

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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Introduction

The Tzemach Tzedek once sent his disciple, the prodigious and renowned chassid, Rebbe Isaac of Homil, to Rebbe Yisrael of Ruzhin regarding a communal matter. Rebbe Isaac very much wanted to acquaint himself with the habits of the chassidim of Ruzhin in general, and with those of Rebbe Yisrael in particular, and paid careful attention to all that he witnessed.

Rebbe Yisrael's custom was such that while receiving his visitors and the notes they gave him containing their written requests, he had an attendant—an elder chassid, chosen from among his most select disciples to act as an intermediary between the Rebbe and the chassidim—stand on his right, while his first secretary stood on his left.

Among the visitors in Ruzhin at the time was one of the prominent rabbis of Bukovina, a great scholar who felt powerfully connected with Rebbe Yisrael of Ruzhin. He had brought with him a manuscript for which he wished to receive the Rebbe's approbation. Also in the reception area, there waited one of the chassidim who had spent years collecting stories from great tzadikim and chassidim. He too had brought his manuscript for which he wished to receive Rebbe Yisrael's approbation.

The Rabbi from Bukovina and the chassid stood with their tomes in hand and, by the Rebbe's command, the attendant took the manuscripts. He read aloud a few sections from the rabbi's work. He then proceeded to read some of the stories from the anthology that the chassid had compiled.

Rebbe Yisrael sat in devoted meditation and then began to speak about the merits of relating stories of tzadikim and how doing so makes a great impression in the halls of the tzadikim in Gan Eden [Paradise]. He then spoke with great astuteness referring to the Torah innovations that had been read from the Rabbi's manuscript. He then instructed his disciple to write his approbation to the anthology of stories and to the rabbi's book.

Rebbe Isaac of Homil carefully watched all that took place, including the proceedings and the nature of Rebbe Yisrael relationship with those connected to him. He was amazed by the Rebbe's astute scholarship and the way he conducted himself. However, he found it difficult to understand why Rebbe Yisrael had first addressed his comments and his approbation to the chassid's anthology of stories before making his comments and granting his approbation to the rabbi's innovations. Rebbe Isaac found it all perplexing.

A couple of days later it was Rosh Chodesh and Rebbe Isaac was invited to the Rosh Chodesh meal. During the meal, Rebbe Yisrael spoke words of Torah. Just before the blessing after meals, he said,

The scholar from Lithuania is surprised that we first discussed and gave our approbation to the tales of tzadikim and only then to the book of Torah innovations.

Indeed, his difficulty with this order is one that was pointed out already by the holy Rashi—an epic genius of both the Torah’s revealed and concealed dimensions. Concerning the Torah’s very first verse, Rashi challenges that, “The Torah should have begun with [the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people and appearing in] the verse, ‘This month is for you.’¹ Why then does the Torah begin with the verse, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’? Because [as the verse states], ‘He has related the power of His actions to His people.’²” God’s purpose was to draw down³ and to reveal the soul permeating His actions, permeating the act of creation recurring every single moment.

The Holy Ba’al Shem Tov taught my grandfather, the great Magid [of Mezritch], how to perceive the spirit that vitalizes everything.

We, Rebbe Yisrael continued to explain to Rebbe Isaac, follow the same order used by the Almighty used in the holy Torah. First comes the book of Genesis, the stories of the tzadikim—as the Midrash⁴ teaches us, “With whom did He [God] consult [before creating the world]? With the souls of the tzadikim.” Then comes the book of Exodus in which we find the verse, “This month is for you.”

Both authors are illustrious chassidim and both books are wonderful novelties. The Torah innovations tell of the author’s scholarship and the powers of reason the author has used in his novel interpretations of the holy Torah. But, the stories of tzadikim tell of the great wonders that God creates and constantly recreates in reality. This is the reason why we preceded our approbation for the stories of tzadikim to our approbation for the Torah innovations.”⁵

Sight and sound

In this book we have selected an anthology of stories about our master and teacher, the Ba'al Shem Tov, from trustworthy and widely-accepted sources. Each story is accompanied by an in-depth meditation bent on following the *tzadik's* example and extracting from it morals on the proper way to serve God out of both love and fear, on learning Torah, and on performing *mitzvot*.

