

TOWARD A MEANINGFUL SHAVUOT

A Personal and Spiritual Guide to Shavuot Making Shavuot Relevant

EXCLUSIVE
FOR SHLUCHIM

By Simon Jacobson

Author of *Toward A Meaningful Life, A Spiritual Guide to Counting the Omer* and *60 Days: A Spiritual Guide to the High Holidays*

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◆ WHAT IS SHAVUOT? ◆

In the 23rd chapter of Leviticus, the Torah instructs:

You shall count for yourselves, from the morrow of the Shabbat, from the day on which you bring the raised omer—seven complete weeks shall there be. Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal-offering to G-d. From your habitations you shall bring two breads for raising... made of fine flour... And you shall proclaim that very day a holy festival...

The festival of Shavuot is unique in that the Torah sets its date not as a certain day of a specific month, but by instructing us to count forty nine days from Passover and designate the 50th day as Shavuot.



Today we follow a fixed calendar in which the month of Nissan always has 30 days and the month of Iyar, 29 days. Thus, the 50th day of the count, which begins on the second night of Passover (Nissan 16th), always coincides with the 6th of Sivan.

However, this is only because today we do not have a functioning *Sanhedrin*. In essence, the Jewish calendar is fixed by eyewitness sightings of the new moon, based on which the *sanhedrin* would proclaim the new month.

By this process, which will recommence with the coming of Moshiach and the re-establishment of the *sanhedrin*, any month may consist of either 29 or 30 days. So Shavuot has no intrinsic calendar date, other than the 50th day from the 2nd of Passover.

Mattan Torah

On Shavuot G-d gave the Torah on Mount Sinai (Pesachim 68b).

On the sixth day of Sivan in the year 2448 from creation (1313 bce), the entire people of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai. There G-d revealed Himself to us and gave us the Torah, His “blueprint for creation” and our charter as “a holy people” and “a light unto the nations.”¹

The Connection Between Counting 49 Days and Mattan Torah On Shavuot

The process of receiving the Torah actually began with the exodus from Egypt 49 days prior to it being given at Sinai. In anticipation of receiving the Torah, the Jews began counting down the days, as soon as they left

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¹Though the Biblical verse above makes no mention of Mattan Torah, the Yerushalmi (Rosh Hashana 4:8) explains that the reason the word “sin” is not mentioned regarding the Shavuot offerings (as it’s mentioned by the offerings of other holidays) is “since you received the yoke of Torah on this day, I [G-d] consider as if you have never sinned.”





Egypt (Ra”N end of Pesachim). They spent the next forty-nine days in the desert preparing themselves spiritually for the most monumental experience of all time: the giving of the Torah to Moses and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. These forty-nine days are traditionally called “Sefirat Ha’Omer,” which means the counting of the *omer*.

This forty-nine day period was one of intense character refinement. For forty-nine days, the Jews climbed one step at a time up the emotional ladder toward a higher purity. This period of character refinement has just as much relevance to our lives today as it did over 3,000 years ago. Just as we were slaves in Egypt, we can also be slaves to our personalities, driven by forces over which we often seem to have no control. The forty-nine days of sefirah teach us how to regain control over our emotions, showing us how to refine our characters, step by step, in a way that is based on the eternal truths of Torah.

After the forty-nine-day period, we arrive at the fiftieth day, *matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah), having fully achieved inner renewal by merit of having assessed and developed each of our forty-nine attributes. What is the significance of the fiftieth day of *matan Torah*? On this day we celebrate the Festival of Shavuot. After we have accomplished all we can through our own initiative, then we are worthy to receive a gift (*matan*) from Above which we could not have achieved with our own limited faculties. We receive the ability to

reach and touch the Divine; not only to be cultivated human beings who have refined all of our personal characteristics, but *divine* human beings who are capable of expressing ourselves above and beyond the definitions and limitations of our beings.

Offerings: The Two Loaves

On the second day of Passover (“the morrow of the Shabbat”) an *omer* of barley was “raised up” and offered in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. This marked the beginning of a seven-week count—“the counting of the *omer*”—which was followed by the “raising up” of the *shteí halechem*, an offering of two loaves of bread, on the festival of Shavuot.

Chassidic teaching explains that the progress from animal fodder (barley) to human food (the “two loaves,” prepared from finely ground wheat-flour) signified the refinement of man’s “animal soul”—his base and materialistic instincts—and its elevation to the human level of a soul forged in the image of the divine. The seven weeks of the intervening count correspond to the seven basic drives in the heart of man, each of which includes aspects of all seven: each week of the count is devoted to the task of refining one of these drives, and each of the week’s seven days to another of its seven aspects. On the 50th day we attain Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks—the perfection of all seven “weeks” of the human heart.





◆ MATTAN TORAH ◆

What is Torah? Torah is a Divine blueprint for life, given to us by G-d at Sinai 3322 years ago.

IN THE TORAH'S EVERY WORD THERE IS DEEP, PERSONAL & SPIRITUAL MEANING

Torah means instruction (*hora'ah*). The Torah and its stories are, in essence, the story of our lives, a spiritual blueprint that illuminates the intricate layers and dimensions of our psyches and souls. Every event in Torah reflects another aspect of our inner personality. Through its *mitzvot*, or commandments, the Torah teaches us how to actualize ourselves according to G-d's intentions in creating us. By deciphering the Torah code, we disclose its personal message for us.

THE "PERSONALITY" OF TORAH

The Torah functions on many levels. On the most basic level, it is a guide to life in the most elementary and technical sense. Its 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) and their thousands of clauses and laws instruct us in the do's and don'ts of life, delineating the permissible and the forbidden, the sacred and the profane, the beneficial and the injurious to our bodies and souls.

But the Torah is more than a regulator of behavior. It "was given to refine the per-

son": to weed out the bad and cultivate the good in our hearts; to develop our minds as vectors of the divine truth; to bring to light the "divine image" in which our souls have been molded.

Above all, the Torah is the Divine blueprint with which G-d created the universe and we humans use to transform the physical world into a "home for G-d"—a place that houses, expresses and serves the perfection of the Divine. G-d "gazes into the Torah and creates the world, and we also gaze in the Torah and uphold the world" (Zohar II 161b).

DIMENSIONS IN TORAH

As blueprint of the universe the Torah, like everything in existence, has a "body" and a "soul" (*gufa d'Ohraysa* and *neshmoso d'Ohraysa*), *nigleh* and *nistar* - the revealed ("outer") dimension of Torah, and the hidden ("inner") dimension of Torah. The revealed level discusses the mechanics and legalities of Torah law and directives, as well as telling us the basic stories of the Bible and the Talmud. The hidden level (*Pnimityut ha'Torah*) discusses the inner dynamics of these laws and the esoteric meaning within the entire Torah narrative. Like the DNA of the body, the Torah's inner dimension reveals the soul within the Torah's outer

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layers - in effect mapping out the inner workings of the soul and the cosmos, which in turn defines and vivifies the outer dimension. Our sages and mystics write:

The Torah doesn't speak about things below (the physical) and alludes to things above (the spiritual); it speaks about things above and alludes to things below (Rameh m'Pano, Asorah Maamoros, Maamar Chokur Din sec. 3, ch. 22. Shaloh 13b. 161a. See Likkutei Sichos Shavuot, vol. 23 p. 38). At the same time, "Torah is not in heaven," but given on Earth ("Torah speak in the language of man"), and a "verse is not to be taken out of its literal interpretation" - because the ultimate purpose of the giving of Torah is that it should empower us to transform this material world, by fusing the "body" and "soul" of the Torah, which allows us to integrate the "body" and "soul" of the universe. The study of the esoteric and spiritual dimension of Torah when coupled with Jewish law and tradition, creates a synergy of body and soul, making G-d as real and relevant to us as the air we breathe and the food we eat.

More specifically, the Torah has 4 levels of interpretation, P'shat, Remez, Drush, Sod (acronym of פרדס), reflecting - as blueprint of existence - the 4 "worlds" of the cosmic order, Asiyah, Yetzirah, Beriyah, Atzilut and the 4 dimensions of the soul, Nefesh, Ruach, Neshomo, Chaya:

- ❖ LITERAL INTERPRETATION (P'SHAT)
- ❖ ALLEGORICAL (REMEZ)
- ❖ HOMILETIC (DRUSH)
- ❖ ESOTERIC (SOD)

The Arizal says that each letter in Torah contains these 4 dimensions of interpretation, each revealing another layer of the inner dynamics of existence.

Chassidus is the 5th dimension, reflecting Yechidah (and the "infinite worlds") - the essence of the Torah and of the soul, which binds and fuses all the other 4 dimensions (see the Rebbe's Inyonah Shel Toras Ha'Chassidus).

MATTAN TORAH'S PERSONAL RELEVANCE TO OUR LIVES

10 ways how Shavuot changed human experience.

Sinai enabled us to:

- 1 Change the world with one small mitzvah.
- 2 Express the inexpressible.
- 3 Connect our most intimate self with those we love.
- 4 Convert matter into energy.
- 5 Transform our physical lives into spiritual experiences.
- 6 Turn the material world into a Divine home.
- 7 Kiss the sky.
- 8 Appreciate how the simplest things carry the greatest power.
- 9 Bridge the unconscious and the conscious.
- 10 Marry heaven and earth.

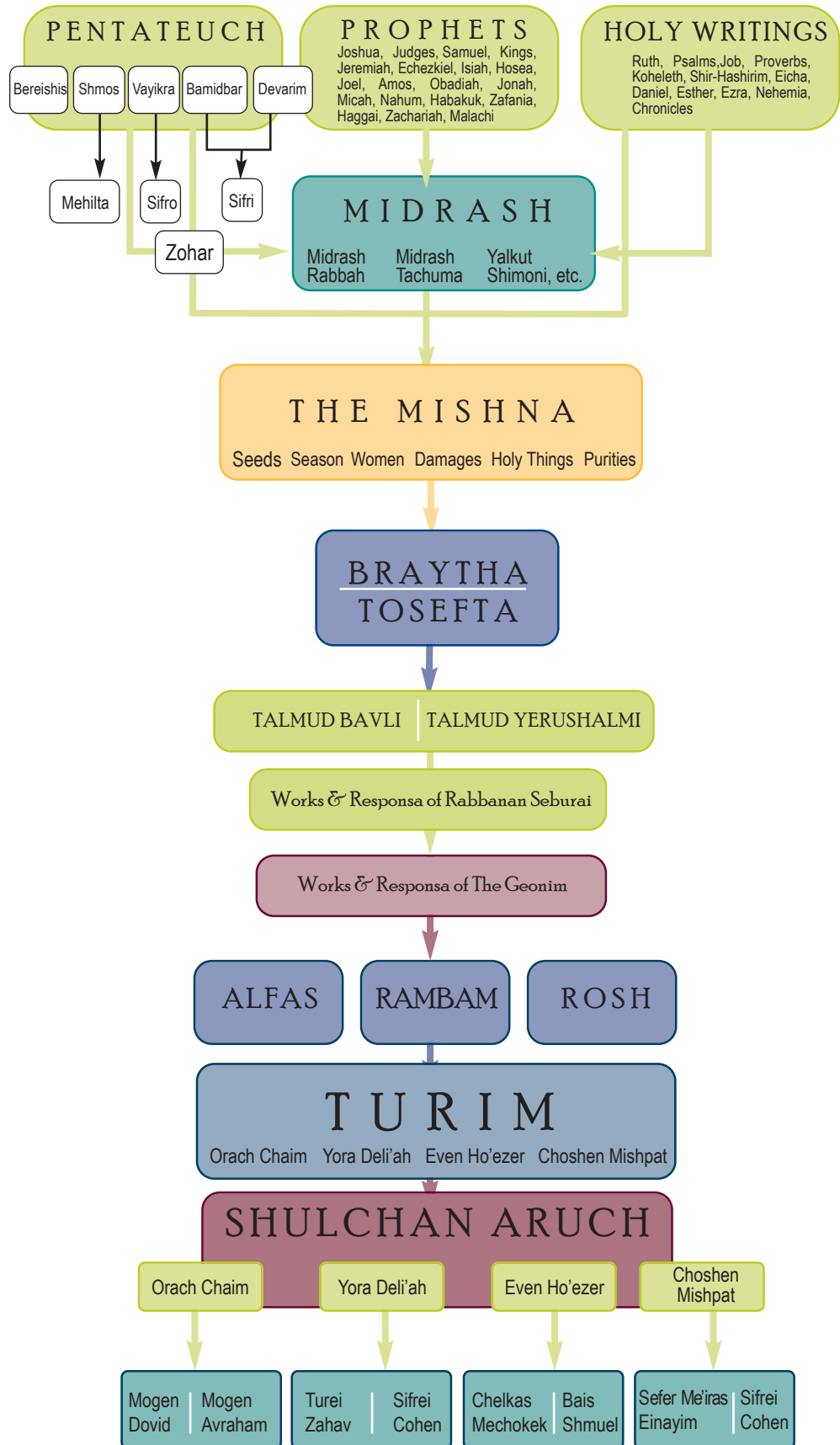




THE GENERAL TORAH STRUCTURE

◆ TOTAL FUSION ◆

Mattan Torah at Sinai fused all the dimensions in Torah - the body and the soul - as one. In turn Sinai married heaven and earth - matter and spirit - infusing the Jewish people with a new power: From here on we would be able to integrate our material and spiritual lives, and transform the physical universe into a Divine home. The radical significance of this breakthrough is staggering. Philosophers and thinkers have always wondered how high man can reach: As mortal, finite creatures how can we ever expect to touch the infinite and the immortal? How can raw matter ever be converted to energy? Sinai changed reality: It allowed us to fuse the finite and the infinite. It opened the door to the total and complete fusion of matter and spirit in the Messianic age.



