

RABBI YISRAEL BA'AL SHEM TOV

Founder of the Hasiddic Movement

Yahrzeit Date 7th of Sivvan (1760)

Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer was born about the year of 1700 in the area of what was then considered Galicia (Poland) but is today Ukraine, close to the Carpathian mountain area. He was orphaned at a young age and spent much time in solitude and contemplation. Afterwards he supported himself by being an assistant to an elementary school teacher ("heder"). Many are the stories and legends pertaining to this glorious personality. Although we cannot testify to their historical or factual accuracy, yet it is enough that they can be linked with his name. Since the majority of our population lives such a spiritual standard that it is unfeasible to tell of them such stories, we can learn from these stories of the general lofty levels of the personalities involved.

One of these stories is that he received his weekly dole by knocking at the doorways of each and every one of the fathers of the children delivered unto his charge. Once it happened that he knocked at the door twice, so to receive his allotment, and at not hearing (from "inside") any response, he immediately went on his way. After a few minutes the father exited from his doorstep and saw the lad Yisrael leaving. He admonished him at being so quick at leaving. "You should knock and knock again and again until you hear a response!" But the pious Tzaddik answered "I believe that it is only G-d who gives us the monies for our livelihood. If I would fully rely on my knocking, I would be rebelling against the true faith. I only have to make normal "hishtadlut", but no more than that".

For a time Rebbe Yisrael was a ritual slaughterer. His first wife died shortly after marriage and it was then that he started his "wandering" amongst the villages of the area. He was a fervent prayer for those ill, and also passed out amulets to aid in their healing. After a while he was dubbed with the honorable surname "**Ba'al Shem Tov**" since he used "shemot" (holy names of the Divinity) to help in healing. Due to the primitive situation of medicine in those days, sickness was rife and many infants died from rampant diseases. Rabbi Yisrael was greatly disturbed at the general suffering, and did the best he could under the circumstances.

At the age of twenty he married his second wife (Hanna) who was the sister of the famous tzaddik (who eventually made Aliyah to the Holy Land) Rabbi Gershon Kitober.

Really we have no extant literature written by Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov, except for a one and only letter written to Rabbi Gershon (then already in Eretz Israel) and published at the end of "ben Porat Yoseph" (written by his famous disciple Rabbi Ya'akov Yoseph of Polna'ah). See the articles concerning this letter in the periodical of "Mossad Harav Kook "Sinai" (volume 67 page 120, so too volume 68 page 198) and "Sefer Margoliot" (Mossad Harav Kook, pp. 347-360). In this letter Rabbi Yisrael reveals that during sleep he had celestial visions of his ascending to the Heavenly Academy. He tells of the revelations granted him there (one of them was, that Meshiach will come when the great majority of the Jewish nation will embrace the tenets of the new Hassidic Movement).

For a few years the great Master chose to live a life of seclusion on the Carpathian mountain range. His wife ran an inn, and thereby the family earned their livelihood. He had only one son (called Zvi) and one daughter (called Adelle), who was considered well learned. Her daughter Feiga was the mother of the well known Rabbi Nahman of Breslau. Adelle was also the mother of Rebbe Baruch of Meziboz (who was a great extremist) and of Rabbi Moshe Haim Efraim, the author of the great masterpiece "Degel Machaneh Efraim", which is in itself a treasure-house, quoting many of the sayings of his grandfather Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov.

At the age of 36 Rabbi Yisrael decided that the time had come for disseminating his teachings. Apparently the first half of a life span is for introspection. The second half is to benefit others by the points of wisdom acquired. After some preliminary efforts to get associated with prevalent Hassidic groups (in Brody and other locales) he moved to Meziboz, where he remained until death, and there he amassed many adherents. Some of them were giants by their own rights, such as **Rabbi Dov Ber, the Magid of Mezritz, Rebbe Ya'akov Yoseph of Polna'ah, Rebbe Yudah Leib Mochiach from Polna'ah, Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz, Rebbe Meir Margoliot** (author of "Meir Netivim"), **Rebbe Nahum of Cernobil, Rebbe Aryeh**

Leib of Shpoleh. Each of the above was a charismatic leader of the community and individually attained mass followings. What Rabbi Yisroel Ba'al Shem could not accomplish during his lifetime, snowballed and attained huge popularity till there were thousands of Hasidim, due to the educational efforts of the named above.

What were the major teachings of the Hassidic Movement?