The Chassidic movement loves stories of *tzadikim* for good reason. As in the story related above, stories have a special place, right beside Torah study, sometimes even taking precedence.

Rebbe Hillel of Paritsch, renowned amongst Chabad Chassidim for possessing a profound talent as an educator, would customarily send every young student who arrived to study under his auspices to the elder *chassidim* so that they might fill him with stories. He asked that each story be related a number of times and that every detail be lingered over so that it might penetrate the soul's inner depths.

Stories about *tzadikim* are not merely nostalgic reminiscing about bygone days. From every story we learn Torah. One who knows how to listen to a story carefully can hear the Torah as if it was being taught first-hand by the teacher himself.⁶ Studying a written Torah work is likened to the sense of hearing: first a person hears

something from his teacher and then delves into himself. Most of the learning occurs deep within the student's psyche, as he takes what he has heard, decodes it, and refines it. The drawback to studying written works is the lack of eye-contact with the *tzadik* that authored the work. When the *tzadik* teaches in person, one can observe his facial expressions and the finer nuances of his tone of voice and thus integrate the richness of his character together with his teachings. Only when we learn from him in person can we be properly inspired by the *tzadik's* teachings. Experiencing the *tzadik* face-to-face makes his Torah come alive.

On this subject, the Alter Rebbe⁷ wrote that,

When reading, the reader follows his own understanding and his mind's present ability to grasp and comprehend. If his intellect and mind are in a state of confusion, and if in his service of God he follows a dark path, he will hardly notice the goodly light hidden in the books, even though the light is pleasant for the eyes and healing for the soul.

When reading a story we hear differently. We visualize the *tzadik*, as if he were standing right before our eyes. The experience is captured by the description of Mt. Sinai and the Giving of the Torah, where, "the entire Jewish people visualized the sounds."⁸ When

hearing a story, we are granted the privilege of studying from the *tzadik* himself, as if we were sitting in his study hall, listening to his own voice.

Author, book, and story

This is the way we should all learn from the *tzadik* whose story we hear. But, even more so, this is the way it is with the greatest *tzadik* of all, the Almighty, the One about whom all stories are.

“The sages ask: Do you wish to recognize the One who spoke and the world was created? Then learn stories, for by doing so you will come to know the One who spoke and the world was created and you will learn to cling to His ways.”⁹ For this reason, the Almighty began His own book with stories about the holy Patriarchs—to teach us that before learning Torah, one must know God, and this knowledge is an essential prerequisite to the actual study that follows.¹⁰

The entire Torah is a story. Neither Moshe Rabbeinu nor the Almighty are its narrator, for they too are referred to in the third person, “God said to Moses,” “Moses spoke,” etc. The Narrator sees everything from above and transmits the picture to us.¹² The narrator is God’s very essence, “I am who I am.”¹³ He is the Torah’s source, higher and superior to the Torah itself.

When God reveals Himself to us and tells us something, we can hear Him only to the extent that He can be contracted and enclothed in our

limited understanding; only to the extent that His words can permeate our consciousness. But, is there a way to become acquainted with God Himself?

The only way we can acquaint ourselves with God is through the subtle hints, the elusive feelings, and the distant inspiration. These and the other different ways in which a story affects us are all understated, but they send delicate threads of consciousness, connecting our innermost soul to God’s essence.

