



“WHEN I MET THE **BAAL SHEM TOV**”

How the Rebbe's Farbrengens Transformed My Life



This is the story of Reb Yisroel Horowitz; a Bochur in the 5740's who embarked on a journey, searching for the deeper truth of Chassidus that seemed so distant and unfamiliar.

In his remarkable story, we'll learn about the need for every Yid to connect with the Rebbe in order to truly connect to his own Yiddishkeit, regardless of which sect or approach it is.

Part I: THE SEARCH

I grew up in Eretz Yisroel in a family of Chassidim. My friends were Chassidim, the yeshiva I attended was a Chassidishe Yeshiva, and I was always conscious of my distinct identity as a Chossid. I was different from my neighbor who learnt in a Litvishe Yeshiva, and from so many other boys my age. And yet, I wasn't sure how I was different. In my Yeshiva we learnt, and in theirs they did too, I had many serious and true Yerei Shomayim in my class, but so did my neighbor in his. Perhaps it was the one-hour we spent every Thursday night learning Chassidus, which in fact set us apart from them?

But was that really all there was to it? If they would incorporate Chassidus in their curriculum, would we be the same?

These thoughts went from being random guests in my head to full time residents; I couldn't help but to ponder what it meant to be a Chossid. I knew the Baal Shem Tov had paved an entirely new path in Avodas Hashem, but I hadn't the faintest clue of where the path leads to, or where it began.

I began voicing my questions to my peers and to my Roshei Yeshiva, but the answers they offered didn't satisfy me. At times I was even frowned upon for daring to ask such sensitive questions, and I was often told that it wasn't my place to voice such concerns.

Finding no answer within my own circles, I ventured to other places. I visited several Yeshivas, attended many Shiurim by distinguished Rabbis, and at times I almost thought I had come to the final stop. Never, however, did the feeling last for more than a few days, after which I would find myself once more at square one – that is, until that day.

A BIG AIBERSHTER IN A SMALL BOOK

I had heard about a periodic Tanya Shiur in one of the neighborhood Shuls, and in yet another shot at finding some answers I decided to give it a try.

I began attending the classes religiously from the beginning of Tanya and I quickly uncovered a new world. Words started to resonate with me, and those words carried meaning. At last, I saw that the Baal Shem Tov was alive and well, and Chassidus was shining a bright light in this world.

But that was only my first encounter with Chassidus Chabad. Little did I know that the following months would take me on a journey to the place where the heavens meet the earth; where I could find solace for my tired soul.

After only the first Perek of Tanya, I realized that Chassidus wasn't a diluted form of Yiddishkeit tailored for the unlearned, and that the Baal Shem Tov was far more than simply a warm and loving Jew. Unlike I had been told earlier, Chassidus had plenty to teach to Tzadikim as well, beginning with the definition of their very being. I reminded myself of what R' Hillel Paritcher had said after his first encounter with the Tanya: "I used to think I am a Tzadik and now I wish I were a Beinoni."

Progressing in our study of the Tanya we reached Shaar Hayichud Veha'emunoh, and I was introduced to a novel sense of faith in Hashem; the Baal Shem Tov had entirely redefined the idea of Emunoh.

Moreover, when I chanced upon the Alter Rebbe's emphasis on the immeasurable value of Torah study I realized the accusations that Chassidim don't appreciate learning were utter lies. My world became clear, and the distorted rumors about Chassidus were instantly dispelled.

As I connected more with my study

group, I began attending Farbrengens, and was soon growing in my new-found self.

Of all the Farbrengens I attended at that early stage of my exposure to Chassidus, one in particular made a significant impression on me. R' Yehoshua Lipkin was explaining why the Rebbe thought it necessary to include all the Shaar Blatt of previous editions of Tanya in every new edition.

"It was," he said, "because the Tanya's message was relevant to every Jew at any point (Shaar) in life; if one particular approach (Shaar) doesn't seem to suit you, try a different one. Either way, the message is there – no matter where, and no matter when.

