

# LET'S LEARN CHASSIDUS

With Rabbi Shais Taub



## USE YOUR OWN TEARS THE PARTNERSHIP PARADOX

### A SMALL BOOK

It is said that when Reb Levi Yitzchak Barditchever first saw the printed *Tanya* he exclaimed, “How did he fit such a great and awesome G-d inside of such a small book?!” Exactly what the Barditchever meant by this is something *chassidim* have discussed for generations.

Our Rebbe also wrote a “small book.”

Indeed, at the 19 Kislev *farbrengen* of 5749, the Rebbe referred to it diminutively as a mere “*sefer*!” (*Hisva’aduyos* 5749, Vol. 2, p. 4). Of course, we are speaking of none other than the first published book authored by the Rebbe, *Sefer Hayom Yom* (Kehos/Merkos, 1943). But why is *Hayom Yom* a “small book”?

The Frierdiker Rebbe was the one who assigned the Rebbe the task of writing *Hayom Yom* and was also the one who gave it its title and subtitle.

Wait, *Hayom Yom* has a subtitle? That’s right. *Luach Ohr Zarua l’Chassidei Chabad*, a “calendar of implanted light” for Chabad *chassidim*.

But how exactly does one plant seeds of light? Yes, it’s a phrase borrowed from *Tehillim* 97 (*ohr zarua latzadik*, light is planted for the righteous), but what are seeds of light and how does one plant them?

People tend to enjoy short teachings or *vertlach* because they are quickly and easily understood. All you have to do is invest 30 seconds and you get a nice idea neatly summed up with a setup and a punchline. *Geshmak*. And then you’re done.

But a short saying that is a “seed of light” is different. A seed of light takes an idea and transmits it in a tiny package, just as the complete DNA of an entire tree is transmitted in a small seed. But the point is not the seed. You don’t actually benefit directly from the seed. You *plant* the seed. And then, in that spot, grows a whole tree with more fruits, with more seeds that grow more trees with more fruits.

So you spend 30 seconds in the morning with *Hayom Yom*—okay, on certain days, 60 seconds—but when you finish reading the day’s entry, the *Hayom Yom* is still not done with you. A seed has been planted. It grows, quietly at first, hidden beneath the soil of your conscious mind. But if you water it and take care of it, each day’s “small” thought grows into a massive tree. And then each time you revisit the tree, that is, each time you think more deeply about what you read in *Hayom Yom*, you harvest another one of its fruits.

### WHOSE JOB IS IT?

I think this is related to another aspect of what makes Chassidus Chabad unique. *Vertlach*, as discussed, don’t make you do work. On the contrary, we enjoy them precisely because someone else has done the work for us. Somebody else has condensed the wisdom into a

pleasant and palatable format.

In contrast, when you hear a teaching that is a seed of light, your work is only beginning. The more you work, meaning the more you revisit the thought, the more fruit it produces.

Chabad requires its *chassidim* to work—in learning, in character refinement, in good deeds, in *davening*, in everything.

Two *Poilisher bachurim* saw that a plate of food that the Rebbe Rashab had eaten from was placed on the window sill for the attendant to retrieve it. Coming from their background, they saw this as the perfect opportunity to “*khap shirayim*,” to partake of the leftovers of a *tzaddik* (not a Chabad custom). As they took the food, the Rebbe Rashab called out to them, “By others, their *shirayim* are *mezakeh* [bring merit]. By me, my *shirayim* are *mechayev* [confer obligation].”

One of the Maggid’s disciples, Reb Shlomo Karliner, used to make a play on words from the phrase (*Chavakuk 2:4*) *tzadik b’emunaso yichyeh*, meaning the *tzadik* lives by his faith, by reading the vowels of the word “*yichyeh*, lives” as “*ychayeh*, enlivens,” the *tzadik* with his own faith enlivens others. Reb Shlomo believed in and prescribed this type of Rebbe-*chossid* relationship.

This, however, was a point of major contention between him and the Alter Rebbe when it came to disseminating the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid.

The Alter Rebbe insisted that *chassidim* must do their own work.

