

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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Even the most distant shall be rectified

For five centuries tzadikim pleaded that the Ba'al Shem Tov's holy soul be allowed to descend into the world, but all that while his soul would not be persuaded, until eventually it did descend. This is how it came to pass:

There once arose a great uproar in heaven. Souls of tzadikim insisted that the time had come for the full redemption. Other souls opposed them, arguing that the time was not yet ripe, since there were many souls who had still not attained rectification, and what would become of them? The others replied that it was not fair that the entire Jewish people suffer while waiting for the rectification of these souls.

They all agreed that since there was one great soul in their midst, the Ba'al Shem Tov's, they would ask its advice. The Ba'al Shem Tov's soul replied that the verse states explicitly that, "Even the most distant shall be rectified."¹ The other souls retorted that the Jewish people had suffered long enough because of these distant souls. How much more would they be made to suffer?

Therefore, they demanded that the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul descend into the world and carry out the rectification of those souls. And so it was that the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul descended into this world.

Indeed, once the Ba'al Shem Tov himself tried to bring the redemption, but from Heaven came the response, "You were the one who demanded that the redemption wait until all souls be rectified! What, then do you want now?"

Ma'amar Mordechai 1

A gentle leadership

The scriptures describe the qualities of a faithful leader, "Like a shepherd managing his flock, gathering the lambs in his arm, carrying them in his bosom, gently leading the suckling lambs."² A leader of this type feels responsible for each and every member of his flock.

When thinking of a shepherd, one of the first images that comes to mind is

of Moses, who is explicitly referred to as "the faithful shepherd." It was he who was prepared to sacrifice his very life for the Jewish people by saying to God, "And now, if You will, bear their sin, but if not, I beg that You erase me from Your book that You have written."³ Etched on every true shepherd's soul-root are his deep connection and profound dedication to every single member of his flock.⁴

In our story, the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul was charged with tending those souls whose needs it had defended, so too Moses was charged with taking responsibility for the "mixed multitude" (עָרֵב רַב) whom he had decided to bring out of Egypt together with the Children of Israel. Moses did so out of concern for the Jewish spark that had submerged in these individuals. Because his entire essence was pure and refined Divine consciousness, only Moses could reach out to the mixed multitudes and take responsibility for their spiritual refinement, properly rectifying their wayward consciousness, which constituted a seemingly hopeless mix of both Jewish and non-Jewish ideas and beliefs. Indeed, since their rectification was not completed in that generation, Moses' soul is charged with extending, or reappearing in every generation hence, obliged to take responsibility for these individuals and tend to their ongoing rectification, until complete.

He who fully commits himself to a particular cause is the one who has the power to bring it to a successful conclusion. The Ba'al Shem Tov's soul's insistent argument that no soul should be eternally lost indicated that it, in particular, should become a conduit of life and redemption for those lost souls. Our concern for something demonstrates our essential connection to it. It also ensures that our mind will remain preoccupied

with it until, eventually, we will find the right way to permanently affect it.

Between light and darkness

The sages teach that the history of our present reality is destined to last 6 millennia, with each 1000 years corresponding to one of the 6 days of creation. The six millennia are also divided into 2000 years of chaos, 2000 years of Torah, and 2000 years described as the "days of Mashiach." Since each day of creation consisted of nighttime followed by daytime, it follows that the first 500 years of each millennium are times of darkness, while the final 500 years are times of light.⁵

Now, turning to the Ba'al Shem Tov's chronology, he was born in the year 5458. He publicly revealed his true nature as a *tzadik* at the age of 36 (in the year 5494), thus connecting him with the sunrise (the years just before the 500th year) of the 6th and final millennium. The story though reveals that for the five-hundred years preceding his birth, the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul was asked to agree to descend into our world, but it refused. Those five-hundred years correspond to the nighttime, the years of darkness of the sixth millennia. As a whole, the sixth millennia corresponds to Friday, the sixth day of the week when we prepare for Shabbat—the infinitely good, eternal Shabbat of the seventh millennium. But, throughout the long dark night—those five-hundred years—that preceded the sunrise of

the sixth day, the Jewish people were engulfed by sorrows. Indeed, the deepest darkness is experienced in the very last moments before daybreak.