◆ THE WRITTEN AND ORAL LAW ◆

The Torah is composed of two parts: the written law and the oral law. The written Torah contains the Five Book of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings, a total of 24 books. Together with the written Torah, Moses was also given the oral law which explains and clarifies the written law. It was transmitted orally from generation to generation and eventually transcribed in the Talmud and Midrash.

Throughout the generations our people have studied these works, commenting upon them, clarifying their meanings, deriving practical applications of these principles and

codifying the laws derived from them. The esoteric dimension of the Torah - the soul within the written and the oral Torah - was also taught and passed on from generation to generation, albeit to specific individuals (not to the general masses), yet it was always preserved. In later generations it became a mitzvah to spread these inner teachings as well. Thus, a continuous chain of tradition extends throughout the generations, connecting the scholars of the present day to the revelation at Mount Sinai.

◆ TEN COMMANDMENTS ◆

The entire Torah is encompassed in the Ten Commandments spoken by G-d at Sinai:

1. I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt.
2. You shall have no other gods before Me.
3. Do not take the name of the L-rd your G-d in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.

6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not bear false witness.
10. Do not covet.

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These ten commands range from the highest and most refined concept of the belief in the oneness of G-d, to the most basic laws which every society has found it necessary to enforce such as not killing and not stealing.

The foundation of even the obvious laws is the absolute belief that “Anochi Hashem Elokecho.” Without this unwavering pillar, all morality is ultimately rendered arbitrary. (More on the 10 Commandments see p.19)

◆ THE COURSE OF TRADITION ◆

A TIMELINE OF THE TRANSMISSION OF THE ORAL LAW


2448	Moses receives the Torah on Mount Sinai	3190	Joel
2488	Joshua - Elazar	3240	Nahum
2516	Phinehas - Elders and Judges: Othniel till 2566 Ehud till 2636 Shamgar till 2636 Barak & Deborah till 2676 Gideon & son till 2719 Tola till 2742 Jair till 2764 Jephthah till 2787 Ivtzan (Boaz) till 2793 Elon till 2803 Abdon till 2811 Samson till 2830	3254	Habakkuk
2830	Eli and his court	3280	Zephaniah
2870	Samuel and his court	3316	Jeremiah
2884	David and his court	3350	Baruch son of Neriah
2924	Ahijah of Shiloh and his court	3370	Ezra and his court (the Men of the Great Assembly including Daniel, Mordechai, Nehemiah, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah)
2962	Elijah the Prophet	3400	Simon the Just
3047	Elisha	3460	Antignos of Soho
3055	Jehoiada the Priest	3500	Jose son of Yoezer and Jose son of Yochanan
3070	Zechariah the priest	3560	Joshua son of Perachiah and Nitai the Arbelite
3090	Hosea	3621	Judah son of Tabbai and Simon son of Shetach
3110	Amos	3722	Shemaya and Avtalyon
3140	Isaiah	3728	Hillel and Shammai
3160	Micah	3768	Rabban Simon son of Hillel and Rabbi Yochanan son of Zakkai
		3800	Rabban Gamliel son of Simon and disciples of Rabbi Yochanan son of Zakkai
		3810	Rabban Simon son of Gamliel and Rabbi Akiba
		3828	Rabban Gamliel and disciples of Rabbi Akiba







3881	Rabban Simon son of Gamliel	4060	Rabba and R. Joseph
3910	Rabbi Judah the Prince - Redactor of the Mishnah	4085	Abaye and Rava
3979	His sons, Rabbi Simon and R. Gamliel, R. Chiyah, Rav, Samuel and Yochanan	4127	Rav Ashi and Ravina
4010	R. Huna, R. Judah, R. Nachman, R. Kahana	4260	Completion of the Talmud through R. Ashi, Ravina and their disciples

WHY WAS THE TORAH GIVEN IN A DESERT?

 In order to emphasize its accessibility to all. Mount Sinai, which rises from the desert, represents a peak that is accessible to all, without restriction or protocol: the Torah is open to everyone, like the ownerless and zoneless wilderness. This is also alluded to by the fact that the section of *Bamidbar* (“In The Desert”) is always read prior to the festival of Shavuot, which marks the day on which we received the Torah, again emphasizing that it is “as free as the desert to all inhabitants of earth.”

 Another lesson from the borderless desert is that true mastery of Torah requires *mesirat nefesh*—unequivocal commitment and sacrifice. In every domain there are boundaries which delineate how far one should go. Halt! the boundary says, you have reached your limits; you cannot go on until you have graduated to the next level. *Mesirat nefesh* means that one does

not recognize any limits on one’s capacity, or any hurdles that one is “not expected” to overcome; that one pursues his goal with a single-minded intensity, uninhibited by external powers-that-be or by one’s own limitations. In the words of the Midrash, “Whoever does not abandon himself like a desert, cannot acquire Torah.”

 One of the most powerful messages is the teaching of the Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, in his Tanya. He explains that the purpose of life on Earth is not for the tzaddik, who does not have an evil inclination and therefore does not face the true struggles of life. The purpose of creation is the average man (the benoni) who faces a constant struggle between good and evil. Judaism does not tell us that life is easy and that faith is bliss. On the contrary. We were placed in a wilderness and life is a battle. And it is precisely this battle that G-d intended us to face. Therefore, do not be disturbed or demoralized by your challenges, by your inconsistencies and by your weaknesses. Do not be shaken when you do not live up to your highest aspirations, and





often do not actualize or maintain your inspiration. Do not be discouraged - because this struggle is the fundamental purpose of all of existence.

Had the Torah been given in a beautiful city, then all we would have is a guide on how to live in beauty. "Torah lo ba'shomayim hi," Torah is not in heaven. It was given to Earth,

in order for us to use it to bridge heaven and earth. Torah was given intentionally in a wilderness in order to teach us that Torah is a guide for real life amidst real challenges. It's not a book for la-la land and for naïve escapists. Torah is called Torat Chaim, the Torah of life - it addresses the harsh realities of living in this difficult world.

TORAH'S CONNECTION TO THREE

Blessed be the Merciful One, who gave a threefold Torah to a threefold people through a third one on a third day in the third month - Shabbos 88a

Three signifies the integration of one and two - an individual entity and duality.

Tiferet, shalom, emes - all expressions of three - expresses the essence of Mattan Torah:
Creating harmony within diversity.



REAL ESTATE



The Torah law of bar mitzra (literally, "the one on the boundary") states that when a person wishes to sell his field, his neighbors must be given first priority to purchase it.

Halachah is more than a code of behavior for life on earth: it also describes G-d's own "code of behavior," the manner in which He chooses to relate to His creation. If G-d commanded us the law of bar mitzra, He conforms to it Himself.

Thus, the Talmud tells us that when Moses "ascended to heaven" to receive the Torah from G-d, *the angels protested to G d: "What is a human being doing amongst us?" Said He to them: "He has come to receive the Torah." Said they to Him: "This esoteric treasure, which was hidden with You for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, You wish to give to flesh and blood?... Place Your glory upon the heavens!"*

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Said G-d to Moses: "Answer them."

Said [Moses]: "Master of the Universe! This Torah that You are giving to me, what is written in it? 'I am the L-rd Your G-d, who has taken you out from the land of Egypt.'" "Have you descended to Egypt?" asked Moses of the angels. "Have you been enslaved to Pharaoh? So why should the Torah be yours? What else does it say? 'You shall have no alien gods.' Do you dwell amongst idol worshipping nations? What else does it say? 'Remember the Shabbat day.' Do you work? ... What else does it say? 'Do not swear falsely.' Do you do business? What else does it say? 'Honor your father and your mother.' Do you have parents? What else does it say? 'Do not kill,' 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not steal.' Is there jealousy among you? Do you have an evil inclination?"

The angels had a legal claim on the Torah—the neighbor's prerogative stipulated by the law of bar mitzra. For the Torah is G-d's "esoteric treasure": before it was given to us at Sinai it related exclusively to the spiritual infrastructure of creation. We, argued the angels, are the Torah's natural neighbors; it should be offered to us before it is translated into a doctrine for physical life for some distant earthly customer.

G-d acknowledged that the angels had a basis for their claim in Torah law, telling Moses to "answer them" before he could receive the Torah and take it down to earth. How, indeed, might Moses defend

the legality of the contract between G-d and Israel?


THE HOME

Hur sages teach that "The purpose of the creation of all worlds, supernal and ephemeral," is that "G-d desired a dwelling in the lowly realms." G-d desired to create a world that is virtually devoid of all manifest expression of His truth—and that this lowly realm should be made into a home for Him, a "dwelling" that serves and facilitates His presence.

Thus, the world was created "for the sake of the Torah and for the sake of Israel": the people of Israel are the builders of this home for G-d, and the Torah is the instrument of its construction. The people of Israel inhabit the physical universe where G-d desires to dwell. The Torah instructs the Jew how to transform material things such as animal hides, palm fronds and coins into holy and G-dly things such as *tefillin*, a *lulav*, and charity. With the Torah as his blueprint, the Jew transforms a mundane world into an environment that is receptive and subservient to the divine reality.

Chassidic teaching defines a dwelling as "a place that houses a person's very essence." This is what is meant when we say that "G-d desired a dwelling in the lowly realms." G-d has many venues for the expression of His reality—He created many spiritual worlds or "realms," each of which conveys another face of His infinitely

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faceted truth. But only the physical world can be His home, the environment that houses His essence.

Therein lies the ultimate refutation of the angels' claim on the Torah. The law of bar mitzra states that "If the outside buyer wishes to build homes on the land, and the neighbor wishes to seed it, the outside buyer retains the land, since the habitation of the land takes precedence, and the law of bar mitzra is not applied in this case."

Thus Moses said to the angels: Do you have an evil inclination? Do you deal with the mundanities of the marketplace? So to what end should you be given the Torah? To cultivate another lush garden of spiritual delights? But we will build a home with the Torah—as only we can. Only we, who grapple daily with the deceit, the strife and the profanity that mark the lowliest stratum of G-d's creation, can construct with the Torah a dwelling for Him, a place to house His quintessential self.

DIFFERENT NAMES OF THE HOLIDAY

1 **Yom Habikkurim (The Day of the First Fruits)** - On this day, the *bikkurim*, the first-ripened fruits of the Israelite farmer's orchard, were presented to the *kohen* (priest) in the Holy Temple, as commanded by the Torah: *When you enter the land which the L-rd your G-d is giving you as a heritage, and you inherit it and settle it; you shall take from the first fruits of the land ... and place them in a basket. And you shall go to the place which the L-rd your G-d shall choose to rest His name....* (Devorim 26).

