



We are proud and delighted to launch a new column, (Inside) Chassidus Unwrapped, by Rabbi Yossi Paltiel. In the first two segments, Rabbi Paltiel explores the birth of Chassidus. -Ed.

THE STRANGER'S VISIT

At the turn of the 17th century, in a small Polish town called Tloste, Reb Eliezer and his wife Sarah served Hashem with pure hearts. The couple could not afford a home in town, instead residing in a makeshift shack, or *okup*, at the bottom of a large ditch.

Eliezer and Sarah did not have children, but their home was always filled with people. (Their guests were even poorer than they were, if you can believe it.) One Shabbos day, while all the Jews of Tloste were congregated in shul, a strange man walked in bearing the signs of a lengthy journey. His clothes were dusty, his beard ragged, and he carried a satchel on his back—in clear violation of Shabbos.

In those days, there was no such thing as a secular Jew. Anyone who wasn't following *halachah* was considered an apostate. The townspeople were quick to snub the stranger and turn away from him when he approached. Only Eliezer introduced himself and invited him to join his Shabbos *seudah*. Ignoring the whispers that followed behind them, the two men walked home together.

After *havdalah*, the man revealed his identity to Eliezer.

"I am Eliyahu Hanavi," he said. "I came here to test you. There is a special soul coming to this world. This soul will introduce a new way of serving Hashem that is predicated on *ahavas Yisroel*. You and your wife have passed the test; you

have been chosen to bring this soul into the world."

It is believed that Eliezer and Sarah were the age of Avrohom Avinu and Sarah Imeinu, 100 and 90 respectively, when they became parents. On the 18th of Elul, 5458 (1698), the Baal Shem Tov's *neshamah* entered this world.

The baby boy was named Yisroel. Uncoincidentally, Yisroel is also the name of the Jewish people. When a person is unconscious, calling his name can wake him. Why? Because the name of a person touches his essence, and the essence is always awake. When the Baal Shem Tov was born, it was time for the Jewish People to be revived from a spiritual coma. The Baal Shem Tov's arrival on the scene was Hashem's way of whispering the name of the Jewish people into their ear.

Remember the *okup* at the bottom of the ditch? Years later, the Baal Shem Tov would sign his name "Reb Yisroel Baal Shem Tov of *Okup*." *Okup*, of course, was not a place on the map but a symbol of his humble beginnings.

The dog died, the spirit of the Samach Mem returned to its supernal home, and the Baal Shem Tov had the key to Chassidus at last.

HOLY POTENTIAL ENERGY

The Baal Shem Tov was born with a unique gift. For lack of a better word, I will call it a power—a force of potential energy. The Baal Shem Tov was given Chassidus in its raw, undeveloped form. It was his task to translate this potent energy into a practical, tangible ideology.

We can look at all of Torah and Yiddishkeit through this lens. Moshe Rabeinu was given a tremendous power at Sinai. By giving us the Written and Oral Torah, Moshe drew this energy from its potential state into a usable, functional form. Throughout the course of Jewish history, Jews have tapped into that power, interpreting the Torah and extracting practical laws that invigorate our lives with holiness.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the Arizal, the Rambam, and Rabi Akiva were each given a special energy too. They opened new doors to the Torah which we didn't know existed. The *Midrash* tells us that Moshiach will teach us a “new Torah”—not a new book, but a revolutionary dimension in the existing Torah.

Like all the great teachers who came before him, the Baal Shem Tov's mindset was this: G-d did not give me this gift for my own sake but for the world's. I need to find a way to ensure that this energy outlasts me and outlives me.

These *tzaddikim* did not measure their success by how holy or connected to G-d they were personally. For them, that was easy. They judged themselves by how long-lasting and far-reaching their teachings became.

The Baal Shem Tov's life's work was planting seeds that he hoped would grow into sustainable and fruit-bearing trees. Every person he touched, every life he transformed, dug the roots of Chassidus deeper into the earth. The trees the Baal Shem Tov planted would go on to survive wars,

revolutions, and pogroms to reach us here today. It is thanks to the Baal Shem Tov that we find ourselves, hundreds of years later, enjoying the sweet fruit of Chassidus.

BUT WHAT IS CHASSIDUS?

There are thousands of complex essays and philosophical treatises that endeavor to explain Chassidus. But Chassidus is best encapsulated by a simple phrase Reb Eliezer told his son.

Right before he passed away, Eliezer called little Yisroel into his room. He put his hands on his son's head and said, “Yisrolik, fear nothing other than G-d himself, and love every Jew with all the depths of your soul.”

The two halves of that sentence are the two foundations, one theological and one emotional, of Chassidus.

