

# Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

## Introduction

Introductions to books are usually written after they are finished, when the author can see the completed work and decide exactly how to present it to the readers. Well, several weeks have passed since I finished this book, and I am still having difficulty deciding how to introduce the great and holy Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. What can I say about him that will present a true picture of who he was? I realize now that the reason I was having so much difficulty is that even after writing this book I still have no more than the vaguest conception of the man. All I can do by way of introduction is give some biographical information, describe the format and goals of this book and offer some general comments.

## A Holy Soul Enters the World

According to Chassidic tradition, the Baal Shem Tov was visibly excited on the day in 1740 that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was born. “I see that a holy child has just been born into his world,” he told his disciple Rabbi Dov Ber, the future Maggid of Mezrich. “Let us travel together to attend his *bris*. It is very far away, so we must get started immediately. We will go disguised as merchants traveling to a fair.”

They arrived the night before the *bris* and found that a crowd had gathered in the home of Rabbi Meir and Sarah Sosha for the reading of Krias Shema. Rabbi Meir welcomed them and offered them refreshments. Afterward, they prepared to go, but Rabbi Meir held them back. He sensed that there was something extraordinary about these two supposed merchants, and he invited them to stay for the *bris*.

“We have to leave early for the fair,” said the Baal Shem Tov.

“Please do me the honor of staying,” said Rabbi Meir. “I will reimburse you for whatever you could have earned at the fair.”

“We can stay,” said the Baal Shem Tov, “if one of us can be the *mohel* and other the *sandek*.”

“Agreed,” said Rabbi Meir. “I’ve already offered these honors to other people, but I will ask them to step aside for you.”

And so, the infant Levi Yitzchak was privileged to have the Baal Shem Tov as his *sandek* and the Maggid of Mezrich as his *mohel*. This was the first and last time that he would meet the Baal Shem Tov, who passed away when Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was only twenty years old. But he would become a close disciple of the Maggid of Mezrich for many years.

According to another Chassidic tradition, repeated in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, Satan complained to the Almighty that if the holy soul of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak were allowed to descend into the world it would mark the end of *bechirah*, free will. The level of holiness would rise so dramatically that people would instinctively turn away from evil, and Satan would become superfluous. The Almighty assured him that he need not worry. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was destined to have a difficult life. He would be distracted by his rabbinical duties and responsibilities in the cities he would serve and by opposition of the Misnagdim who would persecute and hound him because of his exuberantly passionate *avodah*.

During his formative years, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak learned with his father and was so exceedingly brilliant that he became known far and wide as phenomenal *illui*, a genius in Torah. After his marriage to Perel, the

daughter of the wealthy Reb Yisrael Peretz of Levertov, he lived in the home of his father-in-law for a number of years. Levertov was an important Torah center, but Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was not satisfied there. Drawn to the world of the Chassidim, he sought out the famous *gaon* Rabbi Schmelke Horowitz, who was the rabbi of Ryczywohl at that time, and became his *talmid*. Rabbi Schmelke was, and under his tutelage, With Rabbi Schmelke's encouragement, he also became a disciple and Chassid of the Maggid of Mezrich, the successor to the Baal Shem Tov as leader of the Chassidic movement.

When Rabbi Schmelke was called to be the rabbi of Nikolsburg, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak succeeded him as the rabbi of Ryczywohl at the age of twenty-one. Even at that young age, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was acknowledged as a brilliant *talmid chacham*, a budding young *gaon*, but he was also a firebrand Chassid in a city of many Misnagdim, who persecuted him relentlessly until he was forced to leave. The prominent city of Pinsk immediately invited him to become *Rabbi*, but here too, his demonstrative Chassidic deportment aroused intense antagonism among the Misnagdim. After Pinsk, he became *Rabbi* in Zhelichov, where he encountered similar problems.

