

THE BAAL SHEM TOV

The founder of the Chassidic spiritual path was Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (1698-1760), best known as the Baal Shem Tov ("Master of the Good Name"). In the Eastern Europe of his day, any Jewish spiritual teacher considered to be adept at the Kabbalistic mysteries was called a "Baal Shem," or a master of Divine names. However, the Baal Shem Tov was unique among them. Orphaned at an early age, he received a profound directive from his dying father: "Yisrael, do not fear anyone or anything but the Creator. And love every Jew with all your heart and soul, regardless of who or what he may be." Although the story may be apocryphal, it eloquently sums up the Baal Shem Tov's ethic.

Even during his childhood, Yisrael turned to God, spending his days in the fields and forests near the village of Okup, reciting Psalms, praying, and speaking to the Creator in his own language. Like many of the Tzaddikim from the Patriarchs to the Arizal, he gave up the company of his peers, seeking to refine himself in solitude. (This path was also followed by the Baal Shem Tov's illustrious great-grandson, Rebbe Nachman of Breslev.) Although the local community provided for his education until he reached the age of *bar-mitzvah*, Yisrael disguised his piety and studied Torah at night or where others could not see him. During the day, he worked as an assistant in a school for small children.

After his marriage to Chana, the sister of the prominent scholar Rabbi Avraham Gershon of Kitov, he withdrew from the world altogether, sustaining himself as a clay-digger in the Carpathian mountains. There he fasted, studied Torah, meditated, and prayed. His wife was devoted to him in every way, bearing material hardship and the misunderstanding of her family without complaint. This prolonged retreat lasted for ten years, during which an angelic mentor, Achiyah HaShiloni, initiated Yisrael into the mysteries of the Torah. (The Gemara states that Achiyah was among those who left Egypt with Moses. He was also a prophet in the courts of King David and Solomon and taught the ways of prophecy to Elijah the Prophet.)

In 1734, at the age of thirty-six, the Baal Shem Tov told his brother-in-law that the time had come for him to teach publicly, as well as engage in healing the sick in body and soul. He settled in Tlust for a while; then, as his fame spread, he moved to Medzeboz, where he lived for the rest of his life. Some sought him out for remedies; others for Kabbalistic amulets known as *kameyot*; and people from all walks of life solicited his advice and blessings. But the main commodity the Baal Shem Tov offered was his unique path of meditation and Divine service.



Although firmly rooted in the Kabbalistic teachings of the *Zohar* and Arizal, the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov's approach is distinct. It makes us feel that God is right here, if we could but open our eyes and see. Some of its main features are:

INTENSE PRAYER (*Tefilah B'Ko'ach*): to concentrate on each word of the formal prayers, disregarding all foreign thoughts, until love and fear of God hidden in the recesses of the heart are aroused. Thus, the early Chassidim would pray at length, loudly and with fervor. The Baal Shem Tov taught that one should consider his voice to be that of the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) speaking through him.

TORAH STUDY (*Limud HaTorah*): to study all areas of Torah, but especially the legal codes in order to know how to perform the mitzvot correctly. The Baal Shem Tov advocated simplicity in one's studies, disapproving of artificial cleverness and intellectual conceit. He also praised the daily study of *Mussar* (ethical works).

DIVINE PROVIDENCE (*Hashgacha Pratit*): to perceive God's plan and purpose in every circumstance and in every facet of Creation – or at least to believe deeply in this principle. One who is thus attuned can fulfill the directive of the Psalmist to "know God in all your ways."

JOY (*Simcha*): to serve God with gladness, particularly in performing the mitzvot. Even mundane pursuits can be elevated to the realm of holiness if approached in a spiritual way. Asceticism, by contrast, leads to depression; moreover, it contains an even greater spiritual pitfall: that of pride. However, one who attains closeness to God will be constantly joyous. As the verse states, "Might and gladness are in His place." Since God is above all conflicting forces, entering into His Presence automatically redeems us from all distress.



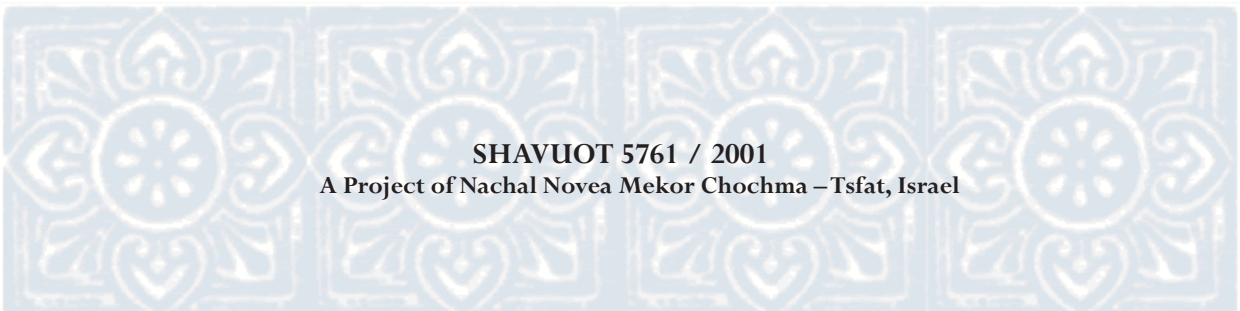


CONNECTING TO A SPIRITUAL MASTER (*Hitkashrut L'Tzaddikim*): to submit oneself to a true Tzaddik who can guide one along the path, pointing out one's possible errors, and empowering one to attain greater heights. One who succeeds will then be able to spiritually benefit others, as well.

LOVE (*Ahava*): There is a Kabbalistic teaching based upon the *Zohar* which asserts: "The Torah, the Jewish people, and the Holy One, blessed is He, are one." This is a compelling piece of mystical theology. But how can it be realized in our lives? According to the Baal Shem Tov, through love. Thus, he proclaimed: "I have come to this world to introduce a new path of serving God that is really very old. There are three things for which every person should strive: Love of God, love of one's fellow Jew, and love of Torah. If one does so, there is no need for self-mortification."

On the first day of Shavuot 5520 (1760), the Baal Shem Tov returned his soul to the Creator. According to Rabbi Yaakov of Medzeboz, the soul of the Baal Shem Tov departed as a blue flame. But in truth, the flame of the holy Baal Shem Tov still burns brightly to this day. 🌟

*Contributed by Dovid Sears, Director of the **Breslov Center for Spirituality and Inner Growth** in New York, and author of **Path of the Baal Shem Tov** (Jason Aronson 1997) and **Compassion for Humanity in the Jewish Tradition** (Jason Aronson 1998).*



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