

## A Tzaddik and His Students

Many Jews are attracted to spirituality but never think to look in their own religion to find it. Still more are unaware that chassidic philosophy and its practice are the “soul” and spiritual core of Judaism.

The starting point of the chassidic way of life is a chassid’s connection to his or her Rebbe. But like many of the more spiritual concepts in Judaism, the role and function of a Rebbe -- and the chassidic movement in general -- has been largely cloaked in mystery, misinterpreted, or simply unknown.

In this book, **A Tzaddik and His Students: *The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship***, Rabbi Shloma Majeski takes the reader on a step-by-step journey into the spiritual world of the Rebbe-chassid relationship, explaining the nature and purpose of a tzaddik/Rebbe, his connection with his chassidim, and the relevance of this phenomenon in the lives of every human being today.

Rabbi Shloma Majeski is the dean of Machon Chana Women’s Institute of Jewish Studies in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, home of the World Headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. A renowned lecturer on chassidic philosophy for over thirty years, Rabbi Majeski is the author of the acclaimed book *The Chassidic Approach to Joy* and a tape series entitled “The Basic Principles of Chabad Chassidic Philosophy.”



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ב"ס"ד

# A Tzaddik and His Students: THE REBBE-CHASSID RELATIONSHIP

By: Rabbi Shloma Majeski

(Chapter 1)



Published by  
**Sichos In English**

788 Eastern Parkway • Brooklyn, N.Y. 11213

5770 \* 2010  
Year of Faratzta



## **A Tzaddik and His Students: The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship**

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**Sichos In English**

788 Eastern Parkway • Brooklyn, N.Y. 11213

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**ISBN-13: 978-0-9814631-2-4**

**ISBN-10: 0-9814631-2-6**

For further reading about this and other topics in chassidic philosophy, information on how to obtain Rabbi Majeski's book *The Chassidic Approach to Joy*, and his tape series on chassidic philosophy, contact your local Jewish bookstore, sie100@aol.com, or call 718-778-5436.



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Printed in the U.S.A.

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\* \* \*

IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR DEAR PARENTS

Mr. Tzvi Hirsh ben Reb Yitzchok ע"ה Greenberg

Passed away on 19 Elul, 5771

Mrs. Chava bas Reb Chaim ע"ה Greenberg

Passed away on 25 Mar-Cheshvan, 5771

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

\*

DEDICATED BY THEIR CHILDREN שיחיו

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**  
 Horav **Schneur Zalman Halevi** ע"ה  
 ben Horav **Yitzchok Elchonon Halevi** הי"ד  
**Shagalov**

Passed away on 21 Tamuz, 5766

Reb **Dovid Asniel** ben Reb **Eliyahu** ע"ה  
**Ekman**

Passed away on 5 Sivan - Erev Shavuot, 5765

Mrs. **Devora Rivka** bas Reb **Yosef Eliezer** ע"ה  
**Marenburg**

Passed away on the second day  
 of Rosh Chodesh Adar, 5766

Reb **Yitzchok Moshe** (Ian)  
 ben Reb **Dovid Asniel** ע"ה  
**Ekman (Santiago, Chile)**

Passed away on the 24th day of Shevat, 5769

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

**AND IN HONOR OF**

Mrs. **Esther Shaindel** bas **Fraidel Chedva** שתחי'  
**Shagalov**

**DEDICATED BY**

Rabbi & Mrs. **Yosef Y.** and **Gittel Rochel** שיחיו  
**Shagalov**

The response to this, once again, is that the chassidic way of life introduced nothing new to Judaism. As with the other elements of Chassidism, the Baal Shem Tov recognized that reviving the intrinsic connection of the Jewish people with a Rebbe would not only heighten their awareness and consciousness of G-d's presence in the world and deepen their emotional connection to Him, it would hurtle them toward the realization of their destiny — the redemption of the Jewish nation with Moshiach.

The origin of the whole concept of a Rebbe and where it is found in Torah will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.



**IN LOVING MEMORY OF A DEAR FRIEND**  
 Reb **Mordechai** ben Reb **Shaul** ע"ה **Staiman**  
 Passed away on 22 Tamuz, 5763

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

\*

**IN LOVING MEMORY OF A DEAR FRIEND**  
 Mrs. **Shaina Mirel** bas Reb **Moshe** ע"ה **Merle**  
 Passed away on 23 Tamuz, 5766

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

\*

**DEDICATED BY THEIR FRIENDS**  
 Rabbi & Mrs. **Yosef Y.** and **Gittel Rochel** שיחיו  
**Shagalov**

one doesn't make calculations. On the contrary, a person will be driven to do as much as possible — more than what is required — for G-d.

