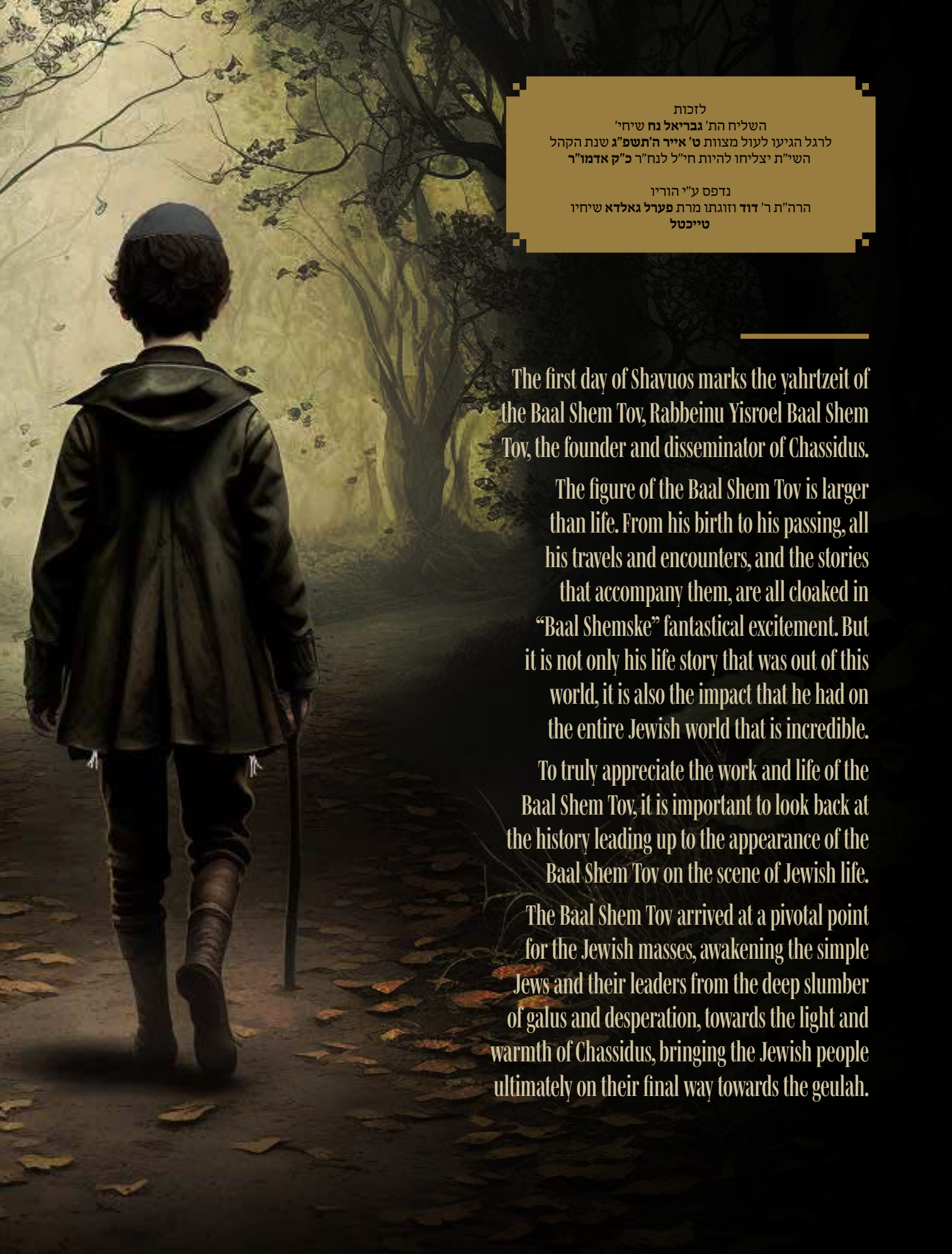


# THE BAAL SHEM TOV

CHILDHOOD AND  
EARLY YEARS

BY: RABBI LEVIK GOURARIE



A young boy with dark hair, wearing a dark kippah and a dark, hooded coat, is walking away from the viewer down a path in a forest. The path is covered with fallen leaves, and the trees are tall and thin, with some bare branches. The lighting is soft and golden, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The boy is holding a thin stick or cane in his right hand.

