

# LET'S LEARN CHASSIDUS

With Rabbi Shais Taub



## THE BRAZEN AND THE BASHFUL

*What's that silly, irresponsible thing you could do that would finally set you free to serve Hashem with all the energy and power that you really have?*

**SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE** that raising children is synonymous with disciplining them. But is that the main goal? Creating well-behaved, well-mannered children who will be seen and not heard? Why not teach them to be outgoing, brave, and even a little wild?

*Chassidim* used to read the *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos*—*Az panim l'gehinnom, uboshes panim l'Gan Eden* (the brazen to Hell and the bashful to Gan Eden)—a little differently. A bashful or timid person can be a good Jew only when in a “Gan Eden,” a place that is hospitable to Yiddishkeit. However, it takes a brazen person to maintain his Yiddishkeit in a “Gehinnom,” a place that is antagonistic to Yiddishkeit.

The truth is that a proper *chinuch* includes training in both directions. And since education is based on the specific needs of the child, the need to gently guide the child towards one extreme or the other will vary.

### THE TWO CHANOCHS

In *Likutei Sichos* Vol. 35, pp. 7-14, there is a *sichah* about two different Biblical figures named Chanoch. Both belong to the first generations of man whose genealogies are delineated in the Torah's first *parshah*, but they are very different from each other.

First of all, the two Chanochs come from two different lineages corresponding to the two surviving sons of Adam—Kayin and Shais (which happens to be my name). Kayin and Shais could not be more different from each other.

Kayin is instability. He is a destroyer, history's first murderer; then, as a punishment, he was sent to wander the earth.

Then there was the third brother of Kayin and Hevel: Shais. Shais is stability. The name Shais is etymologically related to the phrase *mimenu hushtas ha'olam*, from him the world was established, a phrase associated with the *even hashesiyah*, foundation stone, since all of humanity is descended from him. (Hevel died without children and Kayin's descendants eventually died off as a punishment for Kayin's murder of Hevel).

If we look even closer, we find something more curious. In addition to Kayin and Shais being opposites of *each other*, their respective Chanochs

seem to represent qualities inconsistent with *their own forebears*. In other words, the two Chanochs are opposites of each other, but the opposite opposites of what you would expect! Shais's Chanoch seems like he should come from Kayin and Kayin's Chanoch seems like he should come from Shais.

Kayin's Chanoch is associated with stability, as the verse states (*Bereishis* 4:17): "And he (Kayin) built a city and named it Chanoch, after his son." Kayin built a city?! City-building is the very opposite of what we know about Kayin's nature.

Regarding the second Chanoch, the great-great-grandson of Shais, the verse states (*Bereishis* 5:24): "Chanoch walked with G-d, and was no more, because G-d had taken him." Rashi explains, "He was a righteous man but could easily be swayed to do evil, so the Holy One, blessed be He, hastened and took him..." Other sources explain further that he entered Gan Eden while still alive. The point is that the world was becoming corrupt so Chanoch ran away to heaven. That is the opposite of his forefather Shais's trademark permanence and stability.

## THE TWO YONAHs

In order to understand all of this, I want to tell you a story about a young boy on Simchas Torah. Specifically, he was a ten-year-old boy who was growing up in Moscow in the 1930s at the height of Stalinist oppression. Well, this boy made a somersault in the street on Simchas Torah night. That's basically the story. But in order for you to appreciate it, I have to give you some background first.

There was an extraordinary

*chossid* by the name of Reb Yonah Kagan (Russified from Kahan). Reb Yonah was better known as Yonah Poltaver after the Ukrainian city of Poltava where he was born in 1898.

In the 1930s, Reb Yonah lived in Moscow which at that time had a few shuls that remained open despite Communist oppression. Every Shabbos, Reb Yonah would walk two hours from his home, in all kinds of weather, to the shul that had a *mikveh* so that he could immerse himself, and then he would walk an hour and a half back to the shul where he prayed.

But it wasn't the length of his walk that was so impressive. As a Shabbos-observant Jew, Reb Yonah didn't carry outside on Shabbos, which meant he was walking the streets without ID. In those days, walking so far through the center of Moscow without "papers" was hazardous for anyone, let alone a Jew with a beard, *yarmulka* and *tzitzis*. Nevertheless, Reb Yonah persisted in this custom every Shabbos and Yom Tov, and out of respect for him, the *minyán* waited for him to arrive before starting the Torah reading.