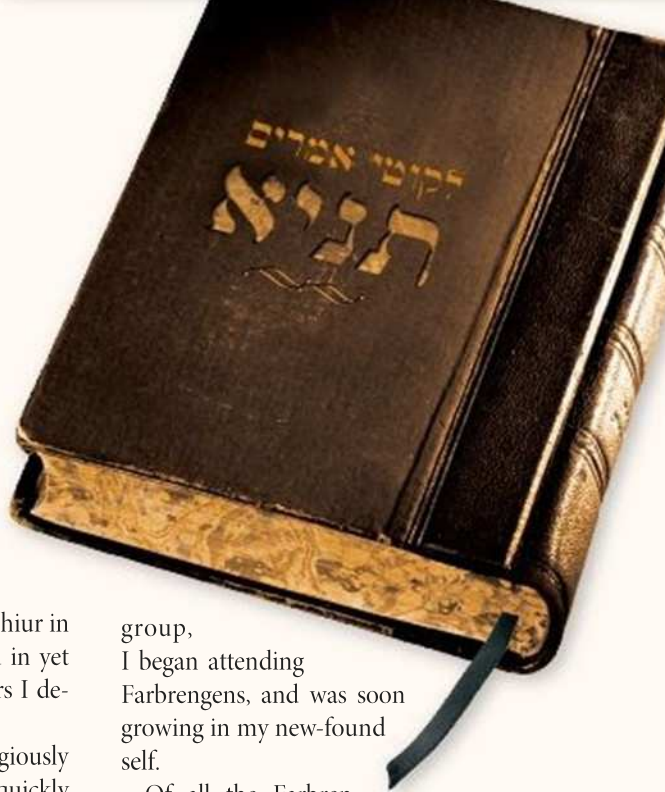
MY CONTAGIOUS JOY

I was excited and overjoyed about my new findings, and I would tell whomever I spoke to about the Tanya classes, and the meaning I found in them.

After that particular Farbrengen I met a Bochur who learnt in a nearby Yeshiva and I started discussing with him the things I had just heard from Rabbi Lipkin. I told him his explanation about the "Shaar Blatt" with great enthusiasm, but he showed no interest in my words.

"The whole Chassidus Chabad is based on 'Moichin'; understanding the intricate layers and dimensions of creation, but how is that relevant? Is not the most important thing the passion that burns in my heart?"

I replied with a question of my own and asked him how he coped with Machsovos Zoros during davening. After spluttering through several fragmented sentences he



confessed that he was broken to his core over them; to him, their very presence was an indication to his lack of Yiras Shomayim.

My question caused the desired effect and I quickly told him that the Alter Rebbe says just the opposite. According to Tanya, Machshovos Zoros are only part of the Keli-pos' effort to battle the Nefesh Ha'elokis, and when it notices it is losing, it intensifies its efforts – as a person who is battling with someone stronger than himself would do (Tanya Perek 28).

This approach seemed to genuinely interest him, and, needless to say, he joined our class.

Another Bochur standing nearby interrupted our conversation and said that Chabad inappropriately investigates Hashem, whereas we know – as an old Chassidic adage goes – that the world stands on three pillars: Emunoh, Emunoh, and Emunoh.

I quickly dismissed his claims but invited him to join me in my journey. I told him that I was no less curious than he was, and so, rather than making uneducated allegations, perhaps we might search together, and observe their ways objectively.

We had heard that Lubavitcher Yeshiva Bochurim go out to public places and offer to don Tefillin with other Jews. He didn't hide his contempt for this particular activity, so we wanted to see what it was like and why they did it. We went to a nearby Lubavitch Yeshiva and asked the first Bochur we saw about the practice that we had come to learn was called 'Mivtzoin'. He told us that it takes place on Friday afternoons, a time during which in other Yeshivos every bochur has the liberty to do whatever he pleases.

Hearing this response, I turned to my friend.

"Do you still need any explanations? While your friends are busy with personal things; when one is heading to the beach and the other is doing his laundry, these boys are out in the street putting on Tefilin with people – *these* are their personal issues!"

He said nothing.

'DON'T GO THERE!'

Over the following days I learned about the Seder in Lubavitch Yeshivos and I found out that Chassidus wasn't left to a sliver of time on a tired Thursday night. Rather, it was learnt each morning and evening. This very fact, I thought to myself, shows just how

important it is to study Chassidus. In my mind, it was no longer a cute brainteaser on the Parsha to learn during one's spare time but something to pursue rigorously and seriously.

Nonetheless, I wasn't able to take that leap of faith and I remained in my Yeshiva, continuing with my regular activities.

I wanted to travel to the Rebbe, from whom I had learned so much from but never had the opportunity to see. When a chavrusa of mine heard of my idea he was quick to warn against it. He said that if Chassidus is what I want to learn then so be it, but to travel to the Rebbe, that's crossing the line!

