

An excerpt from

The Light of Israel

Wondrous stories from our
teacher Rabbi Israel Ba'al
Shem Tov

with commentary by

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In the company of righteous men

The Ba'al Shem Tov was just five years old when his aging father, the righteous Rebbe Eliezer, called him before passing away and told him, "Look my son, I am about to follow the way of the world. I can see that your Torah will illuminate the world, but I will not have the privilege of educating you. There are two things that I command you: do not fear anything other than God; then God will be with you all your life. Love every Jew from the depths of your heart without any distinction regarding who he is and how he behaves."

Only a few years went by and the young Ba'al Shem Tov's elderly mother also passed on, and so he was orphaned of both his parents. The people of his town took care of all his needs and hired a teacher to educate him. He was very successful in his studies and he began to experience spiritual arousal.

After studying with his teacher, he would run away from the *cheder* [schoolhouse] to the forest for a day or two, and then return to his teacher to study as usual. This happened a few times and nobody knew what he did while in the forest.

When he was about seven years old, he went to the forest one day and from afar he saw a Jewish man standing by a tree, wrapped in a *talit*, wearing *teffilin* and praying with pleasant devotion. The scene captured the young Ba'al Shem Tov's heart, for in his hometown of Akop, he had never seen such devotion during prayer.

After praying, the man sat down to learn Torah. After completing his study, he took some dry bread out of his pouch and a flask of water, washed his hands and made the blessing and the blessing after meals with great devotion. He then took his pouch and his cane and continued on his way.

The Ba'al Shem Tov emerged from his hiding place and approached the man, because he wanted to know who he was. When the man saw that a young boy was walking through the forest, he called to him and asked, "How is it that you are not afraid of walking alone through the forest? You are so young!"

The Ba'al Shem Tov replied, "Before his death, my father commanded me to fear nothing but the Almighty."

The man then asked, "Are you not the son of the *tzadik*, Rebbe Eliezer of Akop?" The Ba'al Shem Tov replied, "Yes. My father was the *tzadik* Rebbe Eliezer of Akop."

Then the two of them sat down on a tree stump and the man took out Tractate *Pesachim* from his pouch and learnt with him.

The man asked him, "Do you want to accompany me?" And he replied, "Yes, I want to go with you wherever you go."

The man took him from place to place, sometimes to a town, sometimes to a village, and they never asked for charity. The man paid their way from his own money. So passed three years passed from the day the Ba'al Shem Tov had joined him.

Once, the man told him, "Today I will take you to a hidden *tzadik* who is an esteemed Torah scholar. His name is Rebbe Meir, he lives and works in the forest and earns his living by boiling tree roots and extracting a type of tar and other extracts. Every day he goes into town to pray and the townsfolk have no idea of his erudition. They think of him as a simple craftsman, but in truth he is the head of the hidden *tzadikim* who do nothing without first consulting him.

The Ba'al Shem Tov agreed to go to Rebbe Meir and studied under him for about four years. There, he became acquainted with the hidden *tzadikim* and joined their group, until after a few years even the elders amongst them accepted his opinion on many matters.

Reshimot Devarim 3, p. 8

Following the way of the world

Usually, when considering life and death, we see birth as the beginning of our path in life and death as its final destination. At birth, we bless the newborn soul into the world and at death we bless it as it departs.

As he passed away from this world, Rebbe Eliezer described his imminent death by saying, "I am about to follow the way of the world," thus describing death not as a moment of demise, but as part of a continuing progression. The soul began its sojourn in the world when it arrived here at birth and with death, it continues its journey. The sages state that "The righteous have no rest; neither in this world nor in the next."¹ Although their physical lives have ended, when the righteous depart

from this world they continue to go from strength to strength,² because the vitality of their souls never ceases, even after death.

In his wisdom, King Solomon enumerated twenty-eight stages or epochs that an individual encounters throughout life. The first two are, "A time for giving birth and a time for dying."³ One of the principles used in analyzing Torah is that "everything follows [the lead of] the inception."⁴ Thus, all that follows, follows these first two stages—birth and death—but between them, birth is primary while death is secondary. Death is merely another detail in the unfolding of life, as it progresses and develops from the moment of birth.⁵

Since all the other times of our life mentioned in King Solomon's list require volition—they are conscious

actions that an individual chooses to engage in—following this analysis, we learn that death too involves our will.⁶

Extinguishing the “not”

There are a number of variant accounts of the final will and testament the Ba'al Shem Tov's father gave his son. What they share in common are the two directives: to fear only God and to love every Jew. What stands out in this particular account is that these two directives appear in relation to the Ba'al Shem Tov's father's prophetic statement, “I see that you will illuminate the world with your Torah.” Let us meditate on the relationship between the directives and this prediction. Doing so will grant us deeper insight into the key to the Ba'al Shem Tov's success in his mission to illuminate the world with his teachings.

Loving every Jew is obviously an important tool for spreading the Torah light, because people react to one another and reflect one another's emotions.⁷ If your goal is to affect others, you must cultivate an essential love for them. The essential nature of love is that it awakens love and affection in return, opening others to learn and connect with you.

It might be that with his prophetic gaze, Rebbe Eliezer had caught a glimpse of the great opposition his son would encounter in the future. The Ba'al Shem Tov certainly needed a potent prescription that would annul all fear because he and his

successors would confront tremendous opposition and many dangers before the Chassidic movement would be firmly established. And so, the Ba'al Shem Tov's father, with his penetrating insight, saw fit to reinforce his young son and strengthen him by teaching him to fear nothing but the Almighty. Fear and awe of God alone would equip the Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples with the perseverance and steadfastness required to successfully surmount all obstacles.

