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## Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk: Prayers Hovering Over the Kinneret

*Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, the author of the “Pri Ha’aretz,” was born in the year 5490 (1730). His father, Rebbe Moshe, was a disciple of the Ba’al Shem Tov and Rebbe Menachem Mendel visited the Ba’al Shem Tov a number of times. His mentor was the Ba’al Shem Tov’s disciple, the Maggid of Mezeritch. After the Maggid’s passing, many of his disciples accepted Rebbe Menachem Mendel as their new Rebbe. In 5537, Rebbe Menachem Mendel made aliyah to the Land of Israel, along with 300 of his followers, which was a massive wave of aliyah in those days. He established a community in Tzfat and later, in Tiberias. Rebbe Menachem Mendel combined majesty in his court with extreme lowliness, along with self-sacrifice for the Land of Israel and hastening the redemption. He passed away on the first of Iyar 5548 and is buried in Tiberias.*

One time, before the beginning of the Friday pre-Shabbat Mincha prayers, Rebbe Menachem Mendel entered the synagogue but did not begin to pray. The entire congregation waited for him to begin, but Rebbe Menachem Mendel just stood and looked out the window at the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret) just below. He continued to look at the Kinneret, deep in contemplation. The sun set, night descended, and the congregation had not yet prayed the afternoon prayers. Suddenly Rebbe Menachem Mendel seemed to return to himself, smiled and began the prayers.

After the services, his students asked him what had transpired. He explained that all the prayers of the Jews of the Diaspora have to ascend on Shabbat eve, and they come to the Kinneret, hover over it and then ascend. “I looked at the Kinneret, at all the prayers hovering above it, and saw that they were not ascending. I understood that the Diaspora prayers were not ascending because some of the people there (referring to the chassidim connected to him) were not giving enough charity to help the poor in the Land of Israel.” Rebbe Menachem Mendel’s deep contemplation was apparently effective, so that those people in the Diaspora decided to give generously for Israel’s poor, which released the prayers and they ascended.

Charity in general, and charity for the Land of Israel in particular, is a very important matter in Chassidut. Most of the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch’s “Holy Letters” revolve around this theme. Why did the *tzaddik* have to wait so long for the prayers to ascend? Perhaps because the most propitious time for giving charity is before lighting the Shabbat candles. In Europe, Shabbat begins late, and when the chassidim there were aroused to give charity, it was already quite late on the shores of the Kinneret.

Shabbat in the dimension of time (*shana*) is parallel to the Land of Israel in the dimension of place (*olam*) and to the woman in the dimension of souls (*nefesh*). As

such, it is very fitting to give charity for the Land of Israel before the woman of the house lights the Shabbat candles. The giving of the charity precipitates the ascent of the prayers, which are also relevant to the Shabbat. We can add another Shabbat to the this beautiful tapestry: the Kinneret itself. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* lists seven seas surrounding the Land of Israel. The seventh sea, parallel to the seventh day, the Shabbat, is the Sea of Gallilee, the Kinneret.

It is written that all the prayers ascend specifically from the Cave of Machpelah, the burial place of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron. Apparently, there are two dimensions to the ascent of the prayers. The letters of the prayers and their intentions, their simple meaning and their soul. The revealed dimension ascends through Hebron (which in the Zohar alludes to the connection to the natural elements and the letters of prayer) while the concealed dimension ascends from the Kinneret.

The concealed dimension of the prayers is very relevant to charity. When Rebbe Menachem Mendel saw that the prayers of the Diaspora had not ascended, he understood that the problem was in the realm of charity. He perceived that it was upon him to rectify the situation and to bring the prayers up to God. When a *tzaddik* is quintessentially lowly, like King David, he can uplift the entire reality to God. In the words of the Alter Rebbe of Lubavitch, "In order to lift a building, it must be grasped from below." In other words, when a *tzaddik* sees in everything in the world the point where it ascends to God, he can transform it into something truly lofty.