We see a parallel in the physical realm in the relationship between a husband and wife. Suppose a husband and wife have respect, but no real feelings of love, for each other. The husband will do everything he is responsible to do and the wife will do everything she is responsible to do but neither will go beyond their obligations. On the other hand, two people in a relationship that is full of love will go way beyond what is required of them. In such a case, one's satisfaction and joy in the relationship will be dependent on doing more and more for the other.<sup>27</sup>

The same is true with our relationship to G-d. If a person has a passionate fire burning within him towards G-d, he will strive to do more and more to get closer to Him. Rather than feeling burdened by his obligations to G-d, doing more than what is required will only increase his pleasure and sense of satisfaction.

So to revitalize the spirit of Judaism, the Baal Shem Tov sought to develop and strengthen its soul, and that is why he taught and emphasized those areas of Jewish practice that have the ability to accomplish that.

*The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship.* Now we are in a better position to address the questions people raise regarding the concept of a Rebbe.

Some people may ask, "I can understand showing respect to a *tzaddik*, a Rebbe, but aren't people getting a little out of hand? The level of admiration people give him is what you would give to G-d, not to a person of flesh and blood."

## FOREWORD

Being a Chabad Rabbi has given me many opportunities to speak to varied audiences on the subject of chassidic life. One of the questions commonly asked by them all is, "What is the secret of the chassidim?"

People are intrigued by chassidim: the way they look and the way they live. Most of all, they are fascinated by the amazing energy and passion they see in the chassidic community.

Each year, thousands of people visit 770, World Headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch Chassidic movement, and Chabad centers around the globe. The reaction is often the same: they are awed and inspired by the incredible force and enthusiasm pulsating among the chassidim.

What exactly do they see? Although they observe driven men and women who never seem satisfied with their accomplishments, they see something deeper: faces that radiate a peace of mind and clarity of direction so rarely found in today's society.

Yet chassidim are as human as everyone else, no stranger to the day-to-day tribulations and personal struggles of life. What helps them navigate successfully through their challenges, though, is their fiery love for Judaism, their burning desire to teach others, and their relentless determination to achieve their goals.

Especially wondrous are the young *shluchim*, chassidic couples who are eager to leave their comfortable home environment, family and friends, to bring Judaism to remote Jewish communities all over the world. Surprisingly, although

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27. *Tanya*, ch. 39.

they are young and just beginning their adult lives, they possess the insight of experienced, seasoned, communal leaders. Whether opening a Chabad house, a Jewish pre-school or *yeshivah*, they have the stamina and confidence it takes to be successful.

The same fervor, devotion and warmth can be observed in all other chassidic communities. Impassioned with a burning love for Jewish life and practice, the joy and vitality chassidim exude permeate every aspect of their Jewish life.

From where do all these chassidim get their unique strength? What is their secret?

The answer is, their Rebbe.

### *The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship*

Moses, the quintessential Jewish leader, was the first leader of the Jewish people as a nation, taking us out of Egypt and leading us to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. A clear channel for G-d's words, he conveyed all the words of Torah to the people and taught them its laws, established a sanctuary for G-d in the desert (the *Mishkan*), and set up a system of advisors and judges to educate the people and enforce G-d's directives.

King David, King Solomon, Reb Yehudah haNassi and others were great spiritual leaders of the Jewish people as well. More than appointed leaders, they were also *tzaddikim* (purely righteous people) whose level of spirituality and G-dly wisdom was unparalleled in their respective generations.

Thousands of years later, in 1734, this model of Jewish leadership was revived with the advent of the chassidic movement founded by the Baal Shem Tov. He taught Jews — from the simplest laborers to the greatest Torah scholars — about

*Song*. In the realm of holiness, there are songs<sup>26</sup> that stimulate joy, songs that stimulate love for G-d, and songs that express the soul's yearning to be close to G-d. Regardless, all the songs are geared towards one thing — to stimulate the emotions and help us connect to G-d with our hearts.

*Joy*. Joy lifts our spirits and “opens the channel” to allow our feelings and our love for G-d to develop and flourish. Achieving this enables us to connect to G-d on the deepest levels. The opposite of joy, on the other hand, is not neutral. It makes us feel depressed or stagnant, and causes us to feel separate from G-d.

*Jewish Mysticism*. The difference between the revealed part of Torah and the mystical part of Torah is that the former deals with the technical aspects — the “do's and don'ts” — of Jewish life, while the latter deals with understanding G-d and His universe: how He created the physical and spiritual worlds, the spiritual purpose behind the *mitzvos*, and the spirituality of the soul. By studying the mystical part of Torah, we gain a better understanding of our relationship with G-d and His great kindnesses to us, and this strengthens and reinforces our belief in, and our love and awe for Him.

*Going Beyond the Letter of the Law*. Why would anyone want to go beyond the letter of the law? Aren't there enough rules to follow in Judaism? Are people just trying to make themselves miserable?