לזכות  
השליח הת' גבריאל נח שיחי'  
לרגל הגיעו לעול מצוות ט' אייר ה'תשפ"ג שנת הקהל  
השי"ת יצליחו להיות חי"ל לנח"ר כ"ק אדמו"ר

נדפס ע"י הוריו  
הרה"ת ר' דוד וזוגתו מרת פערל גאלדא שיחיו  
טייכטל

The first day of Shavuot marks the yahrtzeit of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbeinu Yisroel Baal Shem Tov, the founder and disseminator of Chassidus.

The figure of the Baal Shem Tov is larger than life. From his birth to his passing, all his travels and encounters, and the stories that accompany them, are all cloaked in “Baal Shemske” fantastical excitement. But it is not only his life story that was out of this world, it is also the impact that he had on the entire Jewish world that is incredible.

To truly appreciate the work and life of the Baal Shem Tov, it is important to look back at the history leading up to the appearance of the Baal Shem Tov on the scene of Jewish life.

The Baal Shem Tov arrived at a pivotal point for the Jewish masses, awakening the simple Jews and their leaders from the deep slumber of galus and desperation, towards the light and warmth of Chassidus, bringing the Jewish people ultimately on their final way towards the geulah.

# The Tradition of Kabbalah

The study of Kabbalah throughout the generations was a hidden study unique to specific individuals, transmitted covertly from generation to generation by those in the know, to those who were deemed fitting of this great study. Additionally, the secrets of Kabbalah existed beneath the surface in *nigleh*, and also on various levels, as can be seen all across the Midrash, Gemara, and works of the Rishonim.

As the generations went on—once the Sefer HaZohar was discovered and publicized—the study of Kabbalah gradually grew, yet it continued to be limited in the range of the study and was accompanied by bans and restrictions on the characters of the students. While many of the great scholars of the sixteenth century learned Kabbalah and taught their close students, the majority of the Torah students were not allowed to study it, often not even being aware of the study that was going on clandestinely.

[For example, both in the Levush's yeshiva and in the Bach's yeshiva, Kabbalah was studied. In the latter it was a hidden *shiur* only for older and married students.]

## Rabbeinu Eliyahu Baal Shem and the Nistarim

Things began to change when a tzaddik appeared in the city of Worms, Germany in 5350 (1590). He was the first “Baal Shem”—Rabbeinu Eliyahu Baal Shem—gaining recognition as a wondrous healer and miracle worker. Most importantly, he established a yeshiva of which he was in charge.

The yeshiva which began in Worms and then later traveled to Chelm (Poland), eventually taking root in Prague (Bohemia), was run entirely by Reb Eliyahu and stood out among all other yeshivos as the only yeshiva where there was an open emphasis on the learning and dissemination of the hidden secrets of the Torah.

As can be imagined, a great holy war was waged against Reb Eliyahu and his yeshiva. While there were of course those that supported him (at one point the Maharal came to examine the yeshiva and show support for Reb Eliyahu), a large portion of the rabbonim in Germany opposed him and his novel approach. Reb Eliyahu was not deterred and the yeshiva ran under his tutelage for the next forty years, before he passed on the leadership to his student Reb Yoel.

Due to the attacks on the use and the study of Kabbalah, which understandably only increased during the Shabsai Tzvi

fiasco, the *talmidim* of Reb Eliyahu would often not display their views and opinions publicly in support of Kabbalah. Rather they would wait to find people they determined were able to understand and be fit to join in their study and way of life.

Thus began the movement of the *nistarim* (the hidden), a group of devoted *talmidim* of the mystical part of Torah and their great teacher Reb Eliyahu Baal Shem, who kept their stature and identity under wraps, often under the guise of being simple craftsmen and townspeople. The *nistarim* would also share their studies whenever possible.

Eventually, Reb Eliyahu made the *nistarim* an official network and would send these *talmidim* in small groups to experience “*galus*,” wandering through the countryside as a means of *teshuva*, and traveling from town to town, quietly spreading the light and warmth of the hidden part of the Torah.