## WASH YOUR OWN CLOTHES

Speaking of *Hayom Yom*, the entry

for 5 Sivan, Erev Shavuot, gives us a teaching of the Alter Rebbe that he taught on Erev Shavuot 5557 (1797). When the Torah describes the preparations for receiving the Torah the first time at Har Sinai, Hashem tells Moshe: “Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and they should wash their clothes” (*Shemos 19:10*).

The Alter Rebbe gave a short teaching on this: “Sanctify them today and tomorrow; is done from Above, but ‘they shall cleanse their garments’—one must do oneself.”

That was the entire teaching of the Alter Rebbe. It says so in the *Hayom Yom*. But the *Hayom Yom* continues that the Tzemach Tzedek elaborated upon his grandfather’s teaching and explained that what it’s talking about is the relationship between Jewish spiritual leaders and their flocks.

Said the Tzemach Tzedek: “Sanctify them’ was said by Hashem to Moshe. The extension of Moshe is in every generation and they (our leaders) are able to sanctify the ‘today’ and the ‘tomorrow’; but for this to be effective, we still need ‘...and they shall cleanse their garments’—the garments of thought, speech and deed. This must be done by each person on their own.”

In other words, Moshe can bring the Jews to the day before *Mattan Torah* (today). He can even bring them to the day of *Mattan Torah* (tomorrow). But in order for us to be ready to experience that, we have to do our part. We have to critically examine—with an eye to changing—our behaviors (in *Tanya*, behaviors are called “clothes” because we can switch them at will). *And that work cannot be done for us.*

What strikes me about this *Hayom Yom* is the paradox. On the one hand, *you* don’t sanctify today and tomorrow. Only Moshe can do that. Moshe brings you to Sinai and makes the whole Sinai experience possible. On the other hand, in order for you to be part of it, you need to wash your own clothes. Moshe doesn’t do that.

Conclusion: The Chabad idea that *chassidim* have to do their own work does not obviate the need for the Rebbe to do his unique work. Not at all. Indeed, as much as Chabad fosters the ideal of the independent, hardworking *chossid*, it equally emphasizes and venerates the unique and vital role of Moshe. The two ideas are no contradiction, they live side by side, in peace, each needing the other.

In a small way, I think this is the same idea as learning *Hayom Yom* properly. On the one hand, we can’t just speed-read *Hayom Yom*; we have to learn *Hayom Yom*! We have to put in the time to think about what it says so we can harvest its fruits. On the other hand, we would never have reached such understanding on our own. It is only because the Rebbe provided the seed in the first place that we can do our part.

## WHOSE TEARS?

I believe this partnership is also summed up rather well in a story I once heard from Harav Hachossid Reb Yisroel Gordon, *zol gezunt zein*.

It was Rosh Hashanah 5701 (1940), the first Rosh Hashanah after the Frierdiker Rebbe moved to America. Looking back we all know now what terrible things were lying in wait for the Jewish people that year. That was

the year that Hitler *yemach shemo* launched his “Final Solution” to wipe out the Jews.

On the first night of Rosh Hashanah, the small group that made up pretty much the entire Lubavitcher community in America at the time gathered in 770 to pray with the Previous Rebbe. As the *chazzan* concluded *maariv*, they heard the Rebbe, in a voice choked with tears, only finishing the first blessing before *Shema*: “...*hamaariv ... aravim...*”

Who can fathom what a Rebbe's prayers are like and especially a Rebbe's prayers on the holy day of Rosh Hashanah, and especially a Rebbe's prayers on Rosh Hashanah the year when such violence and tragedy were to befall the Jewish people? What the Frierdiker Rebbe thought, we cannot know. What we do know, however, is that his prayers took exceptionally long that night and he was weeping the entire time.

When those in attendance realized that the Frierdiker Rebbe was still praying, and would be praying for a while, they silently handed out books of *Tehillim* and everyone started saying *Tehillim*.

Yisroel Gordon was a boy of ten at the time. He says the room was silent as the men read *Tehillim*. The only sound to be heard was the sobbing of the Frierdiker Rebbe. The young Yisroel got to chapter 80 while many of the adults finished the entire *Tehillim* once and even twice. Finally, the Frierdiker Rebbe finished *maariv*, turned around, and faced the people. His holy face was

covered in tears as he said, “*Gut yom tov, gut yor.*” He then turned and left the shul.