Each year, the Israelite farmer repeated the process, selecting from the first and finest of his orchard to bring to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on the festival of Shavuot. By doing so, he proclaimed: My days are consumed with working the land, my nights with thoughts of seed, soil and weather; but the

purpose of it all is not development of the material for material ends, but to make this world a home for G-d. See—the first and best of my produce I have brought here, to the place chosen by G-d to house His presence.

2 **Chag Hakatzir (Harvest Festival)** - Celebrates the wheat-harvesting season.

3 **Chag Shavuot (Festival of Weeks)** - The festival follows a seven-week count that begins on the second day of Passover.

4 **Zman Matan Torateinu (The Time of the Giving of Our Torah)** - "Torah" means "law" and "instruction." This is the day on which the 600,000 collective souls (which include all souls till the end of time) gathered at Sinai were instructed on "the path along which they should walk and the deeds which they should do."

◆ LAWS & CUSTOMS ◆

Decorate Homes And Synagogues With Flowers

Since Shavuot is also called the “Harvest Festival,” it is customary to adorn the home and synagogue with fruits, flowers and greens. Furthermore, our Sages relate that although Mount Sinai was situated in a desert, when the Torah was given the mountain bloomed and sprouted flowers.

Additional reasons: **Fruits:** In the time of the Beis HaMikdash, the first fruits (*Bikkurim*) were brought to the Beis Hamikdash, beginning on Shavuos. **Greens:** Our Sages taught that on Shavuot judgment is rendered regarding trees in the field.

Eat Dairy Foods

● Chalav—the Hebrew word for milk—has the numerical value (*Gematriah*) of 40 reminding us the number of days and nights that Moses remained on Mt. Sinai.

● One of the eight different names for Mt. Sinai is “*Gavnunim*,” which means white like cheese.

● The words in the Torah referring to the Shavuot holiday offering are “*Minchah chadashah l'Hashem b'shavuotaychem*,” which are also an acronym for the Hebrew word *m'chalav*—from milk.”

● When the Jews received the Torah on Shavuot they were commanded only to eat

meat which was ritually slaughtered. Since none of their meat was previously slaughtered and the Torah was given on Shabbat - when it is forbidden to slaughter animals - they were forced to eat dairy for the rest of the day.

● Two loaves of bread were offered in the Holy Temple on the holiday of Shavuot. To commemorate this offering we eat two meals on Shavuot; one dairy and one meat.

DAY ONE OF SHAVUOT

◆ Torah Readings

- Exodus 19:1-20:23; Numbers 28:26-31
- Haftorah: Ezekiel 1:1-28; 3:12

General Overview: The Israelites experience the Divine revelation at Mount Sinai and hear the Ten Commandments. The day's reading, which relates that which transpired on this very date millennia ago, also describes the preparations for, and aftermath of, this historic event.

The Children of Israel camp opposite Mount Sinai, where they are told that G-d has chosen them to be His "kingdom of priests" and "holy nation." The people respond by proclaiming, "All that G-d has spoken, we shall do." On the sixth day of the third month (Sivan), seven weeks after the Exodus, the entire nation of

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Israel assembles at the foot of Mount Sinai. G-d descends on the mountain amidst thunder, lightening, billows of smoke and the blast of the shofar, and summons Moses to ascend. G-d proclaims the Ten Commandments, commanding the people of Israel to believe in G-d, not to worship idols or take G-d's name in vain, to honor their parents, keep the Shabbat, and not to murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness or covet another's property. The people cry out to Moses that the revelation is too intense for them to bear, begging him to receive the Torah from G-d and convey it to them.

◆ **Staying up the first night;
Tikkun Leil Shavuot**

On the day of the giving of the Torah, instead of rising early to adequately prepare for the momentous event which was scheduled to take place, the Jewish People slept in. To make amends for this mistake, we stay awake every year on the first night of Shavuot. Jews gather to participate in a night of spiritual preparation.

Throughout the night we read the “Tikkun Leil Shavuot” The Tikkun contains bits and pieces of all areas of the Torah: the Five Books of Moses, Prophets, Holy Writings, Mishnah, Zohar, the 613 commandments, and more (see the structure above p.12). Other simply study Torah - any topic of interest - throughout the night. This prepares us to receive the Torah (including the Ten Commandments) the next morning.

◆ **Reading of the Ten Commandments**

All men, women and children should go to synagogue to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments.

- The Lubavitcher Rebbe encouraged the bringing of even the youngest of children to the reading of the Ten Commandments on Shavuot. This is in commemoration of the Jewish people declaring: “Our children are our guarantors [that we will keep the Torah].” This was the only guarantee acceptable to G-d.
- When we read the Ten Commandments, it’s not about something that happened in ancient history. It’s about what’s happening in the here and now. When we hear the Ten Commandments in our synagogue, G-d considers it as though we were hearing them read to us at Mt. Sinai. Just as every single Jewish person—male, female, old, young—was present at Mt. Sinai, so too, every person should attend the annual Mt. Sinai experience of re-receiving the Torah from G-d on Shavuot.

◆ **The Priests bless the congregation with the Priestly Blessing during the Musaf prayer.**

◆ **Many communities chant the Akdamot poem before the reading of the Torah.**

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DAY TWO OF SHAVUOT

◆ Torah Readings

- Deuteronomy 15:19-16:17; Numbers 28:26-31
- Haftarah: Habakkuk 2:20-3:19

General Overview: The day's reading discusses the three biblical festivals - Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot - some of the laws regarding each of these individual festivals, and the commanded to rejoice and be present in the Holy Temple during these holidays.

On the second day of Shavuot we read from Deuteronomy chapters 14-16 which detail the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals -- Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot -- on which all Jews came "to see and be seen before the face of G-d" in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

◆ **The Yizkor memorial service is recited (and charity is pledged) for the souls of departed loved ones.**

◆ **Some communities have the custom to read the Book of Ruth on the second day of Shavuot.**

SUMMARY OF RUTH:

Ruth was a Moabite princess who was imbued with lofty ideals. She was dissatisfied with the idol-worship of her own people, and when the opportunity arose, she gladly discarded the privilege of royalty in her land and

accepted a life of poverty among people whom she admired.

This is how it all came about:

It was in the days when the judges ruled in Israel. The children of Israel had become lax in their observance of the Torah and had brought G-d's punishment upon themselves. A terrible famine ravished the land.

There was a certain man in Judah named Elimelech. He was a wealthy merchant who was not used to hunger and poverty, and so he thought he would escape from the misery by moving elsewhere. He took his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, and settled in Moab.

Ruth befriended this Jewish family and began comparing their different way of life to her own. As her admiration for Jewish laws and customs grew, she became more and more dissatisfied with the meaningless idol-worship of her own people. When one of Naomi's sons asked her to marry him, she was happy and proud to accept.

She did not regret giving up her life of luxury, her royal title, and her future prospects for wealth and honor. All she saw was the selfishness and mercilessness of her own people, and how the Jews, to whom she now had attached herself, were so different.

Time passed and Elimelech and both his sons died. Naomi was left a poor widow, not knowing what to do or where to turn.

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She turned to Ruth and to her other daughter-in-law Orpah (also a Moabite):

“My daughters, I must go away. I have decided to return to my home, to Bet-Lechem. I am a poor woman with no means of supporting you, and there is no reason why you should suffer too. Take my advice and go back to your parents' home. Your husbands are dead, and perhaps if you remain in your own country, you may find other men to marry. I have lost my sons forever, but you are still young, you can get other husbands.”

Orpah sadly kissed her mother-in-law and bade her good-bye. But Ruth clung tearfully to Naomi and begged her to allow her to go with her. She implored her with these touching words:

“Entreat me not to leave you and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried; the L-rd do so to me, and more also, if anything but death part you and me.”

Ruth knew full well what she was doing. Naomi had reminded her of the difficulties that confronted the Jew at all times, yet Ruth was unshaken in her determination to follow her mother-in-law and cling to the faith she had adopted - the faith that had become so dear to her. The future was to prove that Ruth be justly rewarded for her high resolve; even in her poverty she had no regrets.

It was harvest time when Ruth and Naomi came to the land of Judah. They were both weary from their journey, and Ruth prevailed upon Naomi to rest while she herself would go out into the fields of Bet-Lechem, and see what food she could find to sustain them.

Ruth entered a field where many men were busy cutting grain, binding it into sheaves, and piling them onto wagons and carting them away.

Hesitant yet spurred on by her hunger and by the thought that she must get something for her dear mother-in-law, Ruth went into the field and sat down for a while to rest and to see what luck she might have there.

Suddenly she was startled to hear a kind and gentle voice: “G-d be with you, stranger!”

Ruth acknowledged the friendly greeting. She was grateful to hear the same kind person speak on:

“Come along into the field. Do not be bashful! Gather some ears of grain and satisfy your hunger!”

It was Boaz, the owner of the field, who thus addressed Ruth. Boaz was the judge of the Jewish people at that time.

Ruth thanked him and plucked some ears of grain. As she was about to depart, Boaz urged her to stay a while and gather what the peah - what the reapers had left in the corners of the field.

“What is peah?” asked Ruth.

“Our Torah tells us that when the





owner of a field has his grain cut, he is obligated to leave a corner of the field for the poor, the needy, and the stranger to come and reap for themselves,” answered Boaz.

“How wonderful!” exclaimed Ruth. And so she stayed and cut the grain from a corner of the field, and was then again about to go away.

“You do not need to go yet,” urged Boaz. “Why not stay and benefit from leket?”

“What does leket mean?” asked Ruth.

“According to our Torah, if a reaper misses some grain with his scythe, he is not allowed to go back, but must leave the grain which he has either failed to cut or has dropped, and this must be left as ‘gleanings’ for the poor and the stranger,” explained Boaz patiently.

Ruth said nothing, but saw no reason for refusing to take advantage of the laws of the Torah, which she herself had so gladly embraced.

When she had gathered a whole basketful, she went up to Boaz, thanked him very sincerely for his kindness, and got ready to depart.

“There is no need for you to go yet,” coaxed Boaz. “There is still shikchah which you can take.”

“The Torah is indeed boundless in its care for the less fortunate ones,” said Ruth. “Now please tell me what is shikchah?”

“When the owner of a field is taking his load of grain to his granaries, it is possible that he may have forgotten some sheaves in the field. Well, the Torah forbids him to go back and get them, but he must leave these forgotten sheaves for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.”

Ruth was so happy with her good fortune. She had gathered almost more than she could carry. She and Naomi were now well provided-for. She thanked Boaz once more, and he made her promise to come again.

Ruth was full of excitement as she hastened to her mother-in-law and related all that had happened to her in the fields of Boaz. Naomi was happy that Ruth had been so successful and had found favor in the eyes of Boaz the noble land-owner. She told Ruth that Boaz was a kinsman of Elimelech.

In the meantime Boaz had made inquires about the stranger who had captured his heart with her modesty and piousness, and he discovered that she was the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi. When Boaz asked Ruth to marry him, Naomi urged her to do so.

And so Ruth was unexpectedly rewarded with wealth and happiness.

Ruth and Boaz had a son named Oved who became the father of Jesse (Yishai). The youngest son of Jesse was David, who became the L-rd's anointed and beloved king of all the Jewish people. ❖





Why do we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot?

1 Ruth was the ancestor of King David, who passed away on Shavuot (and according to some he was also born on this day).

2 Ruth was a convert to Judaism, willingly entering a covenant with G-d through the acceptance of His Torah. On Shavuot, the Jewish people entered this

covenant with G-d by willingly accepting His Torah. The conversion steps taken by Ruth, and converts until this very day, are derived from the steps the Jewish people took at Sinai in the process of receiving the Torah.

3 Shavuot is also known as Chag Hakatzir - The Harvest Festival. The Book of Ruth discusses the harvest and how the poor were treated in the harvest season with sympathy and love.