It is well known that the period was one of much suffering. Anti-semites the world over found the Jews as easy prey. From time to time the Gentiles took organized action to molest and loot their Jewish neighbors. But even between the mass outbursts, there was constant persecution going on, in money matters and so too physically, as "the bully" instinct in savage man cannot withstand the opportunity to lord it over weaker elements as minority groups. Also suffering from their Gentile political leaders, the Gentile common folk found easy abatement for their frustration by pursuing and persecuting the time immemorial "scape-goat", the Jews. What kept the spirits of the Jews strong? Not the study of the Talmud. This was only the priority of the learned few, those who could afford books (which were then very expensive) and those who had to privilege to receive a basic training in unraveling the abstruse Talmudic debates. We must remember that Yeshivot then were few and far between. The local Rabbi (if he had the personal qualifications for the task) taught the local lads. But upon reaching adolescence and the needs of getting married and earning a livelihood, the learning period had a sudden break. Therefore the great majority of the Jewish population had nearly no knowledge of what the Torah is about; much more so to glean some explanation for their constant sufferings.

But the Hassidic Masters created a new atmosphere. The audiences were told of the mystic "worlds above" the wonderful Sephirot. They were taught that not any action at all of any prayer or Mitzva would go unrewarded, since even if the results are not recognizable to our physical eyes, the spiritual progress up above continues unimpeded. The rapt students were taught of the supremacy of the Jewish soul, of its Divine source, that each and every Jew is "nitzoz Eloha Mi-Ma'al". The intrigued listeners were told of the tremendous battle going on between "ko-chot ha-kedushah"; and Satan, "Ko-chot Ha-rah", in which we too

participate. With even the slightest good intention, with even moving one step in the proper direction, we were bringing the Arrival of the Meshiach. Even more so, the audiences were told that they should not be envious of the well learned Talmudic Masters of that era (the "Mitnagdim") since it could easily be that their studies go unrewarded, since many of them had no intention of "Lish-ma" but studied for the sake of wages, or popular honor, or to attain a good marriage match. (See about this last mentioned dispute - the book of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, Yeshiva University, called "Torah Li-Shma". And it was this accusation which caused Rabbi Haim of Wolohzin to pen his rebuttal, called "Nefesh ha-Haim").

Rabbi Yisrael had here a valid point of criticism.

True that the Torah gives solace and succor against the inroads of the Evil Inclination. **But** this remedy is only good and valid for those who know how to read and understand those books!

True that the major part of Jewish religious service of G-d is "dedication of the heart", **but** this section fell into negligence, since the majority of those then called "scholars" dealt only with externals and superficialities, rather than with basic matters of "Love of G-d, Awe, Devotion" etc. This point was taken up originally by the famous classic "Hovot Ha-levavot" (see his Introduction), so too by the "Messilat Yesharim" (see his Introduction) and later on taken up again by Rabbi Israel Salanter who created the "Mussar Movement".

He saw the spiritual poverty of Talmidei Hahamim then, and the devastating inroads that the Haskalah movement wreaked in his day. Therefore nearly all of the Yeshivot subsequently instituted the position of "Mashgichim", who taught the ideas and ideals of Judaism, not relying alone on the Roshei Yeshivot who taught solely how to understand the legal niceties of the Talmud. This point was taken up by Rabbi Abraham Kook ("Letters", volume two, page 232). The Talmudic source for even this approach is Tractate Sukka 28a: "Davar Gadol, Davar Kattan". The sublime matters are the ideological subjects. The legal disputes of Abaye and Rava are, comparatively speaking, of lesser importance. This approach aided a lot in raising the self confidence and self esteem of the common folk. Their lack of Talmudic acumen could now be attributed to their greater inner worth, in searching for the most important matters.

We shall repeat here some of Rabbi Yisrael's famous teachings (5).

The most well known compendium is "Keter Shem Tov" which collects many of the sayings attributed to the great Master.



(A) It is well known that a father trains his toddling infant to the outstretched arms of the father. However after the initial first trial and the toddler has succeeded, how great is his surprise that afterwards his father distances himself, so that now the toddler must take 4 steps in order to reach his father?! And how great is his consternation and pain when he fails and falls prat-face on his nose, not succeeding at first. And when eventually the child does learn how to walk those four steps unaided, then his father distances himself for 10 steps!

