

B”H



TRANSFORMING YOUR COMMUNITY WITH CHASSIDUS

From acclaimed chozer and maniyach,
author and chassidic teacher
Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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INTRODUCTION

My dear colleague and shliach,

L'kovod the 200th hilula of the Alter Rebbe, the Meaningful Life Center is leading a shluchim-only online webinar, titled Transforming your Community With Chassidus.

I feel it important to briefly share what compelled me to do this (not that spreading Chassidus needs a reason).

As I was preparing some classes and articles about this bicentennial of Chof Dalet Teves, and reviewing the Rebbe's sichos 50 years ago, I was struck by how much the Rebbe was demanding of us then, and especially the shluchim, to learn Chassidus "b'shufi" and do whatever possible to conquer our communities and the world with Chassidus.

If that was the shturem the Rebbe made then, a half century ago, I wondered what type of shturem the Rebbe would be making now, in connection with the 200th hilula...

Muvon u'poshut that anything the Rebbe said at a Farbrengen was as if he was calling each of us personally into yechidus and charging us with this mission. So I asked myself -- and I suggest that each of you ask yourself -- what would I say to the Rebbe if he called me in to his room and asked what I was doing to fulfill his words 50 years ago, al achas kamoh today, to do whatever I can to help spread the Alter Rebbe's Chassidus?

The Rebbe's piercing words 50 years ago resound today more than ever and deeply compel us to take some significant strides in shaking up the status quo and make a tumel in transforming our communities with Chassidus by applying its teachings as indispensably relevant life tools to every person we meet. The Rebbe's sichos, which I was zoche to work on the for many years, can teach us volumes on how to present the methodology of Chassidus as a blueprint for life for people of all backgrounds, as I have personally witnessed on a small scale through the books and articles I have written, and classes taught.

We are not just Rabbis and educators; we are the Rebbe's shluchim, entrusted with the most precious gem in the keser ha'melech given to us by the neshomo chodosh, the Alter Rebbe, and all the Rebbeim until our own Rebbe -- to convey this gem and transform, yes nothing less than transform, lives! Anything less would not do justice to the lives, kochos, hours, sweat, blood and tears that the Rebbeim poured out, all -- for us...

200 years doesn't come every day. Im lo achshov, aimosei?

I am committed to do everything in my power to help spread this revolution. Let us join together as partners. I am willing to use whatever skills and resources I have to help develop the methodologies and modalities to make Chassidus addictive by showing how it can radically enhance improve every aspect of how we teach and communicate. For this to work well we need to interact, cross-pollinate ideas and get your feedback and suggestions in making this a viable and sustainable effort.

This objective -- launched in honor of the 200th Chof Dalet Teves -- is the driving force behind the upcoming webinar: To help each shliach recognize what he is truly capable of and the power of our greatest asset -- Chassidus. Armed with Chassidus and the method to present it, shluchim can achieve their greatest goals and beyond.

I don't see this as a onetime event, but rather -- in the words of the Rebbe: a peulah nimsheches -- as a launch of many events, resources and materials to once and for all give Chassidus and the Rebbeim the prominence they deserve -- fulfilling our core shlichus, one that has not changed in nine generations: Yofutzu Mayonosecho Chutzah, which leads to osi mar do Malka Meshicha.

I am very much looking forward to these webinars. Hopefully it will help live up to a bit of the Rebbe's expectations of us.

Warmly,

Simon Jacobson

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

Modern-day science believes that we humans are evolved beasts, driven by primal, narcissistic needs and feelings. What can we truly expect of creatures obsessed with survival of the fittest? What can we really look forward to for the future of the human race?

In this fascinating essay, Simon Jacobson dissects our current view of the human psyche, and offers a fresh psychological model that will revolutionize the way you think about yourself and the world.

It is commonly accepted that the age of modern psychology began at the end of the 19th century. The way we understand ourselves today is very much defined by the thinking of William James, then Sigmund Freud, who some call the Father of Psychology, followed by Carl Jung, BF Skinner and other great psychologists of the 20th century.

I would like to submit that the Father of Psychology is actually a man who lived a century earlier, and has yet to be recognized as the true pioneer of modern psychology.

That man was Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), and he offered the most sophisticated and comprehensive view to date on the nature of the human psyche and its struggles.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's (also known as the Alter Rebbe) immense contribution can be appreciated by contrasting it with the prevalent view on the psyche.

The big issue facing psychology is of course the human struggle between our conflicting drives. On the lowest end of the spectrum is our selfish need to survive and experience pleasure. On the next rung, our practical need to co-exist, to love and be loved and live productive lives. Then we have our ethical values and our conscience. And finally, our higher, spiritual and transcendental dimensions.

Human anxiety is a result of our conflicting voices. How we treat and mistreat others is determined by which force controls our behavior. Vulnerable and impressionable children, of course, are the first to suffer the consequences and are hurt the deepest by our clashing drives colliding with each other. And we all begin our lives as children. Then, these children grow up and have to pick up the pieces, try to heal from their wounds and rebuild their lives.

The rest is history – your history and mine, the history of every person alive today struggling with the disparate forces that shape our personalities and define our life choices. A vicious cycle indeed.

Plaguing thinkers from the beginning of time is the million-dollar question: Who is the real you? Or more precisely: Which of our drives is the most powerful one? Which is most dominant?

The prevalent theory – which can be coined the Darwinian-Freudian model – argues that the most powerful and most basic human drive is selfish survival.

Humans are fundamentally no different than other creatures, and indeed have evolved from the same ancestors. According to Darwin's theory of Natural Selection, variation within species occurs randomly and the survival or extinction of each organism is determined by that organism's ability to adapt to its environment. Another name Darwin (1809-1882) gave Natural Selection was "the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life."

