



# THE BAAL SHEM TOV

PART II:  
HIS REVELATION  
AND LEADERSHIP

BY: RABBI LEVIK GOURARIE



לזכות ברכה ליפשא תחי'  
לרגל יום הולדתה י"ז אלול

ולזכות מנחם מענדל שי'  
לרגל יום הולדתו ט' אלול

נדפס ע"י הוריהם  
הרה"ג הרה"ח ר' שלום דוב בער  
וזוגתו מרת ח' מושקא שיחיו שוחאט



# The Baal Shem Tov's Hisgalus

The day of Chai Elul is a pivotal day in the development of the revelation of Chassidus, being the date of birth of both the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe. Additionally, on Chai Elul 5494\*, the Baal Shem Tov's holy light was ultimately revealed to the world at large.<sup>1</sup>

After years of inconspicuous wanderings and secret meetings with many hidden *tzaddikim*, all along posing as the simplest of men, the Baal Shem Tov openly revealed his true stature to the Jewish community in Podolya and the neighboring regions. He began openly teaching his Torah, performing miracles, and inspiring the masses.

For ten years, the Baal Shem Tov learned with Achiya Hashiloni in preparation for this great moment. Following this day, the world changed forever. The Jewish soul was awakened, and the people of Israel were set on track to ultimately merit the *geulah*.

The Baal Shem Tov was initially reluctant to become the public personality that was being demanded of him. The Alter Rebbe said that six years were taken off the Baal Shem Tov's life, for the six years that he continuously refused to reveal himself.<sup>2</sup>

Before his *hisgalus* (public revelation), the Baal Shem Tov was in his own world, where he learned the secrets of the Torah, reaching profoundly deeper into the incredible world of Torah, and where he steadily grew in his personal service of Hashem. Understandably, the Baal Shem Tov was hesitant to leave that all behind, even though there was much to be accomplished in the world through his going out of hiding, and his *hisgalus* was essentially the will of Hashem.

Eventually, Achiya Hashiloni promised the Baal Shem Tov that when he goes out into the world, he will retain the sublime levels of knowledge and amazing comprehension of Torah that conventionally comes through isolation.

We ultimately find these two advantages in Chassidus — both the prominent and apparent effect on the world, and the personal heights that one can reach in the inner echelons of divine connection.

The Frierdiker Rebbe compares the Baal Shem Tov's struggle to Moshe Rabbeinu's reluctance at the burning *sneh*: Moshe was also coming from a life of isolation and was instructed to reveal himself to the world.

Yet, it was Moshe who eventually brought the Torah down to this world — affecting the ultimate fusion of holiness together with a most palpable impact on the world.

Such would also be the case with the Baal Shem Tov and Chassidus.<sup>3</sup>



A PAINTING BY REB ZALMAN KLEINMAN ILLUSTRATING THE JOURNEYS OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV TO VARIOUS VILLAGES WHERE HE INSPIRED YIDDEN IN THE MARKETPLACE.



# Reb Odom Baal Shem's Involvement

In the years 5493\*-4\*, Reb Odom Baal Shem stepped down from his position as leader of the hidden *tzadikim* and actively worked to have the Baal Shem Tov take his place.

For inexplicable spiritual reasons, Reb Odom and the Baal Shem Tov were never to meet. Nevertheless, Reb Odom was very instrumental in persuading the Baal Shem Tov to reveal himself and assisted him in taking his place — revealing to him the vital secrets, and handing over the divine reins of leadership.

On the first day of the week of Eikev (presumably 5493\*), Reb Odom wrote a letter to the Baal Shem Tov, describing a fascinating story that occurred to him. Through this story, Reb Odom beseeched the Baal Shem Tov to agree to reveal himself:

Achiya Hashiloni had appeared to him on Shabbos, telling him to be ready to travel to Lvov right after Shabbos. After *havdalah*, the two set out with a holy mysterious wagon driver to the city of Lvov.

After a short ride, they arrived in Lvov. They entered a home, and Reb Odom took a hot drink. Achiya Hashiloni paced back and forth with his face aflame, and Reb Odom sat frozen in his place.

The door opened, and in walked a tall old man — Reb Eliezer, the father of the Baal Shem Tov. At Achiya Hashiloni's behest, even though he was no longer from this world, Reb Eliezer sat down.

Reb Eliezer told Achiya Hashiloni that his son, the Baal Shem Tov, keeps on disturbing his rest, saying that his teacher (Achiya Hashiloni) commanded him to reveal himself, and he really does not want to. The Baal Shem Tov had asked him to intervene and ask that he should not need to reveal himself.

Achiya Hashiloni responded to Reb Eliezer: "If your son asks again, tell him that he must reveal himself, because this is what was decided in the *Beis Din Shel Maalah*. Tell him that if he doesn't listen, there is no longer a purpose for him down in this world. The entire purpose of his descent into the world was for him to reveal himself and his Torah, and that the wellsprings of his Torah should be spread everywhere."

"He then pointed to me," Reb Odom continued in his letter to the Baal Shem Tov, "saying that 'He, Odom, knows this entire story — why your son came to this world. With time I will allow my student Odom to reveal everything to him, and then he will see that I was right in asking him to go out into the world.'"

Achiya added that until the Baal Shem Tov reveals himself, he will not be able to see his face. At this point, Reb Eliezer disappeared and Reb Odom writes that he was left stunned and shocked by the



THE BAAL SHEM TOV



LETTERS FROM THE BAAL SHEM TOV DISCUSSING HIS HISGALUS, DISCOVERED IN THE KHERSTON GENIZA AND PRINTED IN HATOMIM.

incredible occurrences.