## Second Generation of Nistarim

During the next century and beyond—from the appearance of Reb Eliyahu Baal Shem in 5350\* until the Baal Shem Tov took full leadership of the *nistarim* in 5494\*—the network of *nistarim* grew clandestinely, yet steadily, under the direction of Reb Eliyahu's prize *talmid* Rabbeinu Yoel Baal Shem of Zamutsch. He was also a great miracle worker and disseminator of Kabbalah. Following him, the movement was led by his *talmid* Reb Odom Baal Shem of Ropshitz, Galicia.

The Baal Shems all ran yeshivos, taught Kabbalah, and healed people. They performed miracles all across Eastern Europe, in addition to leading the *nistarim* and preparing the ground for the Baal Shem Tov's *hisgalus* down the line. [An amazing story is told of Rabbeinu Yoel Baal Shem saving a town of Jews during the pogroms of *Tach v'Tat* (5408\*-09\*)].

The groups of *nistarim* that were popping up all across greater Poland–Lithuania, while growing in number, still did not turn Kabbalah into a way of life. It remained solely a study, and as such it still did not change much in the general makeup of the Jewish communities of that period.

While they did try to inspire their communities in the limited capacity they had, the situation of the general Jewish community seemed beyond repair. The Jewish people of the time were writhing in pain and confusion, coming after a terrible crisis of faith and the total destruction of their lives and their communities.

## A Painful Century

During this fateful century, two immensely transformative tragedies befell the Jewish people, each shocking the very soul



and spirit of the nation.

First came a sweeping catastrophe that devastated the entire structure of the Jewish world at the time. In 5408-09 (1648-9), Bogdan Khmelnicki *yemach shemo* and his horde of cossacks revolted against the Polish *pritzim* (landlords and noblemen) who were the overlords of all the towns, villages, and countryside, trying to claim back the land for their tribe.

The cossacks, who turned out to be vicious heartless antisemites, spent most of their time attacking close to 300 Jewish communities across the region (today's Ukraine, Poland, and Belarus), ransacking, murdering, torturing, and destroying the Jews and their towns.

In the aftermath, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered, while many others were sold into slavery. With people escaping and moving to the larger cities, many communities were wiped out entirely, while others that survived lost their leadership and their direction. The Jewish people were hurt and tired, clinging to their faith and hope for a better time.

Then came the second blow, the crisis of faith. Following the massacres of the cossacks, the false Moshiach Shabsai Tzvi, riding on the Jewish people's hope for salvation and redemption, swept up huge portions of the population with messianic fervor and baseless anticipation. He promised them his revelation as Moshiach, and recovery and retribution following the tragedies they had just experienced.

Many Jews, longing for some good news, followed the imposter, only to have their hopes dashed and their faith shaken when he ultimately converted to Islam to save his own life.

This fiasco also served to tear the Jewish communities apart, with leaders and congregants on either side of the argument, splintering, sowing hatred and mistrust that only grew as Shabsai Tzvi converted and his followers split again, deepening the crisis of faith and the fear of hope.

After the raids of the cossacks and the communal trauma of Shabsai Tzvi, the Jewish community was in shambles. These two events had quite literally demolished Jewish life and infrastructure, not only obliterating myriads of Jews, but also wiping out any economic or community stability that they may have had before. The poverty and physical need only deepened the terrible spiritual situation, with Torah knowledge dwindling and a dearth of Jewish education becoming increasingly common in the typical Jewish community.

Following this challenge of education and study,

the rift that came between the elite—the Torah scholars and yeshiva students—and the simple masses of uneducated, often illiterate, people, grew stronger and wider, creating a deep division that the post-*tach v'tat* leadership did not know how to handle.

The divide, alienation, confusion, and frustration resulted in an even further deepening crisis of faith. The Rebbe explains that calling on someone's name wakes a person even if the person is in a faint, not just asleep. The Jewish people were in need of a revival—a revolution—and for that, the name Yisroel was whispered into their ear—Yisroel ben Eliezer—the Baal Shem Tov.

