

B”H

Spiritual Masters

Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

The 22nd day of *Tamuz* is the *yahrzeit* of Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin. Rebbe Shlomo was considered so great that *chassidim* used to say that if they had the power, they would make it permissible to get married on this day even though it is during the Three Weeks.¹

Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin lived to the age of 52, the same age as King Solomon (his namesake). Since he was killed in 5552 (1792), he was born some time in 5500 (1740).

Many great *tzadikim* considered Rebbe Shlomo to be the Mashiach ben Yosef of his generation because he was killed while sanctifying the Name of God.² The *Beit Aharon*³ says that there are *tzadikim* who were personally redeemed and had the Mashiach revealed to them fully. In this respect he cites the well known passage in the Talmud which includes sayings from various Talmudic academies that the master of the academy’s name is the name of the Mashiach.⁴ The meaning of this passage is then that each of the heads of these academies had the soul root of the Mashiach revealed to them, which translates into each of these *tzadikim* having revealed the essence of their own soul, the point of the Mashiach within themselves.

Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin was adopted as a young child by Rebbe Aharon the Great of Karlin, the founder of the Karlin dynasty. With Rebbe Aharon, he would travel to the Magid of Mezritch, and became the latter’s disciple. Rebbe Aharon passed away at a very early age and following his passing, Rebbe Shlomo took the mantle of leading the Karlin *chassidim*. He was a good friend of the Alter Rebbe, even though they had major differences of opinion regarding the role of the *tzadik* (the spiritual master) in guiding other Jews. We will illustrate this with one of our stories about Rebbe Shlomo.⁵

In general, Rebbe Shlomo’s life and his death were all in the manner of what is called “*gevurot*,” meaning there was a certain character of harshness to it all. He lived without very much regard for what most people would call a normal way of life, a point that will come out strongly in another of the stories.



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Rebbe Shlomo and the Benefactor

In regard to Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin, there are two stories that we will focus on. The first is from the time before he became a Rebbe.

Before becoming famous, Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin learned Torah without caring at all for the livelihood of his family. He would sit all day in the study hall and learn and totally ignored their needs. Things became so bad that his young wife thought of taking her children and jumping with them into the river, God forbid...

This is a terrible situation and very difficult to understand. In any case, there was either a butcher or a doctor (depending on the version of the story) who heard about this awful situation—a young husband who learns all day and cares nothing for his family.

This butcher or doctor did not keep any of the Torah's commandments and had transgressed everything possible. Still, he could not bring himself to ignore the family's situation. He decided to go settle things with this young man, so he made his way to the study hall where he was learning. If it was indeed a butcher we can imagine what he planned to do to Rebbe Shlomo (who, at the time, was not known as Rebbe Shlomo). If he was a doctor, perhaps he thought of other, more civilized methods.

As he entered, he was immediately overwhelmed with the sweetness of Rebbe Shlomo's learning and prayer and changed his mind completely and decided that he himself would provide for the family and free them from their impossible dependency on Rebbe Shlomo who was obviously very gifted in other areas.

As the years passed, Rebbe Shlomo became famous and the family's livelihood became easier. In time, this butcher or doctor passed away.

Rebbe Shlomo attended the funeral and at the very end of the burial stuck a wooden stick in the mound of earth gathered over the grave.⁶ He then went back home and the angel Duma appeared to him. Duma is the angel responsible for collecting the dead and bringing them before the heavenly tribunal for judgment. The angel had arrived at the grave to collect the butcher (or doctor's) soul. But, because of the stick that Rebbe Shlomo had wedged in the grave, this angel was unable to perform its mission. Obviously, Rebbe Shlomo had done something to the stick.

Duma asked Rebbe Shlomo: "What have you done? I can't collect this man's soul."

Rebbe Shlomo responded: "Come back in three days."

The angel had no choice so it waited and came back after three days. Again, it approached Rebbe Shlomo and Rebbe Shlomo said: "Know that this man has transgressed every possible commandment in the Torah. But, at the same time he sustained an individual who keeps the entire Torah and his family."⁷

The angel asked him: "Why did you wait three days to tell me this?"

