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The Forefathers of Chassidut

(Excerpted from Rabbi Ginsburgh's address on the 19 Kislev 5781)

The 19th of Kislev is significant for two reasons: This is the day that the Maggid of Mezritch ascended to heaven, in 5533 (1772), exactly 248 years ago. Twenty-six (26 is the value of God's essential Name, *Havayah*) years later, on this exact date, the Maggid's illustrious disciple, the Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the author of the *Tanya* and the *Shulchan Aruch Harav* and the Alter Rebbe of Chabad was released from Russian prison, where he was being held on false charges of treason. The day of passing of the mentor turned into the holiday of redemption for his dear pupil. Indeed, the Maggid foresaw these events and just before passing away said to the Alter Rebbe, "This is our holiday."

The Maggid's passing gathers all the deep Torah that he bequeathed during his life to his illustrious disciples and illuminates it even more intensely, as it radiates throughout the people of Israel. In the same manner, the redemption of the Alter Rebbe is the preliminary and decisive stage for disseminating the inner dimension of the Torah to the general public, as the Mashiach answered the Ba'al Shem Tov, the Maggid's mentor, when he asked him when he would be arriving: "When your wellsprings spread outwards."

The revealed reason for the Alter Rebbe's imprisonment was the false accusation made against him that he was aiding Russia's enemies. But the true, spiritual reason was that his revealing of the Torah's secrets had provoked a prosecution in Heaven. In Heaven, the prosecuting angels claimed that the world was not yet ready for this light. (This is similar to the angels' opposition to the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai). The Alter Rebbe's release from prison showed that the true Judge, the Holy, Blessed One, determined that it is permissible and even necessary to disseminate the light of the Torah's secrets in order to bring the world to its ultimate purpose: Mashiach.

Three Fathers

In Chassidic tradition, the leaders of the first three generations of the Chassidic movement are called the "three forefathers of Chassidut," similar to the three holy patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This foundational 'order', which appeared at the inception of *Am Yisrael*, the Jewish people, recurs as we approach the final redemption.

Our teacher, Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, is the Abraham of Chassidut. He is the great man of faith, the pillar of loving-kindness, whose love of his fellow Jews was boundless. The Ba'al Shem Tov's successor, the Maggid of Mezritch, is the Isaac of Chassidut. He is the "pillar of Divine service", who delves into the depths of contemplating God. Not coincidentally, the name of the Maggid's father was Abraham, another allusion to his role as the Isaac of Chassidut. The Alter Rebbe completes the triad, as the Jacob of

Chassidut, the pillar of Torah. He crystallized Chassidic thought into a written method of serving God that can be put into practice.

This year is the 248th year since the Maggid's passing. This number has much significance. First, it is the number of positive commandments in the Torah (of the sum of 613 commandments). 248 is also the number of organs in the human body. Every organ in the physical body corresponds to a "spiritual organ" in the soul. This spiritual organ receives its vitality from a particular *mitzvah*, for man was created in God's image (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), which also equals 248! In addition, 248 is the numerical value of Abraham (אַבְרָהָם). God added a letter *hei* to Avram after he was circumcised, which is when all of his physical and spiritual organs were perfected and he became a vessel to receive and fulfill all 248 positive *mitzvahs* (commandments) of the Torah and to become one with God. The word '*mitzvah*' is from the root that means 'together'. Thus, this year, we are Abraham (248) years since the passing of the Maggid of Mezritch, the same point of time at which the Isaac of Chassidut was 'gathered unto his forefathers' and to Abraham!

Heaven and Earth

The three Biblical patriarchs and the three fathers of Chassidut lead us in a wondrous journey between heaven and earth.

Abraham is like a "piece of heaven." Just as the creation of the world began with the heavens—"In the beginning, God created the heavens..."—so Abraham was like a star in heaven, the first Jewish soul in which all the souls of Israel in all the generations are rooted. All of us, the children of Abraham, are shining stars in the sky. "And Your nation are all *tzaddikim*." God told Abraham to "look at the heavens and count the stars...so shall be your offspring." We are all a nation of super-stars. The heavens represent God's infinite vastness. When Abraham looked up at the heavens as a small child, he perceived the Creator, and when we look up at the heavens from the windows of our synagogues, God's infinite vastness also fills our consciousness. In Kabbalistic terms, the heavens are transcendent lights, Divine light that surrounds everything. This is the light that Abraham discovered. Abraham was the "first of all believers." This is the light that the Ba'al Shem Tov revealed in our generations—the inspiration of Divine light that transcends everything.