◆ THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MATTAN TORAH ◆

a **Formal giving of the mitzvot** - metzuvah v'oseh (Kidushin 31a. Baba Kama 38a). Until Mattan Torah mitzvot were performed not by command, but through human initiative, similar to a child being trained and educated. At Sinai our relationship with G-d and our commitments were formalized - like a collective bar-mitzvah of the Jewish people. The mitzvot are now infused with Divine power and command.

b **The Jewish people became a formal nation**, like a new convert who is considered a new being, a newborn child (Kerisos 9a).

c **Uniting heaven and earth, spirit and matter**

At Sinai the world changed. For the first time the human race was given the opportunity to bridge heaven and earth - to fuse spirit and matter. Until that point there existed an

Rav Yosef on the day of Atzeret (Shavuot) said: If not for this special day's effect how many Yosef's would there be in the street (marketplace) - Pesachim 68b

Until Mattan Torah there was schism between the "Higher" and the "lower." Mattan Torah fused heaven and earth, spirit and matter to the point that we now have the power to actually transform physical matter into a *cheftzah* of *kedusha*, a piece of holiness. Thus Rav Yosef's declaration: If not for this day how many Yosef's would exist in the material marketplace. Mattan Torah transformed Rav Yosef, even as he is in the physical marketplace, into a unique being

(Likkutei Sichos vol. 8 p. 263. vol. 16 p. 211).





invisible wall between the transcendental and the material. A decree, a schism separated between above and below. “That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above.”

Sinai opened a door that allows mortals in a material world to become Divine. It gave us the power to spiritualize the material, and to make our lives sacred, not just ethical. Sinai created an interface that bridged heaven and earth, without compromising one or the other. The finite can become one with the infinite; matter one with spirit; the sacred one with the secular. Because G-d is neither spirit nor matter, He gave us the power to completely integrate the two.

Once in history the schism between sense and spirit was bridged. Sinai was this unprecedented event. 3322 years ago heaven and earth achieved fusion. Empowering us - till this day - to allow our own senses to reach the ethereal, and maintain the integration in our daily lives, in a sustainable and permanent fashion. At Sinai we received a blueprint for life (called the Torah) - like a life operators’ manual - which instructs us how to marry the Divine and the human.

d The 10 Commandments

- Our sages relate that when the people of Israel stood at Sinai and G-d spoke the Ten Commandments, so overwhelming was the experience that “with each and every utterance, their souls flew from their bodies.”

- The Ten Commandments are general and inclusive commandments which have all the 613 Torah commandments incorporated within them. In these Ten one can find the root of all the other commandments.

- Why are The Ten Commandments stated in the singular (Anochi Hashem Elokecho, and not Elokeichem), though they were said to millions of people gathered at Sinai? To teach us that the Torah was given to each person as an individual. Every single person heard the Commandments as if they were being spoken to him/her alone - “when G-d spoke to the Jews, each individual said ‘G-d is speaking with me’” (Pesikta D’Rav Kahana Parshas HaChodesh Ha’Shlishi, on the verse Anochi).

e G-d Chose Us, We Chose Him

The day we stood at Sinai is more than the day we received the Torah from G-d. This was also the occasion on which the Almighty chose us as His people.

“Choice” exists on many levels. A person might choose something because of its positive qualities—but these are “compelled” choices—the positive qualities of these things have dictated that they be chosen. A true choice is a *free* choice—a choice that is not influenced by anything, a choice that is a pure expression of the chooser’s quintessential desire.

At Sinai we were truly chosen, in a choice free of all reasons and conditions. At Sinai was established that “A Jew, although he has

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sinned, is a Jew,” simply because he is the object of G-d’s quintessential choice.

When G-d chose us at Sinai, we responded in kind. We chose Him as He chose us: because our very self—the quintessential “I” that transcends all reason and calculation—so desired.

So when we heard the divine voice at Sinai proclaim “Do not steal,” we accepted it not merely as a sane and rational law of civilized life, but as the will of G-d. When we heard “Honor your father and your mother,” we embraced it not merely as a dictum of decency and gratitude, but as the will of G-d. We committed ourselves to His commands not for their beneficial qualities, but as a response to His unequivocal, unreasoned choice of us as His people.

f Special role of children as guarantors

When G-d gave us the Torah, He wanted guarantors that we would forever study and observe this holiest of gifts. But even the suggestion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob standing in as guarantors was not good enough. Who was G-d’s choice? The children. The youngest of our people are, in fact, the ones who guarantee that we will cherish, learn, and keep the Torah.

g Special role of women

And Moses ascended to G-d. And G-d called to him from the mountain, saying: “So you shall relate to the house of Jacob, and pronounce to the children of Israel...” Exodus 19:3

“The house of Jacob” are the women; “the children of Israel” are the men.... Relate the general principles [of Torah] to the women, and pronounce [its] exacting particulars to the men. - Mechilta, ibid.

Why was Moses sent to the women first? G-d told Moses to relate the “general principles” of the Torah to the women, and its “exacting particulars” to the men. The woman relates to the essence, the all-inclusive, in Torah; the man relates to the detail, the specific law, the particular application.

First, the Torah must be received as is, free of Talmudic *pilpul*, free of philosophical theorizing, free of mystical experience - free of everything save the unequivocal identification with its truth. Go first to the Jewess, said G-d to Moses, for she is the prime conduit of this first step in the communication of My truth to humanity. Then, go to the men and instruct them of the details; it is they who shall play the pivotal role in the second stage - the application of Torah to the particulars of man’s external experience of his world.

Thus the man is the one with the more “intellectual” relationship with Torah - it is to him that the commandment “study it day and night” is directed. The woman, on the other hand, imbibes the Torah at its supra-rational root with her female faith and receptiveness. She is one with the truth of G-d, without the need to dissect it and analyze it—a process that is crucial for the particular-minded man, but which cannot but deflect its force and refract the intensity of its light.

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[This distinction is also seen in the role of the father and mother in determining the identity of their child. According to Torah law, it is the mother who determines the Jewishness of the child: if the mother is Jewish, so too, is the child; if the mother is not, neither is the child, no matter how

much “Jewish blood” there is in his parentage. On the other hand, regarding the particulars of his Jewishness--his tribal identity, or his classification as a “Kohen,” “Levite,” or “Israelite”- the child takes wholly after his father.]



MORE IMPORTANT SHAVUOT EVENTS



King David’s yahrzeit (Yerushalmi Chagiga 2:3. Tosafot, Atzeret, Chagiga 17a)

Baal Shem Tov’s yahrzeit (1st Day of Shavuot). See Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p.1027. Vol. 8 p. 22

The Baal Shem Tov very much cherished the 2nd Day of Shavuot and would eat a special meal and farbreng much on that day (Sichas Shavuot 5704. Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1027)

THIS YEAR: **250th ANNIVERSARY** OF BAAL SHEM TOV’S YAHRZEIT

See Appendix: How the Baal Shem Tov Changed the World

ISRAEL! ISRAEL!

The festival of Shavuot is the *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of the passing) of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, who was born on the 18th of Elul, 5458 (1698).

An old Chassidic manuscript describes Rabbi Israel’s birth as G-d calling the name of His people. When a person loses consciousness, one of the things that is done in the effort to revive him is to call him by his name. The unconscious person might be deaf to all

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other sounds and words, but the sound of his own name—a sound relating to his very identity—will penetrate to the pith of his soul and rouse it to life.

Three hundred years ago, the Jewish people were in a state of faintness and stupor. The devastating pogroms of 1648-9, in which hundreds of thousands of Jews were massacred and more than 300 Jewish communities were utterly destroyed, and the havoc and disillusionment wreaked by the false messianism of Shabbetai Tzvi in the 1660s, had left the people of Israel broken in body and shattered in spirit.

To revive the spirit of Israel, G-d called out the name of His people. A soul called “Israel” was sent to the world to rouse the identity of Israel and breathe love and joy into Jewish life.



VOICES

Our sages tell us that “Every day, an echo resounds from Mount Sinai” beckoning to man to come close to G-d.

Said Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov: Have you ever met someone who told you that he hears this echo? To what purpose is this proclamation if no one hears it?

But often a person is seized by a feeling that has no identifiable source or cause. He may be struck with a sudden joy, or fear, or regret. He may suddenly resolve to turn a new leaf in his life, to embark on a new initiative in his spiritual development. From where do these unprovoked awakenings come?

Every day, an echo resounds from Mount Sinai.












BIOGRAPHY

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Besht) (1698-1760)

The founder of Chassidism, the Besht single handedly reinvigorated mystical Judaism in a demoralizing period. He emphasized the power of each individual soul; the concepts of love of your fellow; serving G-d with joy; Divine Providence

and perpetual creation. The Besht's great student, Rabbi Dovber, the Maggid of Mezritch, continued his legacy and passed it on to his many students, who became the founders of each of their respective Chassidic dynasties.

Biographical Highlights:

-  1698: Born on 18 Elul, in Okup, Ukraine on the Polish-Russian border, to Eliezer and Sarah. Rabbi Eliezer was one of the 'hidden tzaddikim'.
-  1703: Orphaned of both parents at age five. Placed in the care of the community.
-  Becomes a teacher's assistant at a young age.
-  Aged 14, joins a group of 'hidden tzaddikim' (*Nistarim*) led by Rabbi Adam of Ropshitz.
-  Aged 18, introduces new service for the *Nistarim*, namely to devote themselves to the education of Jewish children.
-  Becomes the spiritual leader of the *Nistarim*. Directs them to now focus on the education of adults.
-  Marries Leah Rachel (daughter of renowned Talmudist, Ephraim of Brody) with whom he has a son and daughter. Moves to the Carpathian Mountains.
-  1724-1734: Leads a secluded life dedicated to intensive study of the Torah. Receives instruction from Achiya of Shilo, the ancient prophet of King David's time, who appears regularly to teach him the secrets of the Torah.
-  1734: Begins to teach publicly at age thirty-six. Settles in Talust and later in Medzhibuzh in the western Ukraine. This marks the birth of Chassidism.
-  His main student and subsequent successor is Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch.
-  1760: Passes away on Shavuot in Medzhibuzh, at age 62.



MAJOR CONCEPTS

- ◎ Love your Fellow
- ◎ Perpetual Creation
- ◎ Divine Providence
- ◎ Living with Joy
- ◎ Non-ascetism; transforming the material



COSMIC MARRIAGE

The spiritual mystery of the union between man and woman is implied in the name given to the festival of Shavuot in the Talmud: “The Marriage Day.” What marriage occurred on this day? At Mount Sinai G-d gave mankind the gift of the Torah - a blueprint to enable man to spiritualize the physical world. Shavuot is thus considered a marriage between G-d and the people, between heaven and earth.

The use of the term marriage in relation to the giving of the Torah suggests a parallel to physical marriage. The giving of the Torah was an awesome event, an unprecedented Divine experience. What does this unique spiritual encounter between man and G-d have to do with the corporeal marriage between a man and woman? Let us explore some parallels between the divine and the human models of marriage.

UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

The midrash relates that before God gave the Torah to the Jewish people, He said: “Accept Me ... and then accept My decrees.” In a marriage relationship, it is essential to accept and embrace your partner as they are in essence before addressing individual needs. Too often we treat marriage only as a contract based on mutual benefit: “I will look after the kids and cook the meals if you take

out the garbage and pay the bills.” Marriage is not merely a composite of details, it not just about convenience or getting the job done, it’s about embracing another soul in your life.

There are two kinds of love - selfish and selfless love. Selfish love is conditional - you love on condition that your needs are met, and when your partner falls short of serving your needs, you may be tempted to reject them and search elsewhere. With conditional love, we see our partners as an extension of ourselves and feel that it is our responsibility to correct or change them. Although we constantly learn from each other, the role of a spouse is not that of an authority or a teacher, but that of an equal. The Torah tells us that marriage begins with unconditional love and acceptance of the entire person - first “accept Me” and the details will follow from there.

PARTNERSHIP

At Mount Sinai, G-d initiated a reciprocal relationship, a partnership with mankind. When G-d descended onto Mount Sinai, it was necessary for Moses to respond by ascending the mountain. Judaism teaches that the relationship between man and G-d is not an immature reliance or passive dependence on heaven. We believe that G-d’s blessing is present in all that we do, but it is incumbent upon us to utilize the tools and resources at

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our disposal to fashion a vessel to contain the blessing.

The give and take of a dynamic relationship between husband and wife necessitates a mature sense of self. Ascending the mountain symbolizes the confidence that you matter, that you as an individual have a vital role to play in the world. When this is lacking, unhealthy co-dependence can arise where partners rely on each other to compensate for their own lacks. Marriage partners should look to each other to complement who they are so that together they can create a powerful partnership.