Spewing platitudes born of baseless animosity, he warned me not to take the step, saying the trip would have a big impact on me, and maybe even change who I was. He even dared to say that the Rebbe's very authority and legitimacy was questionable and surely his address wasn't the right place for me.

Then, just when the prospect of my trip seemed to slip further and further away, a relative of mine needed to travel to the United States for medical reasons and he was looking for somebody to go with and help him. I jumped at the miraculous opportunity, looking to take advantage to go see the Rebbe.

Part II: FINDING THE REBBE'S GREAT LIGHT

THE REBBE'S BITTER CRY

I first came to the Rebbe on Shabbos Parshas Shemos 5743. On that day, new air was breathed into my lungs and my heart awoke. It would be no exaggeration to say that I was born once more.

I was by the Farbrengen when the Rebbe passionately explained Moshe's question to Hashem in the Parsha. After being charged with the mission of freeing the Yidden from Mitzrayim, Moshe asks, "If they ask me what is His [Hashem's] name, what will I tell them?"

The Rebbe said that the nature of the question was both surprise and dismay. The Yidden knew that Hashem was 'their G-d and the G-d of their fathers', and here they are enslaved and abused for hundreds of years. Every day, tens of Jewish children are sent like sheep to the slaughter so Paraoh could bathe in their blood, and you are their G-d? What is Your name? Who is this G-d who can idly watch as his children are massacred by the thousands and remain silent?

To that Hashem answered "I am who I am", sending the message, the Rebbe ex-

**"At last, I saw that the Baal Shem Tov was alive and well,
and Chassidus was shining bright light into this world..."**



plained, that if the Jews are suffering, so is Hashem, and if they are crying, He cries with them.

As the Rebbe was saying this, he broke down in tears like his Creator.

Words fail to describe how I felt at that precise moment. However, I do remember thinking in disbelief that here sat a person who was crying in pain over the suffering endured by his nation more than three thousand years ago! I was utterly beside myself. My friend was right after all, the trip was transforming me already, but not the way he meant it would, rather the way he *feared* it would.

So overwhelmed was I from the holy scene I had witnessed that shortly thereafter I found myself repeating it to a Litvisher Rosh Yeshiva. He told me he was surprised to hear about this; thus far, he had always had the impression that the Rebbe spoke in a cold and distant manner about whatever topic he addressed, so this was something new to him. He asked me to forward him the written version of the Sichos we had spoken about.

Chassidus also emphasizes the impor-

tance of song in one's Avodah and by the next Farbrengen I experienced how the Rebbe was literally pulling me away from my materiality through song. That's when I saw the Rebbe singing "Tzomoh Lecho Nafshi." That's when my soul took flight.

Somehow managing to extend my stay in New York for a short period, I attended more of the Rebbe's Farbrengens. I remember hearing a "Hadran," which the Rebbe made on Maseches Megillah over the course of three Farbrengens; Yud Aleph Nissan, Shabbos Hagadol, and Acharon Shel Pesach. I remember digging back into the recesses of my memory for the shiurim I had heard in the several Yeshivas I had visited on my path to the Rebbe, and I could now proudly affirm how incalculable the distance was between them and what my ears

were listening to now.

THE ANONYMOUS COOK

Not long thereafter I encountered an intelligent, young Litvishe Kollel student, and, faithful to the rules of Yeshiva etiquette, he asked me for a Chiddush. Calmly and confidently, I delivered a brilliant talk on the theme of Sefiras Ha'omer. Not to my surprise, the man was speechless (from what he thought was my own working), so when I saw the visible satisfaction on his face I confessed that in truth I couldn't be credited for the words I had just spoken. Rather, I divulged, I had heard it from *the* Rosh Yeshiva of our generation, and, without saying the name, invited him to guess. He rolled out a list of names of people he deemed as suitable candidates for the title of "The Rosh Yeshiva *par excellence*," but to his dismay, he could-

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n't seem to uncover who it was, and so he begged me to reveal his name.

I complied, but I told him that I would say it by means of an allegory:

"Legend has it of a woman whose husband would eat only from food prepared by his mother. However, so sour were the ties between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, that, notwithstanding the fact that the meals were delicious and fresh, the wife could not bring herself to eat it.

