

# PARADIGMS OF PARTING: STORIES OF THE HASIDIC MASTERS

Rabbi Richard Hirsh

## INSIGHT SPARK

### The Language of Death

For *tzaddikim*, we don't [use the term] "death" at all, [we only speak of] "a departure" from this lowly world and a rising up to the world-to-come. The soul departs from the body, the spirit from the material.

—Benjamin Mintz, introduction to *The Book of Departure*

The two key words for "death" in these texts are *histalkut* and *petirah* (as a verb, this word commonly appears as *niftar*). Both words can be translated either as "departure" or as "death"—the final departure—and by itself *petirah* has a wider range of meanings, including "to take leave," "to release," and "to dismiss." But since the introduction to *The Book of Departure* tells us that "for *tzaddikim*, we don't [use the term] 'death' at all," we have here heeded the author's warning and have tried not to use the English word "death" in translating either word. Rather, we have used "departure" for the word *histalkut* and "release" for the more passive verb form of the word *petirah*. There are specific instances where we translated *petirah* as "death," particularly when the text is specifically referring to death of the body in contrast to the soul.

It is worth noting the subtle differences between the "directionality" with which the words *histalkut* and *petirah* are used in the literature—evoking vertical and horizontal relationships. The Rabbis have a strong sense of God's place being "up"—in the heavens, or *bashamayim*—and of our earthly life as being "below," and so the preferred use of the Aramaic root *samech-lamed-kuf*, meaning "to ascend," when one speaks of the departure of the Rabbis.

The verb *niftar*, on the other hand, deriving from the verb *pei-tetresh*, means "to break through" or "to open," as in "opening a womb," *petter rechem* in Hebrew, a woman's first birthed son. In its noun form

it can mean an "exemption" (as in legal writings) or a "release," thus, a forward movement, or even death itself—a release from life.

Each of us may think of death in our own way: as an active or a passive process, as a moving "up" or a moving "out," as a death of the body separate from the ongoing life of the soul, or as absolute nothingness. However, it is not *our* concepts of death that are critical in bringing comfort to the dying, but our understanding of the way in which the dying person understands death and afterlife.

## R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha

R. Simcha Bunim (Bonhart) of Przysucha (Poland) (1765–1827) was one of the main leaders of Hasidic Judaism in Poland. He became a Hasid of the Seer of Lublin with R. Yaakov Yitzchak Rabinowicz (HaYehudi haKadosh). After the death of Rabinowicz, most of the Hasidim followed R. Simcha Bunim as their rebbe. Among his followers were the Kotzker Rebbe (see "R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk"), R. Yitzchak Meir Alter of Ger, and R. Mordecai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, among others.


When R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha was approaching his time to pass on from the world, his wife stood over him crying. He said to her, "Silly, why are you crying? All the days of my life were only so that I could teach myself to die, and all of the Torah is that path to this. Now, as I approach this time, is it now the time to cry?"<sup>1</sup>

He was released on the twelfth of Elul, 5587 (September 4, 1827).

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## R. Elimelech of Lizhensk

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**E**limelech Weisblum of Lizhensk, Poland (1717–1786), was one of the great founding rebbes of the Hasidic movement. He was part of the inner circle of DovBaer of Mezritch, the second leader of the Hasidic movement, becoming one of the third-generation leadership after the death of R. DovBaer of Mezritch. He was particularly influential in his articulation of the figure of the *tzaddik* and is the author of *Noam Elimelech*, a book of commentaries on the Torah in which the role of a *tzaddik* is set out and explained, while the doctrine of Hasidism is explained in greater detail. The book was the subject of an intense investigation by the *mitnagdim*, the opponents of Hasidism.

When he was approaching his time to depart from this world, R. Elimelech of Lizhensk placed his hands on the heads of his students, and to four of them to whom he was closest he distributed **aspects of his soul**.

To the Seer of Lublin he gave the light of his eyes; to the Maggid of Koznitz, the strength in his heart; to R. Mendel of Prostik, the soul that was in his brain; and to the Rav of Apt, the strength that was in his mouth.

He was released on the twenty-first of Adar, 5546 (February 19, 1786).