VISION

G-d shared a vision with us at Mount Sinai, a blueprint of how to bring sanctity and spirituality into the world. Perhaps the ingredient most lacking in marriages today is a shared spiritual vision. People often marry

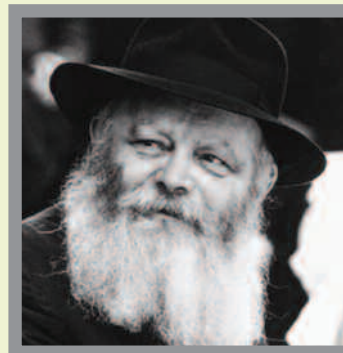
because of physical, intellectual, emotional and psychological compatibility, but don't take into consideration spiritual compatibility. Spiritual compatibility entails not just a shared desire to build a home and family, it also involves a spiritual vision of how you, as a couple and a family, want to impact the world; how you envision your unique contribution to others; how you intend to build something that is greater than both of you.

Shavuot, the Marriage Day, inspires us to view marriage not just as a union between two people, but as the marriage between heaven and earth, between G-d and man. When we harness the mystical power of love and marriage, recognizing that it is a manifestation of the divine union, our marriages will become a microcosm of a cosmic marriage. The unity this manifests will penetrate through the physical and spiritual dimensions shining a light for eternity.

AN UNCLOUDED HARVEST

*Achitofel instructed his children in three things [before his death]:
Do not enter into quarrels. Do not rebel against the sovereignty of the house of David. If it is a clear day on the festival of Shavuot, sow wheat.*

Talmud, Bava Batra 147a



The Ethics of the Fathers tells us that “there are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the

crown of *kehunah* (priesthood) and the crown of sovereignty. But the crown of good name supersedes them all.”

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Sovereignty, priesthood and Torah constitute the three primary objects of human striving: power, spirituality and wisdom. There are two basic approaches to the attainment of these goals: the approach of one “whose wisdom comes before his piety”—who relies on his own understanding to guide him in his quest; and the approach of one “whose piety comes before his wisdom”—whose commitment to G-d takes precedence over his understanding. As the above-quoted *mishnah* concludes, the “crown of good name”—of good works and obedience to the divine will—must supersede all other “crowns.”

Achitofel was one of the greatest sages of his generation (King David called him “my master and teacher”). Yet all his life he followed the route of giving precedence to his reason over his piety—a path which brought him much grief. Therein lies the deeper significance of the three pieces of advice he offers to his children before his passing: he is warning them not to repeat his error of placing wisdom before piety, as this pertains to the three “crowns” of human aspiration.

Therein lies the deeper significance of the three pieces of advice he offers to his children before his passing: he is warning them not to repeat his error of placing wisdom before piety, as this pertains to the three “crowns” of human aspiration.

The first thing he tells them is: “Do not enter into quarrels.” This is a reference to the folly of Korach, whom the Torah considers the father of all disunity and strife. Korach contested the legitimacy

of the *kehunah*, arguing that spirituality should not be defined by a hierarchical priesthood but by every individual in the community, regardless of his vocation and calling in life. Korach had many logical arguments in support of his view. But because he did not accept that it is G-d, not man, who defines the nature of spirituality and the

means of its attainment, his aspirations ended up destroying him and all who joined him in his campaign.

The second piece of advice that Achitofel had for his children concerns the second crown, the “crown of sovereignty”: “Do not rebel against the sovereignty of the house of David.” Achitofel had been among the leaders of Absalom’s ill-fated rebellion against David—and he had many sound arguments on which to base his claim that David had forfeited his right to the throne. Here, too, the root of

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Achitofel's error was his failure to set his obedience to the will of G-d above all else, including the deductions of the most brilliant of minds.

Finally, Achitofel addresses the attainment of the "crown of Torah," telling his children: "If it is a clear day on the festival of Shavuot, sow your fields with wheat." In the writings of our sages, "wheat" is a metaphor for wisdom. The "tree of knowledge," says the Midrash, "was wheat." The Talmud states that "A child does not learn to say 'Father,' until he has tasted grain." If you want your "wheat" to turn out right—

Achitofel is saying—you must recognize that the source of all wisdom is the festival of Shavuot, which is the day we entered into a covenant with G-d and received the Torah from Him. Only when you have a clear vision of Shavuot—only when you achieve an unclouded view of the commitment to G-d that must precede all human understanding—will your crop of reason grow straight and true and beneficially nourish your life.

Based on an letter by the Rebbe dated Erev Shavuot, 5709 (June 2, 1949)



A Successful Sermon

It was the custom of Reb Chaim of Sanz, the Sanzer Rebbe, to deliver a public discourse at the afternoon meal on Shavuot.

This much anticipated event was attended by hundreds of his Chasidim who traveled to spend the holiday with their Rebbe and rejoice in his holy words.

One year all were assembled as usual, but to their surprise and disappointment, the Rebbe failed to appear, retiring to his room instead.

The Chasidim were worried and began to speculate as to why the Rebbe had departed from his usual custom.

The Rebbe's attendants passed through the murmuring crowd and motioned to several

of the wealthier Chasidim to enter into the Rebbe's study.

Honored and humbled to have been singled out, they listened carefully to Reb Chaim's words. "I am old and I don't have the strength to address the entire congregation as I have in previous years. And so, I have asked you to come and I will speak only to you, very briefly, about an important matter. It is urgent that I have two thousand rubles to marry off a poor bride. I am entrusting you the matter to organize this between yourselves. I expect the sum to be pledged by the end of the holiday. I am waiting to hear from you. Come to me as soon as the money has been amassed."

In no time flat the Rebbe's attendants came to inform him that the matter was taken care of.

The wealthy Chasidim had arranged to con-

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tribute the entire sum among themselves, and the money would be presented to the Rebbe at the close of the yom tov. Reb Chaim was overjoyed with the manner in which his plea had been received by his Chasidim. He cried out, "This Shavuot I certainly have delivered my most successful sermon!"



Shavuot: Holiday Or Oath?

The two famous rabbis, Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg and Reb Pinchas of Frankfurt were brothers, the sons of the Rabbi of Tchortkov, Reb Tzvi Hirsh Halevi Horowitz. Even as small children they were known as prodigies.

When they were quite young their father took over the duty of teaching them Torah.

It was a challenging job and he taught them as quickly and as much as their brilliant minds could absorb. When they were both well below ten years of age, they were already learning the Talmud with several commentaries.

As part of their schedule, they would learn the laws which pertained to the next approaching holiday. And so, when the holiday of Chanukah ended, their father began the study of the tractate Megilla. Having completed it by Purim, they began learning the tractate dealing with the laws of Passover, which they finished right on target; the day before Pesach.

Shmelke, the elder of the two boys then said to his father, "Now we have to begin learn-

ing the tractate Shevuot if we want to finish it by the time Shavuot comes along."

"Do you think that Shevuot deals with the laws of the holiday?" asked their father smiling, for that was not the case.

"No," replied the boy. "I know it deals with the laws of oaths, but I have a reason why we should study it now. On that first Shavuot, all the Jews took an oath at Mount Sinai to keep the commandments of the Torah, and that promise has been binding ever since. I want to learn the laws of oaths so I can understand how important it is to keep a promise and how serious it is to break one. I figured out that there are forty-nine double pages of this tractate and forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot, and if we learn a double-page every day, we will finish in time for Shavuot."

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh was pleased by his son's erudite reasoning and he happily agreed to learn according to his suggestion.

By the time Lag B'Omer had arrived (the thirty-third day of the Omer), they had reached a section in the tractate which mentioned a law in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Little Shmelke jumped up from the table excitedly: "Father, Father, you see how wonderful! This is the day of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's yahrzeit, the thirty-third day of the Omer, and here his name is mentioned. Not only that, but it says '...and they laughed in the land of Israel,' and everyone knows that it's a custom to make a big celebration in Israel on this day!" The father and sons

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finished exactly as they had calculated, although they had to study a double-page every day.

The following year when Pesach had passed, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh again asked his sons what they wished to learn in preparation for the holiday of Shavuot. This time the younger child, Pinchas, answered: "I think we should begin the tractates of Ketubot (marriage contracts) and Kiddushin (the laws of marriages)."

Questioned his father, "What do they have to do with Shavuot?"

"That's easy. On Shavuot, G-d took the Jewish people to be His -- it was like a wedding -- and said the words, 'And I have betrothed you to Me forever.'

You taught us that He held Mount Sinai over our heads like a marriage canopy. The holy words of the Torah were like our marriage contract, and He gave us a gift as well - the Oral Torah. That is why I think we should learn the laws of marriage contracts and betrothals - so we will know that the 'wedding' of Israel and G-d was a valid one and that both G-d and the Jews are obligated to fulfill all the points of the contract."

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh couldn't help beaming with pride from his son's well-reasoned words.

The three scholars learned the two tractates in record speed, finishing two double pages a day until, forty-nine days later, they celebrated both the holiday of Shavuot and the successful completion of their studies.



The Previous Rebbe's would bless people before Shavuot with this greeting: "I'kabolas haTorah b'simach u'b'pnimiyus," toward receiving the Torah with joy and internalized."

Joy:

Since the commitment to Torah study and performance of mitzvot faces various challenges and obstacles, we therefore need to receive the Torah with joy. When we accept something with joy it will continue to be performed with joy and will endure.

Internalized:

Torah and mitzvot have to be performed with your entire inner soul. Not merely mechanically, in thought, speech and action. Also not only with the cognitive and emotional faculties. But with the inner essence of the soul.

(Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1307)



TWO SINAI REVOLUTIONS

At Sinai the human race received its mandate how to build a civilized world.

Two major revolutions took place at Sinai.

First and foremost Sinai declared that G-d gave us freedom. The Ten Commandments begin with the statement: "I am your G-d who delivered you from [the bondage in] Egypt." The sages explain that Egypt in Hebrew (*Mitzrayim*) refers to all forms of slavery and confinement, anything that inhibits human freedom.

Then the remaining nine Commandments declared at Sinai define the system that we must build to maintain our freedom and construct a civilized universe ("Thou shall not murder," "Thou shall not steal," etc.)

The opening of the Bible (Torah) formalized at Sinai states that the human being was created in the Divine Image. By this virtue each of us has unalienable rights. Once that axiom is in place then we have the solid foundation upon which all law and order stands: The Divine authority that has endowed us all with fundamental freedom and with a moral system by which to live.

Take away the bedrock of the first commandment, all else inevitably falls. With no Creator imbuing us with

absolute freedom and defining for us a blueprint for life, all morality becomes arbitrary and relative. Case in point: The Nazis defied "though shall not murder" only because they first defied the first commandment of accepting G-d Who gave us all life and freedom. Instead, they chose to "play G-d" and arbitrarily decide who has a right to live and who not.

That is the first Sinai revolution: The bestowal of freedom on all human beings.

The second revolution that took place at Sinai was even greater than the first:

Before Sinai there was an impenetrable rift between heaven and earth, between matter and spirit. An invisible wall separated between the transcendental and the material. A decree, a schism separated between above and below. "That which was above could not descend below, and that which was below could not ascend above."

At Sinai the world changed. Heaven was unplugged. Sinai opened a door, never again to be closed, that allows mortals in a material world to become Divine. For the first time the human race was given the opportunity to bridge heaven and earth - to fuse spirit and matter. It gave us the power to spiritualize the material, and to make our lives sacred, not just ethical.





SINAI FIREWORKS

“The third day arrived. There was thunder and lightning in the morning, with a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an extremely loud blast of a ram’s horn. The people in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp toward the Divine Presence. They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain.

“Mount Sinai was all in smoke because of the Presence that had come down on it. G-d was in the fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke of a lime kiln. The entire mountain trembled violently. There was the sound of a ram’s horn, increasing in volume to a great degree. Moses spoke, and G-d replied with a Voice” (Exodus 19:16-19).

Why did the Sinai experience have to be so dramatic and pronounced? It would seem that the profound spiritual event that was Sinai would be intimate and resonant, without needing to rely on a spectacular display of fireworks.

Indeed, the Midrash explains that the first tablets were broken due to the fact that they were accompanied with high-level fanfare. Thus the second tablets were given on Yom Kippur in silence. “Nothing is more beautiful,” the Midrash concludes, “than modesty.”

