

# BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 35: Beshalach

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## SINGING LESSONS OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV Music and Chassidus

### SUMMARY

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

Did you know that the Baal Shem Tov was a gifted singer, and taught that

song is a path to serve the Divine, a method to grow and reach great heights?

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

How many songs exist within your soul?

### The Mystery of Song

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## A Gifted Singer

The Baal Shem Tov was a gifted singer with a rare voice. He was capable of shifting his voice inflections to release a range of different notes. Singers and cantors categorize this type of voice with a particular name. Possessing an exceptional sense of melody, the Baal Shem Tov would often sing. He considered singing a service of G-d, for music touches the soul and produces an outpouring of the soul; it brings on a spiritual calm and radiance and a sublime joy. All of the Baal Shem Tov's students, and the "holy group" of the students of the Maggid, would use song to serve G-d according to the paths of Chassidus.

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

## The Stirring Song of Reb Michele Zlotchiver

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

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

## Why do Chassidim Sing and Dance?

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

The Baal Shem Tov responded with a story:

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

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

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

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

### The Shepherd's Song

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

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

When the lad finished playing the tune, the Holy Baal Shem Tov offered him a kopeck if he would play the melody once again. The shepherd was pleased, and

played the song once more. The Chassidim watched as their holy Rebbe closed his eyes, and swayed with the music. They too were surely carried away by the beauty of this seemingly unfamiliar tune.

As the lad finished, the holy man gently requested he play the tune once again, and handed him another coin. The boy was thrilled with his good fortune, and

played the melody once again. The exquisiteness of the song was beyond description. The Chassidim felt their souls being lifted to a place of sublime holiness as the music filled the air.

When the lad finished playing, he was amazed

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

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

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

### Wings of Song

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

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

### Soul Transportation

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

Music therapy and other uses of the medium have made their appearance.

But there is so much more that can be done.

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

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

carry our souls to unprecedented heights.

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

Yes, indeed, a song is transportation for your soul. Like wings of a bird, music allows the bird that is your soul to soar

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on high, above the din and confusion of material earth. To fly upward - searching, yearning, discovering new horizons.

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

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

How many songs exist within your soul?

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

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> From Be'er HaChassidut by Eliezer Steinman; from the Hebrew by Yanki Tauber. The analogy is from Degel Machne Efraim Parsha Yisro.

<sup>2</sup> Retold by Gita Levi. From nigun.com.

<sup>3</sup> Torah Ohr 73. 113a.