This parable (understandable by anybody in the world who has experienced fatherhood) is to the reaction of G-d to those who search His nearness. At first one learns the simple steps of Judaism. But to our consternation, suddenly G-d disappears and allows us to fail in our endeavors to reach Him. We fall on our faces, so to say, and suffer failure even after some initial successes. Rabbi Yisrael teaches that all this is a part of education; it is temptation to test whether we are fully serious in our religious quest. Part of religious ascent is "hastarat Panim".

Therefore Rabbi Meir of Premishlan teaches that when the Torah writes -

"And many afflictions and troubles will come about, and they (the final generations) will comment 'It is because G-d is not amongst us, therefore we suffer so!' Following which I (G-d) will increase my concealment" (Dvorim 31, verses 17-18).

This is most odd. Apparently admitting that G-d has forsaken us and therefore we are presently suffering, is a proper religious teaching. So why is it that G-d only multiplies thereby our tribulations? The Hassidic answer is that G-d absolutely never but never forsakes us. To attribute our pains to his leaving us is really an apostate answer!

(B) Another teaching of the Master is a new and novel explanation of the saying in Avot (chapter four) – "Who is to be considered wise? He who can learn from everyone". The proper way is that when one sees a shortcoming or even a sin being done by somebody else, one should understand that G-d is showing us a

mirror, we see thereby a reflection of the shortcomings that we ourselves have. Therefore the Torah teaches us by double language, "ho-cheach To-chiach" (va-Yikra 19, 17) – When you chastise your fellow Jew, chastise yourself first.

This teaching was also publicized by Rebbe Yisrael Salanter who said that if other Jews are travelling on the Shabbat, it is due to our talking about weekday matters on the Shabbat, or by our touching Muktzeh objects. All of the Jews are soulfully interconnected; we each have mutual and reciprocal influences. "No man is an island". We are all interconnected.

(C) When asked by his critics, how is it permitted to teach the secret lore of the Zohar unto the masses accompanying him, (the Hassidic way was that his students flocked to the Master's house for weeks unending, to see how he prayed, how he ate, how he walked and how he talked etc. "shimush Talmidei Hahamim"), Rabbi Yisrael answered that learning "secrets" was similar to eating a certain "soup". If a person had never individually experienced the taste of that soup, all words and adjectives were incapable to deliver a proper appreciation of its taste. So too, all of the books extant who explain in writing the "inner Wisdom" have never trespassed any prohibition. Because to properly comprehend "the Kabbalah" a person must undergo a certain internal experience (of love and awe etc.). Just talking "about it" is like "running around the bush". (In our present way of expression, we could phrase it so: A male will never understand the sublime experience of birth to a living child. For even a female can only "understand" it after physically giving birth. A thousand words, or even many millions of words, of similes and examples, will not give a true picture of "what it is all about". So too with the discussions concerning the secret lore.

(D) The biblical verse "Do not give a hand to the villain, to testify unjustly" (Shmot 23, 1) – the great Master explained that the Torah exhorts us not to slander ("Loshon Horah") a fellow Jew. Since whenever Satan prosecutes a Jew before the Heavenly Tribunal, his words are discarded since it is necessary that testimony be received by two witnesses (Dvorim 17, 6) while Satan is only solitary. But when another Jew speaks evil about his fellow Jew, even if the action mentioned is true, then he can be a partner to Satan, and now that there are two witnesses, punishment can be exacted from the culprit.

(E) A great innovation of the Master was "ha'alat Mach-shavot", that is to say raising the "holy sparks". He taught that the Deity pervades all that exists (this idea later expanded into "pan-enthusiasm", expounded by the famous "Ba'al ha-Tanya").

- Therefore when a person sees a passing dog and is fearful of its ferocious bite, he should raise his thoughts towards fear of punishment for his sinning.
- When a person feels his heart gushing with love towards his son, he should raise his thoughts towards love of all that are Jews, since they are as his sons.
- When a person is excited at seeing the beauties of Nature, he should raise his thoughts to pay attention to the beauties of the Torah texts. Etc.

Rabbi Yisrael taught: what is false humility? That a person doesn't believe that with his each and every action he is "moving worlds above". We project a cosmic influence. No Jew is tiny. Even a barely heard, whispered prayer, can budge populations of millions. We must not judge by "quantity" but by "quality".



The above essay cannot do proper justice to the hundreds of ideas developed by Rabbi Yisroel and his adherents. It is only opening a portal and giving a quick glance. Till today we are on the search for something more sublime, more lofty, than what meets the naked eye.

May his teachings serve us as an inspiration to better and better lives.