

The year before the birth of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Chasidic philosophy, the Baal Shem Tov knew that a new soul was soon to descend to this world. But who would be privileged to host it he did not know, so he searched for it in the heavenly palaces.

What a soul is in its pristine state Above - this the Baal Shem Tov knew. How a soul descends into this world and is garbed in materiality - this he also knew. How fares a new soul - this he dearly would love to know.

He knew that this new soul was due to descend to this world during that year; he did not know where, or in whom.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman's father, the saintly Reb Baruch, was one of the Baal Shem Tov's circle of hidden tzadikim (righteous individuals). But no one knew of Reb Baruch's righteousness - no one, that is, apart from his wife Rebbetzin Rivka.

When a year had passed since their marriage and they had not been blessed with a child, Reb Baruch and his wife set out during the month of Elul to visit the Baal Shem Tov to ask for his blessing. The Baal Shem Tov blessed them and promised them that in the forthcoming year, 5505 (1745), they would be granted a healthy son.

The fact that this child was connected to the new soul that was destined to descend that year was hidden even from the Baal Shem Tov.

On Rosh Hashana of that year, the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov observed a marked difference from his accustomed mode of divine service. His abounding joy could be perceived in his manner of prayer, in the especially cordial tone with which he blessed them, in the Torah teachings at the meal thereafter, in the next day's sounding of the shofar, and in the additional prayer service.

The conclusion of Yom Kippur that year found the Baal Shem Tov in a distinctive state of holy elation, which remained with him until after Simchat Torah. His disciples understood that something wonderful must have transpired that holiday month, something that had brought him such joy that he had departed from his accustomed mode of divine service during the Days of Awe, for joy was now its dominant theme. But eager as they were to discover the reason for this joy, they were left disappointed.

Before Reb Baruch and his wife left Medzibozh, they called on the Baal Shem Tov to receive his farewell blessings. Rebbetzin Rivka, bestirred by spiritual emotion, told the tzadik that when the Almighty fulfilled his blessing and granted her a healthy son, she would dedicate him to the study of Torah and to divine service in the spirit of the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov.

Seeing their state of spiritual arousal, the Baal Shem Tov gave them his blessing, and they left town with glad hearts.

On Wednesday morning, the eighteenth of Elul, the Baal Shem Tov returned from his immersion in the mikva (ritual bath) in extraordinarily buoyant spirits. His disciples were mystified, but none of them ventured to breathe a question. Moreover, the tzadik personally led the prayers to the jovial rhythms of the festival melodies. And when he surprised them by omitting the penitential prayers, they realized that this must be a uniquely festive day.

He then invited them to share his visible joy at a festive meal, where he said: "On Wednesday, 'the day on which the luminaries were suspended in the heavens,' on the Wednesday of the week whose Haftora opens with the words, 'Arise and shine,' on this day a new soul has come down, which will light up the world through the revealed levels of the Torah and through Chasidut. It will endure self-sacrifice for the sake of the spiritual path of Chasidut and will succeed in its mission until the coming of Moshiach."

When the Baal Shem Tov received Reb Baruch on Yom Kippur that year, he warned him that he should tell no one that he had had a son, nor should he tell anyone of the child's name. Later, when Reb Baruch was about to leave for home, the Baal Shem Tov gave him detailed instructions as to how the child should be attended to and how he should be taken out to the fields. He warned him solemnly, moreover, that the child should be kept out of public view, and in particular, out of the view of the local gossips.

And three times a day, the Baal Shem Tov remembered the newborn child in his prayers.

On the child's third birthday, Rebbetzin Rivka and her sister-in-law arrived in Medzibozh for the child's third birthday, when it is customary to give the first haircut. As soon as the Baal Shem Tov had given the child his first training in leaving his peyot (side-curls) uncut and had given him his blessing, he urged them to leave immediately and not to discuss between themselves where they had been. Finally, he wished them a good year and a safe journey home.

The little boy kept on asking who this man was who had cut his hair and left him with peyot, and who had blessed him.

"That was a grandfather," replied his mother. Thus, Rabbi Shneur Zalman referred to the Baal Shem Tov in the future, as his spiritual grandfather.

