

LESSON TEN
THE GREAT REVIVALIST MOVEMENT: CHASIDISM, PART ONE
THE BA'AL SHEM TOV AND HIS TEACHINGS

TEXT ONE --- Keter Shem Tov, #424

I heard a certain chasid tell what happened when Rabbi Dov Ber of blessed memory heard of the fame of the holy rabbi, the Ba'al Shem Tov, how all the people flock to him and how he achieves awesome and tremendous things by the power of his prayers. Now Rabbi Dov Ber was a most acute scholar, thoroughly familiar with the whole of the Talmud and all the Codes, and he possessed ten measures of wisdom in the Kabbalah. Astonished at the reports he had heard concerning the high rank of the Ba'al Shem Tov, he decided he would journey to meet him in order to put him to the test. Since Rabbi Dov Ber was very industrious in his studies, it came about, after two or three days of his journey, during which time he was unable to concentrate on his studies with the same devotion as in his own home, that he was sorry for having decided to go.

When he eventually arrived to the Ba'al Shem Tov, he thought he would hear some words of Torah from him, but instead the Ba'al Shem Tov told him a tale of how he had undertaken a journey of many days during which he had no bread to give to his Gentile coach driver and how a poor Gentile came along with a sack of loaves so he was able to buy bread with which to feed his driver. He told him other tales of this sort. When he came the next day, the Ba'al Shem Tov told him of how on that journey he had no fodder to give to his horses, etc. Now all these tales he related contained great and marvelous wisdom if one could only understand it, but since Rabbi Dov Ber failed to appreciate this, he returned to his inn, saying to his servant: "I wish to return home right away, but since it is so dark we shall stay on here until the moon shines brightly and then we shall be on our way."

At midnight, just as Rabbi Dov Ber was getting ready to depart, the Ba'al Shem Tov sent his servant to summon him and he heeded the summons. The Ba'al Shem Tov asked him: "Are you a scholar?" He answered in the affirmative. "So I have heard, that you are a scholar. And do you know the wisdom of the Kabbalah?" "Yes, I do," replied Rabbi Dov Ber. The Ba'al Shem Tov then instructed his servant to bring a copy of the (Lurianic) book Etz Chayim and the Ba'al Shem Tov showed Rabbi Dov Ber a passage in this book. Rabbi Dov Ber looked at the passage and then expounded it to the Ba'al Shem Tov. But the Ba'al Shem Tov said: "You have

not the slightest degree of understanding of this passage.” So he looked at it again, and then said to the Ba’al Shem Tov, “The correct interpretation of this passage is as I have stated it, but if your honor knows of another meaning, let him tell it to me and I shall judge which is more correct.”

Then the Ba’al Shem Tov said: “Arise!” and he rose to his feet. Now this particular text contained many names of angels, and no sooner did the Ba’al Shem Tov begin to recite the text than the whole house was filled with light, and fire burned around it, and they actually saw the angels mentioned in the text. He said to Rabbi Dov Ber: “It is true that the meaning of the text was as you stated it to be, but your study of it had no soul in it.” On the spot Rabbi Dov Ber ordered his servant to journey home while he himself remained in the home of the Ba’al Shem Tov, from whom he learned great and deep topics of wisdom. The chasid heard all this from the holy mouth of Rabbi Dov Ber, may his memory be for a blessing.

TEXT TWO --- Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, Ben Porat Yosef 18c; Toldot Ya’akov Yosef 17b

“There were ten generations from Adam to Noah, to indicate how forgiving God was.” (M. **Avot** 5:2) All the ten generations caused Him anger, but they were not punished until the generation of Noah. God would still have forgiven them, but Noah stirred up wrath. *He brought the flood upon them.*

(God told Noah:) You did not go out to save your people, to purify them and teach them how to serve their Creator, but only locked yourself in your house (which Abraham did not do); therefore, you shall be locked up in the ark, where you will suffer. You were not a shepherd to your people, sometimes going without sleep in an effort to reach them, to help them and raise them; therefore you shall now be a shepherd to the animals and, in the work of caring for them, sleep shall vanish from your eyes...

