

## The Rebbe Maharash: God Before Me Always

*Rebbe Shmuel Schneerson, the Rebbe the Maharash, is the fourth Rebbe in the Chabad dynasty. He was born on the second of Iyar, 5594 (1834) – on the day of Tiferet within Tiferet in the Counting of the Omer – to his father, the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, and his mother, Chaya Mushka. He was named after a hidden tzaddik, Reb Shmuel the water carrier from Polotzk. Despite the fact that he was the youngest of the Tzemach Tzedek's sons, he became the Rebbe after his father in Lubavitch, while most of his brothers became rebbes in other towns. The Maharash married his niece, Sterna, and after her passing, he married his cousin, Rebbetzin Rivkah.*

*The Maharash acted tirelessly for the Jews in Russia and the Jewish People as a whole, founding Jewish communities and lobbying the government for their needs. He coined the famous Chassidic phrase, "Lechatchilah ariber," saying, "The world thinks that when we can't go under an obstacle we have to leap over it from above. And I think that we have to leap over it from above in the first place (Lechatchilah ariber). In the first place, we have to take strong action, not get sidetracked by anything and implement what we must implement. When we start in this way, the Holy One, Blessed Be He helps."*

*The Rebbe the Maharash is known for conducting his Chassidic court with wealth and generosity. He passed away on the 13th of Tishrei, 5643 (1882) at the age of 48. He was laid to rest in the ohel of his father, the Tzemach Tzedek. His son, Rebbe Shalom Dov Ber, became the next Lubavitcher Rebbe.*

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Once a young married yeshiva student entered the Rebbe Maharash's room for *yechidus* (a private consultation). He told the Rebbe that he doesn't love his wife and wants to divorce her. The Rebbe severely opposed the idea. He explained that it would not be good and it would even be forbidden to divorce his wife under the circumstances that he described. "It would be best to make peace and to continue to live in peace and love," the Rebbe told him.

Even though the young man was a chassid, he said to the Rebbe, "I cannot take it anymore, I cannot obey the Rebbe and I must divorce my wife."

The Rebbe became very emotional, arose to his full stature, fixed his eyes on the young man and said, "Apparently, I do not have fear of Heaven. It is written in the Talmud that 'whoever has fear of Heaven, his words are accepted.' If you are not listening to me, apparently, I do not have enough fear of Heaven."

The Rebbe said these words with so much conviction that they penetrated deep into the young man's heart. "Fine, Rebbe," he answered, "I accept your words. I will not divorce my wife."

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When a person has fear of Heaven, he is able to project it outward and to effect fear on those who hear him. Sometimes, however – particularly if the issue is complex or difficult – “ordinary” fear of Heaven does not suffice. It is necessary to awaken the strong attribute of might and fear of Heaven in order to cause the listener to emerge from his self-centeredness and to become sensitive to God’s presence.

The Rebbe Maharash practiced this teaching not only outwardly, but even when he was all alone:

The Chassidim noticed that every time that someone would enter the Rebbe Maharash’s chamber for *yechidus*, he would take a special, large kerchief and place it on the table in a particular manner. The Chassidim did not know why the Rebbe consistently did this. One daring Chassid snuck into the Rebbe’s room when the Rebbe did not see and lifted the kerchief from the table. Underneath it was a parchment on which the words, “I set God before me always” were written. This parchment was always on the Rebbe’s desk. When he was alone in his room, the parchment was open before him. (It is told that the Rebbe had another parchment with this saying in his glasses). When someone would enter the room, the Rebbe would cover the parchment so that nobody would see.

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From this story, we see how careful the Rebbe Maharash was to fulfill the first directive in the Code of Jewish Law: That a Jew should always keep in mind that God is standing over him. The directive, “I set God before me always” is written using God’s Name, Havayah. This teaches us that God’s standing over us is not to frighten us or make us feel disconcerted, for the Name Havayah is God’s Name of compassion. In His mercy, God watches over every person at every moment. This is particularly true of the Rebbe, whose role is to arouse compassion on the Nation of Israel. He has to empower himself with the directive to set God before him always. The experience of constant sight – seeing Godliness before him always (beginning with constantly seeing the parchment before him) strengthens his fear of Heaven, thus ascertaining that his words will be accepted. This is all with great, true compassion over his flock. As in the previous story, the attribute of might from which the fear of Heaven stems was employed by the Rebbe in order to cause the chassid to act for his own true good and was actually an act of compassion upon him and his household.