Reb Odom continues in his letter to the Baal Shem Tov, that since Achiya Hashiloni was no longer able to meet the Baal Shem Tov, the responsibility to convince the Baal Shem Tov to begin his public journey was given over to Reb Odom.

With that, Reb Odom set out to find the Baal Shem Tov. He traveled far and wide, looking for friends and contacts, anyone who could tell him the whereabouts of the Baal Shem Tov. After a few months passed with no trace of the Baal Shem Tov, Reb Odom was just about to give up and head back to Ropshitz.

That night, Achiya Hashiloni appeared to Reb Odom and told him that there must be some reason that he and the Baal Shem Tov cannot meet. Instead, he suggested that Reb Odom put in writing everything that he needs to give over to the Baal Shem Tov and have his son find a way to get the pages to the Baal Shem Tov.

Reb Odom took a week and wrote down the special secrets for the Baal Shem Tov, and after being told by Achiya

Hashiloni that the Baal Shem Tov isolates in the mountains near Kitov, he sent his son to deliver the papers to the Baal Shem Tov.

This entire back and forth, the stories, the instructions from Achiya Hshiloni, the challenges, and the process of the writing, were all written in this same letter from Reb Odom to the Baal Shem Tov.

He also wrote in the letter the source of the Baal Shem Tov's *neshamah* as revealed to him by their teacher Achiya Hashiloni.

The *neshamah* was of a Jew in Tzefas who declined receiving *gilui Eliyahu* that was promised to him in exchange for telling what mitzvah he did on the day of his bar mitzvah, saying that that mitzvah was only for Hashem, and he would not tell for any reason.

As reward, Eliyahu came and taught him the secrets of the Torah for the rest of his life. After his passing, the *Beis Din Shel Maalah* decided that because not only was he a great *tzadik* but also kept his identity secret, no portion in *Gan Eden* would be enough for him. Instead, his *neshamah* would come down and usher in a new era of *pnimiyus haTorah* and revealed G-dliness down in this world.

Reb Odom concludes in his letter that he davens that the Baal Shem Tov will receive the holy papers and that he fulfills the instructions of their teacher. He adds that “even though I do not know you — I request that you should not decline because this is the will of Hashem; so what difference does it make to you? No matter what, you will be fulfilling the will of Hashem, especially based on the teachings of our teacher Achiya Hashiloni. In this revelation lies the *tikkun* [rectification] of the Jewish people and the *tikkun* of the world.”

One point that the Baal Shem Tov mentioned in a letter to Reb Odom — as a reason why he didn't want to be revealed, was the huge *machlokes* that he saw resulting from it.

The Rebbe explains that in this letter from Reb Odom, he addressed this issue and elicited by the Baal Shem Tov the idea of *hishtavus* (seeing everything equal) in the service of Hashem, telling him that since this is the will of Hashem, he should no longer hold back and should go ahead and share his light with the world.<sup>4</sup>

## The Baal Shem Tov Accepts

Reb Odom's son arrived in the mountains surrounding Kitov with the precious and holy pages in his possession. He searched for the Baal Shem Tov and was also unsuccessful in finding him.

Realizing that he too will most likely not meet the Baal Shem Tov, he decided to leave the papers under a rock in the

00	1	Wolf	Abraham	10
01	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
02	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
03	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
04	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
05	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
06	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
07	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
08	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
09	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
10	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
11	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
12	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
13	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
14	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
15	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
16	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
17	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
18	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
19	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10
20	1	Isabella	Isaacs	10

A POLISH TAX CENSUS OF MEZIBUZH IN THE YEAR 1518 SHOWING “BAAL SHEM” AS OCCUPYING HOUSE #95.



ONE OF MANY PAGES FROM THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S SIDDUR IN WHICH HIS TALMIDIM WROTE DOWN THEIR NAMES AND REQUESTS.

mountain range, with the belief that the Baal Shem Tov will eventually discover them.

As he was about to head back, he saw a non-Jewish shepherd trying to remove the hidden papers. Reb Odom's son shouted at the startled shepherd, telling him to leave the holy documents alone. He then told the shepherd that these were for the saintly Jewish man who isolates in these mountains, and if he ever sees him, he should show the holy man the papers that he left for him. For this, Reb Odom's son gave the non-Jew 50 Polish groshin.

The end of the story was recounted by the Baal Shem Tov, in one of the letters that he sent to his brother-in-law, Reb Gershon Kitover: The shepherd did in fact show the Baal Shem Tov where the papers were and told him the story behind them. The Baal Shem Tov gave the gentile another 50 groshin and instructed him to keep the entire story secret.

The Baal Shem Tov continues in his letter that "while the writings brought great pleasure to me, the stories in Reb Odom's letters made my hairs stand because I really do not want to be revealed, but I see that this is coming from above and that Achiya Hashiloni will not reveal himself to me until I do."

The Baal Shem Tov concludes, "I have therefore decided in my heart to reveal myself. I know for certain that there will be resistance and antagonism against this revelation but I have trust in Hashem that they will all scatter like straw before the *ruach hakodesh* of my holy teacher."<sup>5</sup>

The Rebbe explains that the Baal Shem Tov was not forced to be revealed, rather his friends and teachers worked to persuade him until he himself actually wanted to be *nisgaleh* and reveal the light of Chassidus to the world.<sup>6</sup>

## The Letters and the Hisglaus

The letter that Reb Odom had sent to the Baal Shem Tov is quoted in full in the aforementioned letter from the Baal Shem Tov to Reb Gershon Kitover.