Rebbe Shlomo responded that it took him three days to review and ascertain that the statement that he had just said was true.⁸

Even though this story is difficult in terms of Rebbe Shlomo's conduct towards his family, in the end it is a story of loving-kindness, both of the doctor/butcher towards the Rebbe's family and the Rebbe's returned kindness to his deceased benefactor. But if we think about it a bit more we come to the realization that were it not for the way that

Rebbe Shlomo ignored his family's needs that this benefactor would not have been saved, for he had indeed led a life of complete sin. As noted, Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin's conduct is harsh and here it is clear that it is utterly chaotic (in the sense of the great lights of chaos that we discuss many times in Kabbalah). In this case, Rebbe Shlomo's willingness to put his total trust in the Almighty that He will send someone to provide for his wife and children is an example of something that a regular person is not allowed to do. But, Rebbe Shlomo in his trust allowed the most undeserving of people to perform one *mitzvah*, one good deed, so that he may merit entering the Garden of Eden instead of purgatory.

The Inner Sense of Love

It is hard to find an example of a story of loving-kindness told about Rebbe Shlomo, but we should be impressed that regarding this particular story only the coating is harsh, but the inside is full of love. This is the most important foundation of all of Chassidut, which literally means "loving-kindness." Rebbe Shlomo is therefore a perfect example of how even a *tzadik* whose exterior conduct is seemingly demanding and difficult to stand, has an inner sense for love.

An inner sense (חיות) means that a person is in his element. This is his medium in which he can express himself fully and almost entirely without effort. When a person is in his element he is having fun, regardless of what he is doing. For a person who loves other people, for whom love is his element, his inner sense, what could be more fun than taking a total sinner and making sure he merits paradise?! There is no greater joy than taking a lost soul and elevating him so that at the end of his life, the tables are turned. If a person lacks an inner sense of love, he thinks that if so-and-so is deserving of punishment, let him be punished. This is what Chassidut comes to rectify. A *tzadik* is in his element when he can perform an act of loving-kindness that turns the world upside-down.

About their inner sense of love of the Jewish people, there are different sayings by different *tzadikim*. Rebbe Pinchas of Koritz used to say that, "A perfect *tzadik* is someone who can love a perfect *rasha* (evildoer)." But, Rebbe Shlomo was heard to say, "I wish I could love a perfect *tzadik* the way that the Almighty loves a perfect *rasha*."

The Tzadik's Role

The second story is perhaps the most illustrative of the differences between Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin's approach and the Alter Rebbe's.

There was a chassid (disciple) of the Alter Rebbe who had questions of faith. These questions troubled him terribly and cast doubt on his faith in God. He could not get rid of them. So, he traveled to the Alter Rebbe (this was in the early years when it was easier to see him). He told him of his problems. The Alter Rebbe closed the door and taught him a private Chassidic discourse. This indeed helped for a period of time, but a short while later the questions and doubts came back. He went once again to the Alter Rebbe who again closed the door to his room and taught him a second personal discourse. This helped for a while longer time, but eventually the doubts came back. On his way to see the Alter Rebbe a third time, the chassid happened to be in Karlin one day and he wanted to see Rebbe Shlomo.

When he did, he happened to come exactly when Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin was putting his tefilin on. All he heard was Rebbe Shlomo saying the words, "And I will betroth you in faith,"⁹ part of a verse that is recited by many people when encircling the tefilin strap around their finger. Hearing these three words alone quieted all of his questions and doubts regarding his faith and they disappeared for good. He realized that faith is dependent on being betrothed to God. He felt that before hearing Rebbe Shlomo saying these words, he had not yet fully devoted himself to God, as a man devotes himself to a woman by betrothing her.

He continued on his way to the Alter Rebbe and asked him to explain how this was possible. How could it be that the Alter Rebbe had dedicated a great deal of time to teaching him Torah personally and that had not affected him as much as three simple words that he had heard from Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin, which were not even directed at him?

The Alter Rebbe, in his typical manner of talking in a melodious voice, answered with the verse, "For the Torah will come out of Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem."¹⁰

The Rebbe then explained. This verse describes two types of tzadikim. There are those spiritual masters that are the aspect of Zion. Everything that they do in life and every effect they have in reality they achieve through their Torah.¹¹ But, there are spiritual masters that are an embodiment of Jerusalem. The name Jerusalem means "complete fear of Heaven." These tzadikim project their absolute and total awe and fear of the Almighty in everything that they do and this is how they affect reality. Those tzadikim who are Jerusalem, they only have to say "the word of God"; they can say a word or two and immediately it is perceived as the word of God.

