

LET'S LEARN CHASSIDUS

With Rabbi Shais Taub



HOW TO SATIATE THE YEARNING FOR THE REBBE

ON ROSH CHODESH ADAR 5710, just three weeks after the *histalkus* of the Friediker Rebbe, the Rebbe said the following words in a famous letter to console and inspire grieving *chassidim*.

“*Godel hateshukah l’hiskashrus*, the intense yearning to be connected to one’s Rebbe,” writes the Friediker Rebbe (*Igros Kodesh Admur Moharatz*, Vol. 4, p. 222), “can be satiated only by learning the *chassidische* teachings of the Rebbe.”

As Gimmel Tammuz approaches, our feelings of “intense yearning” are felt even more strongly. In that spirit, I would like to share an idea from the Rebbe on the Torah reading of Korach, the portion to be read on Gimmel Tammuz this year which occurs on a Shabbos.

ASSISTANTS TO THE PRIEST

The eponymous Korach of our *parshah* led a failed rebellion against the high priesthood. Afterward, the Torah commands us about the separation

of labors between *kohanim* and *levi'im*. Moshe tells the *kohanim*: “Draw [the *levi'im*] close to you and they shall join you and minister to you... (*Bamidbar* 18:2.) So what is the role of the *levi'im*? *They shall join you and minister to you*. They are commanded to be helpers and assistants to the *kohanim*.

If you know anybody with the last name Siegel (or Segel or Segal) they are probably *levi'im* because Siegel is an abbreviated form of the phrase “*segan lekohen*, assistant to the *kohen*.”

Now here’s the interesting part. The word “*levi*” in the Holy Tongue literally means “to be attached,” as in: “And [Leah] conceived again and bore a son, and said, ‘This time my husband will be attached (*yilaveh*) to me for I have borne him three sons; therefore, [G-d] named [this son] Levi” (*Bereishis* 29:34).

On a deeper level, husband and wife represent Hashem and the Jewish people. Thus, Chassidus explains that the attachment between husband and wife that the name Levi signifies is symbolic of a Jew’s attachment to Hashem.

So that’s what the name Levi means. Contrast this, however, with the actual function of the *levi*. The *kohen* is the one who directly serves Hashem. Indeed, the word *kohen* literally means “one who serves” as it says, “*l’chahein laShem*, to serve Hashem” (*Vayikra* 7:35). So the *kohen* works directly for Hashem and the *levi* is just the *kohen*’s helper. And yet the name Levi is the one that signifies a Jew’s deep attachment to Hashem. Interesting, no?

ONLY BEGINNING

I'll get back to this, but first I want to tell you a story. It was 2 Iyar 5748 (April 19, 1988) and the Rebbe was giving out dollars. The location was the Rebbe's home on President Street rather than 770. The Rebbetzin had passed away a few months prior and for the entire year of mourning, the Rebbe remained at the home where he and the Rebbetzin had lived. That is where prayer services, distribution of dollars, and (weekday) public addresses took place.

Then - newly-elected MK Binyamin Netanyahu was one of those who came to visit the Rebbe and receive a blessing.

Midway through their brief encounter (the whole exchange was no more than two minutes), Netanyahu said (in Hebrew), "I thank you for the opportunities to be helped by you and to receive the spiritual guidance that you provide not just me but all Jews."

Without a pause, the Rebbe said (also in Hebrew) "*Ani adayan b'tchilat hamaaseh sheli*, I am just starting my work."

Netanyahu smiled and said, "*Ani yodeia!* I know!"

The Rebbe smiled back and said, "*V'atah b'tchilat hatafkid hachadash shelcha*. And you are just starting your new role."

In 1988, Netanyahu was just an MK, and a very newly elected one at that. He wouldn't become Prime Minister for the first time until 1996, and for the second time until 2009. So you might say that for the Rebbe to tell Netanyahu that he was only just beginning his new role (before that he was U.N. ambassador but had never held elected office) makes a lot of sense.

But what did the Rebbe mean when he said about himself, "I am just starting my work"?

The Rebbe was not someone who ever made hollow statements. Even when the Rebbe would make humorous remarks the statement itself was always 100% *emes*. So what did the Rebbe mean when he said he was just starting his work, after 37 years as Rebbe?

In those years, the Rebbe had picked up his movement from a handful of *chassidim* and transformed them into a literal army that changed the face of Judaism all around the world. Think of what the Rebbe accomplished in his first 37 years—the ten *mitzvah* campaigns; Chabad Houses, schools, *mikvaos*, etc., all over the world; Tzivos Hashem, the world's largest Jewish youth club; public *menorah* lightings; *mitzvah* tanks; many special projects and assignments given to individuals and the *klal*, some known and some not known; not to mention the thousands of letters written and the thousands of hours of public addresses containing the most astounding Torah scholarship.

And the Rebbe said he was just getting started?

At the time the Rebbe said these words, he was 86 years old. It was three months after the Rebbetzin had passed away and less than two months after the Rebbe delivered a *sichah* that clearly referred to his own future *histalkus* as a possibility. "*Ba'u venachshov cheshbono shel olam*; Come, let us consider an accounting of the world." (Motzoei Shabbos Terumah 5748/Feb. 20, 1988, published in *Hisvaaduyos 5748*, Vol. 4, p. 401-4.)

And yet, the Rebbe said he was just getting started?

WHAT THE REBBE KNOWS

I told you I wanted to tell you one story before getting back to the question from the *sichah* about the meaning of the name Levi. But I think I need to tell you one more story now.