In one of its most famous passages, the Book of Formation writes,

“God created His world by means of three books: with an author (סופר), with a book (ספר) and with a story (סיפור).”¹⁴

- **The book** is the Torah, the book from which the world was created, “God looked into the Torah and created the world.”¹⁵
- **The Author:** if we do not attempt to acquaint ourselves with the Author through His book, then there is no purpose to our Torah study. Unlike those who claim that once a book has been written, it is no longer connected with its author, by reading God’s book we strive to learn to cling to its Author. This is the purpose for which the Torah was given to us.

- **The story:** one can only discover the Author by understanding the story itself, by knowing how to read it and how to derive its hidden secret from within.

Tales from antiquity

The Ba'al Shem Tov himself explained the significance of stories through a parable:¹⁶

There was once a king who sent his only son to a distant land so that he would later experience greater pleasure [once he returned to the king's presence]. After some time, the prince forgot all the pleasures of being with his father. The king sent for him, but the prince no longer wished to return to his father. Each time the king sent out more and more important emissaries to bring his son home, but none could convince him to return.

Until there was one wise minister who changed his clothing and his language to those of the prince. He grew close to the king's son, as he was, where he was, and succeeded in bringing him back to his father.

Similarly, the Torah wears the garments of mundane stories.

The prince in the parable is each and every one of us, "You are children to Havayah, your God."¹⁷ We have all forgotten something, and once we have forgotten, we are not even aware that we once knew that something that

was forgotten. Some are lucky enough to be afflicted by only partial amnesia; that which has been forgotten is not completely gone from the person's consciousness. It gnaws at his mind, reminding him of its existence, and since he is aware that something has been lost, he makes an effort to find it.

However, there are many individuals who suffer total memory loss, God forbid. In such a situation, that which was forgotten ascends above and beyond the individual's consciousness, until he is no longer aware of it at all. In these cases, amnesia is so deeply ingrained that the person does not realize that he has lost something. What hope can there be for such an individual? How can we arouse him from his forgetful slumber?

From there, only stories can bring back what has been forgotten. Like the wise ambassador in the above parable, the one who *changed his clothing and his language*, through their subtle and indirect style, stories penetrate the walls of amnesia that surround the prince's heart—our hearts—and spark recollection of the king.¹⁸

A storyteller must be the wisest of the king's ministers, for the art of creating a story requires a profound wisdom; the wisdom of employing parables and drawing metaphors that will convey the desired message and inspire the listener. This is was King Solomon's special wisdom, "Solomon's wisdom increased.... and

he became the wisest of all men.... and he told three thousand parables.”¹⁹

A parable serves as a guise for conveying supernal wisdom. Even someone of limited intelligence can begin to grasp esoteric wisdom when it is transmitted by means of a parable. A good story brings lofty ideas down to the listener’s level of perception, allowing him to integrate them into his own psyche through familiar metaphors.

Obviously, creating a parable that accurately reflects the desired message without getting lost in the details requires a special talent. The greater the storyteller’s wisdom, the greater his ability to enclothe the idea in the right vestments that will shine its light into the world for the benefit of the many.

Israel's light

Once, when Rebbe Elimelech retreated into the mountains in his service of God, he saw a vision of the holy Ba'al Shem Tov standing at the top of a mountain. In his vision, the Ba'al Shem Tov jumped off the mountain and his image split into six hundred thousand sparks, one for every Jew. Rebbe Elimelech lifted one of the sparks and saw in it a reflection of the entire Jewish people.²¹

Our teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, was a storyteller.²² He not only told the stories, his entire life was the story.

The healing power found in true stories, those taken from antiquity, is in their success in bringing that which is the highest of the high down to the lowest of the low.

The most exceptional of the great Chassidic storytellers was Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. He employed the use of stories as an essential and major element in his quest to awaken people’s hearts and to reveal the Torah’s innermost secrets. He called his stories: “Tales from antiquity.”

Rebbe Nachman explained that “antiquity” relates to our explanation that when someone is lost in deep sleep, his power of intellect descends so low that it becomes impossible to wake him by regular means.²⁰ The only way one can hope to wake him is by arousing the innermost essence of his soul by relating these tales from antiquity. These stories predate the Torah. They are about God Himself and can therefore speak to and penetrate the essential point of the sleeper’s heart.

