

Rabbi Naftali of Ropschitz: Light of Heaven on Earth

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Horowitz of Ropshitz (Ropczyce) was born on the holiday of Shavu'ot in 5620 (1760)—the very day that the Ba'al Shem Tov passed away. Rabbi Naftali's father was Rabbi Menachem Mendel and his mother was Baila, the daughter of Rebbe Itzikel of Hamburg, under whose tutelage Rabbi Naftali learned Torah when he was young. Rabbi Naftali then studied under Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. After Rebbe Elimelech's passing, he learned Torah from his student, the Choizeh of Lublin and also studied under the Maggid of Kozhnitz and Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Rimanov. He was a rabbi in Ropschitz and additional cities, and after the passing of his rabbis, Rabbi Naftali became a chassidic Rebbe.

Rebbe Naftali was known to be smart, endowed with a sharp wit. On his tombstone, it is written that he was, "unique in his generation in Divine wisdom." He would dress his wisdom in humor and clever sayings. Among his disciples were Rebbe Chaim of Tzanz, Rebbe Shalom of Kaminkah, Rebbe Hanoch Henich of Alesk, Rebbe Yosef Baba"d, author of the Minchat Chinuch and others. He authored the books, Zera Kodesh and Ayalah Shluchah. Rebbe Naftali passed away in Lantzut on 11 Iyar 5687 (1827) and was buried there.

The holy Ruzhiner Rebbe, who was a contemporary of Rebbe Naftali of Ropschitz, called Rebbe Naftali "the wise man of the generation." Once, when he heard a Torah teaching of Rebbe Naftali, the Ruzhiner Rebbe added that "Until now, I knew that Rebbe Naftali was a great sage, but I did not realize it was to such a great extent." There was a *chassid* present—not the brightest—who journeyed specially to Rebbe Naftali to tell him what the Ruzhiner Rebbe had said about him. "Until now, I thought you were foolish," Rebbe Naftali said to the *chassid*, "but I did not realize it was to such a great extent."

This story is an example of Rebbe Naftali's sharp wit. The *chassid* thought that relating what one *tzaddik* said about another *tzaddik* would make Rebbe Naftali feel good. But in truth, it is gossip-mongering. In addition, even a simple remark of a holy *tzaddik* is replete with secrets within secrets. Happy is he who understands the banal conversation of great *tzaddikim*. To take their utterances at face value is very foolish. There is inner, hidden meaning to their words. Only people on a high spiritual level can understand their intentions. Every remark that they make triggers a reaction in heaven. In addition, it was foolish for that *chassid* to tell the Ropschitzer [Rebbe Naftali] what the Ruzhiner said, because a true *tzaddik* is very humble. It does not add to his joy to hear that others are praising him.

Prayer is a ladder, and as we pray, we ascend from rung to rung. The highest rung of the ladder is the *Amidah*, the silent prayer, which is associated with the World of Emanation. The Ropschitzer would say that when the other *tzaddikim* pray, they earn tremendous spiritual gain. But when they finish their prayers,

it all disappears, and they lose all they had gained. "When it comes to me, however," he said, "everything that I earn remains with me."

What did Rebbe Naftali mean by this? Some *tzaddikim* ascend to great heights in their spiritual apprehension. But *tzaddikim* also descend to the reality of this world. Not every *tzaddik* can take the great light that he earned above and bring it back down. To do so, one needs the wisdom to enclothe the light in the simplest actions. "Even when I descend below," said Rebbe Naftali, everything remains with me. The light of the World of Emanation is even in my jokes." [Rebbe Naftali was famous for his sharp-witted, wise jokes].

The Lubavitcher Rebbe instructed us to bring the lofty concepts of Torah far enough down to reach even the simplest of Jews with the spiritual aptitude they possess. Chassidut teaches that if you wish to speak of concepts of Chassidut with a friend who is interested only in football, then speak with him about football, but insert Chassidic concepts into the football conversation. He may think that all you are talking about is his favorite sport (or any other topic that interests him). But the true wisdom is to be able to descend precisely to his level, to speak his language and to imbue your conversation with Chassidut. His soul, which is literally a part of God above, will understand and slowly but surely, he will be aroused to the Torah's inner dimension. This was Rebbe Naftali's specialty. He was a great sage who knew how to bring Divine wisdom down to earth and to make his listeners laugh in the process. In this way, we can bring the Mashiach.