The answer to these questions is very simple. If a person observes the laws of Torah just to fill an obligation, then he or she will do exactly what's required and stop there. But if a person serves G-d out of strong feelings of love for Him, then

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26. In this context, “songs” refers to *niggunim*, holy melodies composed and sung by various chassidic masters and their chassidim in order to tap into the higher realms of G-dliness that are beyond words.

help strengthen the inner dimensions of a person such as developing healthy emotional traits and refining one's character.<sup>23</sup>

The same pattern operates within Judaism. There is a body of Judaism which consists of the physical, technical aspects of the Jewish way of life, such as what we are obligated to do and what we are prohibited from doing, along with the obligation to gain general knowledge in Torah.

Then there is the soul, or life-force, of Judaism that nurtures and strengthens Jewish practice from within. The soul of Judaism is revealed by emphasizing its emotional aspects such as our love and awe of G-d, developing our inner, G-dly qualities, and strengthening our faith and belief in Him. The common thread tying all the different aspects of chassidic life together is their integral role in strengthening the *soul* of Judaism.

Each of the following elements (mentioned previously) assists a person in accessing the soul of Judaism by developing and strengthening his inner qualities and emotions:

*Prayer.* While Torah study is connected to the mind (body), prayer is connected to the heart (soul). We learn this from the *Talmud*,<sup>24</sup> which states: "What is the source in the Torah for the commandment to pray? The verse [in the *Shema*]: 'You should serve G-d with all your heart' — that is prayer."<sup>25</sup> The way to develop a stronger emotional bond with G-d is by meditating on G-d's greatness and our relationship with Him during prayer, and this in turn stimulates our awe and love for Him.

the soul of Judaism: love of G-d, awe of G-d, and awareness of G-d. With the establishment of the Baal Shem Tov's learning center in Mezhibuzh and a core group of sixty of his greatest students, the basic structure of the chassidic movement coalesced and the Rebbe-chassid relationship was born.

Since great Jewish leaders and their followers existed throughout Jewish history, what was the innovation of the chassidic movement? Was anything new added to Jewish practice?

The Rebbe-chassid relationship added nothing and everything to Judaism. Adding nothing, it merely revived the practice of following a great spiritual leader, a head, of the Jewish people. Adding everything, it brought the deeper dimensions of this relationship into the equation.

So the Rebbe-chassid relationship consists of a leader, a Rebbe, and those who follow him, his chassidim. The Rebbe-chassid relationship is not solely academic, although the Rebbe teaches Torah to his chassidim and there is much study involved. Nor can it be characterized as a purely practical relationship, even though the Rebbe spends much time guiding the chassidim in how to live a Torah life. The Rebbe-chassid relationship is difficult to define because it is all-encompassing.

The chassidim and the Rebbe share a unique connection: the Rebbe has an intense love for every chassid and the chassid's heart is filled with love and awe for his Rebbe. Although his level of spirituality is far above those he leads, the Rebbe is not detached from his chassidim, nor do his chassidim feel that the Rebbe is inaccessible or distant from them. On the contrary, their intrinsic, soul-level bond is characterized by the

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23. The role of a Rebbe as "master of the soul" will be discussed later in the chapter and throughout this book.

24. *Taanis* 2a.

25. *Rashi* on *Deuteronomy* 11:13.



chassidic adage, that “a Rebbe is never alone, and the chassidim are never alone.”<sup>1</sup>

The extreme devotion and dedication that the chassidim have toward their Rebbe is legendary. But just as the relationship of chassid to Rebbe is one of deep closeness, it is even more so of the bond that the Rebbe has with his chassidim.

The Rebbe is sometimes described as a shepherd who cares tenderly for each individual sheep. Sometimes the Rebbe is compared to a father, who has unconditional love for his child. Sometimes he is compared to a king, who sees himself responsible for his nation, and sometimes to a teacher, who has a passion to share his knowledge with his beloved students. Indeed, there aren't adequate words or enough analogies to fully describe this unique bond.

As in any close relationship, there is much more than a mere transfer of information conveyed between the two parties. Chassidim turn to their Rebbe for encouragement, blessings and guidance in all areas of life. In addition to spiritual issues, they consult the Rebbe about family matters, health issues, business, child rearing, communal issues, and matters of artistic expression. Chassidim study their Rebbe's Torah teachings and follow his directives in how to live a fulfilling spiritual life. Indeed, a Rebbe's area of expertise encompasses the entire spectrum of human experience.

On a more spiritual level, the Rebbe is a general or collective soul, who encompasses the soul of all those destined to become his chassidim. When chassidim say they get their energy from their Rebbe, they are not just speaking in hyperbole but are expressing a spiritual reality.

All of these topics and their sources in Torah are discussed in the pages of this book.