At "The Great Wedding" in Zhlobin between the daughter of the Mittlerer Rebbe and the grandson of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, there was a *badchan* who joked:

"What is the difference between the Rebbe [meaning the Alter Rebbe] and me? Whatever I know, the Rebbe also knows. Whatever the Rebbe doesn't know, I also don't know. The only little difference is what the Rebbe knows that I don't know."

Obviously, there is the unknowably vast amount that the Rebbe knows that we don't know. And yet, the Rebbe spoke to us. The Rebbe spoke to us and expected to be heard by us. And we need to try to understand his words as best as we can.

How are we supposed to understand that the Rebbe was "only just beginning his work" 31 years ago when this Gimmel Tammuz is his 25th *yahrzeit*?

The Rebbe said it. The Rebbe meant it. There must be a way for us to understand it.

THE CHIEF RABBI, THE CONGRESSWOMAN, AND YOU

Forgive me for repeating something that is well known; it's just so accurate. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said of the Rebbe, "Good leaders make followers. Great leaders make leaders. The Rebbe made leaders."

Jonathan Sacks himself is a primary example of how the Rebbe made leaders. He served as Chief Rabbi of England for 22 years from 1991 until 2013 and he credits the Rebbe as the singular influence that not only pushed him into that role but set him on the path of public service in general.

Of course, Jonathan Sacks gets credit for coming up with the great line, but his story is not at all unique. The Rebbe was constantly empowering people and turning them into leaders whether they were rabbis, scholars, artists, entrepreneurs, or whatever. The list of people who were propelled to greatness because of the Rebbe's urging and guidance is endless. And as the years pass, more and more of these stories come out where we find out how the Rebbe, sometimes very much behind the scenes, was setting others up for greatness.

Just a few years ago, JEM's My Encounter project came out with one of my favorite stories on this theme. In 1968, the first African-American woman was elected to Congress. Shirley Chisholm, elected to represent New York's 12th District, which included her own neighborhood of Crown Heights, found that the "old boys club" conspired to render her ineffective. Before she even arrived on Capitol Hill, they assigned her to the Agriculture Committee, a place where it was assumed that she, coming from inner city Brooklyn, could have little influence. Chisholm felt deflated. Then, one day, she received a phone call from the Rebbe's secretariat. "The Lubavitcher Rebbe wants to see you." David Luchins, who was a senior

advisor to the late U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and chairs the political science department at Touro College, heard the rest of the story first-hand from Chisholm at a party celebrating her retirement from Congress.

Shirley Chisholm came to the Rebbe and told him, "Rabbi, I am upset. I'm insulted. What should I do?"

"What a blessing G-d has given you!" said the Rebbe, "This country has so much surplus food, and there are so many hungry people. You can use this gift that G-d gave you to feed hungry people."

On her first day in Washington, Chisholm happened to run into

Republican Senator Bob Dole from the farm-state of Kansas. He was looking for ways to help the farmers who were losing money on their crops. "Our farmers have all this extra food," Dole told Chisholm, "and we don't know what to do with it." That's when Chisholm thought, "One second. The Rabbi!" With that thought, Chisholm started the WIC program that provided targeted food supplements for pregnant women and their infants.

At her retirement party Chisholm said, "I owe this to a Rabbi who is an optimist and taught me that what you may think is a challenge is a gift from G-d. And if poor babies have milk, and poor children have

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Shirley Chisholm

food, it's because this Rabbi in Crown Heights had vision."

So let me ask you, what do the previous Chief Rabbi of England and (*lehavdil*) the first African-American female member of the United States Congress have in common?

Let me ask a different question. What do you and I and Jonathan Sacks and Shirley Chisholm and untold others all have in common?

I can speak for myself at least. Dear reader, the fact that I am in a position to be writing this column that you are reading right now is only because of one person—the one person who has been and continues to be the single greatest influence in my life, the person who has been and continues

to be the single greatest influence in so many people's lives.

So as difficult as it is to speak about oneself, I will tell you that if I am anything, it is because the Rebbe made me something. Because that's what the Rebbe does. The Rebbe brings out the great potential in regular people.

TRUE GREATNESS

Back to the question, the Rebbe's question, about the *levi'im*—why does the name Levi mean attachment to Hashem but the *levi's* role was to assist the *kohen* so the *kohen* could serve Hashem?

And the answer is that the greatest, holiest, most G-dly mission is to help others accomplish theirs. Therefore, what is attachment to Hashem? True attachment to Hashem is to be a "*levi*" and help others be all that they can be, and accomplish their purpose.

So Netanyahu told the Rebbe, "I thank you for the opportunities to be helped by you and to receive the spiritual guidance that you provide not just me but all Jews," and the Rebbe responded, "*Ani adayan b'tchilat hamaaseh sheli*, I am just starting my work."

Is it not obvious how the past 25 years prove that to be true? Doesn't the Rebbe continue to push us to reveal our own greatness?

In tribute and in thanks, as a

kaddish if you will, how can we repay the Rebbe for devoting his life to making each one of us great?

The answer is simple. We must live our best lives. We must continue to grow. We must do a little more each day. We must help others to reach their potential. And never rest until we accomplish the goal. That much we owe him. It would only be right.

And by accomplishing our own mission in life, may we soon realize the completion of the collective mission with which the Rebbe has charged our generation—to bring the *Shechinah* back into this world through the coming of Moshiach. ❧

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Rabbi Shais Taub has delivered Torah classes and lectures on six continents and is one of the most sought-after speakers in the Jewish world today. He currently serves as scholar-in-residence at Chabad of Five Towns. For more teachings from Rabbi Taub, visit SoulWords.org. For speaking engagements contact info@SoulWords.org.

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