## The Baal Shem Tov's Early Childhood

"I was born in the town *okup* in 5458\*, and when I reached five years of age I was orphaned of my father and mother, of blessed memory. I lived on the account of the community, who supported me with food and drink, clothing, and tuition. But when the community leaders saw that I had no *siman bracha* (a sign of blessing, success) in my learning, they left



THE FIRST PRINTING OF THE ZOHAR IN THE YEAR 5318 (1558), 140 YEARS BEFORE THE BIRTH OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV



A SEFER OF REFUOS FROM THE TEACHINGS OF REB YOEL BAAL SHEM, TRANSCRIBED BY HIS TALMID.



me alone and I went from city to city and from settlement to settlement until I reached the city of Brod.”

The above is how the Baal Shem Tov himself summarized his youth in a letter that he penned in the summer of 5493\*. Each of these details contains much more than can be seen in this letter itself, and this we can learn from the *sichos* of the Frierdiker Rebbe and the *sefer* Shivchei HaBesht.

The Baal Shem Tov was born on Chai Elul of 5458\* to his saintly father Reb Eliezer and his holy mother Sarah, in the outskirts of the town of Tlust in a trench (an *okup*) where his family lived. His birth was a miraculous blessing, being that his father was 100 years old and his mother was 90.

Reb Eliezer and Sarah were childless for many years and spent all their money and efforts on *hachnasas orchim*. One Shabbos afternoon, a guest arrived from nowhere (it seemed to everyone that he must have traveled to get there) but this did not stop Reb Eliezer from inviting him in, providing him with all his Shabbos needs and caring for him. After the other guests taunted Reb Eliezer for honoring such a guest (who seemed to have desecrated Shabbos), Reb Eliezer was even more careful in honoring the guest.

On Sunday afternoon, as the guest set out to leave, he revealed to Reb Eliezer that he was in fact Eliyahu Hanavi and that he was sent to test and see how Reb Eliezer would treat him. Now that he had passed the test, the couple would be blessed with a son. He concluded that when your son will be two and half years old, tell him that Hashem is the *Aibershter* of heaven and earth, Him you should fear, and aside Him, you should fear no creation in this world.

[Shivchei HaBesht recounts a very different story about the Baal Shem Tov’s parents. In the story, Reb Eliezer of Wallachia (Moldova) gets taken by bandits, sold into slavery, serves as a slave, then as a military general, then as a minister. Then after many years in this faraway land, and after staying strong in his commitment to Yiddishkeit (for example, not marrying the minister’s daughter when the king tried pairing them together), he was blessed with being able to have a special child. He was finally allowed to travel home to reconnect with his wife, who had become a midwife in the interim, and the elderly couple was blessed with the Baal Shem Tov.]

The Baal Shem Tov was an extraordinary person from birth. It is brought in the name of the Alter Rebbe that the Baal Shem Tov was never a child. In a *tzetel* from the Alter Rebbe, he writes that the Baal Shem Tov recognized his creator at three years old, and that the Baal Shem Tov was talking and walking at three months of age.

As can be seen in the Baal Shem Tov’s letter, he was orphaned from both parents by the age of five, his father passing away a year before his mother. Before his father passed, he told his young son, “Do not fear anyone aside from Hashem and love every Yid with your entire soul, no matter who and



ILLUSTRATION OF A HORDE OF COSSACKS DURING THEIR REVOLT AGAINST THE POLISH LANDLORDS IN 5408-09 (1648-9).

no matter how.” These two foundations—*yiras Shamayim* and *ahavas Yisroel*—took the young Baal Shem Tov through his entire life.

For the first two years after being left alone in the world, the young Yisroel remained in his hometown and was supported by the community. While the townspeople tried getting him to behave like everyone else, he was already following his own path, walking fearlessly around town and venturing out to the forest outside of town. The Baal Shem Tov loved going there for the peace and quiet, for the lack of lies and ego, and for the concentration he needed to review his studies. He spent more and more time in the forest, often even staying overnight. Whenever anyone questioned him about his behavior, he would explain that the forest doesn’t scare him because his father taught him not to be afraid of anything besides Hashem.

After about two years, circa 5466\* (at around seven years old), the Baal Shem Tov met an impressive-looking Yid in the forest who began learning together with him. He proceeded to take the young Baal Shem Tov with him on his travels and wanderings for the next three years, learning with him daily and caring for all his physical needs.

This unnamed man eventually brought him to a humble home on the outskirts of a small village where he introduced the young Baal Shem Tov to the owner of the house, the Baal Shem Tov’s new teacher, Reb Meir.