In a similar vein, the Magid of Mezeritch once taught his devoted disciple, the Alter Rebbe:⁸

“A constant fire shall burn on the altar, it shall not be extinguished.”⁹ You, my pupil are in need of a constant fire, because you must extinguish the “not” [of your opposition] and God will turn the “nay” into a “yea.”

The burning fire symbolizes the consummate awe of God needed when constantly growing closer to the Almighty and His service. It is an essential ingredient for disseminating the Ba'al Shem Tov's Divinely inspired path. The flames of awe and fear of God automatically extinguish opposition, igniting the naysayers with holy enthusiasm, and transforming their hostility into enthusiastic support.

The balance between love and fear

But, there is another way to see the connection between the trials that lay in the Ba'al Shem Tov's future and his father's two directives. With his purely refined fear of God, the Ba'al Shem Tov would be able to extinguish the bonfires of opposition to his path. But, love of the Jewish people is also a powerful antidote to the false fears and existential turmoil that seem to be an inescapable part of every human life.

A very high percentage of all our psychological turmoil results from excessive self-centeredness. Throughout our lives, we suffer various painful events and experiences. Quite often, as a result, we feel that we have figuratively fallen off our horse. We feel that we have descended spiritually. If at such times one has only oneself, one's own self-image and ego to fall on, then the burden may become too heavy to carry. As the sages say, "An individual who has fallen from his level is described as dead"¹⁰!

However, if one's heart and soul are connected to the entire Jewish people, participating in their joy and identifying with their sorrows, then, like the congregation that can never die,¹¹ he too will not perish. Being part of the communal body infuses the individual with powers that he would never have been able to access by his own merit and provides him with a

reason to live even when his personal domain is falling apart.

There are many *mitzvot* that guide us in loving the Jewish people, beginning with the general *mitzvah* to "love your fellow as yourself."¹³ In addition, we have the *mitzvah* of communal prayer and the sages' ethical injunction to share in communal consciousness.¹⁴ The foundation of all these directives is the recognition that in actual fact, the souls of the Jewish people do not exist separately, but are integrally connected as one entity.¹⁵

The result of our national solidarity is that Jewish souls are connected by strong mutually responsible relationships and every soul can influence others, be it for better or worse. Moreover, each individual can realize his own *raison d'être* by devoting himself to another soul or by dedicating his life to benefiting the entire community of Jewish souls.¹⁶

The title "Ba'al Shem" (בַּעַל שֵׁם), literally means "Master of the Name" and refers to a soul healer. Perhaps the source of the Ba'al Shem Tov's gentle but potent healing powers emanated from the instructions he received in his righteous father's final testament.

¹ *Berachot* 64a.

² See Psalms 84:8.

³ Ecclesiastes 3:2.

⁴ This expression, used profusely by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, follows the sages' teaching that "Everything follows the conclusion" (*Berachot* 12a). The Rebbe's original formulation is based on the words of the Talmud, "the entire body follows the head" (*Eiruvin* 41a).

⁵ The way we perceive the "times of our life" depends on whether we experience them as an extension of our birth or as events bringing our impending death nearer. Since "a time for giving birth" is the general introduction to all 28 stages of life, one can experience these stages as an unfolding of birth. With this point of view, even death becomes just another stage in our continual birth.

Like birth, wisdom is described as that which "vitalizes its possessor" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:12), allowing him or her to perceive and experience the future as being re-created *ex-nihilo* at every moment (see *Tanya* ch. 43). But if any of life's details—our times—are disconnected from the Torah's wisdom, instead of elevating us to a new dimension of birth they are liable to end in ruin and disintegration condemning us to the natural course of entropy that acts on everything that is enslaved to the natural limitations of space-time, as the verse states, "They die, but not in [i.e., while connected to] wisdom" (*Job* 4:21)

If all the contents of an individual's life are connected to birth, then they are constantly re-created at every moment, the shackles of entropic death are broken, and they merit eternal life.

⁶ Indeed, for the truly righteous, the *tzadik*, death itself (not just the preparation for death) is an act of free will. As we will see in respect to another story, the Ba'al Shem Tov stated that he was capable of departing this world

body intact, but expressed his wish to perform the Almighty's decree regarding man, "Of dust you are made, and to dust you shall return" (*Genesis* 3:19).

⁷ That we reflect other's feelings and attitude towards ourselves is learnt from the verse, "As water reflects a face to itself, so is the heart of man to his fellow man" (*Proverbs* 27:19).

⁸ *Hayom Yom* 20th Adar II.

⁹ *Leviticus* 6:6.

¹⁰ See *Zohar* III, 135b.

¹¹ *Horayot* 6a.

¹³ *Leviticus* 19:18.

¹⁴ *Ketubot* 17a.

¹⁵ This perspective not only heals the soul and inoculates the individual against the difficulties associated with hostility and antagonism, but also teaches us the correct way to tackle them: "One should pray for his antagonists who are the reincarnated spirit of a righteous individual, etc. Through his prayers, he [the righteous individual's soul] is sweetened at its source and he withdraws his spirit from them and whatever is left of them inevitably disintegrates" (*Keter Shem Tov*, 18).

¹⁶ See *Tanya* ch. 32, and *Derech Mitzvotcha* in the explanation of the *mitzvah* of loving the Jewish people. Also see above in the story "The soul of Israel" endnote 6.