

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev – Part 1¹

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

The 25th of *Tishrei* is the *yahrzeit*—the day of passing and ascent into heaven—of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (1740-1810). Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev is best known as the advocate of the Jewish people (*sanegoran shel Yisra'el*). He is famous for his ability to find the positive point in every Jew and in advocating in favor of the Jewish people as a whole in front of the Almighty and His Heavenly tribunal.

Birth

On the day that the Berditchever was born, the Ba'al Shem Tov conducted a *farbrengen* with great joy, during which he told his disciples that the soul of one who would be the spiritual defender of the Jewish people has just entered the world. In this respect Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's birth is similar to the Alter Rebbe's (the founder of Chabad-Lubavitch), for whose birth the Ba'al Shem Tov also made a festive *farbrengen* (it was on his own birthday, *chai Elul*) and announced the descent of his soul into the world.

Three Guarantees

It is related that the *Satan* tried to prevent Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's soul from entering the world, claiming that if he were to be born, he would no longer be able to succeed in his mission of promoting evil. In return for his consent to letting the Berditchever's soul come into the world, the Satan received three guarantees:

- a) That he would not be called "Rebbe" together with the name of his city, the Berditchever Rebbe (as was customary to call other *tzadikim*), but only the Berditchever Rov.
- b) That he would be persecuted throughout his life, far more than any of the other students of the Ba'al Shem Tov.
- c) That he would never meet the Ba'al Shem Tov, even though he was 20 when the Ba'al Shem Tov passed away. Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was born in the year 5500, which corresponds to the beginning of daylight of the sixth millennium of creation.² This was the time that the redemption truly began to shine.

There are many *tzadikim* who expressed their deep spiritual connection to Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditshev. Many *tzadikim* quote him often, but here we will focus on four *tzadikim* that related to him and his unique spiritual service in particular. As we will see



later, these four and the manner in which they relate to the Berditschever correspond to the four letters of God's essential Name, *Havayah*.

Stories About Him

The first is the Rizhiner, Rebbe Yisrael of Ruzhin, the great grandson of the Magid of Mezritch. The Rizhiner loved telling stories of the *tzadikim*, but most of all he enjoyed telling stories about Rebbe Levi Yitzchak. He said that simply mentioning Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's name is already a story in and of itself. It is enough to mention his name in order to annul Heavenly decrees against the Jewish people. In Chassidut it is explained that telling a story about a *tzadik* is spiritually higher than even learning his Torah, his teachings. This is because stories about a *tzadik* describe and relate the "self" of the *tzadik*. In the Tanya,³ the Alter Rebbe explains that a story about a *tzadik*, especially one told in short manner, manifests the *sefirah* of higher wisdom (wisdom as it is in the World of Emanation), where the True One is revealed.⁴ Because of this, stories about *tzadikim* have the power to sweeten harsh judgments (which ultimately derive from the outer dimension of higher understanding, the *sefirah* of understanding in the World of Emanation) not just over the one telling the story but over the entire Jewish people.

Though Rebbe Levi Yitzchak had children, they did not take the mantle of his leadership after his passing. Even in Berditchev, he was considered a unique and singular Rabbi, and because of the great love the townspeople had for him, they never again sought another Rabbi to fill his place, and made do with a *beit din* (a *halachic* court) of Rabbis, but there was no Rabbi for the entire town. There is no other example of something like this occurring by any other *tzadik*.

Ridiculing the Tzadik

The second *tzadik* who possessed a special relationship to Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was Rebbe Baruch of Mezhibuzh, the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson. He was a contemporary of the Berditschever. His relationship with Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was truly interesting and unique: he had a daily custom to ridicule and laugh at something the Berditschever had done or said. It seemed like he was scorning and laughing at Rebbe Levi Yitzchak. Rebbe Baruch even promised anyone who would do the same a part of his portion in the World to Come.

Such behavior carries within it great secrets and intentions and we will explore them when we look at Rebbe Baruch in context of all four students. Rebbe Baruch himself once explained that every day that the Berditschever was in the world, there was a Heavenly argument that because of his presence, the world can get along without the Mashiach. In order to counter this, Rebbe Baruch said that he must ridicule Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's behavior and spiritual service.