After the Torah reading, Reb Yonah would *daven* slowly at his own meditative pace in the manner of a true Chabad *chossid*. His prayers took many hours, until mid-afternoon. Afterward, he would stay in shul or go to a local home to *farbreng* for the rest of Shabbos. There, Reb Yonah would say *l'chaim* and inspire *chassidim* in his passionate, fiery style.

But don't get the wrong idea about Reb Yonah. You may think he was something of a wild man. Yes, he walked hours in all types of weather to go to *mikveh*, then hours again

to go to *daven*. Yes, he was openly religious in Stalin's Moscow and acted as if he was afraid of nothing. Yes, he prayed for hours on end. Yes, he said *l'chaim* and *farbrenged*. That's all true.

But what you should also know about Reb Yonah is that he was a master organizer. After almost all of the *chassidim* who ran the underground yeshivos in Russia had either fled, been arrested or killed, Reb Yonah almost singlehandedly took over this responsibility. The yeshivos were constantly on the run and it was Reb Yonah's job to stay one step ahead of the Communists by finding new locations for them every few months.

Another project that Reb Yonah was involved in was helping Jews escape Russia. After WWII, *chassidim* figured out a scheme by which Russian Jews could pretend to be Polish citizens displaced by the War and then get themselves "sent back" to Poland (and from there travel to Western Europe or elsewhere). Reb Yonah moved to Lemberg where the trains left from in order to personally oversee this operation which involved complex and life-threatening logistics including forging documents.

While in Lemberg, Reb Mendel Futerfas, the operation's other main organizer, told Reb Yonah that the KGB was about to close in on him. As such, Reb Mendel had reserved Reb Yonah a seat on the next train to Poland with other escaping Jews. Reb Yonah agreed but at the last minute changed his mind saying that if the Rebbe had made him responsible for the students and alumni of Tomchei Temimim then he could not leave Russia until the

last of them had safely left.

One day, the family with whom Reb Yonah was staying in Lemberg learned that the local KGB had ordered a search there. As soon as Reb Yonah came home, they told him to flee, but he insisted on first *davening Shacharis*. Others might have rushed their prayers, if they had the presence of mind to pray at all, but Reb Yonah *davened* at length and with his usual deep concentration. Then he ate a quick breakfast and left. (I'm not sure which is more remarkable, that he was able to pray or that he was able to eat, but Yonah did both!) The KGB arrived shortly after Reb Yonah had gone.

It's almost as if there were two Yonahs—the fearless mystic who barely thought of this world and the master organizer who took care of the tiniest logistical details. And yet these two Yonahs came together as one Yonah.

But this isn't the story I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you the story about the ten-year-old boy who did a somersault, right?

## RUINING A SUIT AND MAKING A MAN

The little boy's name was Sholom Levertov. (I heard this story from his son Reb Yossi, *shliach* in Scottsdale, AZ, one Shavuot when we were walking to shul.) When he was ten, little Sholom was given a new suit that he was very proud of, especially its beautiful gold buttons. It wasn't easy to come by a new suit in 1930s Moscow, and certainly not one as nice as this one. Sholom wore his new suit for the High Holidays that year and was extra careful to keep it clean.

The climax of the High Holidays, as you know, is Simchas Torah when

our joy knows no bounds. What was Simchas Torah like in Moscow at the height of Stalinist terror? If you imagined that it was quiet and solemn, that would be an intelligent guess, but you'd be forgetting about Reb Yonah, wouldn't you?

That Simchas Torah, Reb Yonah had said plenty of *l'chaim* and he was... yes, he was out in the streets dancing. He even grabbed a stranger, not knowing if he was Jewish or not, and started dancing with him! I'm not sure that we can even fathom such audacity and courage.

To see Reb Yonah make merry in the streets, you would never know that this was a Jewish community living under a state-run terror campaign and that arrests, "disappearances," and summary executions were common. But this was Simchas Torah and Reb Yonah was in another world, a world in which Stalin and his secret police and his purges simply didn't exist.

Then Reb Yonah took the joy to new levels and started doing somersaults in the street! A crowd gathered around him and Reb Yonah got *all* of the *chassidim* to do somersaults in the street, too!

Then Reb Yonah noticed a ten-year-old boy standing cautiously off to the side. The boy was dressed in a brand new suit with shiny gold buttons. There were no dry cleaners in 1930s Moscow. One tumble in the street and that beautiful new suit would never be the same again. Reb Yonah, the master educator and mentor, knew *exactly* what the boy was thinking and he also knew *exactly* what had to be done.

