the focus of our article is on R. Shapira, we will not discuss R. Nachman's biography, upon which much has been written. See, for example, Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Classic, 1992).

Warsaw he was also an active member of Agudat Yisrael and put much energy into fighting the emerging phenomenon of secularization, and Shabbat desecration in particular. In 1932 he published *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, which quickly became a classic of Hasidic educational philosophy. All of his other surviving manuscripts were only published after the war.

At the beginning of the Holocaust most of his family was killed, and he remained alone in the Warsaw Ghetto, where his sermons were eventually published as *Esh Kodesh*. He was killed in November 1943 but there is a dispute amongst the scholars as to the place of his death. In the last two decades or so, his writings have begun to enjoy great popularity in wide circles and he has also merited significant academic attention.

### The Decline Polish Hasidism in the Twentieth Century and R. Shapira's Response<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, Polish Hasidism can be divided into two major trends. The first is the "popular" school introduced by R. Elimelech of Lyshensk (1717-1786), his student R. Yaacov Yitzhak Horowitz, the "Seer" of Lublin (1745-1815), and the Seer's students. This school preserved and cultivated mystical and magical trends within the context of "tsaddikism," including the mass influx of Hasidim to the courts of their rebbes where, in the context of ecstatic prayer, they expected to receive not only spiritual guidance but also material sustenance in the areas of *hayyei*, *banei u-mezonei* (health, children, and livelihood). This approach was challenged in the famous rebellion of R. Yaacov Yitzhak Rabinowitz of Pryshischa (1766-1813), formerly a leading student of the Seer. His school attempted to create an elitist Hassidic fraternity stressing Torah study and inner truth while deemphasizing the tsaddik's role as miracle worker and ecstatic preacher. R. Kalonymus Shapira was not only a direct descendent of the leaders of the first school; he was their spiritual heir as well. In all of his works he quotes them extensively, while never mentioning the

<sup>3</sup> Hasidism in Poland has merited a tremendous amount of academic research. For further study the reader is referred to the following works: Gedalyah Nigal, *The Hasidic Philosophy of R. Elimelech of Lyzhensk and his Students* [in Hebrew], PhD Dissertation (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1962); Mendel Piekarz, *Ideological Trends of Hasidism in Poland During the Interwar Period and the Holocaust* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990); Zvi Meir Rabinowitz, *Between Pryshischa and Lublin: People and Approaches in Polish Hasidism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Kesharim, 1997); Yitzhak Alfasi, *The Hozeh of Lublin: Rabbi Yaakov Yitshak ha-Levi Horowitz*, [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Rabbi Kook Institute, 2006); Uriel Gellman, *Hasidism in Poland in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century: Typologies of Leadership and Devotees* [in Hebrew], PhD Dissertation (Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2001).

Pryshischa School a single time.<sup>4</sup> While it can be argued that he, too, moderated the role of the “tsaddik,” preferring the more neutral term “rebbe,” this was likely due to his sense that in the contemporary period, the *rebbe*s were not on the same spiritual level as were those of earlier generations – not because of any intrinsic difficulty with the mystical-magical role of the *tsaddik* of yesteryear. In fact, he strongly cultivated the mystical trend in Hasidism, and like his forefathers viewed the *rebbe* as responsible for the material as well as spiritual needs of his followers.<sup>5</sup>

In the eyes of R. Kalonymus the situation of Hasidism in Poland after World War I was very problematic. The challenges of modernity and urbanization, compounded with the allure of secular socialism and Zionism, had begun to wreak havoc in the Hasidic community, resulting in the defection of many young people from the Hasidic ranks. In addition, the unique spiritual intensity and mystical fervor of early Hasidism had largely been lost, and the average Hasid no longer understood what Hasidism was meant to be, other than an emphasis on special clothing and other external characteristics. It is against this backdrop that much of R. Kalonymus’s educational and spiritual *raison d’être* emerges: He clearly saw himself as a Hasidic reformer attempting to revitalize the entire Hasidic community and return it to the path of the Baal Shem Tov as he understood it.<sup>6</sup> Part of this spiritual revival emphasized mystical techniques such as meditation, of which *hitbodedut* is but one example.

### Rabbi Nachman’s *Hitbodedut*

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (1772-1810) is arguably one of the most prominent Hasidic rabbis in history. Unlike the persecuted iconoclast he was in his lifetime, R. Nachman is now a major cultural icon throughout much of the Jewish world. The interest in his works and the pilgrimages to his grave in Uman are only partial indicators of how influential he has become.

<sup>4</sup> In a letter written by R. Kalonymus that was recently published for the first time in the collection *Ginzei Yehuda* (Yehiel Goldhaber and Hananiah Dov Leichtag, editors) 2013 (without place of publication), he mentions R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a leading representative of the Pryshischa School, in a decidedly negative context.

