

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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I am asleep, yet my heart is awake

The Rebbe Rayatz told the following story:

Before the Ba'al Shem Tov was born, there were terrible decrees against the Jews, such as the decrees of the anti-Semitic Ukranian barbarians, Khmelnitsky and his troops, in 5408 and 5409.¹ European Jewry's situation was grim, both spiritually and economically. Their landlords harassed them; priests falsely accused them of crimes they had not committed. Not a year passed in which Jews did not suffer from such libels, physically, spiritually and financially.

There were landlords who leased inns to Jews, either on the highways or in town, and if a Jewish tenant did not have the means to pay the rent on time, the landlord would act as if the Jew was his property and would deal with him maliciously.

If revenues from an inn were too few and the tenant had no ability to pay the lease at all, the man and his family's life would hang in the balance. The landlord would imprison them all in an underground dungeon, until they were able to acquire the means by which to repay their debts.

The Jews' economic situation dropped considerably, and their material circumstances seriously influenced their spiritual state, so much so that they were figuratively comatose.

From heaven, it was seen that to awaken the Jews and raise their spirits, both materially and spiritually,² a lofty soul must descend into the world.

As we know, if you want to awaken someone who has fainted, the tried and trusted way to revive him is by calling him by name. So too, the soul of the Ba'al Shem Tov—whose first name is "Israel," like the name of the Jewish people—descended into this world and awoke the Jewish people from their figurative sleep.³

Reshimot Devarim Vol. 3, p.4

Birth pangs

"It is a time of distress for Jacob, and from it, he will be saved."⁴ The message inherent in this verse has been proven time and again throughout all the trials and tribulations the Jewish people have suffered during our long exile. It is because of the suffering we endure that

our strongest and most steadfast inner powers are manifest, leading to our salvation. The same principle holds in the microcosm of the human psyche. When confronted by a challenge, one's character is reinforced and sharpened, bringing one's latent potential to light.

So, strife and challenges should not be seen as punishments; instead, they offer us an opportunity to grow closer, both to our true inner selves and to the Almighty, and to express our self-sacrifice.⁵ When God and the Jewish people are estranged from one another there are times when a powerful and traumatic experience is necessary in order to rekindle the relationship.

The greatest salvation from all distress comes in the form of a supernal *tzadik's* soul being drawn into this world; a *tzadik* who has the power to serve as a true leader and to truly set the nation back on its feet. The *tzadik's* soul represents the offspring from the reunion between God and the Jewish people. His soul is like the beloved child born after a prolonged state of estrangement.

This was realized during the Egyptian exile, the precursor to all other exiles. After being enslaved in Egypt for many years, out of the bitter suffering and pleas to God, we were privileged to receive Moses' soul. This is why the Hebrew for "distress" (צָרָה) is part of the term used to denote "birth pangs" (צִירֵי לֵדָה). It is also cognate with the word "emissary" (צִיר) as in a "faithful emissary" (צִיר נֶאֱמָן)⁶ sent by the Almighty to save and redeem us.

Just as Moses was sent to us in that generation, with the tasks of giving us the Torah and shedding from his light upon the seventy elders—representing the broader leadership of that generation—so the Ba'al Shem Tov was sent to us together with his sixty disciples, whom he ignited with his great light.⁷

The hidden name

We have learnt then that distress causes the power latent in the Jewish people's collective soul to be revealed. Salvation is not accidental, or unrelated to the type of distress encountered. Rather, the two are bound together, arriving as one, but the salvation lies in wait, potentially ready to be discovered so that its light illuminate the darkness we find ourselves in.

In Chassidut we find three different metaphors illustrating varying degrees of concealed potential:

- The first degree of concealed potential is likened to the flame within a glowing ember. The flame exists inside the ember but does not burn visibly on its surface; it is present but concealed. This degree of concealed potential is referred to as *an existent concealed potential* (הַעֲלֵם שְׂיֵשְׁנוּ בְּמִצְיָאוֹת), since its existence is on the verge of being revealed and can be detected even in its concealed state. To reveal the flame, all that is needed is to blow on the ember.
- The second and deeper form of concealed potential is likened to the flame hidden in a flint stone. No flame at all is apparent in the rock itself, but the potential flame is contained therein. This type of concealed potential is referred to as *a non-existent concealed potential* (הַעֲלֵם שְׂאֵינוּ בְּמִצְיָאוֹת). The fire latent within the flint stone can only be seen when the flint is struck forcefully.
- The third and deepest degree of concealed potential is like a name.