Even amid the darkness, there is light that helps us find our way. This light appears in the form of many small candles, flickering in an ocean of shadows, strengthening the heart with faith and trust that daybreak is on the horizon. However, this was not the type of light that emanated from the Ba'al Shem Tov's soul. The Ba'al Shem Tov was not suited to darkness at all; his very essence was light. He loved light and wherever he was, he always asked that more candles be lit.⁶ His glow can chase away all shadows and break through any barrier. The Ba'al Shem Tov did not wish to descend into reality in a time when he would not be able to illuminate the world as brightly as he could. He would not descend into a world engulfed by darkness, a reality where he would not be able to reveal his true nature, completely.

As the sun rose, so did the Ba'al Shem Tov. Anyone who wishes to merit hastening the coming of the Shabbat will do best to quickly gather as much of the Ba'al Shem Tov's light as possible. And then, as the sages say, "He who prepares for the Shabbat on Friday, will have food for Shabbat!"⁷

Shining brighter and brighter

To complete the picture painted by our explanation so far, let us quote from an anonymous manuscript⁸ clarifying the secret behind the Ba'al Shem Tov's revelation and its place and purpose in the redemption process, which begins with first light and gradually grows brighter and brighter until the day begins.⁹

In seeking to understand the well-known argument that if the Ba'al Shem Tov's teachings are true and without them we are unable to battle against the evil forces, why then were they not revealed earlier? As we know, it was only in the year 5500 that they were revealed publicly, and not earlier.

The explanation is that a thousand years above is considered a single day, as it says, "For a thousand years in Your eyes [are like yesterday]...",¹⁰ which include an evening and a morning, thus, during the expanse of time until the end of the sixth millennium, the first five hundred years [of each millennium], is called "night," meaning that the morning of each millennium begins in its 500th year. See also in the *Or Hachayim* on *Parashat Tzav* on the verse, "This is the offering that is burnt."¹¹

It is also written, “On the sixth day, they shall prepare that which they have brought,”¹² [relating to the fact that] one must prepare for Shabbat, and according to the *Shulchan Aruch*¹³ it is a *mitzvah* to taste [on Friday] from the dishes cooked for Shabbat, as it says, “those who taste it will be rewarded with life.”¹⁴ This applies to the general principle [already explained]—since the seventh millennium is called the day that is entirely Shabbat. At that time we will partake of the feast of the Leviathan and the wild ox. The well-known explanation according to Chassidut is that the Mashiach, may he come speedily and in our time, will reveal the Torah’s innermost wisdom and this is what is referred to as the feast of those righteous souls referred to as the hidden fish of the ocean, or “Leviathan,” who will feast on their Torah and *mitzvot*. while the revealed souls, referred to as “the wild ox” will also [feast] on their Torah and *mitzvot*

Therefore, since the sixth day began in the year 5500, we had the merit and the *mitzvah* to taste from the Shabbat dishes. And therefore, the Ba’al Shem Tov was sent to this world to reveal the Torah’s innermost secrets. Still, all that will be

revealed of the inner Torah by the *tzadikim* until Mashiach’s arrival constitutes just a taste. But, the main feast will take place in the future.

But before this era, souls in physical bodies could not taste of the Tree of Life, even though the Arizal’s soul was revealed in 5333¹⁵ and he revealed the wisdom of Kabbalah. Still, this was only on a tiny fraction and only for his holy students. This state is likened to “nursing.”

Indeed, this is what the Talmud¹⁶ alludes to as the secret of how, “[During] the third watch, a baby nurses from its mother’s breasts and a woman lies with her husband,” for in the year 5333 and four months, the first two thirds of the nighttime ended and the final third began, lasting until 5500, [the end of] the night’s third watch. Therefore, that is when the Divine Presence began to rise from the dust, for then ended the decrees of annihilation and souls from the World of Rectification began to descend into the world.

Because of this, the revelation of the wisdom of Kabbalah by the Arizal’s disciples is referred to as merely “nursing,” and this is [the meaning of] “a baby nurses at its mother’s breasts.” “And a wife lies [with her

husband],” refers to the Divine Presence that began to rise from the dust. However, in the year 5500, the light of day began to

illuminate the world for all humanity.