This was what we call nowadays a teachable moment. You can't plan for such a moment. You can't

engineer it. It's just an opportunity that arises where a teacher suddenly has a perfect, fleeting chance to give the student a lesson he or she will never forget. The teachable moment must be seized by the teacher or lost forever. Reb Yonah knew what that suit meant to little Sholom, but Reb Yonah also knew what the boy would need to learn in order to survive and thrive as a Jew.

Wanting to keep his suit nice and clean is a normal thing for a boy that age to want, but there were also times when a Jew just had to do something *abnormal*—to do a somersault in the muddy streets of Moscow even if it ruins his new suit.

"*Mach ah kuleh!*" (Do a somersault!) Reb Yonah shouted at the boy.

All eyes were now on him.

"*Mach ah kuleh!*" everyone echoed Reb Yonah.

There was no way out of it. The suit was about to get ruined. Ten-year-old Sholom took the plunge. It was a silly, crazy, absurd act, and it was so very necessary—the defining moment of a young man's education. The *chassidim* cheered as young Sholom tumbled head over heels in the muddy street.

Some years later, Sholom would marry Reb Yonah's niece, Pesya Nechama Prus, daughter of Reb Yonah's wife Sarah's sister, Faya Chasya Abelsky of Nevel. Reb Yonah and his wife never had children. He was eventually caught by the KGB and passed away while in prison. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

## SOULS OF CHAOS, SOULS OF ORDER

Let's return to our discussion of the two Chanochs, which I think we can understand now in a whole new

light. We have two paradigms—Kayin the restless wanderer and Shais the rock-solid, responsible foundation.

In Kabbalistic terms these two modes are known as *Tohu* (“chaos”) and *Tikkun* (“order.”) *Tohu* is a reality where the “lights,” i.e., the creative energies, are intense but the “containers” that hold them are weak while *Tikkun* is just the opposite with relatively weak “lights” but sturdy “containers.”

When it comes to passion and enthusiasm, we need the blinding bright lights of *Tohu*. When it comes to perseverance and seeing things through, we need the good old dependable containers of *Tikkun*. The Rebbe said on 28 Nissan 5751 that in order to bring Moshiach we need both—lights of *Tohu* in vessels of *Tikkun*.

Thus, the ideal is really to have a best-of-both-worlds outlook and behavior. You know, sort of like Reb Yonah.

But how does one come to have the best of both *Tohu* and *Tikkun*?

The answer is that it depends on your starting point.

If one is by nature a “soul of *Tohu*” like Kayin, then one needs to be brought down to earth and taught discipline. Thus the Chanoch/*chinuch*/education of the wild Kayin was to settle down and build a city.

But if one is by nature an orderly “soul of *Tikkun*” like Shais, then he needs to learn the very *opposite* lesson. He’s *already* grounded. He *is* the ground. He needs to learn how to *fly*. So Shais’s Chanoch is one who rises above this world and leaves it all behind.

## FREE YOURSELF

When we think of the goals of education, we tend to think of the

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taming of the inner Kayin. We often fail to remember the importance of also teaching the inner Shais to do something reckless, to turn somersaults in the muddy streets of Moscow with his new suit on.

Of course, we’re not just talking about the *chinuch* of our children. We are also talking about ourselves, our own *chinuch*.

I understand that this is a women’s journal, so the precise example of tumbling around in the dirt may not be the most practical illustration of the concept. But you get the idea. There are plenty of times when a Jewish woman has to be a little crazy, a little “*Tohu’dig*.”

You have to be wild to say yes to hosting another girl, *bachur* or family who wants to come for Shabbos (or a month) to Crown Heights. You have to be wild to take in an orphan and mother her. You have to be wild to stay up until 2 a.m. when you have work the next day, talking and listening to some teens about the issues that are on their hearts. You have to be wild to say yes to making yet another *sheva brachos* for a couple with no *frum* relatives. You have to be wild to

host *chassidische farbrengens* in your dining room or your *sukkah* that will leave you with an unspeakable mess, because you realize that this is why Hashem gave you the house. You have to be wild to send your sweet child who still needs your hugs out of town to school when that’s where they need to be for their *ruchnius*. I’m sure you, the *chashuva n’shei ubnos Chabad*, can add many more examples. And that’s really the whole point. The point is for each of us to think of an example in our own lives where we can be wild for Hashem’s sake, and to go ahead and take the leap.

So maybe ask yourself, what is *your* beautiful new suit with the gold buttons? And how are you being held back right now because you’re trying to keep that suit nice and clean? And, more importantly, what would be your Simchas Torah somersault in the muddy street? What’s that silly, irresponsible thing you could do that would finally set you free to serve Hashem with all the energy and power that you really have?