To preface, a well-known analogy<sup>22</sup> is given to describe the nature of the Baal Shem Tov's mission and what it was meant to accomplish. It begins with the scenario of a person who has just fainted. One of the ways to revive him is by calling him by his own name. So, too, the Jews in the times of the Baal Shem Tov were in a spiritual faint, and G-d called us with our name, “[the people of] Yisrael.” How did He do that? By sending us Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, in order to wake us up to spiritual consciousness.

Now the person who has fainted has lost consciousness, but his body is very much alive. In the analogue, the body represents the body of Torah (the study and practice of the revealed teachings of the Torah) which was very much alive in those days, while the loss of consciousness, the faint, represents the state of the soul, the spirituality, in Torah observance. The Baal Shem Tov's mission revolved around maintaining a functioning body while reviving a weakened and depressed soul.

In all physical forms of life, there is a body and a soul. In a human being, for example, there are certain things that reinforce and strengthen the body, like food, sleep and exercise. There are other kinds of activities — like developing a positive attitude, refining one's emotions, softening one's ego, and giving of oneself to others — that strengthen and reinforce the soul; the inner dimensions of a person.

For all the various activities, there are different kinds of masters. For strengthening the body there are professionals such as doctors, nutritionists and exercise coaches whose specialty is to work with the mechanics of the body. There are other people, like teachers and counselors, whose specialty is to

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1. *HaYom Yom*, entry for 22 Iyar.

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22. *Kesser Shem Tov*, an anthology of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, (Kehot Publishing Company, Brooklyn, NY, 2004), p. 496.



“Well, then, they don’t *daven*? They don’t pray?”

“Actually, they spend hours a day in prayer.”

This went on and on. Finally the Rabbi said to them, “These are very peculiar nonbelievers indeed. You tell me that not only do they perform all the *mitzvos*, but they do more than is required. I have to see this for myself!”

The Rabbi went down to the square and saw these two chassidim with his own eyes, explaining later, “Looking at their faces, I saw such a brilliance and such a spiritual shine, I knew it was impossible for these people not to be G-dly, spiritual people. I began to do some research, and once I began to understand what Chassidism was all about, I was so impressed that I myself became a chassid.”

To this day, chassidim are known throughout the world as “ultra” Orthodox Jews, a reference to their going beyond the letter of the law. But this aspect of chassidic life is also nothing new. Throughout Jewish history, there was always a select group of people who expressed their love for G-d with a heightened observance of the *mitzvos*. The Baal Shem Tov merely emphasized this mode of practice in Jewish life and brought it to the masses.

### *Reviving the Soul of Judaism*

What was the Baal Shem Tov’s goal in bringing the chassidic movement to the Jewish public at large? Did he simply encourage the observance of a random collection of practices or was there some common thread connecting them all that contributed to an overall vision?

### *The Purpose of This Book*

Unfortunately, there is much confusion about the concept of a Rebbe and the Rebbe-chassid relationship. Many people raise challenging questions about its validity as well as its necessity: Doesn’t it detract from our relationship with G-d? Is it really Jewish? Isn’t it going a little overboard?

However, these questions are no different from the questions that have been raised about all aspects of Torah and *mitzvos* throughout the ages. The answer to all of them can be summed up in two words: knowledge and education.

The lack of knowledge or distorted information is what brings people to view Torah and *mitzvos* in a negative way. And poor or distorted knowledge can easily prevent one from fully appreciating the concept of a Rebbe and the Rebbe-chassid relationship.

The purpose of this book is to educate its readers about this subject, bringing sources from the Torah, *Talmud*, *Halachah*, and *Kabbalah*, and their commentaries to do so.

First and foremost, the information presented here will help the reader understand that a relationship with a Rebbe does not divert our focus from G-d, but actually enhances and deepens our relationship with Him.

In addition, the book will give insight into the nature of a Rebbe. Not just a dynamic leader, brilliant Torah scholar, and person of impeccable character refinement, a Rebbe is a spiritual giant. Head and shoulders above even the most seasoned Torah scholar, his mind, heart and soul is rooted in a higher spiritual G-dly realm. This realm, inaccessible to the ordinary person, is an absolute reality to the Rebbe.

By connecting to the Rebbe, a chassid is open to receive the flow of spiritual light radiating from him. This fills him

with passion and knowledge of how to live his life and fulfill the personal mission for which G-d has created him.

It is with this G-dly light that the Rebbe empowers, inspires, and lifts the chassid to a higher plane. The function of the Rebbe is not to impose his ideas or feelings upon his chassidim, but to inspire and lead each individual through a personal path which enables them to nurture and develop the personal, spiritual wealth they possess within their own soul.

Of course, this subject is very deep and very broad. There is much more to explore than what is written on the limited pages of this book. Even after the book has been read and the sources in all the footnotes researched, there is infinitely more to be learned.

Nevertheless it is my hope that this book will help in a significant way to open a small window by shedding light on the nature and purpose of the Rebbe-chassid relationship. In so doing, the truth of this phenomenon in Jewish life will be unsheathed, allowing all to appreciate it and opening a door for all those who desire to enjoy this experience personally in the most fulfilling way.