TEXT THREE --- Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye, **Tzafnat Paneiach** 48d

The **tzaddikim** are the first two letters of the Divine Name. The common people are the last two letters...

TEXT FOUR --- Pinchas of Koretz (d. 1790), Likkutei Amarim 14d

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (Deut. 6:4).

The term **echad** (“one”) in the reading of the **Sh’ma**, which proclaims the unity of God, causes us to say there is nothing in the whole world other than the Holy One, Who fills the whole earth with His glory. The principal intention (behind recitation of **Sh’ma**) is that we should consider ourselves null and void, and understand there is nothing to us but the soul within us, which is part of God above. Hence there is nothing in the whole world except the One God.

Our principal thought when reciting the word **echad** should be that the whole earth is full of His glory and there is nothing devoid of Him.

TEXT FIVE --- Zev Wolf of Zhitomer (d. 1797), Or ha-Meir, Pekudei, p. 85

Do not see anything in the world as it appears, but raise your eyes to the heights, meaning the aspect of your contemplation and study, to see only the divinity clothed in all things of the world. For there is nothing besides Him, and there must be hidden holy sparks at all levels of being, granting them vitality.

TEXT SIX --- Tzava’at ha-Rivash, #2

I have set (shiviti) God always before me. (Ps. 16:8) **Shiviti** is associated with the concept of **hishtavut**, equanimity in all things, so that whatever should happen to a person, he would consider it just the same, regardless of whether people praise him or insult him. Thus with regard to food, whether it be delicacies or anything else, everything should be the same in his eyes, since the **yetzer ha-ra** (evil impulse) will be entirely removed from within him. And he will say about anything that happens: “Was it not sent from the Blessed God? In His eyes, it is fitting.” And all of his intentions will be for the sake of heaven. But from your own perspective, (whatever happens will make) no difference. And this is a very high level.

TEXT SEVEN --- Keter Shem Tov, #169, p. 42.

It is a great achievement to keep in mind always that you are close to the Creator and that He surrounds you on all sides, as it is written, *Happy is the man who, when he thinks not of God, it is to him as a sin.* (Ps. 32:2) This means that the instant you stop thinking about your **devekut** to God, you incur a sin.

Our **devekut** to God should be such that we need not make a special mental effort each time to be aware of a feeling of nearness to Him. We should perceive the Creator intellectually as the Place of the world, and man as a microcosm. Thus we fulfill the verse, *I have set the Lord always before me* (Ps. 16:8)...

TEXT EIGHT --- Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, Maggid Devarav l'Ya'akov, p. 24, #12.

“The acts of the righteous (**tzaddikim**) are greater than the making of Heaven and earth.” (Talmud, **Ketubot** 5a) This means that the act of creation involved the emergence of something (**yesh**) out of nothing (**ayin**), whereas the **tzaddikim** involve turning something into nothing. For in whatever they do, even if it is something physical like eating, they raise up the holy sparks within that food, and so in all they do, they convert something into (the Divine) nothing.

TEXT NINE --- P'ri ha-Aretz, Ki Tissa, p. 13b

Devekut means that there should be nothing separating (one from God); then one can have **devekut**. The Ba'al Shem Tov provides an analogy: just as it is impossible to glue two pieces of silver except by scraping clean the two places where the glue is to adhere, so too, between God and the person there can be no “rust” or anything separating. This is the meaning of the verse: (*If you call out to understanding...*) *If you seek her out like silver* (Prov. 2:3-4).

TEXT TEN --- A tradition cited by the Seer of Lublin; noted by Buber, Tales of the Hasidim: Early Masters, p. 307

Whenever a new **chasid** came to him, he instantly took his soul out of him, cleansed it of all stain and rust, and put it back into him, restored to the state it had been in the hour he was born.