Darwin did not speak in psychological terms. Indeed, he avoided applying his theory to the social and religious arena. It was apparently British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who first used the term "survival of the fittest" as a central tenet of what became known as "Social Darwinism." He applied (or some say misapplied) Darwin's idea of natural selection to justify European domination and colonization of much of the rest of the world. Social Darwinism was also widely used to defend the unequal distribution of wealth and power in Europe and North America at the time. Poor and politically powerless people were thought to have been failures in the natural competition for survival. Subsequently, helping them was seen as a waste of time and counter to nature. Rich and powerful people did not need to feel ashamed of their advantages because their success was proof that they were the most fit in this competition.

In the psychological realm, Freud (1856-1939) posited that the most basic of all human instincts is the "Id," the primal, unconscious source for satisfying all man's basic needs and feelings. It has only one rule: The "pleasure principle:" "I want it and I want it all now." The id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation or the good of others.

Then there is the "Ego," the rational part of the mind that relates to the real world and operates via the "reality principle," recognizing that you can't always get what you want. The Ego realizes the need for compromise and negotiates between the Id and the Superego, which might be called the moral part of the mind. The Superego is an embodiment of parental and societal values. It stores and enforces rules. The Ego's job is to get the Id's pleasures but to be reasonable and bear the long-term consequences in mind. The Ego denies both instant gratification and pious delaying of gratification.

Freud described the human personality as being: "...basically a battlefield. He is a dark-cellar in which a well-bred spinster lady (the superego) and a sex-crazed monkey (the id) are forever engaged in mortal combat, the struggle being refereed by a rather nervous bank clerk (the ego)."

Thus an individual's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are the result of the interaction of the id, the superego, and the ego. This creates conflict, which leads to anxiety, which in turn generates all types of defense mechanisms.

Though Freud may not have directly correlated his theories to Darwin's, it's irresistible to avoid the parallels, and how each complements the other. If humans are merely "billion year old bacteria" and essentially no different than any other animal fighting for survival, then it would make absolute sense that our most dominant drive is fixation on our own needs and pleasure, even at the expense of others. "Survival of the fittest."

Obviously, there are many variations of this theory. There are also many opinions that fundamentally disagree with Freud. Still, despite the differences, the prevailing view tends to lean toward the Darwinian-Freudian model.

One of the sad consequences of this viewpoint is the lack of expectation we can have of each other. If our most natural self is the need to survive and the narcissistic pursuit of pleasure, then what can we really expect of people?! Can we really be disappointed if someone ends up hurting others in his/her own driving need for pleasure? Can we even blame the person? After all, we are sophisticated "bacteria" just trying to survive in a hostile environment... Yes, we can expect of humans to create superimposed rules, like "red lights" and "green lights" so that we can coexist and not destroy each other. But that is superimposed, not our natural state.

It's interesting to note, that the original German for Freud's Ego is "ich," yet another manifestation of the "self." So even as the Ego negotiates between the Id and the Superego, it still is fundamentally self motivated. [Superego, Uber-ich, can be translated as a dimension that is above – that transcends – the ego. But it can also mean a superman, ultra ego].

If you take it to the anarchist extreme, one can even question our entire justice system. Are we really expecting people to be better, or are we just trying to keep the "store" intact so that we don't self-destruct. In other words, if the "cat were let out of the bag," anarchy would prevail. So we need subjective, arbitrary rules to maintain order.

No wonder fear is the most commonly used tool in education, and punishment is the most popular deterrent to crime. Since people are essentially animals, with an ominous Id lurking within, never knowing when it will strike, we can't depend or trust that people will just do the "right thing" and "rise to the occasion."

That sure sounds harsh, doesn't it?! And indeed, I amplified certain points in order to crystallize the issues, but I have not distorted any of them, and the description above more or less describes contemporary psychological theory.

No doubt that many of us are surely repulsed by this dark perspective on human nature. You may wonder: What about the soul? What about the beautiful acts of nobility and heroism we witness time and again? What about all those people who paid heavy, selfless prices for their beliefs and for protecting others?

How does all human virtue and dignity fit into the Darwinian-Freudian model?

And what about the inner voice that resonates so deeply in most people that good must prevail? And the disturbing feelings we feel when innocent people are hurt? Is all that yet

another evolutionary aberration -- a quirk -- that is inconsistent with the cardinal law of "survival of the fittest"?! Or is it the other way around: Perhaps the good in humans is the most dominant force, and the current "low-end" model may be flawed.

These are excellent questions. Indeed, these and other vital questions are catalysts that compel us to recognize that there is a serious gaping hole in the Darwinian-Freudian model.

After all, no one has ever seen the human psyche. By definition the unconscious defies conscious human observation. Let alone the soul. So, basically all theories about the psyche are as subjective and arbitrary as the people positing these theories and their own life experiences.

No one is blaming Freud or other psychologists. But all they really could offer us is based on their personal psychological experiences. Perhaps some of them were surrounded predominantly by Id-like experiences, which informed their observations and conclusions? Had they truly experienced the selflessness of the soul, they may have incorporated other theories into their models.

All that is speculation. Let's get back to history.

Preceding all these thinkers, was Rabbi Schneur Zalman's psychological model, which is defined by three revolutionary principles:

- 1} Human self-control is inherent, not acquired.
- 2} The essence of a human is good and Divine; the Yid, not the Id.
- 3} Even man's intrinsic self and selfishness ("itness") is rooted in the Essence of the Divine Self.

Here's a brief overview of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model.

A person carries two voices, two souls: The animal soul and the Divine one. In the words of Ecclesiastes, "The human spirit ascends on high; the spirit of the beast descends down into the earth." They are in constant struggle, with the animal soul seeking instant gratification and pleasure (like the Id), and the Divine soul seeking transcendence and unity. The animal spirit wants to be "more animal," hence more self-ego. The Divine spirit wants to be "more Divine," more selfless.