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eds. Joel H. Barron & Sara Paasche-Orlow

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## R. Shmuelke of Sasov

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**W**e know little about R. Shmuelke of Sasov (d. 1858), only that he was a son of R. Moshe Leib Erblich of Sasov (1745–1807), the founder of the Sasov Hasidic dynasty. Moshe Leib was a disciple of Rabbi DovBaer of Mezritch, the disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism.

R. Shmuelke, son of R. Moshe Leib of Sasov—his departure was a wondrous joining with God—with unfathomable ecstasy. Some hours before his departure, **he got stronger** and sat up on his bed and instructed them to give him his Shabbat clothes. He put them on and went from his bed by himself like a healthy man and sat in his chair by the table. He instructed all the men of his community to come and then instructed his assistant to sing **Psalm 139** for him, which concludes, "And see if a vexing way be within me, and guide me in ways everlasting."

And afterward he began to sing by himself in a voice hewing flames of fire the liturgical poem *Ha-aderet v'ha-Emunah*.<sup>1</sup> And all the people responded to him verse after verse. And when he finished he fainted and they had to put him back in bed. And immediately he began to die, and the *shamashim*<sup>2</sup> told the *kohanim* to go out,<sup>3</sup> and suddenly he woke up and said, "They don't need to go, and when they need to, I will tell them."

And so it was. And he left and passed from the world of the living.


He was released in 5618 (1858).



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## R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

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**B**etter known as the Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859), R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was a student of R. Simcha Bunim of Przysucha and upon R. Simcha's death attracted many of his followers. After 1839 he lived in seclusion for the last twenty years of his life.<sup>1</sup> He continues to be well known for his practical philosophies and witty sayings. The Kotzker Rebbe is viewed as the spiritual forebear of the Ger dynasty in Poland and the teachings of its founder, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, grew out of his teachings (see "R. Yitzchak Meir, Master of the *Chidushei haRim*").

R. Menachem Mendel, the aged rabbi from Kotzk, at the time that he became ill with the sickness that killed him, he **kicked out** all the people who had been with him and **instructed them not to bring a doctor**. They paid no attention to his words and brought a doctor. But he didn't respond to him and refused to take medicine.

Several days before his departure, he **completely stopped talking** and did not want to answer any questions, and they did not hear from his mouth even a simple statement. And so, his spirit ascended on high.


He was released on the twenty-third of Shevat, 5619 (January 28, 1859).

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## R. Naftali of Ropshitz

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**R.** Naftali (Tzvi Horowitz) of Ropshitz (1760–1827) was born on the day that the Ba'al Shem Tov died; because of this, the Hasidim of Ropshitz used to say that it was from the holy sparks that emanated from the soul of the Ba'al Shem Tov that R. Naftali rose to prominence. He became attracted to the Hasidic movement and traveled to the court of R. Elimelech of Lizhensk, becoming the first Ropshitzer Rebbe. He succeeded his father as the rabbi of Linsk and was the rabbi of Strizhov as well.<sup>1</sup>

Before the departure of R. Naftali of Ropshitz, he suddenly stopped speaking. And this caused great anguish to the members of his household and with those close to him, because they didn't know what had happened to him. And when he needed something specific, they weren't able to serve him, for they didn't know what he wanted—because he said nothing.

So his son, R. Avraham Chaim, came to him, and said to him, "My dear father, the way I see it you can speak, it's just that you don't want to. **At least tell me the reason for this.**"

He opened his holy mouth and responded, "My son, from the day that I achieved understanding, I said nothing small or great without unification,<sup>2</sup> and now that my mind is weakened, I said **it is better for me not to speak than to speak without unifications.**"

He was released on the eleventh of Iyar, 5587 (May 8, 1827).

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# The Ba'al Shem Tov



**R.** Israel ben Eliezer (1698–1760) is generally acknowledged as the central figure of Hasidic Judaism. He is referred to as the Ba'al Shem Tov, the "Master of the Good Name," the explanation of which is given by Martin Buber as "one who lives with and for his fellow-men on the foundation of his relationship with the Divine" (Buber, 17). The little biographical information we have about the Ba'al Shem Tov (he is also referred to as the Besht, an acronym for *Ba'al Shem Tov*) is so interwoven with stories of his life and of miracles he is alleged to have performed that myth has blended with history.

When he became sick before his "departure," the Ba'al Shem Tov did not lie down on a bed, rather he had become frail and his voice was stricken, and he was sitting by himself in his meditation room.