What was there to ridicule about the Berditschever's behavior? The Berditschever, because of his tremendous arousal and excitement in worshiping the Almighty, would

act wildly and without any regard for décor. It was common to see him jumping on the table, turning over the dishes, etc. Rebbe Baruch and Rebbe Levi Yitzchak would *farbreng* together, and their meetings produced many stories both about their mutual respect and of their disputes. Once, when Rebbe Levi Yitzchak visited Mezhibuzh, Rebbe Baruch's town, he prayed in his own *minyán*, as is the custom when a Rebbe visits other towns. After Rebbe Baruch finished praying in his own main *minyán*, he went to see how Rebbe Levi Yitzchak prayed. In any case, Rebbe Baruch would ridicule Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's wild nature, which was expressed during his moments of great excitement in his worship of *Hashem*.

One time the Berditchever prayed in Mezhibuzh and Rebbe Baruch went to see how he prayed. He came into the Berditchever's *minyán* and stood in the back just as the Berditchever began *kedushat keter*.⁵ Rebbe Baruch cried out for someone to give him a *gartel* so that he could answer after the Berditchever. After the service was over, the Berditchever came over to Rebbe Baruch and asked him what he thought of the way that he prayed? Rebbe Baruch said that he found it all very nice, but everything that he, the Berditchever had done in a wild way, could be done quietly. The Berditchever answered, "You can do it quietly. I can't!"

Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was driven out of many towns until he settled in Berditchev. At the time Berditchev was a town full of Jews who had been influenced by the enlightenment and had all but abandoned their Judaism, so much so that the nature of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's ecstatic service of the Almighty furnished material for the local theatre that would regularly put on a play, satirizing him and traditional Judaism. Still, as the advocate for the Jewish people, Rebbe Levi Yitzchak felt that it was imperative that he live in a place like Berditchev and accepted the difficult task of being the Rav. Other than Rebbe Levi Yitzchak, at that time there was no other *tzadik* of his times who on purpose chose a secular city to live in.

There is a story told of a wealthy, but non-observant Jew who traveled to Berditchev specifically in order to see the play about Rebbe Levi Yitzchak. When he arrived there he suddenly thought, if the play is so funny, why not go see the real thing? So he made his way to the Berditchever's *shul* and soon found himself connecting deeply with the *tzadik*. It was not long before he became a full *ba'al teshuvah* and was one of the disciples dressed in white (silk clothing worn by Chassidim on Shabbat) sitting around the Berditchever's *tisch* (Shabbat table).

A Wonder

The third *tzadik* who was especially connected with Rebbe Levi Yitzchak is the Seer of Lublin (the *Chozeh*), a younger contemporary of his. He noted that everyday he thanks and blesses the Almighty for bringing down the soul of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak into the world. Just as we have a *mitzvah* to say a blessing when we see the wonders that God put in the natural world, so the *Chozeh* would bless God for putting Levi Yitzchak,

whom he considered the greatest wonder, into the world. Like the wonders of nature which are revealed and can be seen by anyone, the Berditchever was able to reveal and show his greatness to anyone (without being adversely affected by this self-revelation).

A Heavenly Hall Dedicated in His Name

The fourth *tzadik* who had a special spiritual connection to Rebbe Levi Yitzchak was the *Tzemach Tzedek*, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe. He said that thanks to all of the positive advocacy that Rebbe Levi Yitzchak had advocated on behalf of the Jewish people during his life, a new hall of merit called the hall of Levi Yitzchak son of Sarah Sasa (his mother's name) was created in heaven.

Apropos, we learn from this that there are new things created in the heavens even today, which did not exist in the early generations. These come into being by means of the new Torah interpretations and new Divine intentions and manners of service of the Almighty that are innovated by the sages of each generation.

What purpose does this hall of merit named after Levi Yitzchak serve? The *Tzemach Tzedek* explains that any Jew who is in trouble and recites chapters of Psalms with wholehearted intent and asks to be saved in the merit of Levi Yitzchak the son of Sarah Sasa, will undoubtedly be helped from above. Rebbe Levi Yitzchak has opened a new channel for Divine deliverance.

Correspondence to Havayah

Now, as is our custom, let us see how these four *tzadikim* and their spiritual relationship with the Berditchever can be modeled using the four letters of God's essential Name, *Havayah*: *yud*, *hei*, *vav*, and *hei*.

Yud (י): The first letter of *Havayah* corresponds to the *sefirah* of wisdom. We have already explained that telling a story about a *tzadik*, especially in short form, is described in the Tanya as tapping into the higher wisdom, the wisdom of the world of Emanation and has the power to sweeten harsh judgments. All the more so when one mentions the name of a great *tzadik* such as Rebbe Levi Yitzchak, since the name touches upon the essence of the person.