"One evening, the husband decided to put an end to this farce; he walked into a restaurant and took a bag bearing their name and logo, wrapped the food in it, and delivered to his spouse. The woman ate and enjoyed her dinner, and once she had finished her meal, her husband decided to 'drop the bomb' on her and tell her that in truth, it had been his mother – as usual – who had cooked her food, but now, there was nothing she could do about it.

The coin dropped. My Litvishe friend had no trouble identifying who would be the one authority he couldn't tolerate and guessed it on his first try. Since then, he has signed up to receive the Rebbe's sichos, which he studies and enjoys until today.

SOBER JOY

On the eve of Purim 5743 I traveled with other Bochurim to several shuls and Chassidishe Shtiblach to see how the occasion was celebrated. Almost all of them had a humorous and witty feel in the atmosphere; many of them had a *Purim Rov* or buffoon who, as always, would entertain the crowd with jokes and sarcasm.

The following day I stood by the Rebbe's Farbrengen. This time there was no buffoon, no joker, and no skits. The room was fur-



nished with a décor of majesty and solemnity, fit for a king's presence. Indeed there was joy, but a most elevated and refined joy that stemmed from true celebration of the Yom Tov.

During that Farbrengen, I felt the paradoxical mix of happiness and seriousness all at one time. I felt like I was hovering a foot above the ground, and I found myself dancing, sucked in by the multitudes of men in ecstasy and transcendence. The entire world was transformed before my eyes; my perception would never be the same after being exposed to this bright light!

I had now received my fair share of 'character building', and I gradually became more prone to understanding the Rebbe's words.

THE FINAL ANALYSIS:

MANY INSTRUMENTS, ONE DIRECTOR

The moment arrived at last when I had to

return home and wrap up what I had acquired while in New York. I had assembled a wealth second to none, and now I needed to assess how to use it in the future.

Was I to formally become a Lubavitcher Chossid, despite my own roots? I eventually concluded there was no contradiction in that statement. In the orchestra of our holy nation there are many instruments that play on different keys, and on different rhythms. There are the happy and quick melodies, and the more awe-inducing ones; there are slow and calming tones, and fast moving ones. Then there is one person who knows how to play all the instruments, who is aware of every song at any rhythm. He can help any person to play their song and dance to it. No one note is lost, there is not a second too many or too few, and all fit in his script.

When I thought of all this I realized that no matter what you play, you'll play along with the Rebbe.

I delayed my return to Eretz Yisroel one final time, in order to stay for Shavuot; I felt I wanted to receive the Torah anew, with true Hiskashrus to the Rebbe.

I fully believe that a Jew, any Jew, particularly a Chossid, must connect to the Rebbe – if not just to be able to understand what *his* Rebbe wants to convey in his particular teachings. It was not for naught that the Rebbe encouraged other Rebbes to print their books, and expand their reach. It was not for naught that he shared a common language with so many of them.

Indeed, the Rebbe is an outstanding conductor by whose hand every musical note finds its place.

"רועי ישראל לא יפרדו מעל צאן מרעיתם", און מ'איז פארבונדן מיט אים איצט פונקט אזוי ווי דאס איז געווען אין דער ערשטער רגע און אין דעם ערשטן טאג נאך די הסתלקות! און דערפאר מען זיך אנהאלטן אן דער "קליאמקע" ביז אנהאלטן זיך אין א אפענער טיר און גייען אויפן ציון מיט שאלות ובקשות, שרייבען פדיונות, און בעטן רחמים און ברכות ביז אז מ'בעט אויך עס זאל זיין "והוא יכלכלך" – אז ער זאל אויך מאכן די כלים מיט וואס אויפצונעמען די ברכות.

און מ'זאגט אז די אלע וואס האבן זיך געהאלטן אן דער "קליאמקע", און וואס האלטן זיך איצט אן דער "קליאמקע", אדער אזעלכע וואס האבן בהשגחה פרטית געהערט תורתו, אדער אן אנדער ענין זיינעם – זיינען זיי זיך דורך דערוף אליין גואל ווארום עס איז "לא אותי בלבד גאל הקב"ה וכו'".

ס'איז מערניט וואס די גאולה פרטית שטייט בכח, און מ'דארף דאס ארויסברנגען מן הכח אל הפועל.

(משיחת ש"פ יתרו תש"מ סט"ו)

"אנהאלטן זיך אין א אפענער טיר..."