**On leil Shavuot**, the final night of his life, **his chosen people were gathered close to him** and he taught about the giving of the Torah.<sup>1</sup> In the morning he sent for them that all of them should gather, and he gave them instructions on how to care for him after his departure.<sup>2</sup>

Afterward he instructed them to give him the prayer book, and he said, **"I will speak a bit more with Hashem**, may He be blessed."<sup>3</sup>

Later, they heard him saying, "I concede those two hours to you. Do not bother me." And they asked him with whom he was speaking, and he said to them, "Don't you see the **Angel of Death** that was always fleeing from me?"<sup>4</sup> And now that he has been given permission over me, his wings are spread and it is a great joy for him."

After all the people of the city had entered [his room] to greet him on the holiday, he [the Ba'al Shem Tov] recited words of Torah.

Afterward, at the time of the meal, he instructed his attendant to put honey on a big saucer, but he brought it on a small one. And he said, "One has no authority on the day of death,"<sup>5</sup> even the *gab-bai* [the person who coordinates the synagogue services] doesn't obey me."

Afterward he said, "Until now I have acted with loving-kindness toward you; now it is time for you to reciprocate."<sup>6</sup>

And he offered them a sign, that when he would be released [i.e., when he would die], the two clocks of the house would stop.<sup>7</sup>

He washed his hands and the big clock stopped and the people turned it around **so that it could not be seen**, and he said to them, "I am not worried about myself, because I know clearly, that I will leave through this door and immediately enter through another door."<sup>8</sup>

And he sat up on his bed and instructed them to stand around him, and **he spoke words of Torah to them**: about the pillar<sup>9</sup> through which one ascends from the Garden of Eden below to the Garden of Eden above, and thus between each and every world how this symbolism manifests in holy space, time, and people,<sup>10</sup> and in the way in which it is realized in worship. And he instructed them to recite *Vih Noam*,<sup>11</sup> and he lay down and sat up a few times and practiced *kavanot*<sup>12</sup> until they did not hear him articulating words any longer.<sup>13</sup>

And he instructed them to **cover him with a sheet** and **he began to shake and to tremble** as when [davening] the *Shem-oneh Esrei*, and afterward he rested a little bit. And they saw that the small clock had stopped. And they waited a while, and they saw that he had departed.

He was released on Shavuot (sixth of Sivan) 5520 (May 16, 1760).

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## R. Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov

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R. Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov (ca. 1721–1782) was a prodigy who was introduced to the Ba'al Shem Tov at a very young age. Zlotshov is the name of a Hasidic dynasty founded by R. Yechiel Michel and is the Yiddish name of Zolochiv, a town in present-day Ukraine.

Two years before his departure R. Yechiel Michel of Zlotshov was already **completely separated from this world**, and it was necessary to watch over him so that his soul would not leave from its great cleaving with the Creator.<sup>1</sup>

His habit was to pace back and forth in his room until his face was burning like a torch of fire, and then it was necessary to watch him very closely. And it was also his habit to eat **the third meal**<sup>2</sup> in his room with one of his sons, and afterward he would go to the house of study to recite Torah and songs and praises.

And on this day of Shabbat—a day of “the fierce and the impetuous,”<sup>3</sup> on which the Ark of God was taken,<sup>4</sup> at the time of divine

yearning<sup>5</sup>—no one was there with him in the room. And he was running back and forth shouting, “Through this [divine] will Moses departed. Through this [divine] will Moses departed.”<sup>6</sup>

His daughter heard, and she sought out her brother R. Isaac of Radvoyel. He (the brother) ran to his (R. Yechiel's) room, he grabbed him and **shook him to extract him from his cleaving** [to God], but, alas, he fell upon his shoulder, calling out *Shema Yisrael*, and his soul departed at *echad*.<sup>7</sup>

He was released on the third of Nisan, 5542 (March 18, 1782).



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## R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Apter

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Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt (1748–1825), popularly known as the Apter Rebbe or Apter Rav, was born in Żmigród, Poland, and died in Mezhbizh, Russian Empire (now Ukraine). He was the direct antecedent of the great twentieth-century philosopher R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), father of the contemporary scholar Susannah Heschel (b. 1956).

Before the departure of R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Elder of Apt—our master, our teacher, and our rabbi—he shouted bitterly about our exile and why the Messiah was delayed.