Yet, the purpose of Sinai was to permeate the sensory universe, and infuse our tangible existence with the Divine. Sinai was

both a profoundly mystical experience and simultaneously an intense sensual experience - a multi-sensory event that stimulated all the human senses: thunder and lightning, the escalating shofar blast, smoke and trembling. While the senses were all engaged at Sinai, they also felt an intense awe of an experience beyond anything physical. Indeed, the people actually achieved a state of synesthesia: “All the people saw the sounds - they saw what is ordinarily heard, and they heard what is ordinarily seen” (20:15 and Mechilta on the verse). With all the dramatic sounds and sights - Sinai opened doors beyond the perceived senses, actually fusing them into one.

True and healthy sensuality was born.

In the third month following the children of Israel’s exodus from the land of Egypt; that same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai... And there Israel camped opposite the mountain (Exodus 19:1-2)

At all their other encampments, the verse says vayachanu (“and they camped,” in the plural); here it says vayichan (“and he camped,” in the singular). For all other encampments were in argument and dissent, whereas here they camped as one human, with one heart (Mechilta, Rashi)



SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

Honoring the Baal Shem Tov's 250th Yahrzeit
(5520-5770. 1760-2010)



EXCLUSIVE FOR SHLUCHIM

Perfect for a shturem'dike, groundbreaking lecture, class or sermon

“In connection with the 200th yahrzeit of the Baal Shem Tov on the first day of Shavuot...I request of you to encourage Rabbis... to devote their words on this special day [Shavuot] (or close to it) to speak about the personality and Torah of the Baal HaHilula [the Baal Shem Tov], founded on the adnei paz (pillars of jade) of Ahavas Hashem, Ahavas haTorah and Ahavas Yisroel, that they are all one”

- Rebbe's letter to Sefardic Chief Rabbi Nissim, Lag B'Omer 5720

(Igros Kodesh vol. 19 p. 301)

My hope is that you speak to the children about the Baal Shem Tov's 200th yahrzeit...
permeated with Chassidishe light and warmth

(Igros Kodesh vol. 19 p. 351)



In response to the Rebbe's request 50 years ago (in connection with the 200th yahrzeit of the Baal Shem Tov) that Rabbis “devote their words” on Shavuot (or around this time) “to speak about the personality and Torah of the” Baal Shem Tov - here are two

powerful presentations about the groundbreaking contributions of the Baal Shem Tov, which you can easily integrate incorporate into your lectures, sermons or classes during this Shavuot.

1. HOW THE BAAL SHEM TOV CHANGED THE WORLD
2. FIVE TEACHINGS OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE



◆ THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S 250th YAHRZEIT ◆

HOW THE BAAL SHEM TOV CHANGED THE WORLD

This Shavuot we celebrate the 250th Yahrzeit of the great Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of the Chassidic movement. I can simply say that were it not for this giant and pioneer, I would not be here with you today, living and serving this community as a Chabad shliach. It was this man, the Baal Shem Tov, that spawned the Chassidic movement, which would give birth to his successor, the Maggid of Mezeritch, and then to his great student, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Chassidus, and in turn to seven generations of Chabad Rebbes, leading to our Rebbe, whom I am honored to serve as his shliach and emissary to our wonderful community.

Who is the Baal Shem Tov?

But who was this man the Baal Shem Tov and what exactly did he achieve? Above all, what relevance does he have for us today? How, we can boldly ask, would the world be different without the Baal Shem Tov?

50 years ago, in 1960, the Rebbe honored the Baal Shem Tov's 200th yahrzeit, by designating that year as "celebration 200." The Rebbe asked everyone to use that year to intensify their study and commitment to the Baal Shem Tov's teachings and directives. He also wrote a letter then to Rabbi Nissim, the then Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, to en-

courage Rabbis to "devote their words" on Shavuot "to speak about the personality and Torah of the" Baal Shem Tov, founded on the triple pillars of love of G-d (Ahavas Hashem), love of Torah (Ahavas haTorah) and love of Jews (Ahavas Yisroel) - which are all one.

I will therefore fulfill our Rebbe's directive and speak about the Baal Shem Tov and his personal relevance to our lives today.

Our Challenges Today

Before we discuss the Baal Shem Tov's great contribution, I would like us all to focus on the dilemmas that we each face in our lives. None of us are immune to the contemporary dichotomies of trying to balance our Jewish lives in a secular world. How do we bridge tradition and modernity? Faith and reason? Science and religion? How do we maintain the highest moral standards when surrounded by a greedy and selfish corporate world? How do we balance career and family life? Time to study Torah and focus on spiritual growth amidst our busy schedules? How do we energize our and our children's Judaism - instead of allowing it to stagnate and be boring?

Battles also exist on an interpersonal level: How to get along with others that we may disagree with? How do we love our fellow

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Jew, V'Ohavto L'Rayecho Komocho? What is the solution to the divisiveness that rages amongst our communities?

Finally, we all have our conflicts in the personal and psychological level. How do we reconcile our minds and our hearts? The different voices that tug us in opposite directions? How can we find harmony between our transcendental yearnings and our material needs? How to break the monotony of our routines and rejuvenate our lives? How to balance our personal and intimate needs for love and warmth in our depersonalized world of modern technology? How to slow down in our fast-paced society? Can we find inner peace in our lives - a place of tranquility and security - without having to escape from our existing lives?

Would you believe that the Baal Shem Tov and his teachings provide us with pointed answers to all these quandaries?

For perspective, let us take a step back in history.

Historical Context: The Enlightenment

The indispensable contribution of the Baal Shem Tov - and the revolution he initiated - can be appreciated by placing his advent in historical context. Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov was born in the summer of 1698 (on

the 18th of Elul) and lived till 1760 - smack in the throes of the Enlightenment, also known as The Age of Reason - the rationalist, liberal, humanitarian, and scientific trend that was born in the 18th Century and would transform the world in which we live. The Baal Shem Tov lived exactly in the same time as Voltaire, J.J. Rousseau, Adam Smith, Swift, Bach, Isaac Newton, Hume, Kant. John Wesley; and in America, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin.

As a humorous aside, just a week after the Baal Shem Tov was born, Peter the Great of Russia imposed a tax on beards: all men except priests and peasants were required to pay a tax of 100 rubles a year; commoners were required to pay one kopeck each.... I'll be happy to hear your

analysis of this coincidence.

The Enlightenment and the subsequent scientific age of reason it spawned - which marks the beginning of the modern age - radically shifted the consciousness of the entire Western world, and its reverberations profoundly affect us till this day. Many of the abovementioned conflicts we face today - the battle between science and religion, between faith and reason, between tradition and modernity, between career and home, between depersonalized technology and personal relationships, between morality

Let's begin with the Enlightenments' impact on the general population, specifically in the religious and scientific arena, and then we'll discuss its dramatic effect on the Jewish people.

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and greed - can be traced directly to the Enlightenment and the time of the Baal Shem Tov!

Let's begin with the Enlightenments' impact on the general population, specifically in the religious and scientific arena, and then we'll discuss its dramatic effect on the Jewish people. Prior to this period in history, Western society was dominated and ruled by monarchs and the church. Our basic freedoms that we take today for granted did not exist. No free expression, no free speech, no free press. Wisdom and education were accessible to an elite minority (the bourgeois), who also controlled wealth and opportunities, while the majority (proletariat) were subjugated to their will and remained mostly illiterate. This power was of course abused (with some rare exceptions), and was used to suppress what is now called "free inquiry."

But then began an eruption, which would only escalate. The Enlightenment brought on a new quest for freedom and free thinking. Slowly, slowly the formidable forces of authority began to be challenged. First the Reformation, then the Renaissance and finally the waves of change began to seep into science and philosophy, with the new thinkers mustering up the chutzpah to question the basic truths that everyone simply accepted as facts. This of course created major tensions between science and religion, perhaps most pronounced by the classic episode of Galileo being forced to recant his

findings that contradicted with church doctrine.

In time, all the old institutions began to crack. The American and French Revolutions translated the newfound freedoms into national and political movements. Briefly stated, the new age - born at the same time as the Baal Shem Tov - created a major cataclysm, ultimately overthrowing all the existing powers and authorities, bringing in its place a new order - new freedoms, new thinking, new ideas.

But this revolution had its powerful down side as well. It wasn't just about enlightenment, freedom and discovery of truth. Many of the thinkers at the time, perhaps as a backlash to the centuries of religious oppression and in their desperation to throw off the shackles, went to the other extreme of rejecting religion altogether and even the very notion of G-d. Voltaire famously captured it in his cynical statement: "if G-d didn't exist we would have to create Him." The Enlightenment gave birth to secularism, agnosticism and atheism. Many argue that the "enlightened" thinkers of the time may have had great minds, but their ethics and morality were sorely corrupt, even decadent.

Impact on the Jews: Emancipation

Let us now discuss the impact of this period on Jewish life. The new "free" flow of ideas of

Voltaire famously captured it in his cynical statement: "if G-d didn't exist we would have to create Him."

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the Enlightenment brought on the Emancipation of the Jews, which posed a particular challenge to the Jewish people.

Until that period, during the Middle Ages, when Jews were all forcibly segregated from the outside world, isolated in ghettos, overtaxed, clearly identified as Jews, there was no choice and no “competition” so to speak. Even if they wanted to Jews could not assimilate. But now that the ghetto walls came down and the Jews were emancipated from institutionalized discrimination, a serious challenge arose: What to do with these newfound freedoms? Are they are blessing or a curse? Now that Jews can enter into Western society, mingle with their Gentile neighbors, attend the world’s universities, enjoy its music and art, how much should a Jew partake in these new opportunities? How does a Jew remain true to his Judaism while being part of the world?

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.

Some opted for segregating their religion from their secular lives. They felt that they can have the “best of both worlds” - to be, as it was coined at the time, “a Jew at home, a non-Jew in the street.” Though this may sound like a great formula, it didn’t work. What do you do when these two worlds conflict? If, for example, you are invited to a beautiful concert on Friday night? With time the clash between Judaism and modernity became vary apparent, and caused Jewish traditional commitment to wane.

The compartmentalized approach made it impossible to balance Torah and secular culture. Many sadly embraced the idea of rejecting the Torah laws that didn’t seem rational and scientific, including kosher, purity and impurity. But once you begin to tamper with the spiritual integrity of a Divine time-tested system, where does it end? How much do you compromise? Just to demonstrate how far this went, look at the Pittsburgh Platform suggested by some in the 18th century, in which they called for Shabbat being moved from Saturday to Sunday, so that Jews be uniform with their Christian neighbors. Obviously that suggestion was not embraced, because everyone recognized how glaringly amiss that would be.

Indeed, modern assimilation was birthed as a result of a people unprepared for the challenges of accelerated emancipation.

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Close to the same time after the Emancipation another extreme was born that took the exact opposite approach: The new openness in the Western secular world was seen as evil and we must impose upon ourselves blinders, create our own “ghettos” that will insulate and protect us from the onslaught of free inquiry and secular culture.

The fascinating irony is that these two extreme approaches were suffering from and were challenged by the same dilemma: **They both felt that it was impossible to integrate faith and modernity.** So you have to opt for one over the other. The former assimilated into the Western culture; the latter escaped into their own religious sanctums.

The Revolution

Now that we have set the historical stage of the early 18th century, we can appreciate the enormous revolution generated by the Baal Shem Tov, with the birth of the Chassidic movement.

Our sages tell us that G-d sends the cure before the disease. The Baal Shem Tov was born exactly at the outset of the modern age (the Enlightenment) and all the new challenges it would present to the Jews and the world - in order to introduce, through Chassidus, the “cure:” A new third approach, which teaches us how to fuse the two - G-d and the material universe, without compromising Divine integrity.

You see, the fundamental flaw in the both approaches mentioned above is that there is an inherent dissonance between the mundane and the Divine, between the secular and the spiritual. Out of this false premise stem all the different positions in the debate around faith and tradition: Some feel that the only way to live in the modern world is to reject many elements of ancient tradition. Others, in fear and reaction to the former,

go to the other rigid extreme, preaching dogma, protectionism and intolerance. And yet others react strongly to religious condescension and ostracism, and compromise the standard.