Hei (ה): The second letter of *Havayah* corresponds to the *sefirah* of understanding, whose internal motivator is joy and laughter. This is of course the essence of Rebbe Baruch's custom to ridicule and mock the Berditchever. Most ridicule stems from a negative and unholy source.

In Chassidut,⁶ the source of unrectified ridicule is identified with the essence of the Philistines who sealed the wells dug by Abraham. Abraham's wells are symbolic of the profound love and pleasure that Abraham experienced in his Divine service and in his holy spiritual path. The Philistines' sealing of his wells suggests how Abraham's pleasure and love are hijacked to serve as the glue that binds those that sit together and mock others. The Torah also relates that Isaac, Abraham's son, redug his father's wells

that had been sealed by the Philistines. Spiritually, this means that Isaac, the archetypal soul of the *sefirah* of might has the power to rectify mockery and turn it into a positive force. For instance, many times a person has to mock his own evil inclination in order to prevent it from taking over his life and destroying him. The ability to do so comes from the *sefirah* of might in the psyche. In practice, the ability of might (and Isaac) to silence the mockers by mocking them stems from the harsh judgments given to might from the *sefirah* of understanding. Thus, Rebbe Baruch of Mezhibuzh awakened harsh judgments in order to both prevent the world's making do with Rebbe Levi Yitzchak as Mashiach and in order to empty the power of those enlightened Jews who mocked him in Berditchev. In fact, anecdotes like the one related earlier about the wealthy Jew who decided to go see Rebbe Levi Yitzchak instead of the mocking ridicule of his conduct in the playhouse can be attributed to the Rebbe Baruch's ridicule. Indeed, the *sefirah* of understanding, which is the source of the harsh judgments is also the source of *teshuva* and thus was also responsible for the wealthy Jew's decision to become a *ba'al teshuva*.

Vav (ו): The *vav* of *Havayah* corresponds to the six *sefirot* from loving-kindness to foundation, usually identified as beauty. The *Chozeh* saw Rebbe Levi Yitzchak as the wonder and hallmark of the generation. In Hebrew, such a person is known as "the beauty of the generation" (פְּאֵר הַדּוֹר). In fact, in Hebrew the same word that means "beauty" also means "exaltation." It is thus only natural to exalt the Almighty for the beautiful wonders of His world, including the "beauty of the generation," like Rebbe Levi Yitzchak.

When the letters of *Havayah* are described as symbolizing the creative process they represent: contraction (*yud*), expansion (*hei*), drawing down (*vav*), and a second expansion (*hei*). In the *Chozeh's* case, he exalted God for *bringing down* a soul as wonderful as Rebbe Levi Yitzchak's, providing us with another parallel to the letter *vav* of *Havayah*.

Hei (ה): The *hei* of *Havayah* corresponds to the *sefirah* of kingdom. One of the models found in the teachings of the Arizal consists of 5 levels called: root, soul, body, garment, and hall (or, chamber).⁷ Thus, all of the supernal chambers or halls correspond to the *sefirah* of kingdom.

From the words of the *Tzemach Tzedek* we learnt that there is a new hall named after Rebbe Levi Yitzchak. Because the *sefirah* of kingdom "has nothing of its own," it can receive new energy and new light from time to time, and therefore can grow from generation to generation. In fact, the entire basis of history (the events that have occurred in human history) according to the Arizal can be traced to the changes occurring in the *sefirah* of kingdom and the feminine principle that it represents.

Finally, that this hall is related to the reciting of chapters of Psalms also suggests kingdom, as the book of Psalms itself was written by King David, the archetypal soul of kingdom.

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- ¹. Based on a lecture given on the 25th of *Tishrei*, 5766 (October 26, 2005).
 - ². Based on the verse in Psalms (90:4), "For a thousand years are like a day past in Your eyes [God]," the sages tell us that the time-span of creation is six thousand years, with each thousand years paralleling one of the six days of creation. Since day follows night in the Torah's account of creation, the year 5500 corresponds to the beginning of the sixth day of creation.
 - ³. *Kuntres Acharon*.
 - ⁴. See *Tanya*, ch. 35, first gloss in the name of the Magid of Mezritch.
 - ⁵. The highpoint of the repetition of the *musaf Amidah*.
 - ⁶. See Mittler Rebbe's *Torat Chayim, Toldot* 144a and following.
 - ⁷. In Hebrew, these are called: שְׁדֵשׁ נְשָׁמָה גּוֹף לְבוּשׁ הַיְכָל, and are usually denoted by the acronym שנגל"ה.