## The Baal Shem Tov and the Nistarim

While Reb Meir may have looked like a simple Jew, he was in fact a member of the society of the *nistarim* and a great

*tzaddik* and *mekubal*. He took care of the Baal Shem Tov, eventually introducing him to the *nistarim* and Reb Odom Baal Shem, and learned with him for the next four years (5470\*-5474\*).

All this time the Baal Shem Tov grew in his Torah study and Kabbalah. He recounted that when he was 16 years old, he had already been involved with the *nistarim*, knew a distinguishable amount of Kabbalah, and davened from time to time with the *kavanos* of the Arizal as taught to him by a member of the *nistarim*.

By the age of 14, the Baal Shem Tov had already joined the *nistarim*, quickly becoming an active member and leader in this special society. He was also especially sent the writings and the special secrets from Reb Odom Baal Shem where he passed on the foundations of the work of the Baal Shems.

On the occasion of his sixteenth birthday (Chai Elul 5474\*), the Baal Shem Tov merited his first private revelation of Eliyahu Hanavi, where Eliyahu Hanavi explained to him that Hashem garners tremendous *nachas* from the basic praising of Hashem by the simple people, more than the sublime *yichudim* [spiritual workings] of the greatest *tzaddikim*. At this point, the Baal Shem Tov took it as a path in the service of Hashem to encourage simple Yidden to thank their creator and shared this new *avodah* with the entire group of *nistarim*.

At age 18 (in 5476\*), the Baal Shem Tov suggested that the *nistarim*, in addition to their regular work trying to uplift the simple people, should begin taking active roles in education. He proposed that they go from town to town to establish small *chadarim* [schools] where there weren't any, and even to accept the position of teacher where there was no one else to fill that role. The Baal Shem Tov's proposition was accepted by the *nistarim* and they began implementing this stage of the Baal Shem Tov's reformation, essentially setting the important foundation of Chasidus on the solid establishment of proper *chinuch*.

Around this time, the Baal Shem Tov was appointed leader of the local group of *nistarim* (which was under the leadership of Rabbeinu Odom Baal Shem). The Baal Shem Tov took this organization very seriously, having reports sent in with the work that was being done and the impact the *nistarim* were making on their communities. The Rebbe explained that the Baal Shem Tov was so much further than his colleagues, that he was even a *nistar* to the other *nistarim*.

Another important emphasis the Baal Shem Tov directed the *nistarim* to busy themselves with (closer

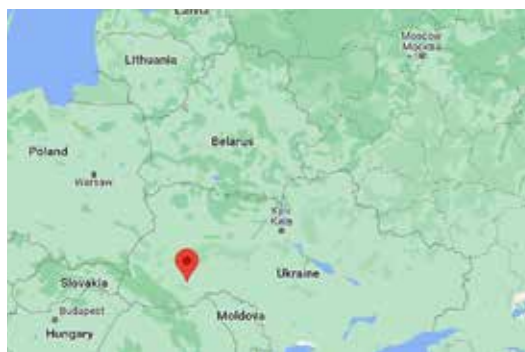
to 5480\*), was the basic betterment of the people's material conditions—encouraging them to put Yidden's physical needs even before their spiritual needs.

The Baal Shem Tov and the *nistarim* worked to convince Jews to move out of the big cities (where many had settled after the massacres of *tach v'tat*), back to the villages and the countryside, explaining that they would have an easier time finding employment and a livelihood in the less condensed towns. (We see this idea implemented by the first Chabad Rabbeim as well.) In addition, the Baal Shem Tov and the *nistarim* lifted the people's spirits, giving them hope, a sense of self-worth, and the feeling of a life worth living for—focusing on the *guf* (body) of the Jewish people before the *neshama*.

Another campaign the Baal Shem Tov and the *nistarim* fought for their downtrodden brethren, was responding to and shielding the Yidden from the wrath of the infamous *maggidim* that were (albeit with good intentions) breaking the spirit of the Jewish people. Instead, they introduced their own style of *maggidus*, sharing inspirational and heart-warming stories from Tanach and Midrashim.

