

B”H

Spiritual Masters

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe was born on the 12th of *Tamuz*, 5640 (1880) and passed away on the 10th of *Shevat* 5710 (1950). He is commonly known by the acronym of his full name, the *Rayatz*. He was the only son of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dovber, known as the *Rashab*. Following are two stories about him and a few words about what we can take from them.

Magnetic Attraction

Our first story requires a little background. Passed down from the Ba'al Shem Tov and inherited by Rabbi Yisra'el of Ruzhin was a treasure trove of writings and objects that belonged to the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples known as the Charson Archive. Among the objects in this precious archive were the Ba'al Shem Tov's *sidur* (prayer book) and his *menorah* (Chanukah candelabra). After the Ruzhiner passed away, a very wealthy man bought the archive. Rabbi Shmu'el Gur-Aryeh, one of the Chabad *chassidim*, bought the archive and gave it as a present to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's father, the *Rashab*.

To this day, the Ba'al Shem Tov's *sidur* is in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's library and after immersing in the *mikveh* (ritual bath), some young men were given the opportunity to see it. In the pages of the *Amidah*, there appear the names of the Ba'al Shem Tov's disciples for whom he prayed, and the *sidur* is stained through and through with the tears of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

In any case, when Rabbi Gur-Aryeh brought the archive to the *Rashab*, the *Rashab* sifted through it, letter by letter, object by object. There were hundreds if not thousands of these and about each one, the *Rashab* declared whether it was authentically from the Ba'al Shem Tov or not. He thus sorted the entire archive. The whole while, the *chassid* quietly watched with amazement, wondering how the Rebbe knew what was authentic and what was not. When the *Rashab* was finished sorting the archive, he gave everything back to the *chassid* and told him to go to his son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, and show him the archive.



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The *chassid* brought the archive to the *Rayatz* and to his continuing astonishment the *Rayatz* started doing exactly what his father had done. He sorted through the entire archive similarly proclaiming what was authentic and what was not. Amazingly, he sorted the archive exactly as did his father.

Even though the wealthy *chassid* who bought the archive did not dare ask the father, he asked the son: How do you know what is authentic and what is not? These are all very precious letters and objects and not anyone could tell the difference.

The *Rayatz* replied that in every Jew, even a child, there is holiness (deriving from the Divine soul, but the *Rayatz* did not use this term). And, he said, holiness attracts holiness. If an object really belonged to the Ba'al Shem Tov, and if a letter is an authentic document from him or his disciples, then they too are imbued with holiness. Just as metal is attracted by a magnet, every Jew is attracted to holiness.

The *Rayatz* did not say that this ability to detect holiness is limited to a Rebbe, to a spiritual master, but rather that every Jew has holiness. If he nurtures it by studying Torah and Chassidut it will be revealed in his heart. Then, whatever he encounters in his life, he will immediately sense if it is imbued with holiness or not. We too have to be sensitive to holiness. Only a Jew can truly become sensitive to holiness, but to achieve this he has to nurture the holiness within.

What is more, the fact that this story about inner holiness that attracts and is attracted to external holiness is told concerning the ability to discern what belonged to the Ba'al Shem Tov, illustrates another important point. The Ba'al Shem Tov began enlightening the world with the holy light of the Mashiach. He set out to reveal the Mashiach, to bring the redemption, through loving-kindness and compassion. For this reason, the Ba'al Shem Tov's own holiness, the light of holiness with which he himself was seen by others and affected his surroundings, was the holiness of the Mashiach. The holiness in a Jew is attracted to the holiness of the Mashiach and therefore is similarly attracted to the holiness of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Always on His Mind

Our second story is one that the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, told about his father in law, the *Rayatz*. In 1947, only a few years before the *Rayatz* passed away, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (he was not yet the Rebbe, but was instrumental as his father-in-law's most trusted aid) traveled to Paris. His mother had made it out of communist Russia. The Rebbe, who had escaped from Europe to the United States in 1941, arrived in Paris to greet his mother whom he had not seen for more than 15 years and escort her back to the United States.

In Paris, he met a group of Lubavitch *chassidim* who had survived the Holocaust and very much wanted to immigrate to the United States but could not get visas. They asked him that upon his return he tell the Rebbe *Rayatz* of their plight and ask him to awaken compassion and mercy upon them from Heaven. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained to them that they must be a little naïve to think that the *Rayatz* needs to be made aware of their problems. In order to make his point he told them the following story.

At the time, the *Rayatz* was ill and required a certain injection of drugs every day. A private nurse would come to his study at 770 at a set time to administer the injection. One day the nurse was a few minutes late, and when she knocked on the door of his study there was no answer. Usually, there were Rabbis from the *Rayatz's* secretariat around, but this time there was no one there. So she slowly opened the door to his study. When she walked in she saw him sitting at his desk, his eyes gazing off into the distance, obviously unaware that she had entered. He had the look of someone who was not in this world altogether. She had never seen anything like this and was certain that something had happened to him, perhaps he had even lost consciousness. She ran out looking for someone from the family. The Lubavitcher Rebbe quickly came into the room and came near to his father-in-law's mouth to hear what he was mumbling and he heard that the Rebbe *Rayatz* was reciting by heart and with the Torah melody the words of the Song of the Sea, *Az Yashir*.¹ It was as if the *Rayatz* was praying. So, immediately he realized that the *Rayatz* was in a state of communion (with God) and not that he was sick. This state is known as disembodiment and the person seems to have lost touch with reality (the truth is very much the opposite, as we will see in a moment). Indeed, after a few minutes the *Rayatz* seemed to snap out of it.

But, the Rebbe sensed that there was a reason for all this, so he did some research and learnt that during those very moments that the *Rayatz* was in a state of communion and disembodiment, thousands of miles away, a small group of *chassidim* had tried to illegally make it across the Russian-Polish border. If they had been caught, they would have been summarily executed. During those critical moments, the Rebbe *Rayatz* had awakened the mercy of Heaven that they be successful.

So, the Lubavitcher Rebbe-to-be told the *chassidim* in Paris that after this story they should understand that the Rebbe *Rayatz* does not need anyone to tell him when to awaken mercy on his disciples. Every *chassid* is always on his mind. He sees and knows exactly what is happening with him, and continually sacrifices himself and prays for each and every one of them.

This is an important story to make us reflect that the Rebbe is indeed thinking of each and every one of us, and continually awakening the mercy of Heaven upon us.

One more point that we can take with us from this story is that there is a powerful connection between saying the Song of the Sea and awakening mercy from Heaven. If the Rebbe noted this (he could have told the story without noting what the *Rayatz* had been saying during his disembodiment), it means that we should be aware of this. If you think about someone who needs Heavenly mercy and recite the Song of the Sea with sincerity and the proper intent, you will be awakening the Heavens to be merciful with him. This is true both for an individual and for the entire Jewish people. The Song of the Sea appears in *parshat Beshalach*, the Torah reading of the week during which the tenth of Shevat—the *Rayatz's yahrzeit*—usually falls. So this story and its teaching are particularly suited to the tenth of Shevat.

*(based on Harav Ginsburgh's address at a children's gathering 11 Shevat, 5767 –
Ramat Aviv)*

¹. Exodus 15.