This is the light that the Ba'al Shem Tov illuminated us with. Even though the chapters of his life are absolutely wondrous,²³ he lived here with us like no other *tzadik* ever has. Donning the fur hat of a simple farmer, plainspoken, and with infinite love for every Jew, the Ba'al Shem Tov and his life are an indivisible part of contemporary Jewish history.

Wherever they met the Ba'al Shem Tov, people were amazed by his presence the same way their imagination would be captured by an incredible story. All that knew him recognized that his actions and conduct were telling an entirely new and completely different type of story.

It was a story about the world's mystery and about its roots, a story about the King's palace and the King's children. The Ba'al Shem Tov was sent to tell to us our own story, and the light emerging from his story illuminates the life of every Jew.²⁴

¹ Exodus 12:2.

² Psalms 111:6.

³ The Hebrew root of "told" (הִגִּיד) is נגד, which is the Aramaic translation of the root "to draw [out]" (מִשָּׁךְ). See for example, *Onkelos* to Genesis 37:28, and elsewhere.

⁴ See *Bereisheet Rabbah* 8:7.

⁵ This story appears at length in *Igrot kodesh – Admor harayatz*, vol. 6, pp. 75-77.

⁶ See *Yerushalmi Shabbat* 1:2.

⁷ In the Introduction to the *Tanya*.

⁸ Exodus 20:14.

⁹ *Sifrei, Devarim* 49.

¹⁰ Similar to the Midrashic teaching (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 9:3), "Good manners [lit. 'the way of the land'] preceded the Torah," which not only refers to the fact that our Torah study should be preceded by refined behavior, but also that the fundamental principles should be rooted in one's character even before one sets out to recognize God intellectually.

¹² Regarding God's essence as revealed through the Torah's third person narration, see the Lubavitcher Rebbe's discourse, *s.v. Lo tehe meshakeilah – 5712 (Torat Menachem Vol. 4, pp. 326-7)*, The Lubavitcher Rebbe cites Nachmanides' introduction to Genesis as his source for the term "third person narration."

¹³ See *Zohar* I, 167b.

¹⁴ *Sefer Yetzirah* 1:1.

¹⁵ *Zohar* II, 161a.

¹⁶ *Keter Shem Tov* 144.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 14:1.

¹⁸ For a general review of the ideas expressed here, see the Lubavitcher Rebbe's discourse, *s.v. Bati legani – 5726*, chs. 6-7. See also *Likutei Moharan* 1:60: "When there is a desire to show him the [king's] face and to awaken him from his slumber, the face must be en clothed in fables."

¹⁹ I Kings 5:10-12.

²⁰ *Likutei Moharan*, *ibid.*

²¹ R.Y. Klepholtz, *Kol Sippurei Habesht*, vol. 4 p. 213, brought in the name of *Shema Shlomo* .

²² See Rebbe Nachman's testimony in the first preface to *Sippurei Maasiot*: "By means of a story, the Ba'al Shem Tov, *o.b.m.*, could make unifications. When he saw that the higher conduits had been damaged and it was impossible to repair them through prayer, he would repair them and reunite them by means of a story."

²³ For a general overview of the above, see the Lubavticher Rebbe's discourse, *s.v. Vayomer Hashem el Moshe – 5746 (Torat Menachem 5746 – Vol. 2, pp. 491ff)*. In this discourse, the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the Ba'al Shem Tov corresponds to *Atik Yomin* (lit., the Ancient of Days, see Daniel 7:9), the infinite extension above revealed everywhere without limitations. See also, the story titled, "Active thought" in vol. 3 of this series.

²⁴ See below, p. *** how the Ba'al Shem Tov's appearance marks the sunrise of the sixth millennium, the first light preparing the Shabbat (the seventh millennium) and the complete redemption.