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11 Nissan, 5768, the birthday of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

hoped he would be executed, G-d forbid, and this would take care of the chassidic movement once and for all.

After serving 53 days in jail, he was eventually freed,<sup>20</sup> but during his jail term, several of his followers were also arrested. When two of these chassidim, the great chassidic scholars Reb Meir Raphaels and Reb Boruch Mordechai of Babroisk, were en route to jail, they were scheduled to pass through the *shtetl* in which the Rabbi in this story lived.

Several of the residents came to him and said, "The head of the community told us that two chassidim would soon be passing through this town and when they do, we should all stand at the corner where their carriage stops and throw rocks at them. As our Rabbi, we are asking you if we have permission to do that." Needless to say, the Rabbi was shocked.

"Throwing stones at other Jews?! Why?"

"Because we were told that they are *apikorsim* (nonbelievers)," they answered.

"Really?!" he said. "Explain this to me. Do they not put on *tefillin*?"

"No," they said. "They put on two pairs of *tefillin*."

"Well then tell me, do they eat *chometz*<sup>21</sup> on Pesach?"

"No!" they replied. "They don't even let the matzah get wet. They suspect that if the matzah were to get wet, there might be a small chance that the dough would become *chometz*."

"So, do they not wear *tzitzis*?"

"No! They wear *tzitzis* that hang down to the ground!"

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20. See *The Arrest and Liberation of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*, A. C. Glitzenstein (in English translation by Jacob Immanuel Schochet, Kehot Publication Society, 770 Eastern Pkwy, Brooklyn, NY, 1964).

21. Wheat products which are made with leavening, prohibited on Pesach.

With his holy vision, the Baal Shem Tov recognized the need to take this a step further and make these mystical teachings available to the masses.

### *Going Beyond the Letter of the Law*

One last example of a basic principle in chassidic life is the idea of going “beyond the letter of the law” in Torah study and *mitzvah* observance.

Every practicing Jew follows *halachah* — the things required of a Jew according to Torah law. A person, though, can go beyond the call of duty, doing more than what is required. The *Talmud*<sup>18</sup> calls such a person a chassid, and because the chassidic movement adopts going beyond the letter of the law as a way of life, this is another reason why its adherents are called chassidim.

In a well-known story, a certain chassid once related how he himself became a chassid as a result of experiencing this practice of going beyond the letter of the law. He was a Rabbi in a small *shtetl* and was totally disassociated with everything outside of the *shtetl*, including the raging conflict between the chassidic movement and its opponents.

At that point, the conflict was so intense that the opponents of Chassidism arranged to have the Alter Rebbe, the first Rebbe of Chabad,<sup>19</sup> accused of high treason and arrested by the Russian government. Through this arrest they

### *Acknowledgments*

This book has been twenty years in the making. It began with a discussion one summer in the country with Rabbi Berel Bell, who encouraged me to make tapes of my classes at Machon Chana and turn them into a tape series on basic concepts in chassidic philosophy. It continued with Rabbi Yonah Avtzon, the director of Sichos In English, who believed in the project and not only polished and packaged the tapes for the general public, but was the driving force behind turning the eight-part series on “The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship” into this book. The process of transforming the rough transcripts of the tapes into a professionally written book was painstakingly accomplished by editor and former Machon Chana student, Mrs. Rochel Chana Riven, who kept the transcripts on her computer for several years until she felt adequately prepared to undertake the project.

I speak for all of us when I say that one thing above all motivated each one of us, and that is our love for and devotion to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. It is our relationship with him — each one in his or her own unique way — that inspires us to share what we know and what we hold dear about the Rebbe and the Rebbe-chassid relationship.

I would like to thank the following people for their significant contributions to this effort.

To the editor, **Mrs. Rochel Chana Riven**, for dedicating her prodigious time, effort, and G-d-given talent to help make this book a reality. Her ability to articulate deep ideas clearly and smoothly, yet retain the essence of the author’s vision, is truly an art.

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18. *Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers)* 6:1; see the commentaries of *Rashi* and *Rambam* on this *mishnah*.

19. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). A spiritual grandson of the Baal Shem Tov and a prominent disciple of the Maggid of Mezritch, the Baal Shem Tov’s successor, the Alter Rebbe established the branch of the chassidic movement known as Chabad, known for its emphasis on spiritual refinement through the intellectual understanding of G-dliness and through prayer.

To **Rabbi Yonah Avtzon**, the director and backbone of Sichos In English, who tirelessly supervised every detail of this project and hundreds like it in his thirty years at the helm of this organization.

To **Yosef Yitzchok Turner**, whose artistry, meticulousness and care in producing the pleasing layout for this book have added much to its readability.