Names express the deepest essence, the deepest and most concealed potential. Adam, for example, was able to intuit the true Hebrew name of every species, as the verse⁸ states, "Whatever Adam called the living creatures, that was its name."⁹ An individual's Hebrew name reflects his *essential self*; he answers only to that name because that name alone is hewn from the foundations of his supernal soul-root. Yet, exactly because it expresses the deepest essence, a true name is very difficult to extract. Its presence is less than even that of fire in a flint stone. For this reason, great sages have said that a child's parents are gifted with Divine inspiration when they name their child. Without it, they would not be able to correctly name their child, expressing his or her most inner and concealed essence.

The more intense the affliction a person contends with and the deeper the anguish penetrates his psyche, the greater the need to draw down a new light that will revitalize him from his highest spiritual root. A small challenge may require just a slight shake to arouse an individual to return to his true self. But, if the individual has already lost consciousness, there is no other choice but to call out his name, awakening the root of his life-force. It is only from there that the rejuvenating dew of life needed to revitalize him can be taken.

Surveying our exile, we can identify three specific periods in which God tried

to revitalize us by revealing our hidden potential, in each of the three ways just described. Prior to the First Temple's destruction, the collective state of our people is likened to half-awake daydreaming. The prophets of the era tried to rekindle our connection with God by blowing upon the glowing embers of our souls, both with words of rebuke and with comforting prophecies.

Then, in the midst of the Babylonian exile, in Mordechai and Esther's time, we fell into a deep sleep. Haman told King Achashverosh "There is one nation" (אֶחָד הָעַם). The sages interpret this as meaning, "One nation is asleep."¹⁰ Only by striking it forcefully (as one would strike a flint-stone to produce fire), only by means of Haman's decree to destroy, to kill and to annihilate the entire Jewish people, God forbid, was the collective Jewish soul revived from its sleep.

But, about two and a half centuries ago, when our prolonged exile approached its final stages, the darkness became heavier and thicker. As dawn drew nearer, our strength abandoned us and we were left lying unconscious, in a deeper state of sleep than ever before. It was then that the Ba'al Shem Tov was sent to us. He who is the soul of Israel and the spirit in our breath. When his name, Israel, was heard by the nation's soul, it was revived, as if reborn.

When enduring distress, the soul returns to a prenatal point, to the nothingness that preceded its coming into being, and from there it flourishes anew. It awakens refreshed, more courageous, and better equipped for the new circumstances that encompass it.¹¹ This is

the significance of the Ba'al Shem Tov calling our people by name.

The name and the essence

Many years have passed since the Ba'al Shem Tov's appearance and we find ourselves once again in a state of unconsciousness. Truthfully, we know that those generations compared to our own are like light to darkness. If they merely fainted, we are truly comatose.¹²

If in the past, we endured the torture of evil gentiles, today we cause our own troubles. It is as if a malignant disease has nested in our collective heart and from there it spreads, killing the Jewish mind and heart, God forbid.

There is a Chassidic tradition¹³ that before his death, Rebbe Isaac of Homil said that he saw the world falling and that *a new order* would be necessary. By *order* Rebbe Isaac was referring to the three generations that illuminated Chassidut: the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Magid of Mezritch and the Alter Rebbe. Rebbe Isaac realized that the great light these three luminaries had filled the world with, was

no longer enough. The thick veil of darkness he saw falling around him convinced him that the task of rekindling our connection with the Almighty had not yet been completed. The name "Israel" that the Ba'al Shem Tov called us with needed to be revealed, not like a whisper in the ears of someone who has fainted, but loudly and clearly, for all to hear.

For those adept at learning Chassidic teachings in depth, we add: Chassidut in general, and the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in particular, are concerned more with matters in and of themselves (תפוצה) than with their names (even when the name expresses the essence), because the burning needs of our time, the era of redemption, require this approach. The Lubavitcher Rebbe taught us how to connect with God's very essence and how to draw down the revelation of God Himself, without settling for anything less, certainly not for any intermediate reality.

1. See also, *Reshimot Devarim IV*, p. 17:

Chassidim know that to inspire the descent of a high soul into a body, there must be some arousal of true self-sacrifice here below. Prior to the descent of the Arizal's soul, we witnessed the self-sacrifice of many Jews who endured the expulsion from Spain, and before our master the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul descended, came the decrees of 5408 (1748) and 5409 (1749).