Thus, concluded the Alter Rebbe: "Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin is a tzadik who is an embodiment of complete and total awe. He is an aspect of Jerusalem. Therefore, the few words that you heard from him were enough to affect you."

Connection with the Rebbe

The first thing we would like to note about this story is that perhaps the greatest *moifes* (מוֹפֵת),¹² meaning supernatural event was that this *chassid*, after having been so strongly affected by Rebbe Shlomo (while at least externally, the efforts of the Alter Rebbe seemed to have failed) still saw the Alter Rebbe as his spiritual master and did not become a follower of Rebbe Shlomo.

In the annals of Chabad there is an even more astounding story demonstrating the same point.

There was a chassid of the Alter Rebbe's called Binyamin Klotzker. He was killed in some form or another and Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin brought him back to life. When he was able to talk again, Rebbe Shlomo came to see him, perhaps thinking that from now on he would follow him. But, Binyamin Klotzker said: "Indeed, you are a master, but not my master. Indeed, I am a humble servant, but not your humble servant."

The Chabad *chassid* in our story is open to asking questions about what happened to him. He goes to the Alter Rebbe to find out what it all means—why is it that his faith was restored by Rebbe Shlomo's indirect words?—but in the end his sentiment is that there is the general course that the world takes and there are the personal experiences that I go through. As important as the latter are, they are secondary to the bigger picture. And, in the bigger picture, it is the Alter Rebbe that remains the leader of the generation.

Put another way, the *chassid* held the Alter Rebbe in the proper light and was certain of his connection with him. His connection was not created by some miracle that the Alter Rebbe had performed for him or his family, but on the realization that the Rebbe's essence is that of the leader of the generation. For this reason, he did not find it threatening to his relationship with the Alter Rebbe to go and visit Rebbe Shlomo in the first place. This is unfortunately not the case for many *chassidim*. The fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber once said¹³ that there have always been two types of *chassidim*: those that recognized the greatness, piety, and worthiness of *tzadikim* other than their own Rebbe, and those who militantly claimed that their Rebbe is the only real *tzadik*. He then continued to say that the latter group did not succeed in living by the ways of Chassidut and its teachings and carrying them on to following generations.

What we learn from this story is that two *tzadikim*, who had the same Rebbe (both the Alter Rebbe and Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin were disciples of the Magid of Mezritch), even if they use different methods, in the end they complement one another (as do Zion and Jerusalem). The conclusion of the verse the *chassid* heard from Rebbe Shlomo is, "And I will betroth you in faith, and you will know God." Were it not for Rebbe Shlomo, this *chassid* would not have come to know God through the teachings of the Alter Rebbe.

Inner and External Light

The Alter Rebbe offered his disciple an explanation for what had come to pass. Let us go into it a bit.

It is well known that everything taught in Chabad is *pnimi* (internal) in its nature. In other words, the teachings of the Alter Rebbe and his successors are meant to illuminate

a person from the inside as opposed to creating just an external impression on him. A long discourse of the type the Alter Rebbe taught this *chassid* on two different occasions is an example of the inner light of Chabad teachings. When integrating them properly, the individual studying the Chabad teachings undergoes an internal transformation. But, the way of the Polish *tzadikim*, a method whose greatest original advocate was Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin, was to create an external impression on those who saw and heard him. Yet, in this story it seems that the opposite happened.

The explanation then is that the external impression advocated by Rebbe Shlomo is not just a passing impression. The function of the external light of a *tzadik* of Rebbe Shlomo's nature is not just to create an impression, but it acts like an external armor, shielding the person receiving it from negative influence. Many times in Kabbalah, external light is even called the "guardian" (שׂוֹמֵר), meaning that it protects that which is on the inside.

In this story it is clear that the external encircling light that Rebbe Shlomo gave the Chassid kept what was on the inside safe and free from negative external influence. Specifically, the discourses that the Alter Rebbe had taught him, as much as they had been integrated, were still prone to doubts cast on them from the outside. The energy of Rebbe Shlomo's words of prayer did not come from their content but, as the Alter Rebbe explained, from Rebbe Shlomo's spiritual level; the awe and fear he had of the Almighty. Therefore they did not add a new understanding, but rather enforced and strengthened the understanding this *chassid* already had: that he should be betrothed to God.¹⁴

Renewing the Torah's Light

This raises another question: Why were the Alter Rebbe's teachings, even when integrated, still prone to doubts and still able to be forgotten?