Everyone was stunned. After a moment, someone got up and walked over to the place where the Frierdiker Rebbe had prayed. This individual then picked up the cloth that had covered the Frierdiker Rebbe's *shtender*. The cloth was sopping wet with the Frierdiker Rebbe's holy tears. This person took the cloth and started wiping it all over his own face.

## **Two Polisher bachurim saw that a plate of food that the Rebbe Rashab had eaten from was placed on the window sill for the attendant to retrieve it.**

The *gabbai*, Reb Yochanan Gordon, little Yisroel's father, called out immediately, “What do you think you're doing?!”

“*Dema'os mechabsos,*” said the man. In Hebrew, those two words mean that “tears cleanse.” These words make up a well-known phrase referring to the power of tears, especially tears of sorrow or contrition, to purify the soul.

Reb Yochanan had no patience for this reply. “That's with your *own* tears! Use your *own* tears!” shouted Reb Yochanon. “You don't wipe away *your* sins with the *Rebbe's* tears!”

Ever since I heard this story many years ago, I have thought about it often. On the one hand, Reb Yochanan was obviously right. You can't use the Rebbe's tears. You have to use your own tears. On the other hand, the Frierdiker Rebbe as the *nosi* and *neshamah klalis* did *daven* differently than a layman.

Like the *kohen gadol* on Yom Kippur acts as a representative for all of *Klal Yisroel* to earn atonement, similarly the head of the Jewish people (*rosh bnei Yisroel*, acronym for Rebbe) on the head of the year (Rosh Hashanah) has a job that is different than everyone else's. This was evident in the Frierdiker Rebbe's *davening* which was an entirely different sort of *davening* than that of any other Jew in shul.

### **INAUGURAL ADDRESS**

This year, 10 Shvat, marks the 70th *hilulah* of the Frierdiker Rebbe and the beginning of the seventieth year of the Rebbe's formal leadership.

The *kabala hanesius* took place in 1951 at the *farbrengen* in honor of the Frierdiker Rebbe's first *yahrzeit*. Not to use too mundane a term, but it was something of an “inaugural address.” At that gathering, the Rebbe even delivered what he referred to (in English, no less) as his mission statement. There the Rebbe made clear what kind of leader he was willing to be and what kind of commitment he expected of his *chassidim* in return.

On the one hand, the Rebbe expressed a vision that only he

saw—that the goal of our generation was to finish the work of all previous generations. The Jewish world had just been decimated by the Holocaust yet the Rebbe was speaking about nothing less than perfecting the entire world. Who other than the Rebbe could have dreamed of such a thing let alone sought practical means to make it a reality?

On the other hand, the Rebbe makes it clear that the work of each and every individual is needed in order to bring about this goal.

## KINUS HASHLUCHOS

The results of this approach are particularly evident at the upcoming International Kinus Hashluchos. Thousands of women who are leaders in their communities come together to draw inspiration so that they may have the strength to inspire others to become leaders in their own right who inspire still others to become leaders, and so on and so forth.

This is the paradox of the Rebbe-chossid relationship in Chabad. To

us, the Rebbe is everything. It's his plan, his inspiration, his guidance. We wouldn't even know where to start on our own. And we can't even

To us, the Rebbe is everything. It's his plan, his inspiration, his guidance. **We wouldn't even know where to start on our own. And we can't even imagine who or what we would be, G-d forbid, on our own.**

imagine who or what we would be, G-d forbid, on our own. And yet, the reverse seems to be true as well. I say "seems" because who can really understand the perspective of a Rebbe? The Rebbe looks to us. Can you even fathom that?

Just as we look to him, he looks to us. And he asks us, I think it's even fair to say he implores us, to do our work because no one else, not even he, can do it for us.

And when we both do our work, the Rebbe and us, then we will have the fulfillment of what the Rebbe described at that inaugural *farbrengen*, the return of the *Shechinah* in its full glory, here on earth. *Vehu yigaleinu.* ❧

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*This article is the fifth installment in a series of articles for the N'shei Chabad Newsletter entitled "Let's Learn Chassidus With Rabbi Shais Taub. Visit [nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives](http://nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives) to read the first four. 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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