Finally, in 1785, at the age of forty-five, he became rabbi of Berditchev, in which capacity he remained until he passed away some twenty-five years later on 25 Tishrei 1809. In Berditchev, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak also encountered opposition but this time it came from the adherents of the Enlightenment, who had abandoned traditional Jewish life and Torah observance. They loved to ridicule Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's fiery devotions, but they also held him in grudging respect.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had an enormous impact on the Jewish world in general and the Chassidic world in particular. He was famous for his knowledge and brilliance and widely acknowledged as one of the leading *geonim* of his generation. His monumental work on Chassidic thought, *Kedushas Levi*, is one of the most widely studied and revered *sefarim* of the

early Chassidic masters. But perhaps most of all, he is known and remembered for his love for the Jewish People, always finding a way to represent them to the Almighty in a good light. A large number of the legendary stories about him, some of which appear in this book, reflect his passionate devotion and advocacy. The Chozeh of Lublin often said, “I thank the Almighty every day for sending down the holy soul of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.”

### **The Concept of Advocacy**

What exactly is the concept this kind of advocacy for the Jewish people? It is clearly quite distinct from asking the Almighty to have mercy and forgive their sins, for although he definitely prayed for forgiveness, his celebrated advocacy was to depict the people exactly as they were in a positive light. In one story after another, he would come up with an idea and then turn to the Almighty and say, “Look at what a wonderful and devoted people you have.”

In a story I once heard, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak sent an urgent summons to the people of Berditchev to assemble in the central square in the middle of the night on Pesach. He ordered them to produce certain goods the possession of which the government had banned.

“We have none,” they cried out. “If we had, we would be risking the death penalty.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak adamantly insisted, and little by little, the contraband trickled into the square until there was a sizable pile of it. Then he demanded they produce a different kind of contraband that was even more strictly forbidden. The people again protested, but in the face of his adamant insistence, they again relented, and a fresh pile of contraband arose beside the first.

“And now,” he declared, “bring out all the *chametz* you have hidden away in your homes.”

This time, however, all his insistence and exhortations were to no effect.

Not a speck of chametz was produced.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak raised his hands heavenward and cried out, “Master of the Universe, look at the kind of people you have. The government has ruled that whoever has such contraband will be severely punished and perhaps even put to death. The government has police and armies to enforce its laws, and yet, piles of contraband emerge when the people are pressed. You have no police and no armies, but when You decree that no *chametz* may be found in our homes, not a single speck can be found. Who is more devoted and loyal to You than the Jewish people?”

What was Rabbi Levi Yitzchak trying to accomplish with this and all his other advocacies? The people were not being judged. He was not asking for forgiveness. What was his purpose?

It appears to me that he may have been teaching the people of Berdichev, and the rest of the Jewish people by extension, a very important lesson. Some people tend to view *mitzvos* with the eyes of bookkeepers. They think that for every *mitzvah* they perform they score a certain number of merit points and for every *aveirah* they commit they get a certain number of demerit points. Then the two columns are toted up, and if the merit points outweigh the demerit points, they’ve won the game. Someone once said to me that on Erev Yom Kippur he sucks on hard candies all day. Why? Because Chazal said that eating on Erev Yom Kippur is a *mitzvah* comparable to fasting on Yom Kippur. Therefore, he wanted to be in the act of eating all day so that he could keep those *mitzvah* points coming in a steady flow. It is like a pinball machine, so to speak, that keeps ringing all day. Ching, ching, ching.

The Rambam writes (Teshuvah 3:1-3), “Every person has merits and sins. One whose merits outnumber his sins is a *tzaddik*. One whose sins outnumber his merits is a *rasha*. Half and half is a *beinoni*, an average person ... On the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, the *tzaddik* is inscribed for life and the *rasha* is inscribed for death. The *beinoni* is held in abeyance until Yom Kippur. If he repents he is inscribed for life, and if not, he is inscribed

for death.” Every person encounters thousands upon thousands upon thousands of opportunities for merit or sin in the course of a year. How then is it possible that on Rosh Hashanah the *beinoni*’s score will be exactly half and half? The odds against it are astronomical. And if it does occur, is this the only person who is judged on Yom Kippur, the one whose score happened to be exactly even?

Clearly, this is not how the system works. The Mishnah states (Avos 2:1), “Be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as with a major one, for you cannot know the reward for the *mitzvos*.” We do not know how merits and sins are measured. The Gemara also states (Menachos 110a), “It does not matter of a person does much or little as long as his heart is directed toward heaven.” The Rambam (ibid.) writes that only the Almighty knows how to make these determinations.