To **Rabbi Berel Bell**, a Rabbinic judge of the *Beis Din* of Montreal, who directed me to Sichos In English and gave me the confidence to undertake this project.

To **Rabbi Aharon Leib Raskin** for his diligence in providing sources and valuable advice about the text.

To **Mrs. Tzivia Yaffee**, who transcribed the tape series on which this project is based with great devotion.

To **Avrohom Weg**, for his beautiful work designing the cover of the book.

authentic and essential part of the Torah. Many people were confused and disturbed when the Baal Shem Tov began teaching these secrets of Torah to the masses. Some questioned the legitimacy of the *Kabbalah* and mystical teachings in general, and some, recognizing their authenticity, objected to making them accessible to simple people.

Regarding their legitimacy, a bit of background is in order. *Kabbalah* and the teachings of Jewish mysticism are referred to as *nistar*. *Nistar* means “hidden,” and these teachings are considered the hidden dimensions of Torah. The revealed part of the Torah<sup>17</sup> is called *nigleh* which means “revealed.”

A very great scholar known as the Chasam Sofer once said, “When a person argues *b’nigleh* against *nistar*, this is an indication that *b’nistar* he argues against *nigleh*,” meaning, that when a person openly (*b’nigleh*) denies the teachings of the hidden part of Torah (*nistar*), it’s an indication that in secret (in his heart — *b’nistar*), he also denies the teachings of the revealed part of Torah (*nigleh*), because the hidden and the revealed parts of Torah are all one.

The mystical teachings of Torah were always studied by the greatest Torah scholars and sages throughout Jewish history, but even among this elite group, there were only a select few in each generation who had access to this wisdom. In later times, revealing the hidden secrets of the Torah (i.e., *Kabbalah*) to the public — in this case, to a much broader group of Torah scholars — came about two hundred years before the Baal Shem Tov through the *AriZal*, when he declared, “It is a *mitzvah* to reveal [the wisdom of the *Kabbalah*].”

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foremost authority on the *Kabbalah* since Reb Shimon bar Yochai, he is perhaps most well known for his magnum opus *Etz Chayim*, a compilation of his Kabbalistic teachings penned by Rabbi Chaim Vital.

17. Consisting of *Chumash* (the Five Books of Moses), *Navi* (Prophets), *Kesuvim* (Writings), *Midrash*, *Talmud*, *Halachah* (Torah Law) and all the accompanying commentaries.

time, one emphasized Torah study and one emphasized prayer. In Vilna, whose central figure was the Vilna *Gaon*, Reb Schneur Zalman would be in the court of one of the greatest Torah masters of all time. In the city of Mezritch, he would focus on the service of prayer under the great chassidic master, the Maggid of Mezritch.<sup>13</sup>

In weighing his choice, he reasoned, “I have already had a lot of training in how to study Torah, but not a lot of training in how to pray.” And so he chose Mezritch.<sup>14</sup> In this defining moment, the chassidic movement gained its most central figure.<sup>15</sup>

The emphasis on lengthy and heartfelt prayer was not an innovation of the chassidic movement. On the contrary, praying at length was a practice that took on great importance at various times throughout Jewish history. If there *was* an innovation, it was that the Baal Shem Tov recognized that extra focus on the service of prayer was a necessary ingredient in the overall service of *all* the Jews in our times — regardless of Torah scholarship and level of observance — and not just the practice of an elite few.

### *Jewish Mysticism*

The mystical teachings of the Torah — the *Zohar*, the writings of the *AriZal*,<sup>16</sup> and other Kabbalistic texts — are an

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13. Reb Dov Ber of Mezritch (d. 1772), the main disciple and successor of the Baal Shem Tov, who developed the next generation of chassidic masters under his tutelage.
  14. *Sefer HaSichos*, 5745 (Talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 1985; Kehot Publication Society., Brooklyn, NY), p. 132.
  15. By establishing Mezritch as a center whose main emphasis was prayer, Reb Schneur Zalman (the Alter Rebbe) publicly identified the idea of prayer as being the major focal point of the chassidic way of life.
  16. The *AriZal* (translated as “The Lion, of blessed memory,” from an acronym of his name “The Ashekanic Rabbi Isaac”) is the name commonly used for Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572), a Jewish mystic in the Israeli town of Safed. The

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE REBBE-CHASSID RELATIONSHIP: A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF THE TORAH

A chassid’s connection to his or her Rebbe is one of the most fundamental aspects of chassidic life. In the Jewish world at large, it is also one of the most misunderstood. Like many of the more spiritual concepts in Judaism, the role and function of a Rebbe has been largely cloaked in mystery, misinterpreted, or simply unknown.

So what exactly is a Rebbe? Is he a *tzaddik* (a completely righteous person)? A Torah genius? Is he a leader who inspires, guides, teaches, and counsels his followers in matters of personal and religious life?

