

B”H

Spiritual Masters

Rebbe Zusha of Anipoli and the Alter Rebbe

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Rebbe Zusha’s full name was Meshulam Zusil, but everyone knows him by Zusha. Even he used to refer to himself as Zusha. Despite being one of the greatest *tzadikim* of his generation, Zusha would call out to God before going to sleep every night, “Almighty, Zusha did not conduct himself properly today. Tomorrow, Zusha will conduct himself as you have commanded.” Zusha is known to have been a genius in earnestness and sincerity and many of the stories about him highlight his earnest nature.

The Bond Between Rebbe Zusha and the Alter Rebbe

There was a special connection between Rebbe Zusha and the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad, both in life and in passing. Every child that merits to be born on the 24th of Tevet, the *yahrzeit* (day of passing) of the Alter Rebbe, will be circumcised 8 days later on the 2nd of Shevat, Rebbe Zusha’s *yahrzeit*.

When the Alter Rebbe first published his magnum opus, the Tanya, he sent an emissary to Rebbe Zusha and to Rabbi Yehudah Leib Hacohe¹ to ask them for an approbation. Why did the Alter Rebbe choose them? Apparently, even though all of the Magid of Mezritch’s disciples held each other in great esteem, these three had a special deep and emotional bond between them. It is known that after the Magid’s passing, the Alter Rebbe with these two close friends wrote a note to the Magid’s son, Rabbi Avraham the Angel (*Hamal’ach*), accepting him as their Rebbe and declaring their complete devotion to him. There they said that they were dedicating their entire being, all five levels of their soul, to Rabbi Avraham.

Life and Times

Now let us add a little perspective to the special relationship between the Alter Rebbe and Rebbe Zusha. Rebbe Zusha was much older than the Alter Rebbe. He was born in 5462 (or, 1702) and was only 4 years younger than the Ba’al Shem Tov. Even so, he was a disciple of the Magid, the Ba’al Shem Tov’s successor. Zusha was actually 2 years older than the Magid.²



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Rebbe Zusha's famous younger brother, Rebbe Elimelech (known as Rebbe Meilech) of Lizhensk, who founded the entire branch of Polish Chassidut, was 15 years his junior. Not only was Rebbe Zusha born close to the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Magid, he also lived a very long life. He passed away in 5560 (or, 1800) at 98 years of age. His brother, Rebbe Meilech, passed away at the age of 70, so Rebbe Zusha lived another 13 years after the passing of his famous brother.

Since the Tanya was originally printed in 5556, it turns out that Zusha wrote his approbation at the age of 94, just four years before his passing. It is told that during the last 7 years of his life, Zusha lived like Adam before the primordial sin.

The Alter Rebbe was born in 5505, so Zusha was 43(!) years his senior. This is the first point we would like to take from the relationship between Rebbe Zusha and the Alter Rebbe: it is certainly possible that your best and dearest friend be 43 years older than you, someone who could very well be your grandfather. This also says a great deal about Zusha's earnestness and sincere nature. His Rebbe, his teacher, the Magid, was 2 years younger than him and his best friend 43 years younger.

The Infinite and the All-Inclusive

Before he passed away, the Magid wrote his son, Rabbi Avraham *Hamal'ach* (the angel) a letter in which he asked that he listen only to Rebbe Zusha and the Alter Rebbe. He should listen to the Alter Rebbe because his wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are infinite and his first assessment of a situation or idea is like a minor prophecy. But, he writes that Rebbe Zusha has risen above this, he is like the *sefirah* of crown, he is the surrounding light. How can we better understand these descriptions?

The *mitzvah* of circumcision has two stages: circumcising and revealing (מילה ופריעה), the cutting off of the thick foreskin and the tearing away of the thin membrane that covers the crown of the *brit*. It is well known that as much as there are non-Jews who circumcise their children, whether it be for medical reasons or for more traditional reasons, still they are not considered circumcised according to the Torah because they do not perform the second stage. Spiritually, the first stage represents the opening of a channel to the infinite. This is the type of channel that is open to the prophet and corresponds to the Alter Rebbe's infinite insight. But, there is a higher level revealed represented by the second stage of the circumcision. The three-letter root of "revealed" (פרע) is also the root of Pharaoh (פַּרְעֹה) and Pharaoh's counterpart in holiness represents the sudden revelation of the essence of God Himself. This revelation is so strong and so powerful, that even the greatest of prophets, Moshe Rabbeinu, responds to it with fear and trepidation. The lights revealed in this stage are so great, that they simply cannot be

contained in vessels. It is like the source of light occupying the place of the light it emits. There is no order here and everything seems jumbled but infinitely powerful. This second stage and the revelation of God's essence corresponds to Rebbe Zusha's level of Divine service and experience.

There are many stories that illustrate that this was Rebbe Zusha's level of consciousness. One of them is that when the Magid came to teach and had only uttered his first word, Zusha became so excited that he began yelling and tumbling about the room. He completely lost his countenance. He so disturbed the other students that there was no choice but to simply pick him up and take him out of the room. Even outside, he remained just as excited and continued his shouting. When the Magid finished teaching and the students began reviewing what the Magid had just taught, it turned out that Zusha knew the whole Torah (teaching of the Magid) word for word. This was a common occurrence.

