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Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf of Cherni-Ostra'ah: Keep Your Eyes Open and See Mashiach

Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf of Cherni-Ostra'ah was a disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch and Rebbe Meshulam Feivush of Zabriz. He was the Rabbi and Admo"r of Cherni-Ostra'ah in the Ukraine.

In the year 5558 (1798), about twenty years after the first great Chassidic aliyah to the Land of Israel, Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf made aliyah to Israel, settling first in Haifa and afterwards in Tiberias. After the passing of Rebbe Avraham of Kalisk, Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf was appointed to be the leader of the Chassidim. Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf's students included Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Kosov – the father of the Vizhnitz dynasty – and Rebbe David Shlomo of Eibschitz, author of "Arvei Nachal." He passed away on the fifth of Adar, 5583 (1823) and was laid to rest in Tiberias, in the section of the disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

Guidance for a Simple Jew who Attained Spiritual Heights

A simple man (with no special spiritual aptitude withstood a great trial. (The type of trial he withstood is not recorded. Generally, however, 'a great trial' refers to a trial in maintaining sexual purity, as in the trial of Joseph). In reward, Heaven granted him a special gift: Whenever he would mention God's Name, such as when praying or reciting a blessing, he would feel God's majesty in his soul. As a result, whenever this man would utter pray or make a blessing, his entire body would begin to tremble and he would feel that his organs were burning up in fear.

There are stories about tzaddikim who merited lofty heights and did not want them. Rebbe Zusha of Anapoli merited to see Heaven like the Rambam and was not able to contain it. It is told of the Rebbe of Komarna that every time that he learned what one of the sages in the gemara taught, he would see that sage before him. The teaching of the Jerusalem Talmud that when a person learns Talmud, it is as if the sage who taught that particular teaching stands before him – spontaneously occurred to him. But the Rebbe of Kamarna asked God to take that spiritual height away from him, as it disturbed his study.

Our simple Jew, who did not understand why he would be experiencing such lofty spiritual heights, came to the Rebbe of Cherni-Ostra and complained that he did not know what happened to him, but he could not bear the suffering it entailed. He entreated the Rebbe to help him to disengage from this spiritual level.

Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf said to him: "You have merited and were given something that others ask for and toil for their entire lives. All the tzaddikim serve God all their lives

with an inner desire to reach this level, and you have received it as a gift. How can you forgo it? The Rebbe then proceeded to teach him how to live with this lofty level.

Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf did not agree to take this level away from the simple Jew. If he merited it, he was apparently deserving. Instead, the Rebbe gave him the tools to serve God at that level. The Ba'al Shem Tov would also take simple Jews and invest years teaching them Torah and service of God until they attained spiritual heights.

Anticipating Mashiach

Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf's eyes were always open. (Even when he was reciting the Silent Prayer. It is also told of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev that he would pray with open eyes – even in front of an open window facing the street – despite the law that says that if one is praying without a prayer book, he should close his eyes. Rebbe Levi Yitzchak said that even though his eyes were open in prayer, he did not see the comings and goings in the street. A tzaddik has a level of sight that is not physical. He radiates Godliness from his eyes. He sees only the Godliness in all the things taking place in front of him. In the same vein, it is also told of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Shneur Zalman of Liadi, that before he died, he said that he did not see the beam in the ceiling at all, but rather the word of God giving it vitality).

Even when Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf was sleeping his eyes would remain open. (We can learn from this that his soul root was the *mazal* of fish, which coincides with his day of passing in the month of Adar).

Once, Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf was laying down with his eyes closed. His assistant, who was next to his bed, thought that he had passed away and began to wail loudly. The holy rabbi opened his eyes and asked him, "Why are you crying?"

"I thought that you had passed on to heaven," the assistant answered.

"Do not fear," Rebbe Ze'ev Wolf calmed him. "We are all fine. I simply closed my eyes in order to contemplate on the generation of Mashiach: Our forefathers in Egypt were sunk into the depths of the 49th gate of impurity. They could not tarry in Egypt any longer, for they had nearly sunk to the fiftieth gate of impurity, from which they would not have been able to emerge. The fiftieth gate is *apikorsus* (denial of Torah), may God save us. I saw that before Mashiach comes, this gate – the impurity of *apikorsus* – will spread throughout the world, may God save us, and even for people of our stature (even tzaddikim, disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov) it will be difficult to be saved from it. The solution is to speak about tzaddikim. This is the only force with which they can be saved from a trace of denial of Torah."

When the holy Ruzhiner Rebbe told this story, he concluded by saying, "It is even good to tell about me, and even to tell about my possessions, the chairs and tables." (The Ruzhiner Rebbe conducted a wealthy court and engaged in injecting Godliness into his material possessions. This level is fitting for someone who lives at the level of

“with all your might,” who infuses his physical possessions and all that surrounds him with Godliness).

Opening Eyes with Stories of Tzaddikim

To see and understand the tribulations of the exile and the approach of Mashiach, Rebbe Ze'ev wolf had to close his eyes and see the darkness. This is similar to the Covenant of the Pieces in Genesis: “And behold, a dread, a great darkness falls upon him,”¹ The famous Biblical commentator, Rashi, explains as follows: “This is an allusion to the troubles and darkness of the exiles.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe commented that in the time of *ikvata d'Mishicha*, when the Mashiach is approaching, we are in the throes of “double and doubly-double darkness.” This darkness is so pervasive that it can be tangibly felt, similar to the plague of darkness in Egypt. The Rebbe said, however, that in order to emerge from the exile, all that we have to do is “open our eyes” and see that Mashiach is rapidly approaching.

How can we open our eyes and see redemption? By telling stories of tzaddikim. It is written in the Tanya that there is a spark of Moses, a true tzaddik, in every Jew. The Hebrew word for “story,” *sippur*, is cognate to *sapir*, “sapphire.” By telling stories of tzaddikim, we illuminate the spark of the tzaddik inside us - the root of pure faith. We are then saved from the impure husk of denial of the Torah and we merit the resurrection of the dead.

¹ Genesis 15:12.