A Rebbe is all of the above. But no matter how many lofty qualities and superlatives you attribute to a Rebbe, he is much more than that. A Rebbe is someone whose entire being is permeated with G-dliness; one of the few people whom G-d has “planted in each generation” to give the Jewish people a window into depths of spirituality they could not possibly perceive, understand, or sense on their own.

A Rebbe has no worldly desires other than connecting to G-d, following the laws of the Torah and guiding others to do the same. This unique dimension is what differentiates him from common Torah scholars and leaders.

There are many different groups of chassidim, each with their own unique customs and way of life. Nevertheless,



common to all chassidic groups<sup>1</sup> is the connection between the chassidim and their Rebbe.

Fearing comparisons to other religions, Jews, out of a lack of knowledge, have often rejected and even publicly condemned some of the most basic concepts of their own tradition. If Jews have a direct connection to G-d, say some, how can a Jew or a Jewish group place so much importance on a human being of flesh and blood?

The lack of understanding of the Rebbe-chassid relationship and the role of a Rebbe in the overall scheme of Judaism can easily lead to misconceptions. The purpose of this book will be to address these misconceptions and provide a clear and enlightening explanation of the historical origins and ongoing importance of a Rebbe in Jewish life and his connection with his followers.

### *The Origins of the Chassidic Movement*

The spiritual dimension of Judaism known as Chassidism<sup>2</sup> existed since the beginning of time but was kept a guarded secret, passed down from *tzaddik* to *tzaddik* in each generation. It was only revealed to the masses by Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, known as the Baal Shem Tov,<sup>3</sup> “the Master of the Good Name,” in the early 1700s, when dire circumstances

One of the main services performed in the *Beis HaMikdash* by the Levites was praising G-d through song. Regardless of whether they sang or played instruments, an integral part of their holy service there was to fill the Holy Temple with music. Often attributed to an innovation of Chassidism, song has always played a role in Jewish practice. The Baal Shem Tov merely recognized the need to bring this aspect of Torah life to the forefront.

### *Prayer*

An emphasis on deep and heartfelt prayer is another practice that characterizes the chassidic movement.

The *Talmud*<sup>10</sup> discusses certain individuals from early *Talmudic* times who would spend up to nine hours a day on prayer. For each of the three daily prayers, they would prepare an hour before prayer, spend an hour on the actual prayer, and then take an hour to absorb and internalize what they gained from each experience, totaling nine hours of daily prayer.<sup>11</sup>

Even though these people lived approximately 1,800 years before the chassidic movement, they were called chassidim, so when the Baal Shem Tov instituted a revival of lengthy prayer, his adherents also became referred to as chassidim.

When the time came for Reb Schneur Zalman of Liadi,<sup>12</sup> the great Torah genius and future first Rebbe of Chabad, to decide where to further his studies, he considered two opportunities. Of the two Torah centers in the world at that

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1. Some of the more well-known chassidic groups today include Lubavitch (Chabad), Belz, Bobov, Breslov, Satmar, and Ger.

2. *Chassidus* in Hebrew.

3. Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer (1698-1760), founder of the chassidic movement. Born in the Ukraine, Rabbi Yisrael was orphaned at a young age and learned the secrets of Torah from hidden *tzaddikim* as well as the prophet Achiyah HaShiloni. At the age of 36, he revealed his teachings to the masses, thus beginning the chassidic movement.

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10. *Berachos* 32b.

11. The *Talmud* asks, if they spent so much time on prayer, when did they have time to study Torah or accomplish anything else? The *Talmud* answers that because they were such righteous people and they prayed so much, there was a special blessing in their study. In the merit of their prayers, they were able to accomplish in the little available time they had the same amount of Torah study that took others all day.

12. Later referred to as the “Alter Rebbe.”



special practices which demonstrate appropriate aspects of joy for each of the holidays.

Even though joy is the general mood of these holidays, the essence of one of the holidays, Sukkos, is joy itself. In the special holiday prayers, Sukkos is called *z'man simchaseinu* (the time of our joy). In the times of the Holy Temple (*Beis HaMikdash*) in Jerusalem, there was so much singing, dancing and rejoicing during the holiday of Sukkos and the intermediate nights of *Simchas Beis HaSho'evah*, that if a person did not experience that joy it was considered as if he never experienced real joy in his life.

Clearly, then, joy has always been part of the Torah and an important aspect of the Jewish way of life. What the Baal Shem Tov revealed was that his times necessitated an increased emphasis and focus on this particular area of Torah practice in greater measure than before.

### *Song*

Another heightened aspect of chassidic life is serving G-d through song. Song is so intrinsic to the chassidic way of life that someone well-versed in chassidic melodies can actually hear a particular melody and identify from which chassidic group it originated.

Critics of Chassidism called the use of song as a vehicle for inspiration a waste of time, claiming that inspiration can only be stimulated through learning Torah.