The domain of the animal manifests in the impulsive emotions, while the domain of the Divine spirit rests in the reflective mind, which can control and temper impulsive reactions. A young child for instance, is controlled entirely by emotion, and yells out "I want it and I want it all now." Similarly the animal within us selfishly barks "give, give." As our minds develop we gain the ability to reflect, repress, temper or channel our impulses.

The question of course is, as mentioned earlier, which is our most dominant force?

The answer is the Divine soul. The inner good in man is the most dominant force in our lives. Yet, this force is locked in battle with the animal soul. We have the freedom and the ability to overcome any temptation if we so wish through self control ("moach shalit al halev," the mind's dominance over the emotions).

Self Control

An argument can be made that self-control is an acquired skill that comes later in life, and is superimposed over the inherent impulses of the heart. And as a rule, an acquired skill will never be as powerful as an inherent one. It can dominate for a while, but when "push comes to shove," and survival is at stake, we will gravitate to the inherent.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman categorically rejects that argument, and unequivocally states that the power of self-control is natural and inherent to the human being. We are born with that quality. But like other talents, it takes time for it to emerge in our lives. As our mind develops, it brings out our inherent self-control.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman actually supports this with a verse in Ecclesiastes, which equates the dominance of the mind over folly [of the impulsive heart] to the natural dominance of light over darkness. Unlike fire and water, two equal adversaries, which have the power to extinguish each other, light naturally dispels darkness.

-- Incidentally, this is the essential theme of Chanukah, when we light the flames at sundown and facing the street, to demonstrate the victory of spirit over matter, quality over quantity, and the few over the many.

The Essence is Good

True, we have an impulsive animal spirit. But even more powerful than the animal is the Divine Image in which each human being was created.

Yes, we have an inherent primal, unconscious force that shapes all our behavior. But the deepest force within us is not the Id, but the Yid, the "pintele yud," the Divine spark (like the Hebrew letter Yud, which looks like a dot).

Fueled by our (inherent) self-control, behavioral discipline helps us access our inner good and bring it to the surface.

So, in Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model, behavioral change goes hand in hand with internal work.

The Human Self Below is Rooted in the Divine Self Above

One can argue that all vice (greed, selfishness, corruption etc.) is rooted in the inherent "itness" of our ego, the sense of self-containment that feels as if it has no source and is utterly independent of anything except itself. The self is driven to survive and distinguishes us from others. If we felt, for instance, that we were integrally connected to a higher unity and to other people, like limbs of one body, we would never hurt each other, just as one limb doesn't hurt another in a healthy body.

This would lead us to conclude, that ethical and spiritual goals must include some form of "self" sacrifice. As long as the self-contained self is intact, the basic drives of self-survival will continue to impede spiritual growth.

According to this way of thinking, the ego is the root of all evil, and the independent "self" is an illusion and a distortion that must be eliminated.

Hence, all spiritual disciplines include measure to tame and even nullify the ego.

Enters Rabbi Schneur Zalman with a radically different approach -- which may be his greatest contribution of all. He explains, in perhaps one of the most powerful philosophical declarations ever made, that our sense of "self," the feeling that we are "self-created," with no source preceding us, is rooted in the Divine "Self" whose existence is Self-generated, with no other source preceding Him.

True, we must do everything to sublimate our egos, but the ultimate goal is not nullification of the ego but transforming it into recognizing that it is a manifestation of the Divine Self. The "yesh hanivra" becomes united with the "Yesh haAmiti," the human ego unites with the Divine Ego; the created "it" (self) below is rooted in the true "It" (self) Above.

So in addition to our inherent self-control and goodness, even our Id ("it" in English, "es" in German) is ultimately rooted in the true "It."

All of the basic ideas in contemporary psychology about the struggle and battle between different forces within us are included in Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model. Yet, with a critical additional dimension of the inherent Divine spirit, that accounts for man's sublime nature, and thus radically alters the way we look at a human being and his/her potential.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman also recognizes human inherent selfishness (the Id). Yet he doesn't stop there, and sees deeper dimensions even beyond that. Rabbi Schneur Zalman's picture is simply a bigger and more encompassing one.

Perhaps Divine choreography arranged that Rabbi Schneur Zalman's model be introduced at the end of the 18th century (1796 to be exact), as a type of "cure preceding the illness" phenomenon. His model served as a pre-emptive prelude to the psychological and scientific revolution that would rock the world and our notion of human nature.

All systems of knowledge, if I may, evolve. As new discoveries are made, arguments and

counterarguments serve the role of crystallizing ideas. Through trial and error, and the sincere search for truth, every theory undergoes refinement, "reality checks" and "market corrections." Certain details may be discarded in the process, as the idea matures into fruition.

Freud and the other thinkers of the 19th-20th century opened many new doors of inquiry and deserve the credit for recognizing deeper truths about the human condition. Rejecting any of their conclusions in no way rejects their contributions.

It's ironic that the Enlightenment and the psychological – and all other scientific – advances in the last few centuries were followed by the most blood-shedding century in history: The Two World Wars.

The turmoil of the last hundred years -- and the upheaval today, both personally and globally -- provides us with a unique opportunity to revisit our psychological models. With all our so-called psychological insights, and with a thriving therapeutic industry -- as well as unprecedented dysfunctionality in family life and in religious life -- we can learn much about how to define, or not to define, the very nature of what it means to be human.

208 years ago Rabbi Schneur Zalman presented us with an invaluable model of life that can be appreciated now more than ever.

It would be wise to explore his teachings, which provide us with a most comprehensive blueprint for modern life, uniting faith and reason, spirit and matter in our struggle with physical life.

Freud and his colleagues may be the fathers of psychology today. But the Alter Rebbe is the true father of the psychology of tomorrow.

CHABAD

I'll never forget the question posed to me by a woman in South Miami Beach. I had just finished a lecture about my book, *Toward a Meaningful Life*, presenting the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to the secular public.

"Did the Rebbe recognize Conservative Judaism?" asked the woman. "Because if he did not, I don't want to buy the book of a bigot," she bluntly stated. The entire auditorium fell silent.