2. Referring to improving the material state of European Jewry, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak once commented:

It has been related that the Ba'al Shem Tov would expend great physical effort to free Jewish prisoners, traveling from place to place, collecting the resources necessary to pay landlords their leases, in order to save the Jewish tenant and his family from death.

The following letter, uncovered in the Kharson archives is particularly interesting in this context (*Reshimot Devarim* IV, p. 52):

With God's help. I, the undersigned, owe the sum of one thousand gold rubles, to Mr. Anton Scharitzki from the village of Tarnafka, such that he release all those held captive on today's date (below) on the condition that within a month, I will recompense him the sum of one thousand rubles (1,000 rubles). Signed on the first day of the Torah reading of *Vayikra*, 5513, here in the holy congregation of Litin. by Yisrael Tallis-Macher, son of Rabbi Eliezer, Ba'al Shem of Mezhibuzh.

3. This parable, used to describe the the Ba'al Shem Tov's appearance, is quoted elsewhere in the name of Rebbe Pinchas of Koritz (see *Keter Shem Tov*, addendum 418).

4. Jeremiah 30:7.

5. See our Hebrew volume, *Lichyot Im Hazman*, parashat *Shemot*.

6. Proverbs 25:13.

7. See *Netiv Mitzvotcha* 1:13 (quoted in the introduction to *Ba'al Shem Tov al Hatorah* 4).

8. Genesis 2:19.

9.

When the Tzemach Tzedek was an infant of about three years old, he sat on his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe's lap, and they played together. His grandfather asked him, "Where is Grandpa?" and his grandson touched his hands and said, "Here's Grandpa!" The Alter Rebbe said, "No, those are Grandpa's hands." The child touched his face and said, "Here's Grandpa!" The Alter Rebbe said, "No, that is Grandpa's face." The child then got off his grandfather's lap and turned to leave the room. Suddenly, the child called, "Grandpa!" The Alter Rebbe turned to him and asked, "What?" The child replied, "Aha! That's Grandpa!"

This story teaches us that calling someone by name acts to reveal his true essence. A name is neither like the faint flame that lies hidden within an ember, nor the fire latent in the flint stone. These potentials do not manifest the actual being (אצות) in which they lie. Therefore, when they are revealed, the connection between the two is severed. In contrast, a name is an absolute and actual expression of the actual being, so calling a name serves to reveal the actual being.

From here we can understand the basis of Rebbe Isaac's statement (discussed later on in the text), that *the new order*, the new revelation of Chassidut we require today will not be different from, but a direct extension of the Ba'al Shem Tov's own essence, his actual being. Still, it will be new in that it will be free of all the limitations that have constrained it in the past.

10. Esther 3:8; *Esther Rabbah* 7:12. Haman claimed that it was God who was asleep and no longer cared for His people. Understood more profoundly, Haman's claim actually refers to the inner sleep experienced by the Jewish people's collective soul, the source for the mistaken belief that God is no longer in them.

11. This was also the Ba'al Shem Tov's opinion, who said (see *Chachmei Yisrael – Ba'al Shem Tov*, letter 41) "I only came to the world to rectify and revive the dry bones so that everything should have vitality and a soul."

In this respect, let us note that the Ba'al Shem Tov was taught by the prophet Achiyah Hashiloni, known as the "Master of Life" (בַּעַל הַחַיִּי), referring to his affinity with the soul's two highest levels, the living one (חַיָּה) and the singular one (יְחִידָה), since their acronym spells "life" (חַי).

New vitality is drawn into the unconscious slumbering soul from these two levels that are closest to the soul's very essence. This principle is voice in Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk saying that every thought of *teshuvah* (repentance) anyone has, from the time of the Ba'al Shem Tov until Mashiach's arrival, comes from the Ba'al Shem Tov's power.

That same vitality that God breathed into the Jewish people's collective soul by means of the Ba'al Shem Tov's revelation, must once again rekindle in the masses the willingness to follow his light until the time of the ultimate redemption.

¹². See also in the source cited above in endnote 3, in which four levels of sleep are enumerated: 1) A state of dozing in which the person hears someone calling him but is unable to reply coherently. 2) A state in which the person has fallen into a slumber and needs to be awakened. 3) A state where a person has fainted and needs to be aroused by medicinal means. A spiritual remedy for this is to whisper his name into his ear. 4) Someone who must be anesthetized in order to amputate a limb, God forbid, is given an anesthetic that negates his sense of feeling, completely, numbing the pain from the surgery. In the same source, these levels are shown to correspond to the various stages of exile, extending all the way to the present.

13. Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Duchman, *Lesheima Ozen*, p. 176.