The answer is that as much as the light of the Torah is inner light of the type that transforms us from the inside, if a person does not make himself into a vessel to contain this light anew every day, it can be lost.

The sages tell us that we should regard the Torah as having just been given to us today.¹⁵ In order to receive something you have to have a vessel. If what is being given to you is meant to go into your heart and mind that means that you have to make your heart and mind into a vessel. You have to open them up and be ready to accept something from the outside. It follows then that in order to receive the Torah anew every day, you have to make yourself into a vessel every single day. Regardless of what you think you studied yesterday and what you think you have already integrated into

yourself, today you are receiving it anew and you have to start the process from the beginning.

A Rebbe, like the Alter Rebbe, whose spiritual guidance is founded on his Torah teachings, does not want to make you into an angel. An angel hears Torah and the Torah gives it eternal life. But, a human being has ups and downs, and to ensure that the Torah you have learnt continues to influence you properly, you have to renew it all the time.

Be a Rebbe!

Going a bit deeper, “Zion” is representative of the inner point of the heart.¹⁶ On the one hand in all the Polish Chassidic groups there was always a Rebbe that had many students and many of these students became Rebbes themselves. But in Chabad there was never such a thing.

But in our generation the tables are turned—the Rebbe proclaimed in 1992 that every Chabad *chassid* should prepare to become a Rebbe himself. The reason is that as much as the distance between the Rebbe and the *chassid* in Chabad is infinite—the *chassid* cannot compare to the Rebbe—the Chabad Rabbe'im gave us not only the internal light of the Torah but its essential light (אור עִצְמִי) as well, and somehow over the generations this created a reality in which the essence of being a Rebbe was transmitted to the Chassidim, just as the essence of the father is transmitted to his children.

(based on lectures given on 22 Tamuz, 5766 in Kfar Chabad and 24 Tamuz, 5767 in Ramat Aviv)

1. The Three Weeks is the name given to the period of mourning between the 17th of *Tamuz* and the 9th of *Av*, inclusive.

2. He was shot by a Cossak on the 17th of *Tamuz* and passed away 5 days later. See in length in our class from the 22nd of *Tamuz*, 5765.

3. Written by the second Rebbe Aharon of Karlin.

4. *Sanhedrin* 98b.

5. In the lecture given on the 24th of *Tamuz*, 5767, we related 14 stories about Rebbe Shlomo of Karlin, which correspond to the *sefirot* (3 stories corresponding to wisdom, 2 to understanding, 2 to knowledge, and 1 to each of the *sefirot* from loving-kindness to kingdom).

6. There is another version in which he drew a circle in the earth around the grave.

7. This is similar to the language used by the sages in describing that Moshe Rabbeinu took the bones of Joseph with him when they traveled from Egypt to the Land of Israel, “This one [Joseph] performed everything that is written in this one [the Torah].”

8. I.e., that he himself was someone who keeps the entire Torah. This is reminiscent of the story with the Alter Rebbe and the person who asked him why he wore different clothing from everyone else, etc.

⁹. Hosea 2:22

¹⁰. Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2.

¹¹. For example Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who to bring rain taught a verse in the Bible. He did not pray or appeal to the Heavens, he just said Torah on the verse: "Behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together" (Psalms 133:1) as related in the *Zohar* (III, 59b).

¹². Though we usually use the Sephardic pronunciation to transliterate words from Hebrew to English, in this case, the colloquial pronunciation of this word is the Ashkenazic one.

¹³. *Torat Shalom*.

¹⁴. One might even venture to guess that this was the topic of the two discourses the Alter Rebbe had taught him earlier.

¹⁵. *Sifrei, Va'etchanan*.

¹⁶. Introduction to the Mittler Rebbe's *Sha'ar Ha'emunah*. This lecture was given at a *brit*. By the self-sacrifice of circumcision, a child merits to connect with the inner point of the heart. By the willingness to remove the extraneous foreskin, the child becomes a vessel for the inner light. Even though the baby cannot express its wishes (or maybe even seem to have no wishes at all), his inner Jewish essence wants to be circumcised, an inheritance that all Jews receive from our forefather, Abraham. For this reason, the sages say that a Jew, even if physically uncircumcised is circumcised; being circumcised is an expression of his inner essence.