Aside from the amazing history these letters present us, we can also learn from these letters the great level of *hiskashrus* that the Baal Shem Tov had to Achiya Hashiloni, and the profound impact he had on the Baal Shem Tov, as well as on Reb Odom. Additionally, they give us a peek into the greatness of Reb Odom and his unbelievable level of *bittul*.

While this letter is one of the main sources to



THIS PORTRAIT OF RABBI CHAIM SHMUEL YAAKOV FALK, ANOTHER 'BAAL SHEM,' WHO LIVED IN LONDON AT THE TIME OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV, HAS MISTAKENLY COME TO BE CONSIDERED A PORTRAIT OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV.

understand the background behind the Baal Shem Tov's revelation, in other letters from this period we see that the *hisglaus* was a complicated process and seemed to occur in stages. There are letters spanning the years of 5493\* and 5494\* where the Baal Shem Tov discusses his upcoming *hisglaus*.<sup>7</sup>

In a letter dated Tuesday, Emor [Iyar], 5494\*, the Baal Shem Tov writes that he had just recently been revealed (four months before his official *hisglaus* on Chai Elul) and that he was having a very difficult time from the opposition; so much so that he was unable to leave his house. He asked that Reb Gershon meet with him so that they can think of a place where he would be able to settle.

The Rebbe explains that the Baal Shem Tov's revelation came in stages and that although in letters it seems like the Baal Shem Tov was revealed earlier than Chai Elul (such as a letter from Vayeshev [winter], where the Baal Shem Tov writes that he will reveal himself the next day), we still accept the official version that the *hisglaus* occurred on Chai Elul.<sup>8</sup>

## Hisglaus

Where the actual *hisglaus* occurred and how it played out remains unclear, with many different opinions and versions describing how it happened.



According to one source<sup>9</sup>, the Baal Shem Tov was living and teaching in a village near Brody when one of Reb Gershon Kitover's students, who was unaware of the Baal Shem Tov's greatness, was miraculously led to stay at the Baal Shem Tov's home for Shabbos, though it was far from his plan.

As the Shabbos progressed, the Baal Shem Tov gradually revealed his greatness to this young man through *divrei Torah*, fiery davening, and otherworldly behavior.

After Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov told the young man to tell the group of "Chassidim" [the people inclined towards Kabbalah] living in the city, that there is a great light surrounding their town and that they should seek him out and bring him to their city.

The small group of Chassidim understood quite well that it was the Baal Shem Tov who they should be going to find, and they set out to bring him to town.

The Baal Shem Tov met them on the way to the city where they greeted him happily, fashioned for him a seat out of branches, and appointed him as their Rebbe and leader. The Baal Shem Tov sat down and began teaching them the secrets of the Torah.<sup>10</sup>

## The Baal Shem Tov's Travels

Following the Baal Shem Tov's revelation, he moved continuously. He traveled far and wide all across the Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe and beyond, inspiring, teaching, and sharing his divine light with the world.

The Baal Shem Tov had three primary goals in his many travels. The first one was to go around from town to village, *poritz* to landlord, releasing Jewish leaseholders from prison, paying up their debts, and returning them to their homes — assisting them with their physical needs.

Secondly, the Baal Shem Tov set out to inspire and uplift the simple folk all across the Jewish towns and villages, exciting them about their Yiddishkeit, encouraging them to study Torah and to love one another.



A WELLSPRING OF WATER ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF MEZIBUZH STILL IN USE TODAY, SAID TO HAVE MIRACULOUSLY EMERGED FROM THE GROUND WHEN THE BAAL SHEM TOV ONCE NEEDED WATER TO WASH HIS HANDS.

Third, the Baal Shem Tov would seek out scholarly Torah students among the yeshivos and houses of study, and teach them new secrets of the Torah, revealing to them the beauty and the wisdom of *pnimiyus haTorah*.

The Baal Shem Tov was not just the founder of the movement of Chassidus; he was the first to teach, classify, and reveal *Toras HaChassidus*. He educated the students that he gathered in the secrets of the hidden part of Torah, revealing the soul in every part of Torah, from Kabbalah all the way through *peshat*.

The Frierdiker Rebbe writes that the Baal Shem Tov journeyed to all the great yeshivos of his time, teaching Chassidus and *pnimiyus haTorah* to the *roshei yeshiva* and the *bnei Torah*. The Baal Shem Tov visited the great yeshivos in Brisk, Slutsk, Pinsk, Halusk, Minsk, and Smargon.

In his travels, the Baal Shem Tov gathered students and followers. The Rabbeim explained that while the revealed part of Torah is like water that people are drawn to, Chassidus is like a warming and enlivening fire that needs to be brought to people. This is why the Baal Shem Tov traveled to spread Chassidus and could not wait for students to come to him.<sup>11</sup>

Though there were some students who had previously learned Kabbalah, many were not learning it correctly. They were simplifying the Kabbalistic matters too much, painting a humanlike image, *chas veshalom*, of Hashem. They were going astray in the hidden and secret avenues of the Torah and were desperately awaiting a teacher and guide, capable of illuminating and explaining the secrets of the Torah correctly. In the Baal Shem Tov's teachings, he showed them the way and lit for them the road to the true understanding of *pnimiyus haTorah*.