## The Baal Shem Tov as a Bahelfer

Leading up to the Baal Shem Tov's *hisgalus* and work in the communal eye, he held a position that encapsulated the essence of his life work—serving as a “bahelfer” [assistant] to a *cheder* teacher. This involved taking the children to and from *cheder*, guarding them against any dangerous assailants, showering them with love and instilling in them the foundations of our faith, answering with them *amen* and *baruch hu u'varuch shemo*, and teaching them



THE RED POINTER INDICATES THE CITY OF TLOSTE, WHERE THE BAAL SHEM TOV WAS BORN. THIS REGION OF UKRAINE IS KNOWN AS “PODOLIA” AND IS WHERE THE BAAL SHEM LIVED AND OPERATED FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE.





*tefillos* like *Modeh Ani* and *Shema Yisroel*.

The Rebbe explained that it was in this position that the Baal Shem Tov proved his worth as a leader and shepherd of his people. As *bahelfer*, the *ahavas Yisroel* expressed and the deep care that the Baal Shem Tov displayed for every single child, foreshadowed his life's work, especially in his focus on the basics of *chinuch* and *emunah*—building up the new generation on the strong foundations of Yiddishkeit.

## Personal Life

Prior to his *hisgalus*, the Baal Shem Tov settled in a small town near Brod where he served as a *melamed* and a spiritual leader for the small local community. It was during his time in this town that he met his future father-in-law Reb Avraham, father of his soon-to-be wife Leah Rochel (in letters in Shivchei HaBesht, she is called Chana) and her brother Reb Gershon Kitover, who was then the *rosh beis din* in the city.

The Baal Shem Tov secretly arranged his *shidduch* with Reb Avraham's daughter (who he saw in *ruach hakodesh* was meant to be his wife) all the while keeping his true stature a secret from everyone.

Even after the *shidduch* was confirmed, the Baal Shem Tov didn't get married right away. Only after Reb Avraham passed away a short while later, did the Baal Shem Tov make his way to Brod to marry his wife.

When the Baal Shem Tov approached Reb Gershon Kitover with the *shidduch* he had arranged with his sister with their father's approval, Reb Gershon was appalled and shocked by the *shidduch* that his father made with this "simple" man. The *kallah* intervened and said that her father's wishes should be upheld and that she would happily marry the Baal Shem Tov.

At some point, the Baal Shem Tov revealed to his wife who he really was, but it would take a while longer before he revealed his true greatness to his brother-in-law, Reb Gershon.

[In HaTomim, a letter (from the Kherson Genizah) is cited, where the Baal Shem Tov writes to Reb Gershon apologizing for not being able to learn, but that hopefully by helping out in the *cheder* he'll pick up some Torah.]

Following his marriage and the secret he was hiding from Reb Gershon, the Baal Shem Tov set out to wander again, living in a small town where he was able to serve Hashem and be *misboded*—isolate and spend time in solitude—without being bothered.

It was during this period, in the years 5480\* and 5485\*, that their two children were born, Odel (5480\*) and Reb Tzvi Hirsh (5485\*).

It is written in histories of the Baal Shem Tov that for a period of time, he owned a tavern in the village, and it is also mentioned that for some time the Baal Shem Tov served as a



custodian in his brother-in-law Reb Gershon Kitover's house.

[There is a letter in HaTomim where the Baal Shem Tov writes to his wife that somebody will be bringing the spirits to her instead of him. This letter may back the tavern story.]

During this period (post-Brod, pre-*hisgalus*), the Baal Shem Tov spent time in the mountains between Kosov and Kitov where he would be *misboded* and study the secrets of Torah, coming home for Shabbos, and then repeat the same schedule the next week.

Throughout this entire period, he continued on as the leader of the *nistarim* of the region, running operations, visiting towns, and corresponding with his colleagues, the fellow *nistarim*.

It is brought in *sefarim* that the Baal Shem Tov spent the first 26 years of his life (the numerical value of the name *Havaye*) in hiding, and the last 26 years post revelation. The middle 10 years were the years when the Baal Shem Tov prepared to move from the first 26 to the next.