From Likutei Dibburim by the Previous Rebbe

THOUGHTS THAT COUNT

On the weekly Torah portion

You shall go to the place the Eternal your G-d will choose to cause His name to dwell there. (Deut. 26:2)

A Jew must know that when he goes from one place to another, he is not going on his own but is directed from Above. And the intention and purpose of this is "to cause His Name to dwell there" - that is, to make G-d known in the place to which he was Divinely led. *(The Baal Shem Tov)*

Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field (Deut. 28:3)

A city has certain advantages over rural life, among them the pleasure of others' company and the availability of places of Torah and learning. Rural life also has its advantages, such as a more relaxed life style, fresher air, and warmer relationships between neighbors. G-d's blessing is that we should be equally blessed in both locales. *(Chatam Sofer)*

And G-d shall make you plentiful for good, in the fruit of your body (Deut. 28:11)

The Torah promises length of days and good years - even beyond what is truly deserved - in the merit of children who are raised and educated according to Torah. *(Torat Moshe)*

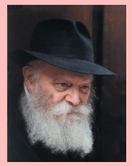
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"Jerusalem has mountains around it, and the L-rd is around His people from now and to eternity" (Psalms 125:2)



LIVING WITH THE REBBE

from the teachings of the Rebbe on the Torah portion

According to Maimonides' enumeration of the Torah's 613 mitzvot (commandments), general commandments such as "You shall be holy" or "You shall keep My laws" are not, as a rule, considered mitzvot. Rather, these injunctions are classified as broad directives encompassing all of Judaism.

It is therefore surprising, at first glance, that the commandment in this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, "You shall walk in His ways," is classified as a positive mitzva, requiring a Jew to emulate the Holy One, Blessed Be He." Maimonides writes, "Just as G-d is gracious, so shall you be gracious. Just as G-d is merciful, so shall you be merciful. Just as G-d is pious, so shall you be pious." Indeed, the commandment implies that a Jew is required to emulate G-d to the best of his ability, always and in all circumstances.

But why is this commandment different from all other general statements in the Torah, to the point that it is characterized as a separate mitzva? What does the verse "You shall walk in His ways" mean that other similar commandments do not?

To explain:

Maimonides classifies "You shall walk in His ways" as a distinct commandment, as it contains a unique aspect not found in any other general directive in the Torah. This innovation is alluded to in the specific use of the word "walk," which implies an ongoing and perpetual sense of motion.

One of the differences between the soul of a Jew and an angel is that angels are stationary beings, fixed in their spiritual positions, whereas the Jewish soul constantly ascends from one spiritual level to the next. The Jew is constantly in motion, reaching higher spiritual heights by virtue of his actions.

It sometimes happens that a Jew may observe mitzvot, yet he remains on the same spiritual rung as before. His performance of the mitzva did not cause him to progress or ascend any further. The commandment "You shall walk in His ways" comes to teach us that a Jew must never be stagnant, and that his observance of the mitzvot must always lead to an improvement of his overall spiritual condition.

How are we to accomplish this? By observing the Torah's mitzvot solely because they are "His ways" - because of our desire to emulate the Creator. For when we do, our spiritual ascent to higher levels of G-dliness is assured.

Adapted from Volume 4 of Likutei Sichot

Two Ways to Be Grateful

A familiar Jewish story tells of two people who bring their disagreement to a rabbi. After hearing the first person, the rabbi says, "You are right." The second presents the opposite argument, and the rabbi tells him, "You are right, too." The rebbetzin objects: "They cannot both be right." The rabbi smiles and answers, "You are also right."

Behind the humor lies a characteristically Jewish approach to disagreement. The Talmud teaches, Eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim chayim—"These and those are the words of the living G-d." This does not mean that every opinion becomes Jewish law. A decision must ultimately be made. It means that two opposing viewpoints can each reveal part of a larger truth.

An example appears at the beginning of Ki Tavo, in the Torah's discussion of bikkurim. In ancient Israel, farmers brought the first fruits of their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem. The ritual was an expression of gratitude for the land, the harvest and the blessings that made both possible.

The ancient rabbis disagreed about when this practice began. The Torah states: "When you enter the land…and possess it and settle in it." The Jerusalem Talmud emphasizes "possess it and settle in it," concluding that the first fruits were brought only after the land had been conquered and divided under Joshua—a process that took fourteen years. The Midrash focuses instead on "when you enter the land," suggesting that the obligation began immediately upon arrival.

At first, this appears to be a technical debate about timing. But it also offers two different ways of understanding gratitude.

The Midrash represents gratitude in its most immediate form. It is the spontaneous appreciation we feel before we have had time to analyze anything: the awareness that waking up to another day is itself remarkable. Jewish tradition gives this instinct a voice in Modeh Ani, the short statement of thanks said upon awakening. In modern terms, it is the pause before reaching for the phone—the moment when we simply notice that life has been given to us again.

The Jerusalem Talmud represents a more reflective gratitude, one that comes only after we have "settled" into our lives and considered them carefully. We think about the people who have stood beside us, the opportunities that opened unexpected doors, the difficulties that helped us grow and the many circumstances we could never have arranged on our own.

Each approach contributes something important. Spontaneous gratitude has emotional force, but it can remain vague. Reflective gratitude is specific and grounded, but it may lack the freshness of that first response.

The richest form of gratitude combines them. We begin with wonder and then give that wonder depth. One opens the heart; the other changes how we see our lives. Together they transform gratitude from a passing feeling into a thoughtful and enduring way of living and meeting the world.

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