I paused before I replied. "No, he did not recognize its legitimacy." The audience became uncomfortably restless, until I continued: "But he also didn't recognize Orthodox Judaism, ultra-orthodox, reformodox, reconstructodox, and all the other 'dodoxes' that have been and will be created.

"The reason being: Nowhere is mention made of all these labels in the constitution of Judaism – The Torah.

"Indeed, allow me to ask you in return: Was Moses Orthodox, Conservative or Reform? Anyone with even a rudimentary understanding of spirituality knows that one cannot stereotype and fit the soul into man-made labels and structures. The soul is not square, round, tall or short. Neither is it orthodox, conservative or reform, any more than it is republican or democrat. The soul is a Divine force in each of us, infusing us with an indispensable mission to fulfill in our lifetime."

I learned this fundamental truth in Chabad, as a student and chassid of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994).

Rabbi Schneerson, or as he is lovingly called "The Rebbe," was the seventh in a dynasty of Rebbes, spiritual leaders, that began with the founding of the Chabad Chassidic movement in Belarus by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812). Rabbi Schneur Zalman, whose lineage traces back to King David, was the youngest student of Rabbi Dovber of Mezeritch (d. 1772), who in turn was the student and successor of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism in 1734.

The contribution of Chabad Chassidus can be appreciated by placing its advent in historical context. The primary challenge facing the Jewish people following the Emancipation in the 18th century was: How to benefit from their newfound freedoms while not compromising the integrity of millennia-old Jewish tradition. Indeed, modern assimilation was birthed as a result of a people unprepared for the challenges of accelerated emancipation. The challenge would take on different forms in the subsequent years – the battle between religion and science, between church and state and between faith and reason. Some chose insulation to protect from these progressive forces; others compartmentalization, and yet others assimilation.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, and the six successive generations of Chabad Rebbes, developed an eloquent and comprehensive system to bridge the schism between the material and the spiritual – offering a dynamic blueprint for Jewish life today, one that makes the spiritual journey personally relevant to contemporary times.

Drawing from the vast corpus of mystical and Talmudic teachings, Chabad (an acronym for Chochma, Binah, Daat, the three defining intellectual faculties, conception, understanding, knowledge) teaches that within all of matter lies potent spiritual energy. Each of us is charged with the mission of discovering the Divine “sparks” allocated to us in our respective corner of the world and sphere of influence.

We relieve the tension between matter and spirit by spiritualizing the material, releasing the Divine energy embedded in every person, object and experience. Redemption is the natural culmination of this process. Recognizing the Divine soul in each person naturally leads to a loving attitude toward every individual, regardless of background or persuasion.

If Kabbalah manifests the Divine in the human then Chabad Chassidism transforms the human into the Divine. This interface between God and Man allows us to enter the emancipated world of the West without compromising timeless values. On the contrary: it begets the opportunity to integrate both freedoms, material and spiritual, by refining and spiritualizing material secularism, turning the world into an intimate home for the Divine. Chabad offers man the tools to perceive and reveal the Divine in every aspect of life: to integrate personal independence with the highest moral standards of Torah, to blend fiery passion with profound intellect.

The ultimate litmus test for the success of any movement or philosophy is its future – does it inspire passion and commitment in its youth? Does it have the power to perpetuate into future generations?

Since its inception, some 250 years ago, Chabad has spawned generations of adherents, men and women from all walks of life. Today, Chabad is a vibrant force in Judaism: Infused with a profound sense of mission, tens of thousands of young revolutionaries can be found all across the globe, directing Chabad houses, schools, synagogues and community centers – perpetuating Jewish life and igniting souls.

What lies behind this power is a profound philosophy that plumbs the depths of Talmud and Kabbalah and integrates it into a systematic lifestyle, joining ritual and spiritual in a seamless union, resting on the underpinnings of the cardinal mitzvah in the Torah: Love thy neighbor as thyself.

The intimate appreciation of each soul’s dignity – regardless of background, education, or Jewish experience – drives the Chabad individual, welcoming all with an unmatched warmth and non-judgmentalism. Eternal and humble respect for the mysterious journey of every

unique soul, and the responsibility to do everything possible to actualize that soul's potential, lies at the heart of a Chabad Chassid's commitment: to not just warm yourself in this cold universe but to warm all those around you.

Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, unaffiliated... is not the way a Chabadnik looks at a Jew. A Jew is a Divine soul, period. And "who can know their [every soul's] greatness and excellence of in their root and source in the living God...all Jews are called real brothers" (Tanya chapter 32).

What does the future hold to a Chabad Chassid? The Chassid is driven by the absolute belief that we now stand at the threshold of Redemption – when all the Divine "sparks" will be actualized. We therefore are compelled to do everything possible to finish our work of refining and transforming the material universe into a Divine home; to be "a light unto nations" and reveal the Godly "spark" in every human being and in every part of existence. Then, our accumulative effort, coupled with the hard work of generations past, will finally erupt into a global surge of goodness and spirituality, bringing on the age of redemption, the messianic age, when the world will be filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

ARE YOU BORED?

(Taken from a weekly sermon, Parshas Netzavim. *Exclusive for members*)

ABSTRACT

Are you bored? And how about Judaism: Do you find it monotonous?

Do you find Torah relevant to your life? Do you turn to the Torah for answers to your personal issues? When you read or hear the Torah being read do you feel it is speaking to you? Do you fulfill its commandments mechanically and by rote? Are you excited and passionate about your Judaism?

If you answered in the negative to any of these questions, you are not alone. Sadly, most Jews today do not find personal relevance in Judaism. They may look to Torah for legal guidance, and may embrace it due to a cultural influence or pressure, but most do not find Judaism personally exciting, exhilarating and relevant – definitely when compared to other things in life that they turn to for stimulation.

