

Rabbi Isaac of Homel: A Sense for Divine Inspiration

Rabbi Isaac Halevi Epstein was born in 5540 (1780) to his father, Rabbi Mordechai. When he was still young, he left his home in order to learn Torah from the Alter Rebbe of Chabad despite opposition from his family, who opposed Chassidut. He was known as a genius in the revealed portions of the Torah and was admired for his knowledge by both chassidim and mitnagdim (those who opposed Chassidut) alike. In 5565 (1805) he became the Rabbi, Head of the Beit Din and Head of the Yeshivah in Homil (Gomel), a position that he held until his passing. After the passing of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Isaac became a disciple of his son, the Mittler Rebbe. After the Mittler Rebbe's passing, some of the heads of the chassidim asked Reb Isaac to become the new rebbe. Reb Isaac initially agreed, but ultimately, after he recalled that the Alter Rebbe had instructed him not to become a Rebbe, he convinced the Tzemach Tzedek—the Alter Rebbe's grandson—to assume the position.

Reb Isaac was one of the few chassidim who wrote original chassidic discourses. His writings ("Asarah Maamarot" on various topics and "Channah Ariel" on the Torah) are known for their depth and uniqueness. Rabbi Isaac of Homil passed away on the 26th of Iyar 5617 (1857) and was buried in Homil.

One of the sages of Poland wanted to meet the Alter Rebbe of Chabad incognito. He donned simple clothing so that nobody would recognize him and went to see the Alter Rebbe. The Alter Rebbe, however, saw his greatness and said to him, "Garments like those are not fitting for a person like this!" and gave him white garments from his own home.

On his way back, the same sage had to pass through Homil, home of Rabbi Isaac of Homil. The Alter Rebbe sent him to see Rabbi Isaac and wrote to him: "Be diligent with the honor of the man, for he is a great man." Rabbi Isaac served him to the best of his abilities and when they parted, he asked him what he thought of the Alter Rebbe. The *tzaddik* answered: "I heard from him that if he had not heard from his rebbe (the *Maggid* of Mezritch) that the Ba'al Shem Tov was a human being, born to a woman, he would not have believed it; and, the same is true of him."

Later, Rabbi Isaac was not sure if the words "and the same is true of him" were the words of the *tzaddik* regarding the Alter Rebbe, or if they were the words of the Alter Rebbe regarding the *Maggid* of Mezritch, and was sorry that he did not ask him to clarify the point.

This question is typical of Rabbi Isaac of Homil, who would express his opinion about his rabbis. It is related that,

once Reb Isaac of Homil and Rabbi Hillel of Paritch sat at a farbrengen and the conversation turned to the levels of the different rebbes of Chabad. Rabbi Isaac, who had a personal connection as a devoted chassid with the first three rebbes of Chabad, said that the Alter Rebbe was privy to *ru'ach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration) all day long, that his son, the Mittler Rebbe, was able to tap into *ru'ach hakodesh* whenever he desired, and that the Tzemach Tzedek, the Alter Rebbe's grandson, had *ru'ach hakodesh* a number of times a day.

Rabbi Hillel of Paritch was a bit put off that his friend would dare to evaluate the levels of the rebbes and asked him: "And you, Reb Isaac? Do you too have *ru'ach hakodesh*?"

"I do not have *ru'ach hakodesh*," Reb Isaac answered, "but, I do have an understanding of *ru'ach hakodesh*."

True understanding of *ru'ach hakodesh* borders on actually having *ru'ach hakodesh*. Even Reb Hillel, who was one of the greatest *chassidim* of Chabad in all the generations, did not see this level as possible for a *chassid*. Reb Isaac's understanding of the levels of *tzaddikim* was based on many long years of service to his rebbes. He made himself into an empty vessel, which absorbed their spirit into him, internalizing it to the point that he could review their words in his own words and even add and innovate on the basis of their ideas. This is also how he was able to discern between the varying nuances of what seemed to most people to be one phenomenon and to reveal the wealth of subtlety behind the unified wondrous screen.

This can be likened to an art critic: Even though he himself is not an artist, after years of study and contemplating art, the critic can discern nuances that the artist himself may not have noticed. His attention makes it possible for the uninitiated to connect to those subtle hints that the artist unknowingly concealed in his work.

[Rabbi Isaac revealed concealed subtleties not only with respect to rebbes, but in the teachings of Chassidut, as well. He honed explanations and parables typical of Chabad in an extraordinary manner, and was even criticized for this from within Chabad. The critics feared that his explanations would turn Chassidut into simple, understood intellect, void of the feeling of Divinity. In our generation, however, we need not fear that we will simply understand Reb Isaac's teachings. For us, incomprehensible Divinity clearly shines through his deep parables for the supernal *partzufim* (personas), awakening wonder and amazement].

Ru'ach hakodesh is a main characteristic of the days of Mashiach, during which "I will pour out My spirit on all flesh." As such, in order to prepare for the days to come, it is upon us to acquire the refined sense to identify it. How can this be done? Let us contemplate Rabbi Isaac's first steps in the chassidic world:

When Reb Isaac entered the Alter Rebbe's room for the first time, he gave the Rebbe a *pidyon nefesh* (note with a written request) as was customary. Only five (Hebrew) words were written on the note: "The soul labors on how to come

close to Divinity.” He proffered the note to the Alter Rebbe and promptly fainted.

The labor of Chassidut touched Reb Isaac’s soul so much that he fainted immediately upon expressing his longing to the person who was destined to fill it. This level of identification with the words of God in the mouth of the *tzaddik* also highlights Rabbi Isaac’s sense for *ru’ach hakodesh*. According to the Ba’al Shem Tov’s secret of *chashmal*,¹ after *chash* (silence) comes *mal* (speaking). The silence here is full of submission when hearing the words of Torah from the *tzaddik*. Through his silent devotion, the *chassid* also develops a sense for the *tzaddik*’s essence. Reb Isaac, who merited this sense, was then able to ascend to the level of *mal*, and to speak and teach chassidic discourses.

Rabbi Isaac also demanded similar devotion from his students and sometimes tested their will:

A person came to Rabbi Isaac and asked him to teach him some words of Torah, because it was a matter of life and death for him. “For me, Chassidut is dear like 50 silver rubles.” Reb Isaac replied. “If I would ask you for 50 silver rubles would you be willing to give them to me?” The man saw that Reb Isaac was genuine about this and did not persist in requesting that he teach him words of Torah, and they spoke about other issues. “Liar and fool!” Reb Isaac eventually said to him. “If it was really a matter of life and death for you, would you not persist?”

Reb Isaac, who would sometimes become physically ill from his great desire to hear Chassidut, reprimanded this person, who attempted to deceive him, just as he was deceiving himself. Chassidut must touch the essence of the soul. This is the only way to truly understand it. Understanding according to Reb Isaac means to also innovate. To understand how Chassidut’s touch upon the soul creates new Torah, in words that no ear has ever heard. This is the concealed *mal*, which parallels separation, the stage between submission and sweetening. When a person is true to his essential self, his Torah swells forth from his essence and enchants his listeners with the truth inside.

¹ According to the Ba’al Shem Tov, the full process of *chashmal* includes three stages, usually referred to as *chash-mal-mal*, corresponding to: submission-separation-sweetening (הכנעה הבדלה המתקה). The first stage, *chash*, corresponding to submission, is silence. The first *mal* refers to a state of separation, following the etymology of *mal* as “circumcision” (מילה) and the second *mal* refers to sweetening or speech, following the etymology of *mal* as “word” (מלה).