The Baal Shem Tov met with many rabbonim and great Torah giants of his time, like Reb Chaim Rapoport of Lvov. Some eventually became close students of his, such as the "Toldos," Reb Yaakov Yosef of Pulnaah, while others remained staunch adversaries of his.

Among his adversaries, some respected and honored the Baal Shem Tov but did not become his students, while some respectfully opposed him and his *derech*. Unfortunately, there were also those who fought against the Baal Shem Tov in harsh and audacious ways.

## The Baal Shem Tov and the Simple Folk

The Baal Shem Tov spent time and energy, traveling to the yeshivos to teach and study, but this was not his main goal. Rather it was his visits to the simple and unassuming men and women that stood as his top priority. His affinity and care for the *poshute Yid* (the simple Jew), played a central role in the Baal Shem Tov's life and *derech*, and proved fundamental to his objective and approach.

The Rebbe explained that the Baal Shem Tov stands out from other *gedolei Yisroel* in the fact that most of his time was spent dealing specifically with the simple people, and only a smaller portion of time was allotted to teaching and learning with his prominent students.

During these visits, the Baal Shem Tov would not only try to inspire the simple *Yiddelach* to learn and love Torah. Most of the effort was to uplift them and assist them in their material needs, while simultaneously encouraging them to give thanks to Hashem and strengthen their connection to Yiddishkeit and their observance of Torah and mitzvos.<sup>12</sup>

The Baal Shem Tov specifically spoke in Yiddish so that he could be understood by everyone including the women and children. And while his Torah speaks about the loftiest of things, he also taught very simple day-to-day lessons, such as his famous teaching that anything a person sees in this world must also be a lesson in their service of Hashem.<sup>13</sup>

In response to a writer who questioned the Baal Shem Tov's proficiency and *ge'onus* in Torah, the Rebbe clarified why the Baal Shem Tov focused on and emphasized the labor of the heart and the art of prayer more than the study of Chassidus and the toil of the brain, which we find by the Alter Rebbe.

The Rebbe explains that this variance in their emphasis was based on their locale and their subsequent target audience. The Baal Shem Tov worked predominantly with the Jews in Ukraine and Poland, whose intellectual level at that time was diminished. In order to reveal the soul and the meaning within Yidden, Torah, and mitzvos to these communities, the main channel was via a Jew's heart and emotion. Thus, the Baal Shem Tov's emphasis was on feeling and prayer.

The Alter Rebbe, on the other hand, worked more



within the communities in Lithuania and Belarus, where the yeshivos were more established and there was a greater foundation of Torah. The Alter Rebbe therefore pursued their minds and their study, teaching Chassidus to them on an intellectual level.<sup>14</sup>

While the Baal Shem Tov would later settle in the city of Mezibuzh, he seems to have begun his revealed *nesius* on the road. There doesn't seem to be a fixed city where the Baal Shem Tov lived during these years, rather it seems like he was constantly in transit, visiting Yidden in the important cities, little towns, and remote settlements.

## The Miraculous Nature of the Baal Shem Tov

“The Baal Shem Tov, who there was none like him from the days of the ancient sages, so many miracles and wonders were seen by him that were unbelievable and supernatural. I heard from my grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, that the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid were able to see from one end of the world to the other, and were able to reveal things that they clearly saw to their students.” This is a quote from Sefer Hachakirah of the Tzemach Tzedek.

The Tzemach Tzedek continues: “They were capable of this due to the fact that the light that Hashem created on the first day of creation and was concealed in Torah was revealed to them. All these authentic miracles reveal Or Ein Sof, which is infinite.”<sup>15</sup>

The Baal Shem Tov's work inspiring the masses as a teacher of Chassidus came along with his occupation, as his name suggests, “Baal Shem” — caring for the Jewish people, performing miracles, writing *kameios* [amulets], and healing people that came to him or that he met through his travels.

It is these legendary travels and otherworldly stories of the Baal Shem Tov that have made the name Baal Shem Tov synonymous with amazing wonders and miracles.

The Rebbe explains that the miraculous and amazing stories of the Baal Shem Tov are not just a side component of the Baal Shem Tov but part and parcel of what he represented. The Rebbe proves this from the fact that we refer to miraculous and wondrous phenomena as “*Baal-Shemske*,” proving the innate connection between the Baal Shem Tov and the supernatural.<sup>16</sup>

The Baal Shem Tov revealed the true essence of everything; as such, in his mystical behavior and open miracles, he was revealing the true essence of the world, G-dliness, where nature cannot interfere.

This was especially brought out in the learning of Torah,

as we see several stories of the Baal Shem Tov's *ruach hako-desh*, where he saw the unseen through learning and looking in *sefarim*.

The Rebbe teaches that these miraculous stories and behaviors of the Baal Shem Tov taught and revealed that even in the darkest times of *galus* we remain a *mamleches Kohanim* (a kingdom of Kohanim). Hashem looks after us with *hashgacha pratit*, guiding our every step, allowing us to reach beyond the confines of physicality and material aches and strains, and behave in a manner of *lechatchila ariber*.<sup>17</sup> The Rebbe adds that in the Baal Shem Tov's life and conduct we can discover a glimpse and a foretaste of Moshiach's times.

## Mezibuzh

After years of traveling, the Baal Shem Tov eventually settled in the town of Mezibuzh, a beautiful, secluded town, locked in by passing rivers on three of its borders. Mezibuzh would become the home and the base of the Baal Shem Tov and his *chevraya kadisha* (holy congregation) for ten to twenty years after the Baal Shem Tov built his home and his *chatzer* (court).