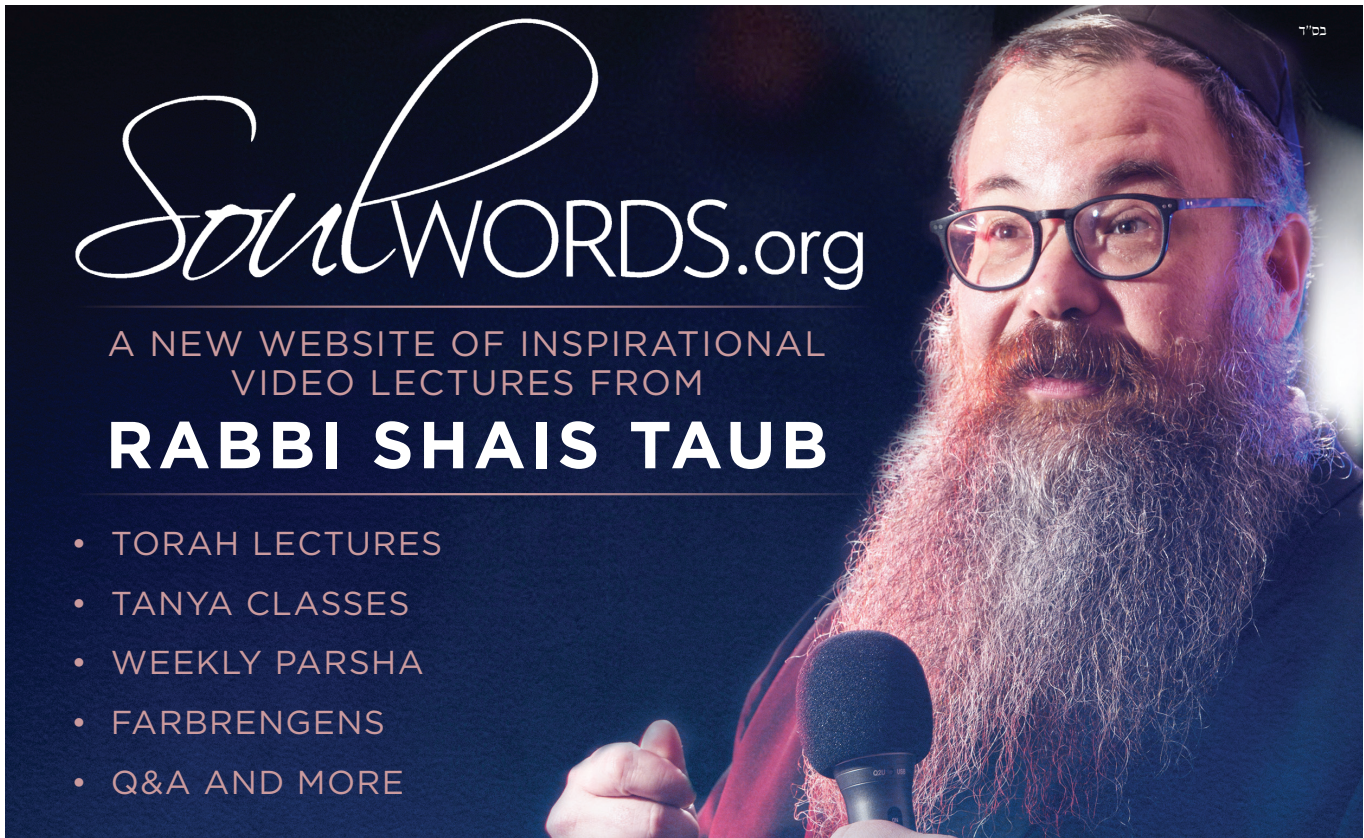
If we do it, and teach our children how to do it, we can bring some of the spirit of Simchas Torah into the whole

year. This can be a teachable moment for all of us.  
*Macht ah kuleh!* ❁

This article, the third installment in a series of articles for the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* entitled "Let's Learn Chassidus With Rabbi Shais Taub," is based on *Likutei Sichos* Vol. 35, pp. 7-14, which is based on the *farbrengen* of 20 Av 5732 found in *Sichos Kodesh* 5732, Vol.

2, pp. 48-51. There is a recording of this *farbrengen* as well. Visit [nsheichabadnewsletter.com](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com) home page for audio.

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](http://SoulWords.org). For speaking engagements contact [info@SoulWords.org](mailto:info@SoulWords.org).



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