The theological foundation of Chassidus is *Achdus Hashem* (Oneness of G-d). In short: There is nothing other than G-d. Not only is everything created by G-d; everything is G-d. An extension of this belief is *hashgachah protis* (Divine providence). Thus, no matter what obstacles we face, there is nothing to fear other than G-d Himself.

The emotional foundation of Chassidus is *ahavas Yisroel*. Every Jew has a pure soul worthy of love. In a time when the Jewish world was constricted to a rigid hierarchy system, with the majority of Jews feeling like outcasts, this was revolutionary.

Chassidus revealed that Yiddishkeit is not about Judaism, but about the Jew. Yiddishkeit is not about the *mitzvah*, but about the person doing the *mitzvah*. You don't have to make the world more G-dly, just reveal the G-dliness already in the world. You don't have to make a Jew more G-dly, just reveal the G-dliness already in the Jew.

THE KEY TO CHASSIDUS

S *hivchei HaBaal Shem Tov* was written by a Jew who knew the Baal Shem Tov personally. It is considered the most authentic and reliable book on the Baal Shem Tov's life. In it, the author writes that the Baal Shem Tov was searching for the key to Chassidus.

Using the various "tricks" he had at his disposal, the Baal Shem Tov asked the Heavens where he could find it. He was told that the Samach Mem (abbreviation for Samael, the *yetzer hara* or *malach hamaves*), the devil incarnate and the source of all evil in this world, was in possession of the key. So the Baal Shem Tov prayed and brought the Samach Mem down into the world.

The Samach Mem arrived in the form of a huge black dog. Snarling outside of the Baal Shem Tov's cottage, it raised its massive forepaws up on the glass and pounded against the window.

The Baal Shem Tov said, "Give me the key to Chassidus."


The Samach Mem raged, "I have only come down to earth two times! When Adam and Chava ate the forbidden fruit and when the second Bais Hamikdash was destroyed. [Alternatively, during the first *churban* and the second *churban*.] How dare you bring me here now?!"

Few could survive the whirlwind of fury that the Samach Mem hurled at the Baal Shem Tov. Many great *tzaddikim* who approached the Samach Mem ended up plunged into the depths of darkness.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, did not waver. "I am not afraid of you. My father taught me to only fear G-d Himself."

At this, the dog vomited. Symbolically, it represented the Samach Mem giving up what he had inside of himself, the key to Chassidus.

By refusing to fear the Samach Mem, by denying its very existence as an object separate from Hashem, the Baal Shem Tov stole his power. The dog died, the spirit of the Samach Mem returned to its supernal home, and the Baal Shem Tov had the key to Chassidus at last.



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THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S MAGIC

It is well known that the Baal Shem Tov had many followers, mostly simple people who flocked to him in order to soak in his holy countenance and witness a miracle. What is less known is that there were also Torah giants, scholars, and mystics, who traveled to the Baal Shem Tov in order to study his Torah.

The Baal Shem Tov found a unique way to transmit the power of Chassidus to each individual. For the intellectuals, the Baal Shem Tov packaged the raw energy into the form of scholarship. His teachings were so deep that you and I wouldn't even realize they're deep. They sound like fairy tales. The Baal Shem Tov had a small inner circle of 60 great scholars who were able to receive his teachings, and each of these giants transmitted the Torah of Chassidus to the next narrow group of students, and so on.

For the tens of thousands of simple Yidden, the Baal Shem Tov clothed the energy of Chassidus in a physical form. A *brachah*, a smile, a *niggun*, a story, and many, many miracles.

In most Chassidic circles (although not in Chabad), there is a tradition known as *shirayim*—eating the leftovers of a *tzaddik*. The belief is that eating *shirayim* purifies you and makes you holy. This tradition began with the Baal Shem Tov: People came to the Baal Shem Tov for a piece of cake and it worked like magic. It changed them forever. It wasn't just cake, it was the holy *koach* of the Baal Shem Tov, being transmitted in a tangible form.

The most important tool that the Baal Shem Tov developed in order to immortalize Chassidus was the idea of traveling to a *tzaddik*. By grounding Chassidus in the relationship between the simple person and the holy master, between *chossid* and Rebbe, the Baal Shem Tov ensured that Yidden in future generations would continue seeking leaders to warm them from the inside out and connect them with their energy source.

Ultimately, the fact that we are studying Chassidus today is living proof that the Baal Shem Tov succeeded in his sacred mission. ❄️

This article is based on a lecture by Rabbi Yossi Paltiel. It was transcribed and edited for the N'shei Chabad Newsletter by Musia Kaplan.

ב"ה



ספרי התורה של ילדי ישראל

"No Jewish child should be left without a letter in the Children's Sefer Torah".

-The Rebbe



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