There are several versions regarding when the Baal Shem Tov moved to Mezibuzh and what the reasons for moving there were. The years cited for the Baal Shem Tov's move range from 5500\* to 5508\*, and he remained there until his passing on Shavuot 5520\*. City documents that were discovered in the last few decades reveal in the records for 5501\* that the Baal Shem Tov lived there in a house provided by the community near the shul.

It was in Mezibuzh that the Baal Shem Tov and his close students, the *chevraya kadisha*, themselves a collection of the greatest rabbonim and *talmidei chachamim* of their time, would bask in the Baal Shem Tov's light, and learn the secrets of the Torah with their great Rebbe. This holy company of students numbered sixty.

The Baal Shem Tov would say a *shiur* for his *talmidim* in Gemara, with great genius and acuity. He would learn with them the Rif, the Rambam, and the Rosh, and other *rishonim* that gave insight to the *daf* that they were learning. The Baal Shem Tov would translate everything into Yiddish.<sup>18</sup> The Baal Shem Tov also taught Chassidus in its most original and emergent form. Many of these teachings of the Baal Shem Tov were shared in short pieces, as pointers, and were written down and later expounded upon by his students.<sup>19</sup>

It was with this *chevraya kadisha* that many miraculous stories occurred. Several exceptional visions were seen by this holy group of students, in which the Baal Shem Tov would visually teach many powerful lessons to them. In addition, many specific stories occurred with certain *talmidim*,

some in Mezibuzh, some through messengers, and famously, a large number of stories occurred on the road with those students whom the Baal Shem Tov had requested accompany him on his travels.

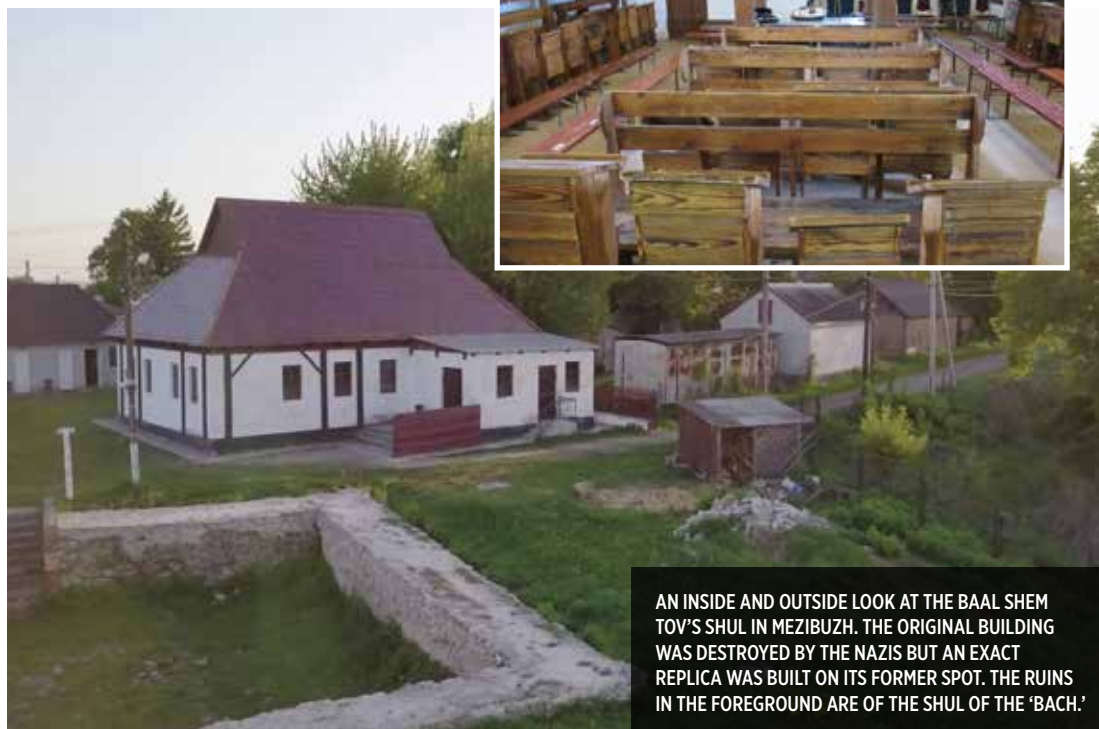
The Rebbe shared a beautiful story that showcases the immense *hiskashrus* that the *chevraya kadisha* had to the Baal Shem Tov and the belief they had in him. One Motzei Shabbos, the Baal Shem Tov told them to go buy candles. (The Baal Shem Tov had a great affinity for light). Even though they were all still Shabbos'dig and not carrying money, they still - with full faith in the Baal Shem Tov - reached into their pockets to get the coins needed to buy the candles. Lo and behold, the money was right there and the candles were bought and lit.

Between the great students of the Baal Shem Tov we find of course his successor the Maggid of Mezritch; Reb Yechiel Michel Zlotchover; Reb Yaakov Yosef of Pulnaah, the Baal Hatoldos; Reb Menachem Nochum Chernobyler; the Shpoler Zaide; Reb Leib Sarah's; Reb Pinchos Koritzer; and Reb Volf Kitzes.