Over the past three centuries, from the time of the Enlightenment, this compartmentalized flaw became ingrained in the consciousness, and has shaped the education and

minds of millions of people, and has by now, understandably, affected the critical mass, to the point that this premise controls and defines the dialogue - with each position reacting to the other. Once a fundamental misconception becomes a “fact,” it is extremely difficult to dislodge its power without radical rethinking the initial premise. Often, we have to hit “rock bottom” to shake us out of our presumptions and recognize the logical missteps that led to the distortions.

[It reminds me of the powerful words of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev to a

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A new third approach, which teaches us how to fuse the G-dly and the material universe, two, without compromising the integrity of either.





self-proclaimed atheist: The G-d you don't believe in, I also don't believe in. Once the definition of G-d has been hijacked, we can never discover G-d's true meaning until we revisit the initial premise].

The Baal Shem Tov nipped the issue in the bud - when it took root during the Enlightenment - by exposing the philosophical flaw in compartmentalization: Compartmentalization implies a duality, which challenges the very notion of G-d Himself, Divine Unity, and His purpose in creating the universe.

Earlier in history people lived in secluded environments, insulated and protected from outside influences. The challenges were internal. The question of a pluralistic (or dualistic) universe was more philosophical than practical. As the options broadened due to emancipation, the issue of reconciling G-d with the modern world became very real, with far reaching consequences. The question of duality stormed to the fore with enormous force.

But "the cure precedes the illness." When the duality challenge arose the Baal Shem Tov, anticipating the great battles it would spawn, began teaching, like never before, the deeper spiritual nature of Torah and G-d's plan with creating this seemingly dualistic universe.

Unity

The Baal Shem Tov taught a "new" approach (not new at all, just emphasizing the funda-

mentals of Torah that may have become obscured) - the cardinal principle of Divine unity. As we declare in the most famous of all liturgy - the Shema: Hashem Echod. G-d is One does not merely mean that there is one G-d and not many. In its fullest, richest sense, it means that there is only one reality; the Divine permeates all of existence. So though on the surface the universe seems

fragmented and multifaceted, in truth there is no duality or plurality. Underneath it all, everything is permeated with Divine Unity. Our role and mission in life is to expose and reveal the inherent unity in every fiber of creation.

It is our role and mission in life to expose and reveal the inherent unity in every fiber of creation.

The Baal Shem Tov, and then his successors. The Maggid, 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, Chassidus 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, releas-

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ing 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 Chassidism transforms the human into the Divine. This seamless interface between G-d 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. Chassidus offers us 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 Need for the Baal Shem Tov Today - More Than Ever

If the Baal Shem Tov and his teachings were necessary three centuries ago, how much more so today, when we see the effects of the spiritual and cognitive dissonance created by the Enlightenment that have only accelerated in the challenges of our modern age.

Now let us return to the questions I posed earlier - how we each experience a disparity between our own Jewishness and the secular world, and all the forms and shapes in which this dichotomy manifests. Do you have to silence your mind to be religious? Or reject your beliefs in order to embrace secular life?

Look at the breakdown of our economy today traced to greed and lack of accountability. This compels us to ask ourselves: How steadfast are our own moral standards? Would I be ethical if I knew I wouldn't get caught? Is there room for G-d in the world of finance? Can we rely on the fear of G-d when no one's watching and there are no regulators?

A similar schism exists today between ritual and spiritual - between mechanical Judaism and its soul. Witness how many people can dress and act religiously, but then behave anything but. How is such inconsistency possible?

Then we have the split between the religious and the secular. On one end we have ultra-orthodox intolerance, astringent and unable to deal with a Jew outside of their "system." Or we have the other extreme - those calling for abolishing Torah's "ancient laws" based on "primitive" notions. Even worse is the fact that each "philosophy" doesn't stand on its own feet; it is responding to the other arguments - in one vicious, unending cycle: The ultra-orthodox become more inflexible in response to liberal permissiveness. The

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anti-religious become more radical, and even fanatic, in reaction to religious fanaticism. And the centrist reconciliators, many thinking people, are repulsed by the religious extremism of the mindless Orthodox, who ostracize those they don't agree with, lacking the knowledge of how to love without compromising Torah. They oppose the Orthodox "blind" rejection of Jews that are "not in our club." But in turn, they go to the other extreme, some more than others, and confuse the standards and blur the boundaries between.

Every one of our conflicts can be traced to a duality between our physical and our spiritual lives. The Baal Shem Tov teaches us a formula to discover integration and unity in all that we do. The formula is deceptively simple: **Look for the soul in everything.** Yes, in everything - in every person we meet, in every place we travel to, in every experience we encounter, in every leaf, stone and detail of our lives.

As long as Judaism remains a body of law, a system of do's and dont's, divorced of its inner spirit, we will never be able to integrate it into modern life.

This is the great revolution spawned by the Baal Shem Tov: The Baal Shem Tov was sent to this earth just at the dawn of the modern age, to empower us with the ability to confront all the dichotomies of our modern age (beginning with the Enlightenment).

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The Baal Shem Tov changed the world forever by providing us with a system and tools to integrate the Divine into the material.

It's interesting to note that the Baal Shem Tov lived at the time when *Essay on Man* was penned by Alexander Pole, including the words, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," and when Benjamin Franklin discovered the electrical nature of lightning. The

Baal Shem Tov in his own way delivered hope and illuminated the hearts and souls of thousands - and by now, millions - of people, giving them courage and strength to fuse the material and the spiritual into one glorious unity.

What Does the Future Hold?

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 by the Baal Shem Tov, Chassidus has spawned generations of adherents, men and women from all walks of life. Today, Chassidism is the most 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. I

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am but one humble example of thousands of my colleagues across the globe.

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 Chassid, 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 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 Chassid 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 G-d...all Jews are called real brothers" (Tanya chapter 32).

What does the future hold for a 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 G-dly "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 time of redemption, the messianic age, when the world will be filled with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

And "who can know their [every soul's] greatness and excellence of in their root and source in the living G-d...all Jews are called real brothers"

(Tanya chapter 32).

Call To Action

We all have a critical role to play in the unfolding of this drama. In a letter to his brother-in-law, R' Gershon Kitover, the Baal Shem Tov writes that on Rosh Hashana 1706 he asked Moshiach "when will you be coming?" To which Moshiach famously replied: "When your wellsprings will spread outward."

Paramount to all our discussions is that they lead to action. Let us committ on this special 250th anniversary to designate time each day, each week, to learn together a thought and directive from the Baal Shem Tov's Chassidic teachings, and then apply it into our actions. What a great gift we have - teachings that can help us see the soul in

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ourselves, in all the people around us and in all our experiences and interactions!

50 years ago the Rebbe also suggested that everyone donate \$200 to a special Baal Shem Tov-200 fund. Perhaps I can be so bold to suggest that we all do the same this year - \$250 corresponding to the 250th anniversary.

As we celebrate and honor the 250th yearzeit of Baal Shem Tov - a pioneering giant who spawned a spiritual revolution - let us all recommit to join this revolution. Share with your sphere of influence, with everyone you meet, the empowering and revolutionary message of the Baal Shem Tov. Act with love and sensitivity to every person you meet.

Together we can finish what the Baal Shem Tov began, and what all the Rebbes advanced, up till our Rebbe who initiated the broadest and widest expansion of “spreading the wellsprings outward.”

My standing here before you today is a testimony to this expansion. Our beautiful community is a living expression of the Baal Shem Tov’s Chassidic revolution.

This Hebrew year is also 5770, with 770 being the gematria of “foratzto” - to spread out, the motto coined by the Rebbe (with great fanfare 50 years ago) to express the mission of the Baal Shem Tov of “yofutzu mayonosecho chutzpah” and the mission of all the Rebbe’s shluchim to spread out all over the globe disseminating Torah and Chassidus.

Together we can finish what the Baal Shem Tov began, and what all the Rebbes advanced, up till our Rebbe who initiated the broadest and widest expansion of “spreading the wellsprings outward.”

So join me and let us say l’chaim to the Baal Shem Tov. L’chaim to all the Rebbes. L’Chaim to our Rebbe. And let us remember the Rebbe’s promise, that we now stand at the threshold of the Geulah. Our actions can help cause these “wellsprings” to flow over to the outside world, and finally realize Moshiach’s words - that he will come when “your wellsprings will be spread outward.”

(In Part II of this discussion we will focus on 5 major teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and how they can change our lives).





◆ THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S 250th YAHRZEIT ◆

FIVE REVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLES OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Who of us has not suffered from boring Judaism? How about boredom in general? Does the monotonous routine of your daily life grind you down?

One of the great challenges in life is to feel exciting and passionate. Most of our human troubles stem from the vacuum created by plain boredom and lack of enthusiasm in our lives.

A counselor who helps teenagers at risk once shared his own personal experience before a group of parents. "As a teenager I got into serious trouble with drugs. Thank G-d I finally rehabilitated and rebuilt my life. Thinking back, I wonder what was the core root of my problems? I ask you, what do you think is the single most important thing that causes a person to turn to drugs, alcohol or other destructive addictions?"

Each of the parents offered their own opinions. The various suggestions posited included, lack of love, peer pressure, curiosity and so on. All issues that are, obviously, not easily preventable. The counselor told them that he feels, as it was in his case, that the biggest cause was "boredom." "When you're bored and have nothing to do, especially if you are brimming with energy and creativity, you desperately search for a high, any high, to relieve the emptiness. The solution then is to fill that void with healthy

passion, which automatically will prevent destructive behavior."

Besides for boredom there are many other factors in life that cause us to be anxious, restless, unfulfilled - and just plain empty.

Existential loneliness - the feeling that you are alone in the world and that your choices don't make any real difference - is yet another deep root of anxiety.

Today we will look to the Baal Shem Tov, whose 250th yahrzeit we honor this Shavuot, for direction in addressing some of the most common challenges that we all face. To some the Baal Shem tov may be an unlikely place to turn to - after all, we pay our therapists to address these issues - yet, as we shall see, the Baal Shem Tov presented a powerful approach to life, based on the inner teachings of Torah (Chassidus), that has the ability to transform our lives.

Needless to say, the Baal Shem Tov was not just about healing maladies and solving problems. His major contributions electrified Torah scholars and mystics, as well as laypeople alike, in their devotion to G-d and their commitment to Torah and Mitzvot. But at the same time we are told that the Baal Shem Tov - whose name was Yisroel, the collective name of the Jewish people - came to revive and awaken the people of Israel from their spiritual slumber. *Cont'd*



Overall, the Baal Shem Tov taught every person he came in contact with, to always look for the soul - the neshomo - in every one you meet, in every experience you encounter, in every object and detail of your life (as we discussed in our previous talk).

Let us now focus on five teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, that train us to do just that - see the inside, rather than just the superficial outside, and to act upon it.

But first a story, told by the Friediker Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. On one of his journeys to Berlin - he lived in Russia but he would occasionally travel to Europe - he was greeted at his hotel by a delegation of Orthodox German rabbis. The German Jewish community had a long history of strong tradition.

The Rabbis met the Rebbe in the lobby of the hotel, and one of the questions they posed to him was: "what did Chassidus come to contribute that we don't have? Our German Jewish community is very proud of our heritage which stretches back over 1,000 years. Chassidus never reached us. What is the significance of the Chassidic teachings taught by you and your predecessors, beginning with the Baal Shem Tov?" Their question was sincere, and not meant to be critical in any way.

Sitting on a sofa in the hotel lobby, the Rebbe pointed out to them the beautiful marble pillars that adorned the magnificent

room. "Please describe what you see." The Rabbis proceeded to describe the majesty of the large, magnificent pillars shaped out of marble. The Rebbe stood up and with the Rabbis following him, approached one of the pillars. Shining a lamp on the pillar, the Rebbe asked them "And now what do you see?" They replied: "Now we see the exquisite flowers and intricate designs etched into the marble pillar." They all stood marveling at the unique sculpting that they were witnessing.

The Rebbe continued: "Why didn't you initially describe the pillars that way?" They replied the obvious: "Earlier we were standing at a distance and we couldn't see and appreciate the fine details, the flowers. Standing close up, with a shining lamp, allowed us to see the true makeup and beauty of these pillars."