It seems to me, therefore, that there is no esoteric point system. Rather, the Almighty takes the measure of the entire person. Does he do *mitzvos* with devotion and enthusiasm? Does he sin with disregard for the Torah? What kind of a person is he? A person dominated by merit is a *tzaddik*. A person dominated by his evil inclination is a *rasha*. And somewhere in the middle ground there are a multitude of half-and-half people, the *beinonim*. It all boils down to a question of attitude, of effort, of a “heart directed toward Heaven.”

While it is true that it is acceptable to do *mitzvos shelo lishmah*, in order to receive reward, it is comparable to a servant who serves his master in order to receive reward. The servant works hard to please the master and fulfill his will, knowing that in the end he will be rewarded, but he does not consider each little act as bringing him another little bit of reward; he does not calculate how much he will get for the glass of tea and how much for making the bed. Rather, he sees his service as a unified mission; if he is faithful and devoted he will be rewarded. It is the same with *mitzvos*. Even if a person is doing them for reward, they should be done to please the Almighty, not to elicit pings on a pinball machine with the connection to the

Almighty being incidental. It is the totality of the service that the Almighty desires and evaluates.

In this light, perhaps we can suggest that the advocacy of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was intended to direct the hearts of the people toward Heaven. The people of his time suffered oppression, persecution and grinding poverty. Under those circumstances, it was often difficult to learn Torah and fulfill its *mitzvos* in the best manner possible, and the people must have been discouraged and disheartened. They must have seen themselves as poor excuses for the chosen people. They must have felt distant from the Almighty.

But when Rabbi Levi Yitzchak stood up in *shul* in front of the people, when he opened the *aron kodesh* and shouted their praises to the Almighty, they were inspired and uplifted. They realized that, in spite of all their difficulties, they were a special people and that their devotion to the Almighty did indeed make them elevated and exalted. After hearing the advocacy of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak on their behalf, their hearts were indeed directed toward Heaven.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's message has come down to us through the generations. The people of his time may have had one set of challenges, but the people of our times have a different set of challenges. In all generations, people experience a sense that their observance does not measure up to what it should be, and this leads to a risk of alienation from the Almighty. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's exuberant advocacy echoes down to us and reassures us that we are a holy people, a special people, that even as we strive and struggle to improve and progress we must never forget that we are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, that we are the people who stood before Mount Sinai and said, "*Naaseh venishma*. We will do and we will hear." Yes, the memory of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak directs our hearts toward Heaven.

### **Bridging Two Worlds**

The purpose of this book is to convey a sense of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's outlook and spirit through a selection of stories about him as well as some of his own thoughts drawn from his *Kedushas Levi*, arranged according to the weekly *parashah*. I make no claims for the reliability of each and every story as historical fact; some of them come from more reliable sources than others. But in total, they deliver an authentic sense of this holy *tzaddik* and his love for the Almighty and His people. In each *parashah*, I have presented one story and a piece from *Kedushas Levi* that relates to that story, if sometimes only tangentially.

Although *Kedushas Levi* is replete with esoteric thoughts that deal with the deepest *kabalistic* secrets of the universe, I have elected to present thoughts that would be more accessible to a general readership. Nonetheless, I feel that, at least in the Introduction, I should present some of the more esoteric thoughts, especially as they provide insight into Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's relationship with the Almighty and the world around him.

In Parashas Bereishis, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak offers important insights into the very essence of existence. It is well-known that the world was created *yesh* from *ayin*, something from nothing. But that does not mean that these are two independent states, one following the other, and that now that we are in a state of *yesh* we are no longer in a state of *ayin*. That is not accurate.

In actuality, says Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the world, before and after creation, is always in a state of *ayin*, the true state of all being. After creation, however, there is also the appearance of the artificial state of *yesh*. The state of *ayin* is not nothingness, an empty void. It is the boundless existence of the Almighty, the Ein Sof, the Infinite. Nothing can exist independently of Him, because He is infinite in time and space and every aspect of existence. As the Torah states (Devarim 4:35), "*Ein od milvado*. There is nothing except for Him." The entire universe and everything in it are no more than manifestations of His essence. The Almighty, however,



gave the physical world the appearance of an independent existence governed by laws of nature. This is called the state of *yes**h*.