<sup>5</sup> See *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 118-148.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Kalonymus’s *Hovav ha-Talmidim* (Warsaw: Feder, 1932), 5-16; *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 15-32. For a somewhat different view see Daniel Reiser, *To Fly like Angels: Imagery or Waking Dream Techniques in Hassidic Mysticism in the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, [in Hebrew], PhD Dissertation (Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 2011), 1-20.

One of R. Nachman's central spiritual practices is *hitbodedut* (literally, being alone with one's self), a meditative technique in which the Hasid engages in free dialogue with God in his own language.<sup>7</sup> As we shall demonstrate, certain aspects of R. Nachman's teachings on *hitbodedut* resurfaced, albeit subtly and with significant differences, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century writings of R. Kalonymus.<sup>8</sup>

R. Nachman's major teaching on *hitbodedut* is found in his work *Likkutei Moharan*. These ideas were later developed in the booklet *Hishtapekhut ha-Nefesh* (*Outpouring of the Soul*), by R. Alter Tepliker. The following is one of Rebbe Nachman's descriptions of the practice:

*Hitbodedut* is a great level, surpassing everything else. This means to set aside at least an hour every day to be alone in a room or a field and to speak with one's Creator, explaining oneself, appeasing, and supplicating Him to bring oneself close to true divine service. And this prayer and discussion should be held in the vernacular, i.e. Yiddish... for it is hard for us to speak in Hebrew, which we are not used to... But in Yiddish, which we are accustomed to, it is easier to express oneself... One should express all that is in one's heart before God: regret and teshuva regarding the past and supplications to draw close to God... It is important to practice this every day at an appointed time and the rest of the day is to be joyous. And this practice is very great and constitutes an excellent method for drawing close to God... for everyone can do this and in doing so one will reach a great level. Happy is he who follows this.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Despite the centrality of this practice in Bratzlav writings, little attention has been paid to it in the academic studies of scholars such as Joseph Weiss, Mendel Piekartz, and Arthur Green. A recent exception is Zvi Mark, *Mysticism and Madness: The Religious Thought of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav* (London: Continuum, 2009), 131-147. On the other hand it has been discussed in detail in internal Hasidic works, such as Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, (New York: Schocken 1982), 92-98, and Ozer Bergman, *Where Earth and Heaven Kiss: a Guide to Rebbe Nachman's Path of Meditation*, (Jerusalem/New York: Breslov Research Institute, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Most of the research on the Piaseczner Rebbe has focused upon his Holocaust era writings, collected in *Esh Kodesh*. For biographical and bibliographical information see Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto*, (New Jersey – Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1999), 1-14, Leshem, From Messianism to Prophecy, pp. 1-32, Ron Wacks: *The Flame of the Holy Fire* [in Hebrew] (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 2010). On R. Shapira's mystical techniques see also Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance and Modern Kabbalah*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 115-118. Most recently see Daniel Reiser, (above note 6), 75-77. On his meditative techniques see also Tomer Persico, *Jewish Meditation: the Development of Modern Spirituality in Contemporary Judaism* [in Hebrew], Phd Dissertation (Tel Aviv, Tel Aviv University 2012), 246-302.

<sup>9</sup> *Likkutei Moharan*, Part Two: 25. All translations are my own.

According to R. Nachman, *Hitbodedut*, while informal in content and style, becomes formal in that one is instructed to practice it every day, at a set time, for at least one hour. According to Zvi Mark, *Hitbodedut* should be considered a mystical technique. In its first stage the Hasid discusses his desire to improve his *middot*. This then leads to the more intense mystical stage, which culminates in divestment from corporality (*bittul ha-gashmiut*), and ultimately in mystical union and envelopment within the Divine.<sup>10</sup>

### The Piaseczner Rebbe's *Hitbodedut*

In the twentieth century this method was echoed, with differences, in the mystical practices of the R. Kalonymus. Although the term *hitbodedut* is not always used, we see clearly the elements of the Bratzlav practice in several passages of R. Kalonymus' writings. And while R. Kalonymus never mentions R. Nachman or any Bratzlav works, it is clear that he was in fact deeply influenced by him.<sup>11</sup> Let us examine some of these passages.

In R. Kalonymus' first work, *Benei Mahashava Tova*, we read as follows:

When you feel broken-hearted, even due to physical needs, turn quickly aside, face the wall and recite some chapters of Psalms, preferably those that are similar to the type of distress that you are experiencing... not that you should come in from the marketplace and immediately begin to recite without concentration; rather think first about the concerns that are causing such consternation. Who can he turn to and who can help him, if not *ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the all powerful and merciful Father? Now he approaches God's throne and in his mind imagining that he is standing before Him and supplicating... and after the Psalms he should pray

<sup>10</sup> *Mysticism and Madness*, n. 2. It is also interesting to compare this with another of R. Kalonymus' meditative techniques, *hashkata* (*mind-quieting*), which appears in his *Derekh ha-Melekh*, (Jerusalem, 1991), 406-407. There as well work on one's *middot* is woven into the fabric on the mystical experience. On *hashkata* see *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 247-253.