Concluded the Rebbe: "The same is with the contribution of Chassidus. Chassidus did not create anything new. It simply shines the light on the "pillars" of Torah allowing us to see and appreciate their true makeup and beauty. Over years and years of galut, trans-migrations, expulsions, persecutions and genocides, many Jews, distracted and broken, may have lost sight of the Torah's "flowers." Even commitment to tradition can become "stale" and mechanical. The Torah therefore alerts us to constantly learn Torah and fulfill mitzvot with a new vitality ("b'chol

We have many truths embedded in our psyches. Yet they can remain concealed. The Baal Shem Tov came to wake us up to see and smell the roses.

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yom yi'hiyu b'aynecho chadoshim"). The teachings and ways of Chassidus came to shine the light and reveal the beautiful flowers within the pillars.

The Baal Shem Tov taught us to see the soul in everything, to love everyone unconditionally and the other teachings that we will discuss. These messages are not new; they are the essence of the Torah. And once you hear them, they resonate in us all. But due to the powerful veil of the material universe, and all our busy schedules we are distracted from seeing these "flowers."

We have many truths embedded in our psyches. Yet they can remain concealed. The Baal Shem Tov came to wake us up to see and smell the roses. And when you absorb his teachings they resonate - you feel that you always knew these "flowers" were there but couldn't quite place them.

Here are the five "flowers" of Judaism that we will focus on - as taught by the Baal Shem Tov:

1. **Unconditional love for all**
2. **Joy: infusing everything we do with passion, inspiration and warmth**
3. **Perpetual creation**
4. **Divine providence, everything is a lesson**
5. **Non-asceticism: transforming the material**

One can say that these are five tools that allow us to see the "soul" in everything that comes our way - covering the five dimensions of the human experience:

1. **Our interpersonal relationships (love)**
2. **Our state of mind and being (joy)**
3. **Our view on existence (perpetual creation)**
4. **Our life experiences (Divine providence)**
5. **Our relationship with the material world**

When you look at another with your naked eyes you see the body and the externals. Learn to peer deeper - into the personality, spirit and soul of another, and you will discover beautiful gems.

Unconditional Love

The Torah's cardinal mitzvah - foundational pillar - is "love your fellow as yourself." The Baal Shem Tov teaches us to see the "flower" in this pillar. How can you love another when you may not agree with that person, or he may not be behaving properly? Says the Baal Shem Tov: When you look at another with your naked eyes you see the body and the externals. Learn to peer deeper - into the personality, spirit and soul of another, and you will discover beautiful gems. If the body and the physical dominate, we cannot truly love each other. Love is only possible when the soul dominates over the body, and when we see that we are all parts of one larger organism (see Tanya ch. 32). By looking at the soul we also discover greatness even in the (seemingly) "simplest" people.

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They tell a story, that reflects this point: *A man punished his 3-year-old daughter for wasting a roll of gold wrapping paper. Money was tight and he became infuriated when the child tried to decorate a box for the upcoming Shavuot holiday.*

Nevertheless, the little girl brought the gift to her father the next morning and said, "This is for you, Daddy." He was embarrassed by his earlier overreaction, but his anger flared again when he found the box was empty.

He yelled at her, "Don't you know that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside it?"

The little girl looked up at him with tears in her eyes and said, "Oh, Daddy, it is not empty. I blew kisses into the box. All for you, Daddy."

The father was crushed. He put his arms around his little girl, and he begged for her forgiveness.

It is told that the man kept that gold box by his bed for years and whenever he was discouraged, he would take out an imaginary kiss and remember the love of the child who had put it there.

When meeting anyone or encountering any situation, never draw conclusions from what you see with your eyes. If someone offers offers you a gesture, don't dismiss it because it may not appear meaningful to you. You

never can know what beauty lies waiting within, if you only allowed yourself to look.

In a very real sense, each of us as humans have been given a gold container filled with unconditional love and kisses from our children, friends, family and G-d. There is no more precious possession anyone could hold.

When meeting anyone or any situation, never draw conclusions from what you see with your eyes.

Joy

How can you be happy when things are not going well? And when life is good why would we need a command to be joyous?

Answers the Baal Shem Tov: Joy is the natural state of every soul. Look at children - have you ever seen a child

born sad? Our challenge is not let the superficial surface of our negative experience deceive us into thinking that there is no good within. At times this can be tremendously difficult, especially in face of loss and tragedy (which clearly are not good). But even then, the joy in the soul never gets extinguished.

In hard times you need to hold on to your faith and trust and others who give you support. But always know that you carry within a reservoir of joy and hope - which is always waiting to be released.

You hold the key. By looking deeper into your life, recognizing the Divine providence in your life, seeing the blessings that have

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been bestowed upon you, not allowing yourself to stoop to self-pity and a victims attitude, knowing that nothing can vanquish your spirit - these are all tools that help you open up the door to your inner joy.

Divine Providence

Nothing in your life is random or coincidental. Everything a person sees or hears contains a lesson for him or her. G-d leads a person's footsteps, and every experience, every place we travel to and encounter is for a purpose.

On a surface level, the script of your life may look one way. In truth, there is a hidden script - invisible "flowers" - in everything we do. Think a moment how different your life would be with such an attitude.

A beautiful story illustrates this point:

In 1759, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov sent one of his young disciples, Rabbi Moshe Meshel, with a letter to his former opponent and now disciple, the great scholar Rabbi Chaim Rapaport, rabbi of the city of Lvov.

The letter instructed Rabbi Chaim that on a certain Wednesday in the summer month of Tammuz, he should travel to a designated place in the forest outside the city and study there, in depth, the first four chapters of the laws of blessings in Maimonides' Mishneh Torah. He should briefly record his Torah insights, so as not to forget them, and then

pray the afternoon minchah prayer, and return home. Rabbi Chaim did not know the purpose of this mission, but he implicitly followed his master's instructions.

Although the place the Baal Shem Tov had designated was only eight miles from the city, Rabbi Chaim and Rabbi Moshe Meshel traveled for many hours, because there were problems with the coach every step of the way: the reins broke; the harness straps snapped; a wheel fell off; the shaft connecting the horses cracked; and so on. It took time to deal with every mishap and to repair everything that needed to be fixed. They had set out early in the morning but, because of the many difficulties and delays, only arrived at the place the Baal Shem Tov had indicated at two o'clock in the afternoon.

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Following the Baal Shem Tov's directives, Rabbi Chaim walked into the woods on the side of the road and led Rabbi Moshe Meshel and the coach driver to an opening among the trees, a flat area that seemed to be a ruin of some sort, with the remnants of a number of buildings. He sat there studying for four hours and, because of the hot summer day, became very thirsty. While he continued studying, his companions went to search for some water. In the midst of the thick forest undergrowth they discovered a fountain and brought back fresh water for Rabbi Chaim to drink. He also washed his

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hands with that water before he prayed minchah; then they returned to Lvov.

At the beginning of the month of Elul, Rabbi Chaim went to the Baal Shem Tov in Medzibuz and told him that since he had been sent on the mission to the ruin in the forest that day, his eyes were opened in Torah study and his heart had opened in the service of G-d. He had made more spiritual progress in that brief period than ever before in his life. He thanked G-d and he thanked the Baal Shem Tov for sending him there, because he undoubtedly merited to benefit from the radiance of a holy soul buried nearby.

At the Shabbat meal, the Baal Shem Tov told Rabbi Chaim that the purpose of his trip was to help a Jew who had passed away one hundred and seventeen years earlier. This man, named Moshe the son of Shmuel Tzadok, had been a great Torah scholar, but was also an atheist who led a dissolute life. Yet, in his advanced old age, he had fully repented. "The time had come for the Torah that Moshe had studied in impurity to be raised up," said the Baal Shem Tov. "And I chose you, Rabbi Chaim, for the task. That clearing in the forest is the place where Reb Moshe's estate stood, and where he was buried. With G-d's help, your pure study and prayer, elevated what had remained below, trapped by the kelliopot

('shells,' i.e. the negative elements of creation). By succeeding in this holy work, you merited to be renewed spiritually.

"You also accomplished another great task there," said the Baal Shem Tov. "It is written says in the holy Zohar that 'the lower waters weep, "We want to appear before the Holy King!"' From the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, separated between the lower

“Every creature and creation has a time for its elevation and it is foreordained when it will occur and by whom. And that is true for each and every soul; it too has its time for elevation.”

waters and the upper waters on the second day of creation, the lower waters have been weeping and begging to appear before the Holy King, that they be used for holy purposes: hand washing before prayer; immersion in a mikvah for a mitzvah or for purification before prayer and Torah study; hand washing before eating with a blessing mentioning G-d's name; or water for drinking with a

blessing. The weeping and pleading of these or those lower waters, that they be used for mitzvot and acts of holiness and purity, may continue for hundreds and thousands of years, until a Jew passes by and washes his hands for prayer or drinks some water to satisfy his thirst, making the appropriate blessing.

"Near the former property and grave of Reb Moshe was a fountain that had been weeping for five thousand, five hundred, and nineteen years, since the creation of the world: Why should it be less than all the

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other fountains in the world? Why should its waters be denied their elevation? Since the Holy One, blessed be He, had created it, no one had ever made a blessing over its waters; they had never been used for holy purposes. That day,” said the Baal Shem Tov to Rabbi Chaim, “when you drank its water and used it to wash your hands for prayer, you elevated that fountain. This was all the working of divine providence. Every creature and creation has a time for its elevation and it is foreordained when it will occur and by whom. And that is true for each and every soul; it too has its time for elevation.”

Just imagine how different your life would be, how empowered you would feel, knowing that every person you met, every situation you encountered, every place you arrived at, was waiting from the beginning of time for you to come and do a mitzvah!

Perpetual Creation

When you look at the world around you it seems like an inanimate world. Sure, there is life and vitality. But much of the universe seems stationary and just going through its motions like a clock. No wonder it’s so easy to get bored and find your routines so uninspiring. “The more things change, the more they stay the same,” say the cynics. Nothing really changes. “A generation

comes, a generation goes, and there is nothing new under the sun.”

How depressing. What hope can we have with an existence that sloths through dull and passionless habits?

Tells us the Baal Shem Tov: You are wrong. Look closely at the “flowers” and you will discover that the universe, every fiber of existence, is recreated every moment anew.

Beneath the surface - on the soul level - renewed Divine energy is vivifying everything, every second. We live in a dynamic universe - brimming with energy. Just as our sustenance is dependent on continuous breathing and a ceaseless heartbeat, every iota of the universe is continuously being refreshed.

When you can tap into that inner energy, everything you do comes alive. Every mitzvah is not merely a lifeless ritual,

but one infused with passion, vitality and warmth.

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Non-asceticism

The spiritual path, some argue, requires separating yourself from material pursuits. How else can we access the soul if we are being distracted or seduced by physical pursuits and pleasures?

Says the Baal Shem Tov: *If you see the donkey of your enemy collapsing under its*

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burden, and are inclined to desist from helping him, you shall surely help along with him (Mishpatim 23:5). The Hebrew for "donkey," *chamor*, also means "material." Thus, this verse also instructs us as to the proper attitude toward the body and physicality:

"When you will see the chamor of your enemy" - initially you will see your material self as your enemy, as something that obstructs and hinders your spiritual growth.

"Collapsing under its burden" - in such a state of animosity between body and soul, that the body resists the Torah and its commandments, making them an unbearable burden for it...

One's first inclination may be *"to desist from helping him"* - to shun the body, suppress its instincts, and deny it its wants.

Says the Torah: *"you shall surely help along with him."* Aid the material self with its 'burden,' by training it to recognize that the Torah is the vehicle for its own refinement and elevation.

Here again, a "flower" in the Torah's soul is illuminated for us. If the material world was just that - a physical layer, then it contradicts the spiritual journey. But since the material universe is created - and constantly revitalized - by G-d, it contains within it

potent Divine "sparks," waiting to be released. Only by engaging the world can we redeem these spiritual opportunities.

The Divine plan for existence is realized only when we fuse matter and spirit, and convert the material into Divine energy.

There you have it:

Five powerful principles to change your life.

Implement them and you will

- **Revitalize a boring life.**
- **Rejuvenate a stagnant or hollow Jewish experience.**
- **Energize your otherwise monotonous routines.**
- **Uncover the music within your soul.**
- **Learn to dance and sing, even silently.**

Let us commit to continue studying through this year more of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings and directives, and apply their personal messages for us.

That's one small thing we can do toward helping "spread your wellsprings outward," which in turn will expedite the coming of Moshiach.