Therefore, when we observe the existence of physical entities, such as the sun, the moon and the stars, it appears to us that they are there because they were there yesterday and that the laws of nature brought them from then to now. But this holds true only in the illusory world of *yes**h*. In reality, the world is in a state of *ayin*. It only exists as a manifestation of the Ein Sof, the Infinite, and its having existed yesterday is not a cause for its existence today. That is the deeper meaning of the saying of our Sages that the Almighty “renews the world every day.” It does not mean that He creates a new *yes**h* every day and every instant. The state of *yes**h* was created during the first six days, and it continues to exist by the laws of nature. But that is not the true state of being. It is only the way the Almighty wants the world to appear to us. The true state of being is *ayin*, the absence of any existence independent of the Infinite. The true state of being is that the physical world is a manifestation of the Almighty, and its having been a manifestation of the Infinite in the past has nothing to do with its being a manifestation of the Infinite at any given moment; it has nothing to do with the laws of nature. In that sense, the physical world is “renewed every day.”

Accordingly, a person attuned to the state of *ayin* is less bound by the laws of nature than a person completely absorbed in the state of *yes**h*. He is also less concerned with his own honor and desires, because he knows that these only exist in the state of *yes**h*, which is not the true state of reality.

This conception of *ayin* and *yes**h* resolves a seeming contradiction in the formulations of our Sages. When our Sages formulated the words “*yotzer ohr*, He creates light,” they used the present tense, but when they formulated the words “*asher yatzar es haadam bechachmah*, who created the person with wisdom,” they used the past tense. Why the difference?

It is because when we speak about “creation with wisdom” we refer to the wondrous wisdom of the laws of nature, which operate in the state of *yes**h*. In the state of *yes**h*, the existence of the present is an outgrowth of the

existence of the past driven by nature. Therefore, we speak of the creation as being in the past.

But when we do not mention wisdom in connection to creation, we are talking about the true state of being, the state of *ayin*, of *ein od milvado*, of nothing existing except for Him. Therefore, the past has no relevance to the present. Light exists today, because it is a manifestation of the Almighty today. It has nothing to do with there having been light yesterday. It has nothing to do with nature. And so, we use the present tense.

How do we bridge these two states of being, *ayin* and *yesh*? How do we live both in the world of *ayin* and in the world of *yesh*? It is through Torah and *mitzvos*. When we learn Torah and do *mitzvos*, we bring divine emanations into this world and sustain it, and we also fulfill the Almighty's will and give Him *nachas ruach*, pleasure. The effect of *mitzvos* in this world is revealed to us; it is manifest in the state of *yesh*. But the pleasure it gives the Almighty, so to speak, is totally concealed from us. We cannot even begin to understand the concept of the Almighty wanting or enjoying, since want and pleasure as we understand them are indicative of a void to be filled. The words wanting and pleasure when referring to the Almighty are just words we use to refer to concepts that are not understandable to the human mind. This completely concealed aspect of *mitzvos*, therefore, functions in the state of *ayin*. Therefore, when we do *mitzvos* we are functioning both in the state of *yesh* and in the state of *ayin*.

The word *mitzvah* itself alludes to this idea. The first two letters of the word, *mem* and *tzadi*, can be converted by the *aht-bash* system to the letters *yod* and *heh*. These letters, concealed in the first two letters of *mitzvah*, constitute the Name that relates to the concealed state of *ayin*. The last two letters, *vav* and *heh*, constitute the Name that relates to the state of *yesh* and are therefore unconcealed. The entire word together bridges both states.

These are the words of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, paraphrased rather than translated, and this was the guiding light of his life. Again and again throughout his *sefer*, he emphasizes that the work of a *tzaddik* is to connect

with the world of *ayin*, to subsume his own being into the Infinite, to have no interests and desires that are not extensions of the will of the Almighty. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did indeed live in the world of *ayin*, and in doing so, he was aflame with love and devotion and the sheer joy of serving the Almighty. And because he transcended the world of *yesh*, which is limited by the laws of nature, he himself became a bridge between the *yesh* and the *ayin* and was able to achieve knowledge and power unbound by the limitations of the world of *yesh*.