And, if you count yourself among them, are not passionate about your spiritual heritage, what fills the vacuum? Where do you find relevance? After all, vacuums lead to some of our worst problems. Moses addressed this dilemma over three thousand years ago in one of the most compelling of his statements. It is part of our Torah reading this week – as, indeed, it is part of our Torah reading every year just before Rosh Hashana. And the entire book of Tanya is based on this verse – which is apropos as we honor this coming new year the 200th yearzeit of the author of this classic masterpiece, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (5573-5773/1812-1912).

But what is unclear about this verse that required an entire Tanya to be written to explain it? This sermon explains it, and the explanation couldn't come at a better time. With Rosh Hashana 36 hours away, we need to candidly evaluate the status of our lives: What drives and excites us? Does Judaism and God have anything to do with our deepest passions and desires? What role does Torah play in our personal lives?

Above all, we must answer the most compelling question: How can we make Torah indispensable to our modern times? How can we excite our children and ourselves with what Judaism has to offer?

ARE YOU BORED? THE RELEVANCE OF TORAH

1. Just 36 Hours Away

With Rosh Hashana just 36 hours away, let's talk about where we stand at this point in time.

Another year has passed. And – as can be said of every year – many good things happened, as well as many bad. Some have died, and some were born. Some have married and found love and bliss, while others have experienced loss and heartbreak.

The pessimist may conclude, paraphrasing the opening words of Ecclesiastes: “A generation has passed, a generation has arrived, and there is nothing new under the sun. Only the names and props have changed.”

But the optimist will counter: “Though there might be nothing new under the sun, over the sun, in the higher world of spirit, new energy is always brewing.”

The choice is ours: will we succumb to the pull of gravity and be dragged down to earth, and its tedious routines; or will we rise “above the sun” and experience renewal and rejuvenation.

As a new year approaches and a new energy is about to descend into our lives, let us all rise a bit above the sun. Rosh Hashana – and the renewal it brings – teaches us that we don't need to remain stuck breathing “stale recycled air” that results from being trapped in the “greenhouse” of our wearisome lives “beneath the sun.” Or, we can transcend the earthy stratosphere and live dynamic, passionate lives.

The monotony of the daily grind is one of our greatest enemies. The vacuum that a monotonous life creates is extremely susceptible to boredom, and it makes us desperate for something, anything, that will relieve it.

Some of our gravest mistakes and deepest addictions are a result of the vacuum in our lives. How can we ignite the forces of healthy passion in our lives? A passion that will fill us up And can we connect this vitality to Judaism? Can we find relevance in Torah for our modern contemporary lives?

2. Hot Air Balloon (Joke)

Two fellows get lost flying in a hot air balloon. Down below they suddenly see a group playing golf. The two lost passengers yell down: “Where are we?” One yells back at them: “You're in a hot air balloon.”

Before they know it, a gust of wind abruptly whisks their balloon away, and they remain as lost as they were with no direction to go. They look at each other with a bewildered expression.

“What was that?” one asked the other. “I have no clue, but one thing is for sure: the guy below who responded to our call was surely a Rabbi.” “How do you know that?”

“Simple. Because what he said was true, but irrelevant”...

3. Moses' Address

This challenge of relevance was addressed by Moses over three thousand years ago in one of the most compelling of his statements. It is part of our Torah reading this week – as, indeed, it is part of our Torah reading every year just before Rosh Hashana. This is what Moses said: The mandate that I give to you today is not beyond [or concealed] nor distant from you. It is not in heaven ... It is not over the sea ... It is something very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it...¹

What does “very close” mean? Physical proximity? Moses could not be referring to that, for a person can be standing very close to a Torah scroll, yet feel very distant from its contents. On the other hand, one may physically be many miles away from the Torah scroll and yet still feel close to it.

4. Very Close

By using the words “very close” Moses was teaching us one of the most critical lessons we will ever hear: that the Torah is relevant to you. The Torah is not merely a book of laws and legalities. It is not a book of stories and history. It is first and foremost a – not a, but the – Divine blueprint for existence. You can call it “life’s operator’s manual” written and given to us by the Cosmic Engineer that created all of life.

Torah comes from the word ho’raah, which means instruction, and also from the word ohr, light and illumination (Torah ohr). Indeed, Torah in Aramaic is ohr’aisa, which is a combination of two words: ohr aisa² – “carrier of light.” Torah illuminates and instructs us how to navigate our lives, like a roadmap and headlights that allow us to travel the dark and unknown roads of life. Like a light, Torah illuminates for us the path that will help us realize our deepest potential, and avoid the pitfalls that can cause us harm.

¹ Deuteronomy 30:11-14.

² Sefer Hasichot 5704 p. 116.

Imagine bringing home a complex new machine – say a new type of mobile phone – without an operator’s manual. You won’t know how to use the machine properly, what buttons to press, and you may even press the wrong ones, causing the machine to malfunction.

Torah is the operator’s manual that comes along with the most complex machine of them all called “life, and it guides us how to best use it for maximum benefit and minimum grief.

5. Why Distant?

So now the question arises:

Why would we think that this blueprint for life is “distant” from us, that Moses had to emphasize that it “is not beyond you nor distant from you. It is not in heaven ... It is not over the sea?”

The answer becomes quite apparent when we look at our own lives. We live in a material world that is driven by self-interest and doesn’t easily respond to a mandate to answer to a higher calling. Material (not spiritual) things are “close” to us. When we are hungry or tired we naturally feel it. It takes no effort. Spirituality on the other hand is an elusive entity that requires persistent effort.

Because ours is a material world that revolves around our physical needs, it serves to derail our spiritual quest to find a deeper purpose in it all. Where do we find direction? How do we access spirituality when we are surrounded by narcissism? Can we maintain higher integrity in a corrupt world? Is spiritual passion even possible in a pedestrian life?

Especially today, how many Jews find personal relevance in Torah?