The group included also the Baal Shem Tov's son-in-law, Reb Yechiel Michel Ashkenazi, *Der Daitchel*; the Baal Shem Tov's son, Reb Tzvi; and his *sofer* who wrote his holy *kamei'os* and writings, also named Reb Tzvi; and many more.

It is also important to mention that the Alter Rebbe's father, Reb Baruch, his friend Reb Yitzchok Shaul, and the Alter Rebbe's uncle Reb Yosef Yitzchok, were also close to the Baal Shem Tov.

Although he settled in Mezibuzh, the Baal Shem Tov kept traveling all around the towns and villages, continuing to connect both with the rabbonim and Torah giants of his time, and with the simple folk — men, women, and children — inspiring them, showering them with love and care, and assisting them both physically and spiritually.



AN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE LOOK AT THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S SHUL IN MEZIBUZH. THE ORIGINAL BUILDING WAS DESTROYED BY THE NAZIS BUT AN EXACT REPLICA WAS BUILT ON ITS FORMER SPOT. THE RUINS IN THE FOREGROUND ARE OF THE 'BACH.'



# Toras HaBaal Shem Tov

The novel revelation of Chassidus that was discovered and taught by the Baal Shem Tov is beyond the scope of this historical biography, however we will take a quick look at the general outline of the Baal Shem Tov's Torah.

The Baal Shem Tov did not write any *sefarim*. The Torah that we have from him, most famously, the Kesser Shem Tov and the Tzavaas Harivash, are short *Toros* and *Verter* (pieces) written down and gathered by his students. Additionally, we have snippets of letters where we can see the Baal Shem Tov's ideas in his own writing.

For the most part, the Torah and *shitah* of the Baal Shem Tov are really only explained through the elucidations of his *talmidim*, predominantly by his successor the Maggid, and following him, as the Berditchever put it, "the Litvak" - the Alter Rebbe, took the "*smetene*" (fats) - the core, and further expounded on the Baal Shem Tov's Torah.

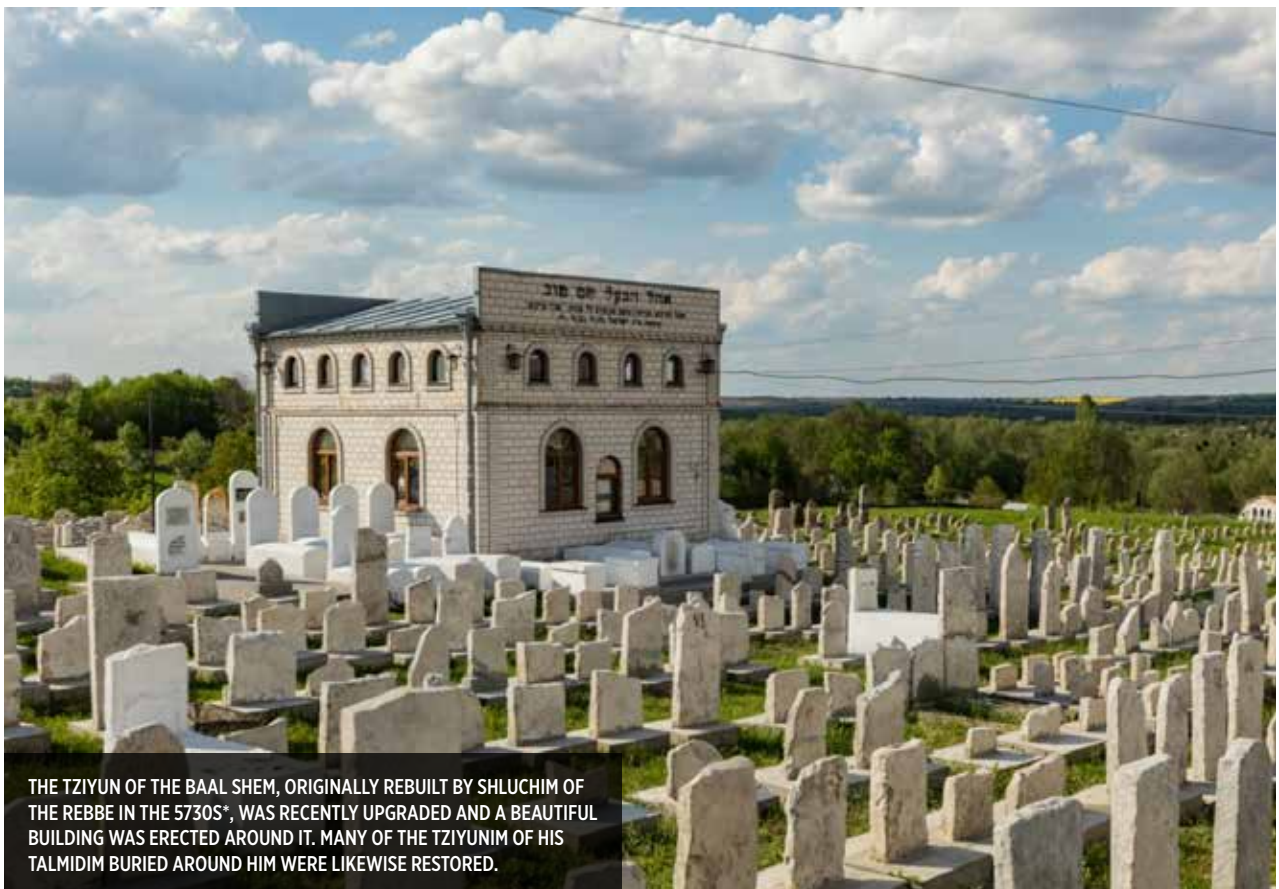
While the Alter Rebbe never learned by the Baal Shem Tov, and they did not really come in contact for heavenly

reasons, the Alter Rebbe considered himself the spiritual grandson of the Baal Shem Tov<sup>20</sup>. Chassidus Chabad is the direct continuation of Toras HaChassidus Haklolis [general Chassidus] — Toras HaBaal Shem Tov.