## Learning with Achiyah Hashiloni

Ten years before the Baal Shem Tov's *hisgalus*, on Chai Elul 5484\*, a man appeared to the Baal Shem Tov and told him to come and meet him in the mountains right outside town, where he will teach him Torah. After the Baal Shem Tov saw him a second time during his immersion in the *mikveh* on

Erev Shabbos, he decided to go meet the man in the mountains on the following Sunday.

The Baal Shem Tov recounted that while it was snowy and difficult to walk, he went to *mikveh* and set out to meet the man in the mountains. The man had the Baal Shem Tov follow him to a cave where there were two chairs and a *sefer*. The *sefer*—which was unnamed—amazed the Baal Shem Tov, containing unimaginable secrets of Torah.

The Baal Shem Tov and his new teacher sat and studied for a few hours, which the Baal Shem Tov described as opening his mind and everything becoming clear to him. After they finished learning, they made up to meet again the next day, and they studied together for the next 10 years.

Only after a full year did the man reveal his name saying that he was the great Achiyah Hashiloni.

The learning and the preparations went on. The Baal Shem Tov tried holding back from needing to reveal himself to the world. He explained that he enjoyed his life of learning, spiritual isolation, and the ambiguity he held as a *nistar*. But after pressure and clear directions from on high that he was meant to reveal himself, the Baal Shem Tov ultimately

relented.

*The story of the Baal Shem Tov's revelation, leadership, and legacy, will be'zras Hashem be published in the upcoming Elul Derher in connection with Chai Elul, the Baal Shem Tov's birthday.*

The early years of the Baal Shem Tov, from his miraculous birth to his time studying with Achiyah Hashiloni, shed light on the true character of the Baal Shem Tov.

The Frierdiker Rebbe explained that in the *chinuch* the Baal Shem Tov received from his father we can see the basis of all the Baal Shem Tov's ideas—undaunted *yiras Shamayim* and boundless *ahavas Yisroel*.

So, too, in his work with the *nistarim* and the simple Yidden, on to his work as a *bahelfer*, inspiring and educating Jewish children through love, the secret of the Baal Shem Tov can be seen.

It is this secret of the *neshamah* that he revealed, which shaped his life and continues to be the foundation and life of the movement that he founded—Chassidus. **T**

1. Sefer HaToldos, vol. 1, p. 55.
2. The Rebbe further explains this idea, originally from Reb Pinchos Koritzer, in Likkutei Sichos vol. 6, p. 285.
3. Letter from the Baal Shem Tov, HaTomim, vol. 1, p. 19.
4. The exact history of the Baal Shem Tov remains unclear. The sefer Shivchei HaBaal Shem Tov is accepted as a special sefer across all communities, including Lubavitch, but it is also clear that we don't accept all the versions of the stories there to be accurate. Two fundamental sources that we do have are the sichos of the Frierdiker Rebbe and the letters found in the Kherson Genizah that were published in HaTomim. For the basic outline of the story we will use these aforementioned sources.
5. Toras Menachem, vol. 28, p. 12.
6. Recorded in a note by the Alter Rebbe, Kovetz Yagdil Torah NY, vol. 31.
7. Sefer Hatoldos, p. 27
8. Yagdil Torah ibid.
9. Sefer Hasichos 5702-3 (Hebrew), p. 169.
10. Sefer Hasichos 5703, p. 165.
11. Toras Menachem, vol. 27, p. 176.
12. Toras Menachem, vol. 36, p. 5.
13. Letter from the Frierdiker Rebbe, HaTomim, vol. 1, pg. 138.
14. The Rebbe references the story where the Baal Shem Tov saved the children from vicious dogs—Toras Menachem, vol. 38, p. 150. (See also Shivchei HaBesht where the Baal Shem Tov saves them from a werewolf.)
15. There it is written that The Baal Shem Tov was married to someone and she passed away soon after their marriage.



A HANDWRITTEN COPY OF ONE OF THE LETTERS OF THE BAAL SHEM TOV TO HIS BROTHER IN LAW REB AVROHOM GERSHON KITOVER DISCOVERED IN THE "KHERSON GENIZAH." IN THIS LETTER FROM LAG B'OMER 5493 (1733), THE BAAL SHEM TOV ADDRESSES HIS UPCOMING HISGALUS AS PER THE INSTRUCTION OF REB ADAM BAAL SHEM.