6. Relevance

Ask yourselves: Do you find Judaism relevant to your life? Do you turn to the Torah for answers to your personal issues? When you read or hear the Torah being read do you feel it is speaking to you? Do you perform mitzvot mechanically and by rote? Are you excited and passionate about your Judaism, or do you find it monotonous and mechanical?

If any of the above fits your profile you are not alone. Sadly, most Jews today do not find personal relevance in Judaism. They may look to Torah for legal guidance, and may embrace it due to a cultural influences or pressure, but most do not find Judaism personally exciting, exhilarating and relevant – definitely when compared to other things in life that we turn to for stimulation.

And if you are not passionate about your spiritual heritage, what fills the vacuum? Where do you find relevance? Taking this one blunt step further: Most of the things people do to relieve the monotony of their daily lives is not exactly Torah based.

When we don't find passion in healthy things – the vacuum, the hunger, the desperation – drives us to unhealthy things. Some of our gravest mistakes and deepest addictions are a result of the vacuum in our lives, causing us to be desperate for something ... anything ... that will relieve the tedium.

So it's quite easy to understand the dilemma Moses was addressing, how the Torah mandate can seem "distant" – very distant – from us...

7. Moses' Answer

As the true and sensitive leader he was, Moses did not shy away from this vital issue. In the last days of his life he addressed head-on the greatest challenge that would face the Jewish people throughout history: Spiritual relevance. And this is why he used the words that he did.

"The mandate that I give to you today" may appear:

- "distant from you" – for in our material world the spiritual mandate can seem very far away and inaccessible
- "but it is not in heaven" – though some would relegate it to heaven, which we can only touch when we climb the mountain and live ascetic lives
- "and it is not over the sea" – though some might claim that it is for the old world, for the old country and not for modern days and times

The Torah is not there but here. It is a timeless blueprint for all existence which speaks to life in this material world, in this place, at this time.

These words resonate through the ages as the single most compelling challenge in life – to follow a spiritual path, to live a meaningful life.

8. But How?

Now that Moses established that Torah's mandate is "very close – relevant – to you," the question looms:

As creatures trapped in the tentacles of the material universe, a world driven by self-interest and narcissism, how can we experience it as “close” and relevant? How do we access the relevance? What should we be teaching ourselves and our children to discover this “closeness?”

Moses answers this: “It is in your mouth (in your speech) and in your heart (in your thoughts, and in your actions, so] that you may do it.” What do these three expressions mean? “Mouth,” “heart” and “do it” refer to the three “garments” (referred to in mysticism) of the soul – the three and only three ways the soul can express itself in this world: Thought (heart), speech (mouth) and action (do it).

With these three words Moses reveals the secret of finding the indispensable relevance of the Torah to our lives, and the key to living a dynamic Jewish life: Educate and discover how Torah feeds and actualizes your soul and its faculties in your thought, speech and action.

9. The Tanya

And how do we achieve this?

Well, my friends, the answer lies in a classic work called the Tanya, composed by the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, whose 200th yahrzeit we honor this year (5573-5773; 1812-1912).

The Alter Rebbe writes on the cover page of the Tanya, that his entire book is “based upon this very verse – ‘for this thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it’ – explaining clearly how it is exceedingly close, in both a long and short way, with the aid of the Holy One, Blessed be He.”

What is unclear about this verse that required an entire Tanya to be written to explain it?

Moses declared that the spiritual Torah path is relevant (“close”), and the way we access its relevance is by educating and training ourselves in the method of how Torah feeds and actualizes our soul and its faculties in our thought, speech and action.

The Tanya comes to explain clearly how it is exceedingly close, in both a long and short way. Briefly the Tanya lays out a magnificent and comprehensive system, explaining how the soul and spirituality is our natural inherent personality, as well as the process how to access the innate soulfulness in every aspect of our thought, speech and action.

The key to discovering the Torah’s absolute relevance (closeness) to our lives is to recognize the soul in the Torah, the soul in us and the soul in everything in existence. As long as we look only at the “body” of Torah – its mechanics – we will not appreciate its personal rel-

evance to us, no more than we recognize the relevance of an obscure star in the distant sky. But once we uncover the energy and soul within, then we suddenly perceive the connection and intrinsic unity and symbiosis of everything.

10. Long Short Way (Talmudic Story)

Is finding spiritual relevance – and becoming intimate with your own soul – a difficult process? Yes and no. As in everything, there is a long and a short way, as the Alter Rebbe noted.

His words bring to mind a Talmudic story recounted by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananiah:

Once a child got the better of me. I was traveling, and I met with a boy at a crossroads. I asked him, “Which way to the city?” And he answered: “This way is short and long, and this way is long and short.”

I opted for the “short and long” way. I soon reached the city but found my approach obstructed by gardens and orchards. So I retraced my steps and said to the child: “My son, did you not tell me that this is the short way?”

He answered: “Did I not tell you that it is also long?”³

By writing that Tanya explains “clearly how it is exceedingly close in both a long and a short way,” the Alter Rebbe is telling us that Torah’s path to spiritual growth has a “short but long” way and a “long but short” way.

Yogi Berra once said: When you come to a fork in the road, take it...

The “short but long” route is the quick answer to a complex life question. It addresses the symptoms, and offers a quick fix. The answer may be impressive and, when you hear it, you are pleased. Later, when you think it over, though, you realize you still have some unresolved issues with this answer. And so you must go on a long search to really get satisfaction.

The “long but short” approach addresses the root of the issue. Not just its symptoms. This path requires more patience and trust. You ask the question and, instead of hearing an answer, are directed to study something seemingly unrelated. That discussion leads you to another tangent, which takes you to a third, entirely unrelated concept. Along the way, you muse that this is all very interesting, but how does it answer the question?

But then, in an instant, everything clicks and you realize that, in light of the new perspective all this information has afforded you, you actually have no question at all. And by getting

³ Eruvin 53b

to the root of the issue many problems are solved all at once and many others pre-empted. The Torah generally opts for the “long but short” route to spiritual growth in a material world.