Some of the core ideas of the Baal Shem Tov serve as a base for Chassidus, and Chassidus Chabad in particular. These include: "*Lolam Havayah devarcha nitzav bashamayim*" — the world is recreated every moment with Hashem's power of creation; *hashgacha pratis* for every single creation and incident that occurs, even with the inanimate objects of the world, no matter how trivial; *etzem* is undividable; through Torah, mitzvos, and love of a fellow Yid we can reach the *Atzmus* of Hashem; and much more.

The Baal Shem Tov's emphasis on *simchah*, *ahavas Yisroel*, *bittul*, working with one's physical side instead of breaking it, working on one's *middos*, uplifting the sparks of *kedushah* — revealing the *kedushah* in everything and every place, all these themes stand as pillars of Chassidus from the revelation of Chassidus to this day.

But above all else, the statement that takes center stage and stands as the backdrop for so much of Chassidus Chabad, is the concept of *hafatzas hamaayanos*. The story is described



THE TZIYUN OF THE BAAL SHEM, ORIGINALLY REBUILT BY SHLUCHIM OF THE REBBE IN THE 5730S\*, WAS RECENTLY UPGRADED AND A BEAUTIFUL BUILDING WAS ERECTED AROUND IT. MANY OF THE TZIYUNIM OF HIS TALMIDIM BURIED AROUND HIM WERE LIKEWISE RESTORED.

by the Baal Shem Tov in a letter to his brother-in-law Reb Gershon Kitover.

The Baal Shem Tov relates: On Rosh Hashanah 5507\*, he experienced an *aliyas haneshamah*, with his soul passing through and seeing many divine chambers. Ultimately, assisted by his teacher Achiya Hashiloni, he arrived at Moshiach's chamber. There, he saw Moshiach learning Torah with all the *tana'im* and *tzaddikim*, including the *shivas haro'im* (the seven shepherds of the Jewish people), and they were all very happy when the Baal Shem Tov arrived.

The Baal Shem Tov asked Moshiach, "*Eimas assi Mar* — When is the Master coming?"<sup>21</sup> Moshiach replied: "When your study will become known and when '*yafutzu maayanosecha chutzah* — your well-springs will spread outward,' what I have taught you and you have grasped, and they will be able to do *yichudim* and *aliyos* [divine fusions and transcendences] as you do, then all the *klipos* will disappear and it will be a time of *ratzon* [G-dly will] and salvation."<sup>22</sup>

It is this statement of "*kesheyafutzu maayanosecha chutzah*" that established the work and study of Chasidus as the final step that will lead us to Moshiach. It is this goal and objective that the *nesi'ei Chabad* and the Rebbe in particular ingrained in the Chassidim as the final work to bring the *geulah*.

## The War Against The Frankisten

During the Baal Shem Tov's lifetime, and more intensely in the later years of his life, a new danger arose that threatened to destroy the Jewish people both from within and from outside — the Frankisten. Against the menace of the infamous Frankisten, the Baal Shem Tov and his students fought fiercely and bravely, until they defeated the conniving heretics.

After the demise of Shabsai Tzvi, secret groups of followers of his "*kat*" (cult) continued to exist on small and for the most part discreet levels all across Europe, and many *gedolei Yisroel* of that generation set out to fight the war against these secret followers.

In the early 5500s\*, they regrouped and created clout under the leadership of Yaakov Frank. Frank mixed ideas from Shabsai Tzvi together with Christian ideas of his time and fashioned around him an abominable gathering of heretics who were out to hunt innocent Jewish souls and erode the stability of the Jewish communities.



LIBRARY OF AGUDAS CHASSIDEI CHABAD

IN THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S SIDDUR IT IS WRITTEN מידו המלאה הפתוחה הגדושה והרחבה, WITH A GIMMEL, AS THE REBBE MENTIONED MANY TIMES.

After accepting certain Christian beliefs, they found a listening ear from the church and the local Gentile, often antisemitic, city rulers and governments. They defamed the Jews and told lies and libels, until they convinced the priests and the municipalities to burn all the Gemaras and other *sefarim* that they claimed were an offense to them.

The *gedolim* of the time fought bravely against them and participated in debates, calling out their lies and their misconstructions of Torah. They pointed out the fallacies of their arguments, attempting to have them lose favor in the church's and rulers' eyes.

Among the rabbonim who participated in these debates were the Baal Shem Tov and his *talmidim*. In Sefer Hashimush of Reb Yaakov Emdin, himself one of the great warriors against the *kat* of Shabsai Tzvi and Yaakov Frank, he lists Reb Yisroel Baal Shem as one of the rabbonim that fought against the Frankisten in the Podolieh region of Poland/Ukraine.