And he cried and said, “The Rav from Berditchev<sup>1</sup> said before his departure that when he got there he wouldn't rest, he wouldn't be quiet, and he wouldn't let any of **the holy ones** rest until the Messiah came, but after that they entertained him in the courtyards and the high spiritual rungs until he forgot about it. But I,” concluded the Apter Rebbe, “I will not forget....”<sup>2</sup>

Afterward he said, “*Ribbono shel Olam*, I know that my merit is not such that You would let me enter the Garden of Eden among the righteous. You might want to put me in **Gehinnom**<sup>3</sup> among the wicked; however, You, *Ribbono shel Olam*, You know that I hated those who went against Your will, so how can I be there among them? Therefore I ask that You send out all the wicked of Israel from *Gehinnom* so that You can put me there.”<sup>4</sup>

He was released on the fifth of Nisan, 5585 (March 24, 1825).



## After Many Years

עָכָשׁ אַחֵר הִרְבֵּה שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים אֲנִי מֵתְחִיל לִרְאוֹת  
שֶׁלֹא מִרְדָּתִי אֶלָּא מַעֲט וְאֲנִי מְקַיֵּם אֶת כָּל הַחֻקִּים וְכָל הַמִּצְוֹת.  
אֲנִי מְקַיֵּם אֶת חֹק הַכֶּבֶד, הוּא חֹק מְשִׁיכֵת הָאֲדָמָה,  
בְּכָל גּוּפִי וּבְכָל מְאֹדִי וּבְכָל אֶהְבֵּתִי.  
אֲנִי מְקַיֵּם חֹק שְׂוִי מִשְׁקָל וְחֹק שְׂמוֹר הַחֲמָרִים,  
גּוּפִי וְגּוּפִי נִפְשִׁי וְנִפְשִׁי וְגּוּפִי וְנִפְשִׁי.  
אֲנִי מְקַיֵּם אֶת פֶּחַד הַרִיקָנוּת בְּכֹאֲבִי וּבְשִׂמְחָתִי  
אֲנִי מְקַיֵּם חֹק הַכָּלִים הַשְּׁלִיבִים, עֶבֶר וְעֵתִיד מִתְזָרִים  
אֵלַי. אֲנִי קֵם וְאֲנִי מְקַיֵּם בְּחֹק הַמָּנוּף.  
אֲנִי מֵתְחִיל לְהִבִּין, כְּמוֹ בְּמִכּוֹנִית שֶׁהִיא כְּבֵר וְשָׁנָה  
אֵיךְ הִיא עוֹבְדָת, פְּעֻלַּת בְּכִיּוֹת וּבְלָמִים  
שָׂכָר וְעֵנֶשׁ, פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ, שְׂכוּחַ וְזָכוּר, בְּרָגִים וּקְפִיצִים  
מֵהָר וּלְאֵט וְחֻקֵּי הַהִסְטוֹרִיָּה.  
זֶה נְאוּם שָׁנוֹת חַיִּי אֶל יָמֵי חַיִּי  
זֶה נְאוּם נִפְשִׁי אֶל חֻלְקֵי גּוּפִי,  
זוֹ דִּרְשָׁה בְּבֵית כְּנִסְתִּי, זֶה הַסִּפֹּד  
לְמֵתִים, זוֹ קְבוּרָה וְזוֹ תְּחִיָּה. נְאוּם הַגִּבֹּר.

Now, after many years of life I begin to see  
That I only rebelled a little and that, in fact, I fulfill all the laws and all the commandments.  
I fulfill the law of gravity, the law of the earth's pull,  
with all my body, with all my might and with all my love.  
I fulfill the law of equilibrium and that of conservation of matter,  
my body and my body my soul and my soul and my body and my soul.  
I fulfill the abhorrence of a void with my pain and with my joy.  
I fulfill the law of water seeking its level, past and future are rebalanced  
in me. I rise and I raise by the law of the lever.  
I begin to understand, as with a car that is already old  
how it works, working of pistons and brakes,  
reward and punishment, be fruitful and multiply, forget and remember, screws and springs  
quick and slow, and the laws of history.  
This is the declaration of my years to my days,  
the declaration of my soul to the parts of my body.  
This is a sermon for the synagogue, a eulogy  
for the dead, this is burial and this is resurrection. A farewell declaration.

Yehuda Amichai  
Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager



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