1. 2 Samuel 14:14. The original verse appears in the story of King David and the wise Teko'aite woman sent by Yoav to convince David to readmit his son Absalom into his court (Absalom had just murdered his brother Amnon). In arguing that Absalom be pardoned by the king she said, “For we shall all surely die and be like water pouring to the ground failing to gather in one place. [Therefore,] shall a judge not pardon an individual and contrive arguments so that he who is already lost not be [eternally] lost.”

The traditional Kabbalistic interpretation of this verse finds in it a source for the idea that God continually seeks to offer a soul another chance to rectify itself be it through transmigration (עֲבִירָה) or reincarnation (גִּלְגּוּל).

2. Isaiah 40:11.

3. Exodus 32:32.

4. The Lubavitcher Rebbe spoke profusely against the thoughts of certain individuals who would like to postpone the coming of Mashiach until they finish studying the entire Talmud and the like (obviously, we hope that there is no-one who would really say that it is best that Mashiach not come until he has completed the Talmud, but there are many who postpone their involvement in bringing his arrival closer until later stages in life). Foolish thoughts like this stem from one's heightened sense of self and a lack of awareness of what the only true reality is, but their spiritual root begins with a very serious issue. related once by the Rebbe Rayatz to his Chassidim. He explained that when Mashiach arrives, people will no longer be able to climb higher and advance as we can now in our present reality that is full of deceit. Yet even so, the Rebbe Rayatz told them, You must desire and pray with all your heart that Mashiach come immediately.

It is clear then that although the Ba'al Shem Tov proclaimed that the redemption will not come until *all* souls have been rectified, he was neither referring to those souls who have not yet rectified some flaw, nor to those who have not yet been perfected, but to those souls who were fatally flawed. For these souls to remain in their current state would mean that they remain eternally uprooted from their source in the Living God—truly lost.

5. In the *Tana Devai Eliyahu Rabbah*, 2, we read,

“Days were formed, and He possesses one of them” (Psalms 139:16), [referring to] the seventh day of creation. Since this world will exist for six millennia: two thousand years of chaos, two thousand years of Torah and two thousand years of Mashiach... and just as we make a sabbatical year once every seven years, so too God will give the entire world a sabbatical for one day, that is for one thousand years, as it says, “For a thousand years in

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- Your eyes are as yesterday," (Psalms 90:4). It also says, "There shall be one day that is known as God's, [it will be] neither day nor night" (Zachariah 14:7), this is the seventh day of the world. "Come evening, there will be light" (Ibid.), refers to the World to Come, as it says, "There shall be month by month" (Isaiah 66:23), and it says, "A psalm, a song for the day of Shabbat" (Psalms 90:1), alluding to a world that is entirely Shabbat."
6. See volume 2, in the story, "He who commanded that oil burn."
 7. *Avodah Zarah* 3a.
 8. Proverbs 4:18.
 9. Printed in the addendum to the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Sefer Hama'amarim* – 5663, pp. 142ff. (also quoted in the addendums to *Keter Shem Tov*, 418). It is not clear if this manuscript was written by one of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe's chassidim (after having heard it from the Rebbe) or perhaps by a chassid of the Rebbe of Kapost (the former's first cousin).
 10. Psalms 90:4.
 11. Leviticus 6:2. The *Or Hachayim* writes,

"This is the regulation of the ascent-offering, the ascent-offering remaining on the fire pile atop the altar the whole night, until morning"... these word clarify until when the Jewish people will be unique in respect to these two things [being on the fire-pile and being on the altar]—"the whole night," refers to the time of exile which is likened to night, as in the verses, "O' Guardian, what shall be with this night?" (Isaiah 21:11), and, "Sleep here tonight" (Ruth 3:13), which the sages taught refer to the exile. "Until morning," which is the time when He will empty out upon us His glory, and "morning comes" (Isaiah 21:12). And this time [begins] after five centuries of the sixth millennium have passed, following the teaching of the sages that we have already taught that one of the Almighty's days lasts a thousand years. It logically follows then that the first five centuries are akin to night and the second five centuries are akin to day. And the Almighty pronounced that "until morning," when 500 years spent in exile will be over, until morning when our elevation will begin.
 12. Exodus 16:5.
 13. *Shulchan Aruch Harav* 250:8 (also noted in the *Magen Avraham* there, *siman katan alef*).
 14. From the Shabbat *Musaf* prayer.
 15. See also the Mittler Rebbe's *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 5:2.
 16. *Berachot* 3a.