Isaac is the earth that aspires to reach the heavens. If the heavens are the Divine revelation, the reality of One God, the absolute, objective truth, then the earth is us, each person with his subjective experience of existence, his own perception of self. But this earth-bound consciousness raises its eyes to the heavens above and aspires to reach them with all its might. In Hebrew, the word for 'earth' is *eretz*, whose root means '*ratz*' (to run) or *ratzon* (will). The earth has a will and it runs, it flies high above. This is the soul of Isaac, who is likened to a "pure burnt offering," and whose entire life is devoted to uttering sweet prayers that flow from the source of his soul up to the heavens.

The Magid of Mezritch, the Isaac of Chassidut, taught that God created the world *ex-nihilo*, “something from nothing”. Our service of God is to restore the somethingness to the nothingness, to include the reality of the earth within the vastness of the heavens and to be part of the Divine nothingness—to remove the coarseness of the world that exists and to become “nothing” in the Divine pleasure. The Ba’al Shem Tov taught us that we are all consummate *tzaddikim*, stars in the heavens. The ascent of the Maggid, however, adds another dimension: *teshuvah* (repentance). All of us have a lower-realm feeling of self that we must purify. By doing so, the *tzaddikim* also become penitents.

We have run above with pleasure, but the proper, consummate pulse of life is written in the Workings of the Chariot in the Book of Ezekiel: “and the angels, run and return.” After running upward, to heaven, we must return to look down to earth. (This is similar to the ladder that Jacob saw in his dream, with angels ascending and descending upon it). This creates the pulse of constant, beating life—a great ascent upward followed immediately by a return down to earth. This is the Torah of Jacob and the teaching of the Alter Rebbe. In fact, the Hebrew for “run and return” (רצוא ושוב) equals “Torah” (תורה).

In the Book of Formation, it is written, “If your heart runs, return to One.” After running to the oneness of God, which can be found in Heaven, know that true oneness is only when we complete the movement and return to earth. The ultimate goal of creation is to make a dwelling place for God down here on earth. This is the revelation of “the true oneness” as the Alter Rebbe wrote in his book, the *Tanya*, in the name of his rebbe, the Maggid of Mezritch: In the Divine soul of every Jew the “true One” is revealed, in the *sefirah* of wisdom in the soul. Amazingly, “the true One” (אחד האמת) equals Ba’al Shem Tov (בעל שם טוב)! It is the same oneness of God that the Ba’al Shem Tov illuminated.

Now we can come full-circle. In the first generation of Chassidut, the Ba’al Shem Tov revealed the heavens, inlaid with the souls of Israel like stars, a created “something from nothing.” In the second generation of Chassidut, the Maggid of Mezritch revealed how the soul aspires to leave the ego and to nullify itself, to return to the sky. Finally, in the third generation of Chassidut, Divine Providence tasked the Alter Rebbe with the return. To return from heaven to earth and bring redemption to this world.

The movement of “return” initiated by the Alter Rebbe is the direct continuation of his rebbe’s ascent, or “run.” The entire ascent of his rebbe is for the sake of the descent that follows. Thus, when he passed on, the Maggid hinted to his pupil, the Alter Rebbe, “Today is our holiday.” The two of us, together! When the Maggid ascends to heaven, he ascends to Abraham—to both the physical Abraham and also to his spiritual father, the Ba’al Shem Tov. Simultaneously, however, a movement of actualization that brings the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, down to earth begins. This movement is still going strong, Abraham, i.e., 248 years later.

May we merit to embody the three stages of patriarchs and the fathers of Chassidut in our lives: To discover the heavens, to run from earth to the heavens, and to return to



Gal Einai

*Revealing the Torah's
Inner Dimension*

earth and reveal God's Unity here. It is then that, "Truth will sprout from the earth" (Psalms 85:12) with the coming of Mashiach, who grows from the earth—"from below he [the Mashiach] will sprout" (Zechariah 6:12)—immediately!