Less known is the fact that one time when this happened, some of the disciples asked the Magid to explain how this could be. How could Rebbe Zusha who was clearly beside himself when the Magid taught, how could he know exactly what the Magid had said. The Magid explained that everything that is revealed to him is also revealed to Rebbe Zusha at the same time, except that the difference is that he (the Magid) opens the gate. Because of this, there is a split second lag between when it is revealed to me, the Magid, and when it is revealed to Zusha. Still, Zusha is completely overwhelmed by what is revealed and that is why he cannot contain his excitement.

There is another related story about Rebbe Zusha. One time, a simple Jew came to Rebbe Zusha. This man was bewildered and pained because his deceased father kept coming to him every night in his dream telling him to convert to Christianity. What a terrible experience to have night after night. Rebbe Zusha heard the man describe his troubles and without thinking twice told him that he should have his father's grave opened and he will immediately know what to do. The man did as Rebbe Zusha instructed him and on his father's coffin he found two beams that were placed (apparently by the non-Jewish gravediggers) in the shape of a cross. He removed them and the dreams disappeared. This incident was spread far and wide until it reached the ears of the Gaon of Vilna who was very surprised. He explained that the matter is alluded to in a certain cryptic passage of the Jerusalem Talmud and that he did not know how it is possible that Zusha, who was not known to be a Talmudic scholar, could know this. When the Gaon's words reached Rebbe Zusha he said earnestly, as was his usual nature, that indeed he did not know about this passage in the Jerusalem Talmud.

But, he had taken his knowledge from the same source in God's infinite light, the essence of the Torah, where the sages of the Jerusalem Talmud took theirs.

Lights of Chaos in the Vessels of Rectification

Though both Rebbe Zusha and the Alter Rebbe had two names, they were known by their second name. Zusha is simply the colloquial form of Zusil. With a Polish-Yiddish accent, it is actually pronounced Zisha. And, the Alter Rebbe, whose full name was Shne'ur Zalman was known as Zalman. In any case, the value of Zusha (זוּשָׂא) is the same as the holy Name, *Shakai* (שְׂכַי) and the value of Zalman (זַלְמָן) is 127, alluding to the perfected lifespan of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Together, their names equal 441, the *gematria* of "truth" (אֱמֶת) and the square of 21, alluding to God's holy Name, "I shall be that which I shall be" (אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה).

Since both names begin with the letter *zayin* (ז = 7), their names are related to the secret of the *mezuzah* (מְזוּזָה). 441, the sum of their names, is also the product of 7 and 63, but 63 itself is the product of 7 times 9. So, we have that their names not only begin with two *zayin*'s (זז), their sum also equals $7 \cdot 7 \cdot 9$! The number 7 also represents the 7 days between their two days of passing, as above. Given everything we have discussed so far, we can understand the relationship between them even better.

Another way of describing their relationship is that the Alter Rebbe represents the strong vessels of the world of rectification, while Rebbe Zusha represents the overwhelming lights of the World of Chaos. After the Magid passed away, his disciples met a number of times to discuss how to continue forward. The Alter Rebbe, who was the youngest of the disciples stood up and proclaimed that our reality is the world of rectification whose purpose is to create robust and strong spiritual vessels through the study of Torah and performance of *mitzvot*. Therefore, it should be their—the Magid's disciples—calling to dedicate themselves to creating new vessels and improving the already existent vessels necessary for the dissemination of the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Magid to all of the Jewish people, and, for this sake, to lessen their involvement with achieving spiritual light and inspiration for themselves and their close disciples alone. Only this way, will there be enough vessels ready to contain the tremendous spiritual light that will be revealed with the coming of the Mashiach. True to his proclamation and in accordance with the explicit instruction of the Magid (before his passing), the Alter Rebbe wrote an updated version of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the basic code of Jewish law and custom.

Indeed, we noted that the sum of the names Zusha and Zalman is the square of 21 and alludes to the secret of the holy Name, "I shall be that which I shall be." This holy

Name refers to the Divine power of redemption. The first “I shall be” represents the redemption and exodus from Egypt; the second “I shall be” represents the full and complete redemption of the future. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained that to bring the redemption, to bring the Mashiach in our age, it is necessary to contain the overwhelming energy in the lights of chaos in the stable and robust vessels of rectification. So to bring the Mashiach, we need to connect these two *tzadikim*. It is said that every true *tzadik* chooses his day of passing. These two best friends chose to pass on a week apart in order to teach us and help us first prepare robust spiritual vessels through Torah and *mitzvot* and then to be able to receive the overwhelming light that shone through Rebbe Zusha’s personality and life.

(based on farbrengen given at the brit of Shne’ur Zalman Deitchik in Rechovot, 2 Shevat, 5767)

¹. Known as the *Maharil*. He too lived in Anipoli, the final residence of the Magid of Mezritch, the Ba’al Shem Tov’s successor.

For a full account of the approbations and the events surrounding them, see the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe’s account in *Kitzurim Vehe’arot al Sefer Hatanya*, pp. 121ff. The *Maharil’s* *yahrzeit* is the 14th of *Tishrei* and his grave lies beside those of the Magid of Mezritch and Rebbe Zusha.

². According to the traditional account that the Magid was born in 5464 (or, 1704).