<sup>11</sup> See *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 45-46, citing Piekarcz who writes that "there is no doubt that that the Admor of Piaseczna knew his [R. Nachman's] works", and n. 122 that R. Kalonymus' personal copy of *Likkutei Moharan* is held in the rare book room of the Bar Ilan University library (thanks to Prof. Zvi Mark for calling this to my attention). Recently it was called to my attention by R. Shmuel Tefilinsky that the Bratzlav work *Shivho shel Tsaddik*, (Jerusalem, 2008), 146, contains evidence that R. Kalonymus studied extensively from the Bratzlav work *Hishtapekhut ha-Nefesh*, which deals entirely with the subject of *hitbodedut*. This source provides additional textual evidence linking R. Kalonymus with the study of Bratzlav works in general and of *hitbodedut* in particular.

spontaneously to God in his own language, and with each word he will feel that his consciousness is strengthening and he is ascending. Slowly he leaves behind his physical needs and a cry issues forth from the depths of his heart: *Master of the Universe, bring me close to You, purify me, lift me above all these worries so that I can be close to You...* and now he should be happy, for God is really close to him... all day he will feel spiritual pleasure, the pleasure of purity... and so too when he feels inner joy.<sup>12</sup>

When we analyze the Piaseczner's version of *hitbodedut* several points become apparent. First, *hitbodedut* is a response to a preexisting emotional state influenced by the events of everyday life, either positive or negative. This comes as no surprise when one considers the fact that R. Kalonymus generally views every emotional experience as an opportunity to move closer to God.<sup>13</sup> However, there is also a significant difference between R. Nachman's *Hitbodedut* and that of R. Kalonymus: For R. Nachman, *hitbodedut* is practiced in the context of fairly formal instructions, an hour a day, at a regular hour, preferably in the seclusion of the outdoors or a closed room. R. Kalonymus provides far less formal guidance, limited to the recommendation to recite Psalms and a personal prayer in the vernacular in a state of concentration. Other than facing the wall in order to concentrate, there is no suggestion of a special place, time, or frequency. While *hitbodedut* is certainly a powerful method of *avodat Hashem* that should be taken advantage of, he says, it is not part of the daily service of the Hasid. Additionally, while one's physical needs can serve as a trigger for the emotional state that facilitates *hitbodedut*, we do not find that these needs become the content of the meditation, as they do in Bratzlav.<sup>14</sup> Instead of praying for God to meet one's physical needs, the prayer is directed to moving beyond the physical, to coming close to God.

To summarize, the entire process, especially in the context of broken-heartedness, begins with the recitation of Psalms, followed by a personal prayer that expresses the Hasid's broken feeling. This, in turn, leads to a

<sup>12</sup> *Benei Mahashava Tova* (Tel Aviv: Committee of Piaseczna Hasidim, 1973), 23-24. In *Hakhsarat ha-Avreikhim*, (Jerusalem: Committee of Piaseczna Hasidim, 1962), 46a, 48a R. Kalonymus lists chapters of Psalms that are appropriate for different moods.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, *Histapekhut ha-Nefesh*, (Jerusalem, 1974), 63, where it says that one should pray over torn clothing, *and for all similar matters, great or small*. See also the sources quoted in *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 255, n. 844.

request for closeness to God, and finally to a feeling of spiritual pleasure, which is meant to last throughout the day.

Returning to R. Nachman's words above, we find a similar process in his version as well, as he instructs the Hasid to:

explain himself and appease God, supplicating Him to be brought close to true Divine service. This prayer and discussion should be held in the vernacular... supplicating God to draw close in truth from now on... and the rest of the day he should be joyous.<sup>15</sup>

Other discussions of *hitbodedut* can be found in R. Kalonymus' spiritual diary, *Tsav ve-Ziruz*. Let us look at one entry that adds several new points:

If you have not yet tasted a prayer that is free of personal needs, if you have not yet cried while singing the praises of God, your prayer appears childish in the eyes of Heaven... This is what you should do: For a moment or two leave behind the world and its noise... meditate [*hitboded*] by yourself, and if possible go out into the forest, and imagine yourself as a simple creature among God's creations. Then sing before God together with the sun and the moon... and the trees of the forest. You have come to reveal God's grandeur and to fill the world with it.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the explicit use of the word *hitboded* here, one can also note the strong disdain for personal requests as the essential point of prayer. This stands in stark contrast to the position attributed to R. Nachman – that one should supplicate Hashem for every worldly need, no matter how small.<sup>17</sup> An additional innovation here is the explicit instruction to go to the forest to meditate together with all of nature, which is a

<sup>15</sup> *Likkutei Moharan*, Part Two, 25. See also *Sihot ha-Ran*, ch. 41. Regarding the use of Psalms in *hitbodedut* by both masters, see *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 254-256.