The key thing to know is that the soul lies right beneath the surface, readily accessible and “close.” We have all the spiritual resources we will ever need to face any challenge in life. Yet, we are our own greatest enemy. Our material immersions blind us from seeing our own deep strengths. So, it is indeed a “long – but short – road.”

11. Practical Action

Let’s now translate this into practical action.

If spiritual relevance is about awareness – awareness of our own inner spiritual strengths, and of our soul’s calling – then how do we create awareness?

Only one way: By teaching ourselves and our children about it. By speaking about it. By doing everything in our power, and as often as humanly possible, to bring attention to the driving engine of our lives: our souls. Our greatest enemy is not an active force or a power; it is actually a passive absence and lack of force. Our greatest enemy is ignorance and apathy.

A fellow asked his indifferent friend: What is worse, ignorance or apathy? His reply: I don’t know and I don’t care.

We need to create a revolution – a revolution of awareness: Parents at home, educators at school, ought to begin inculcating in children, on a consistent basis, that they each have a soul inside them, waiting to be released. A soul that was sent down to this earth on a mission, and nothing – absolutely nothing – is more important than discovering our unique mission and doing whatever it takes to realize it.

How many of us know this? How many of our children know it?

12. Poor Education

So many have not been taught this by their parents and certainly not in school ... And poor education is one of the most serious problems we face today – and the root of some many other issues.

Yes, our children are taught reading, writing and ‘rithmetic, but they are not taught what makes life meaningful.

Today's best education will teach a student the skills to earn a respectable income. But what about life skills? How to love and be loved. How to be a giver and not just a taker. How to fulfill your life's mission and leave a permanent mark, rather than just survive and entertain yourself. These values are not taught in schools. Learning them is almost completely dependent on circumstantial factors – a good family (and that may not be enough), or bumping into the right mentor, or hitting rock bottom and learning from the bottom up.

The average American child annually spends 900 hours in school but more than that in front of a TV, watching about 8,000 murders before finishing elementary school. And that's not counting time on the Internet, or playing computer games, which are mostly about killing and winning.

So where will that child's values come from? Where will he or she learn about sensitivity to others, reverence for life and social responsibility?

13. Spirituality

The only force that will infuse our children with higher values and empower them to face the challenges of a material world is not more materialism, but – surprise: what is the opposite of matter? – spirituality.

Spirituality is a deep sense of the soul within each of us and the mission of the soul's journey in this life. No child on earth should be deprived of the need to discover meaning in life. Every boy and girl must know to ask the question, ingrained in his or her psyche from the youngest age, and that question is: What is my purpose? What is my mission? What is my calling?

The calling of our time is to imbue our children with a sense of purpose and mission in life. Spirituality has to become an essential ingredient in the education of every child, and an absolute prerequisite study for any aspiring leader, teacher or clergyperson.

Just think how this will empower your children to face the challenges that their material lives will bring them.

The message of the soul is the single most relevant message you will ever hear – and it is renewed each Rosh Hashana, which is the collective birthday of the human race. And that message is: You are indispensable.

You were born an original, don't become a copy. – Anonymous

Each one of you was created in the Divine Image with an exclusive imprint, unique to each one alone. Only you can fulfill your role and play your special music in the cosmic sym-

phony. And the whole world apprehensively waits – and cannot be complete – until you actualize your life’s calling and make your unique mark and contribution.

14. Divine Image

Rosh Hashana celebrates this Divine Image, for it is the birthday of the creation of humanity.

As you prepare for Rosh Hashana – over this Shabbat, and tomorrow morning – set aside time to be alone. Sit down and try to access your deepest thoughts. Feel the soul within you. Feel the Divine Image within you.

Resolve to speak about the soul with your children on a daily basis, when they awake and before they go to sleep.

And then resolve how you will build your life this coming year in accordance with the spiritual mandate, remembering always that it is not in heaven ... it is not over the sea ... it is very close to you for it dwells in your very heart. Amen.

SINGING LESSONS OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV

Music and Chassidus

(Taken from the Baal Shem Tov Insights, Parshas Beshalach- *Exclusive for members*)

SUMMARY

Ahh, the power of melody. To close your eyes, sing a song and be transported to another time and place. Perhaps to a time and place that is beyond time and place. How can we tap into this mysterious – yet readily available – tool to reach transcendence?

With all our presenting life pressures and anxieties, how can music help us rise and soar?

Did you know that the Baal Shem Tov was a gifted singer, and taught that song is a path to serve the Divine, a method to grow and reach great heights?

With this week being Shabbat Shirah, the Shabbat of Song, we bring you a selection of stories and descriptions about the Baal Shem Tov's power of song, and the way he teaches us to use music as a tool for our own development.

How many songs exist within your soul?

The Mystery of Song

Ahh, the power of melody. To close your eyes, sing a song and be transported to another time and place. Perhaps to a time and place that is beyond time and place. How can we tap into this mysterious – yet readily available – tool to reach transcendence?

With all our presenting life pressures and anxieties, how can music help us rise and soar?

The Baal Shem Tov, whose 250th yahrzeit we honor this year, was a gifted singer, and taught us how song is a path to serve the Divine, a method to grow and reach great heights.

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A Gifted Singer

The Baal Shem Tov was a gifted singer with a rare voice. He was capable of shifting his voice inflections to release a range of different notes. Singers and cantors categorize this

type of voice with a particular name. Possessing an exceptional sense of melody, the Baal Shem Tov would often sing. He considered singing a service of G-d, for music touches the soul and produces an outpouring of the soul; it brings on a spiritual calm and radiance and a sublime joy. All of the Baal Shem Tov's students, and the "holy group" of the students of the Maggid, would use song to serve G-d according to the paths of Chassidus.

After the Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi) arrived in Mezeritch, he heard from the Mezritcher Maggid in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, that song is one of the paths of service in Chassidus.