But the idea of serving G-d through song is hardly new. After the Jews were miraculously saved at the Splitting of the Sea, the first thing the Torah records is the Song of Moses and the Song of his sister Miriam in praise of G-d.

among the Jewish people necessitated the revelation of its teachings.<sup>4</sup>

Many Jewish groups rose up in fierce opposition against the chassidic movement, claiming that it added new aspects and practices to Judaism — a clear violation of Torah law. Ignorant of the truth and validity of chassidic philosophy, and not wanting to repeat the calamities that accompanied the false messiah, Shabtai Tzvi, these Jewish groups committed themselves to eradicating the movement. It took nearly a century to satisfy the questions and concerns posed by other Jewish groups regarding the legitimacy of Chassidism. Through systematic and intellectual exposition, chassidic Rebbes and their followers successfully demonstrated how every aspect of Chassidism is firmly rooted in Torah — whether the Written Torah, *Midrash*, Oral Torah, or the *Zohar* — and how chassidic teachings are not additions to, but deeper dimensions of, already existing Torah lore.

Everything in Chassidism has its source in Torah. The only “new” thing that the Baal Shem Tov introduced was that previously unstressed details and aspects of the Torah way of life were brought to the fore and given more attention.

An analogy can be drawn from the medical field. More than a century ago, the practice of medicine was primarily performed by general practitioners. Medical specialty did not exist; medicine was practiced for the most part by a family practitioner who treated everything. He treated the heart. He treated the brain. He treated the bones. He delivered babies. He performed surgery.

The concept of medical specialization emerged in the 19th century, when certain areas of medicine were singled out for

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4. For more on this, see the section entitled “Reviving the Soul of Judaism” later in this chapter.

more focused study. Eventually, a doctor would choose a certain field such as cardiology, gastroenterology, or neurology on which to concentrate. But what happened when a doctor chose a field of specialty? Did all of his general medical knowledge become obsolete or had the concept of healing been fundamentally altered? Of course not. He simply took his previous knowledge and focused more deeply on one specific area. In so doing, he enhanced and brought more efficiency to that particular field.

The same is true of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. Although everything that the Baal Shem Tov “introduced” and taught is found in Torah and is part of the Torah way of life, his chassidic philosophy deepened and amplified each of its components. Firmly grounded in the “general practice” of Judaism, chassidic philosophy offered “specialization” in those aspects of Jewish life that needed to be strengthened in order to heal and awaken the Baal Shem Tov’s ailing generation and the generations that followed.

The same concept applies to the role of a Rebbe in Jewish life. The relationship of the Jewish people with their Rebbe is nothing new; it has always existed in Torah starting with the first Rebbe, Moses,<sup>5</sup> and has always been an essential part of the Torah way of life.<sup>6</sup> What the Baal Shem Tov taught was that this aspect of Jewish life would need to be rekindled in order to revive and strengthen Jewish practice in times of devastating hardship. Whether to stay firm in their faith during the pogroms of Europe or the 21st century’s floodgates of assimilation, certain aspects of Torah life would need to be revived to ensure Judaism’s survival.

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5. The common Hebrew name for Moses is Moshe *Rabbeinu*, which is translated as Moshe our Rebbe (i.e., Teacher).

6. The *Midrash* tells us that in every generation there is someone like Moses (*Bereishis Rabbah* 56:7).

Before explaining the role of a Rebbe in chassidic life, let’s look at the following examples which illustrate how other aspects of chassidic life — aspects that may have erroneously been seen as innovations — have their source in Torah and Torah practice.

### *Simchah*

A common factor in all chassidic groups, being *b’simchah* (happy) was one of the fundamental concepts taught by the Baal Shem Tov. So basic is happiness to chassidic life that before the chassidic people were called chassidim, one of their transitory names was the Yiddish term “*de freilicha* — the happy ones.”

Opponents to the chassidic movement would erroneously condemn *simchah* in one’s G-dly practice as negative or frivolous, yet the importance of joy in one’s Divine service was not an innovation of the Baal Shem Tov — it’s an essential part of Torah. As the verse in the *Book of Psalms*<sup>7</sup> states: “*Ivdu es Hashem b’simchah*” — “You should serve G-d with joy.” And the *Talmud* states<sup>8</sup> that “*Ein haShechinah shoreh ela mitoch simchah*” — “G-d’s presence will only dwell upon a person when he is in a state of joy.” As such, a prophet, for example, was not able to receive prophecy unless he was in a state of joy. If he were morose or depressed, G-d’s presence would not dwell upon him.

One of the most important aspects of the *Shalosh Regalim* — the three main Jewish holidays of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkos — is to be in a state of joy.<sup>9</sup> There are even certain Torah laws connected to expressing and stimulating joy, and

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7. Psalm 100:2.

8. *Shabbos* 30b. See also *Tanya*, ch. 31.

9. See *Chagigah* 6a.