<sup>16</sup> *Tsav ve-Ziruz* (Jerusalem: Committee of Piaseczna Hasidim 1962), ch. 18.

<sup>17</sup> See R. Yitzhak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzchak Letters and Writings*, [in Hebrew] (New York: Gur Aryeh Institute, 1991), 332: "The feeling of closeness to God in a non-accepted prayer is no less than the feeling of closeness to God in an accepted prayer." R. Kalonymus also consistently stresses the experience of closeness to God in prayer over the "results." See for example, *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, 52-53. On the other hand, R. Nachman puts more stress on the "results" of prayer as well. See for example, *Likkutei Etsot*, *Tefilla* 3. For a detailed analysis of the debate concerning the legitimacy of petitionary prayer in early Hasidism, see Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Hasidic Thought*, [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), 88-91, Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Prayer*, (London/Washington: Littman, 1993), 23-33. Jacobs discusses a passage from *Tsav ve-Ziruz*, 32-34.



central feature of Bratzlav *hitbodedut*. R. Kalonymus' words here are reminiscent of R. Nachman's famous statement: "Know that when a person prays in the field, all of the plants come into his prayer and assist him, giving his prayer strength."<sup>18</sup>

In another passage in *Tsav ve-Ziruz* R. Kalonymus suggests that those with spiritual maladies discuss them with a close friend, a practice that he mentions elsewhere in the context of group spiritual work.<sup>19</sup> Here, however, the passage takes an unexpected turn:

And do you have any friend who is comparable to your Heavenly Father?... Seclude yourself in a special room if you can, and if not turn toward the wall. Imagine that you are standing before God's throne, and pour out your heart in conversation and prayer, based on whatever enters your heart and in any language that you understand.<sup>20</sup>

In this passage we find that the human peer counselor that R. Kalonymus insists upon elsewhere<sup>21</sup> is effectively replaced by the divine counselor. Once again Rav Kalonymus instructs the Hasid to seclude himself, preferably in a special room, and to address God in a personal prayer in the vernacular, similarly to Bratzlav *hitbodedut*. Here R. Kalonymus even suggests a possible version of such a prayer, but only as an example; ultimately it is preferable to devise one's own prayer.<sup>22</sup> In this example as well, the main focus is upon the desire to draw close to God.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, even though R. Kalonymus does not explicitly mention R. Nachman or his writings, and does not always use the technical term *hitbodedut*, it is clear both from textual evidence and outside testimony that R. Kalonymus was well versed in Bratzlav literature in general and particularly in the literature on *hitbodedut*. He chose to adopt *hitbodedut* while modifying certain aspects of it to make it more in line with his own spiritual/mystical practices, a unique blend derived of several earlier Hasidic

<sup>18</sup> *Likkutei Moharan*, Part Two: 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Benei Mahashava Tova*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> *Tsav ve-Ziruz*. Ch. 4. On the visualization of standing before God's throne, see *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 177-188. I hope to discuss this topic in more detail in a forthcoming article.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Personal, informal prayers of this sort, some in Hebrew and some in Yiddish, are scattered throughout R. Kalonymus' writings. For a list, see *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 260, n. 860.



systems that differ greatly from Bratzlav Hasidism.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, we cannot state definitively why R. Kalonymus never refers to R. Nachman other than the fact that in his time (unlike today) Bratzlav Hasidim comprised a relatively marginal and somewhat controversial group.<sup>24</sup> I once asked the current Piaseczner Rebbe, R. Kalman Menachem Shapira, about it and he said that there is a lot of similarity between the two but that R. Kalonymus chose not to mention R. Nachman due to his “extreme and radical style.” Instead he offered his readers a more “moderate version,” which R. Shapira called *Bratzlav be-better* (“permissible Bratzlav”).

<sup>23</sup> R. Kalonymus was primarily influenced by his own ancestors R. Elimelech of Lizhensk, the Seer of Lublin, the Kohznitzer Maggid and the author of *Maor va-Shemesh*. His system is also a synthesis of Chabad and Karlin Hasidism. See *Between Messianism and Prophecy*, 1, 114-117, 264-267.

<sup>24</sup> Regarding the persecutions of Bratzlav Hasidim in different periods, see Joseph G. Weiss, *Studies in Braslav Hasidism*, [in Hebrew] (ed. Mendel Piekartz), (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1974), 5-57, and David Assaf, *Untold Tales of the Hasidim: Crisis and Discontent in the History of Hasidism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2010), 120-153 (translated from the Hebrew by Dena Ordan).