The Stirring Song of Reb Michele Zlotchiver

Indeed, prior to his passing, the Baal Shem Tov instructed that they sing the stirring, great-compassion (his'orerus-rachamaim-rabim) song composed by the tzaddik Reb Michele of Zlotchiv. When they finished singing, the Baal Shem Tov said:

"I guarantee for all generations, that whenever, wherever and whoever will sing this stirring, great-compassion melody with a teshuva awakening, no matter in what [cosmic] 'hall' (heichel) I will be, I will hear [the song] and I will sing along and rouse great compassions for these 'baalei-teshuva' singers."

Why do Chassidim Sing and Dance?

The Baal Shem Tov was once asked: "Why is it that Chassidim burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation? Is this the behavior of a healthy, sane individual?"

The Baal Shem Tov responded with a story:

Once, a musician came to town – a musician of great but unknown talent. He stood on a street corner and began to play.

Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away, and soon a large crowd stood enthralled by the glorious music whose equal they had never heard. Before long they were moving to its rhythm, and the entire street was transformed into a dancing mass of humanity.

A deaf man walking by wondered: Has the world gone mad? Why are the townspeople jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in middle of the street?

"Chassidim," concluded the Baal Shem Tov, "are moved by the melody that issues forth from every creature in G-d's creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to dance?"¹

The Shepherd's Song

This event took place during one of the frequent visits of the holy man into neighboring thick-wooded forests. These were times the Baal Shem Tov dedicated to meditation. He would contemplate G-d's infinite glory as is revealed so awesomely in nature. Most often he would go alone into the forest, the seclusion providing him with true closeness to his Maker. On other occasions, such as this, and for reasons revealed only unto him, the Rebbe would bring along with him several of his disciples.

As the group walked on together through the profuse green forests, they suddenly heard a particularly beautiful melody. The Rebbe followed the music, his Chassidim close behind him. As they neared, they discovered a young shepherd playing a melody on his wooden hand-crafted flute. They were all enthralled by the lovely music.

When the lad finished playing the tune, the Holy Baal Shem Tov offered him a kopeck if he would play the melody once again. The shepherd was pleased, and played the song once more. The Chassidim watched as their holy Rebbe closed his eyes, and swayed with the music. They too were surely carried away by the beauty of this seemingly unfamiliar tune.

As the lad finished, the holy man gently requested he play the tune once again, and handed him another coin. The boy was thrilled with his good fortune, and played the melody once again. The exquisiteness of the song was beyond description. The Chassidim felt their souls being lifted to a place of sublime holiness as the music filled the air.

When the lad finished playing, he was amazed that the Rebbe asked him to play the melody again, slipping a third kopeck into his hand. And so the shepherd boy played the melody on his flute once more. The Chassidim found themselves dancing, their spirits so uplifted by the splendor of the music. And they saw the Master swaying, reaching out to heaven with uplifted hands, tears falling from his closed eyes.

When the holy man asked the boy to play the melody once again, the latter was taken aback to discover that the melody had been erased from his memory. Though he tried and tried, he could not recall a single note. Then the Baal Shem Tov smiled sweetly and led his Chassidim out of the forest.

Later the disciples asked their teacher to explain what had transpired there in the forest. The Baal Shem Tov explained that when the Holy Temple was destroyed, the niggunim, the songs of the Levites too were exiled along with the Jewish people. The melody the shepherd boy played on his flute was one such melody. The Master thanked G-d that he had been able today to pay the ransom and free the Levites' song from its captivity, so it could at last ascend to heaven until the time when the Holy Temple will stand once again.²

Wings of Song

The Baal Shem Tov's insights about the power of song are explained in the teachings of Chassidus of his successors, and especially in the teachings of Chabad Chassidus of the Alter Rebbe (a student of the Maggid, who succeeded the Baal Shem Tov) and his successive generations of Chabad Rebbes.

The Alter Rebbe explains,³ that a soul travels through song. The body moves from one place to another using its legs or a vehicle. But for a soul to travel it needs a melody. Music lifts the soul and carries it to higher levels.

Soul Transportation

Song is one of the most underutilized gifts at our disposal. Music has surely captured the imagination and the hearts and souls of our generation. Yet, turning the music into a tool that can help us heal, grow and thrive – is a frontier that has hardly been touched.

Music therapy and other uses of the medium have made their appearance. But there is so much more that can be done.

The Baal Shem Tov, with his directive how song is a path of service, challenges us to make song and music a very real part of our growth and development.

Not only to allow music to entertain us and lift our spirits, but to turn it onto a force of growth; wings that carry our souls to unprecedented heights.

Imagine having a song for every occasion. Imagine what our children would look like if they were put to bed each night by their parents with a beautiful melody. Imagine what type of people we would be if we were singing all the time (not necessarily out loud...).

Yes, indeed, a song is transportation for your soul. Like wings of a bird, music allows the bird that is your soul to soar on high, above the din and confusion of material earth. To fly upward – searching, yearning, discovering new horizons.

So as we celebrate Shabbat Shirah, let us embrace the song in our hearts and let our voices be heard reverberating through all the layers and membranes. Let our soul music show us a path that is not bound by our life trappings; let it bring us freedom – personal and global redemption.

The next time you have a chance, sit down and hum a melody to yourself. Think about the Baal Shem Tov and his songs. Keep in mind some of these ideas.

How many songs exist within your soul?

Sources: Igros Kodesh Admur MehuRayatz vol. 3 p. Sefer HaSichos 5702 p. 122. 5703 p. 169. Degel Machne Efraim Parshas Yisro.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 From Be'er HaChassidut by Eliezer Steinman; from the Hebrew by Yanki Tauber. The analogy is from Degel Machne Efraim Parsha Yisro.
- 2 Retold by Gita Levi. From nigun.com.
- 3 Torah Ohr 73. 113a.

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