In addition to the debates, the Baal Shem Tov fought against the terrible decrees using several methods. Through davening, *aliyos haneshamah*, sending messengers, and through performing miracles, the Baal Shem Tov ultimately succeeded in thwarting their evil plan to burn the *Shas*.<sup>23</sup>

In the summer of 5519\*, Reb Chaim Rapoport of Lvov, Reb Yisroel Margalios of Yozlovitch, and the Baal Shem Tov, debated the Frankisten and won. The rulers sided with the Baal Shem Tov and the Jewish community and that day, 26 Tammuz, was celebrated as the day of the victory over the Frankisten.<sup>24</sup> The Rebbe Rashab explained that the spiritual victory over them had already taken place on Acharon Shel Pesach, when the Baal Shem Tov said that he would defeat them, yet the open and revealed



victory happened only later in the summer.<sup>25</sup>

Chof-Vov Tammuz was established as a Yom Tov that was to be celebrated every year, but since the following year was already after the Baal Shem Tov's passing, the celebration didn't really take off.<sup>26</sup>

The Frankisten were placed under *cherem* by the rabbonim of the time, and soon they fell apart, most of them converting to Christianity. Although it may have been the only solution, the *cherem* pained the Baal Shem Tov, because, as he explained, when the limb is still connected it can be revived, but once it's cut off there is no way to bring it back.

## The Baal Shem Tov's Passing

In the months leading up to the Baal Shem Tov's passing, on the first day of Shavuot 5520\*, there were signs from the Baal Shem Tov that he would be passing away shortly. In Shivchei Habaal Shem Tov, it is brought that the Baal Shem Tov's passing was connected to the strengthening of Shabsai Tzvi and his *kat*, and the Baal Shem Tov's fight against them.

The Rebbe quotes several times from the Rebbe Rashab in Toras Shalom about the Baal Shem Tov, that although he could have gone up to heaven just like Eliyahu Hanavi in a heavenly fire, he specifically wanted to pass away regularly and to be buried in the ground, to fulfill the *possuk* "*V'el afar tashuv* — and you will return to dust." The Rebbe explains that this expresses the Baal Shem Tov's idea of working with

the mundane and the worldly, uplifting it and revealing its innate holiness.<sup>27</sup>

On Lag Ba'omer before his passing, the Baal Shem Tov was in a very uplifted mood. He hinted at his upcoming passing, stating that in 18 days he would merit *Or Chazer*, a divine reflective light, and he will be returning his *ruach* to Hashem, and that *ruach* will bring another *ruach* until the coming of Moshiach.<sup>28</sup>

Before the Baal Shem Tov's passing, he told his students to sing the *Niggun Hisorerus Rachamim Rabim* of Reb Michel Zlotchover. He said that when this *niggun* will be sung by anyone with a real feeling of *teshuvah* awakening, "I will hear the *niggun*, and I will come and sing it with them and will awaken Heaven's abundant mercy for this person."<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the exact day of passing, there was confusion whether it was the first day of Shavuot or the second. The Rebbe proves from the fact that the Alter Rebbe said that the Baal Shem Tov passed away on Wednesday that the *petirah* must have been the first day of Shavuot, the sixth of Sivan.

The Rebbe said that the burial must have happened on the second day, when it is halachically permissible for Yidden to handle the burial. Hence, the Baal Shem Tov's passing was connected to both days of Shavuot, and this was the cause for the confusion.<sup>30</sup>

Shavuot and the Baal Shem Tov are strongly related, since the Baal Shem Tov revealed a whole new level of Torah that was not yet revealed to the masses, further merging and fusing the mundane with the spiritual, continuing and spreading the message of *Matan Torah* to even greater magnitudes.<sup>31</sup> **T**

1. Hayom Yom Chai Elul.

2. Likkutei Dibburim, vol. 3, p. 742.

3. Likkutei Dibburim, vol. 1, p. 190.

4. Sichä, Shavuot 5720.

5. HaTomim, issue 1, p. 14ff.

6. See above sichä, Shavuot 5720, se'if 12.

7. HaTomim issue 1, pp. 24-25.

8. Igros Kodesh, vol. 15, letter 5670.

9. From this point on, we follow the events according to the Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov, while up until now we quoted mostly from HaTomim and the sichos of the Friediker Rebbe.

10. Shivchei HaBesht, p. 47. It should be

noted that the towns where the Baal Shem Tov lived before his *hisgalus* and at the time of his *hisgalus* vary according to different sources.

11. Sefer Hasichos, Kayitz Tof Shin, pp. 83-44.

12. Sichä Chai Elul 5745, Pg. 2920.

13. Toras Menachem 5742, Pg. 1399.

14. The Letter and the Spirit, pg. 459.

15. Sefer Hachakirah, 65:1.

16. Sichä, Shavuot 5742, p. 1564.

17. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 18, Shavuot 2.

18. Hayom Yom, 13 Cheshvan.

19. Toras Menachem 5748, vol. 1, p. 186.

20. Hayom Yom, 27 Iyar.

21. Based on a similar question posed by

Rebbi Yehoshua ben Levi, Sanhedrin 98a.

22. Beginning of Kesser Shem Tov.

23. Likkutei Dibburim, vol. 3, p. 770.

24. Sefer Hatoldos, vol. 1, p. 765.

25. Sefer Hasichos 5696, p. 140.

26. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 24, p. 345.

27. Likkutei Sichos, vol. 4, p. 1031.

28. Likkutei Dibburim, vol. 3, p. 742.

29. Sefer Hasichos 5703, p. 169.

30. Toras Menachem, vol. 3, p. 148.

31. Two general sources for large parts of this article are the articles from Reb Shlomo Abish in Heichal Habaal Shem Tov, and HaMe'oros HaGedolim.