# Truth and Wisdom

**R**av Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev is most famous for being one of the greatest of the early Chassidic masters, an extraordinary *tzaddik* aflame with love for the Almighty and His people. But at the same time, he was also a tremendous *gaon* who served as the rabbi and head of the rabbinical court in the city for which he is known. He did not, however, take the post of rabbi of Berditchev until 1785, when he was forty-five years old. Before that, he was rabbi in several other cities, the first of which was Ryczywohl. The illustrious Rabbi Schmelke of Nikolsburg had been the rabbi of Ryczywohl before being invited to serve as rabbi of Nikolsburg. When he left, he was replaced by his brilliant *talmid*, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, who was only twenty-one years old.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak came to a talmid of Rabbi Schmelke because of a dream he had. After his marriage to his wife Perel, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lived in the home of his wealthy father-in-law Reb Yisrael Peretz in the city of Levertov. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did not feel that Levertov was the place for him. He yearned to study in the *yeshivah* of Rabbi Schmelke, but his father-in-law insisted that he stay in Levertov. At that time, Levertov was a bright star in the Torah galaxy. Among its illustrious *talmidei chachamim* were Rabbi Yosef Thumim, the author of *Pri Megadim*, and Reb Yissachar Ber of Zlotchov, the author of *Mevaser Tzedek* and *Bas Eini*. What better place could there be for a young Torah prodigy such as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak than Levertov?

As time went on, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's dissatisfaction manifested itself in his physical appearance.

"Why do you look so drawn?" his father-in-law asked him.

“Every night I dream,” he said, “that I must go study with Rabbi Schmelke.”

“Very well. If your heart is so set on it, then you must go.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak became one of the star *talmidim* that Rabbi Schmelke brought to the holy Rebbe Reb Ber, the Maggid of Mezrich and successor to the Baal Shem Tov as leader of the Chassidic movement. The others were Rabbi Yisrael, who later became the Maggid of Kozhnitz, and Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak, who later became known as the Chozeh of Lublin.

There was another young prodigy living in Ryczywohl at the Rabbi Levi Yitzchak became its *Rabbi*. His name was Rabbi Uziel Meisels, and he was the future author of *Kerem Shlomo*, *Tiferes Uziel* and *Eitz Hadaas Tov*. Recently married, he was living in the home of his wealthy father-in-law while he was learning Torah.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was a fiery Chassid of the Maggid of Mezrich and emulated his ways. When he prayed or made *berachos*, his body trembled uncontrollably, and he would cry out at the top of his lungs in an ecstasy of devotion. Rabbi Uziel was not accustomed to this kind of behavior. It offended his sensibilities, and he disapproved. Furthermore, being wealthy and learned, he felt no need to conceal his distaste for Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s behavior, even though Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was the rabbi of the city.

The first time Rabbi Uziel attended one of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s *derashos*, he sat quietly among the people with his hands folded in his lap, listening to the *Rabbi’s* words with intense concentration. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak began by posing a number of sharp and perplexing questions regarding a difficult *sugya*. Then he rigorously proved one point after another with numerous citations and seemingly impeccable logic, laying foundation upon foundation until he had built a stunning intellectual edifice and resolved all the questions and difficulties in one sweeping revelation of the true meaning of the *sugya*.

Those among the people who were able to follow the intricacies of

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's reasoning were awed by his insight and genius. Rabbi Uziel, however, was not so impressed. He pointed out an inconsistency in Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's reasoning, whereby the entire edifice collapsed. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak listened quietly. Then he nodded his head and walked away. Rabbi Uziel felt it was his duty to expose the *Rabbi's* flaws, and he was pleased that he had done so. In the course of the next few months, this scenario repeated itself several times. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak would say a dazzling *derashah*, and Rabbi Uziel would dismember it with a few surgical arguments and questions.

One time, Rabbi Uziel had occasion to travel to a distant town, and his father-in-law placed his carriage drawn by three fine horses and his coachman at his disposal. As he traveled along the road in plush comfort, he noticed a Jewish man with a bundle slung over his shoulder trudging along the roadside. Rabbi Uziel ordered his coachman to stop the carriage.

"*Shalom Aleichem*," he called out to the traveler.

"*Aleichem shalom*," the man replied.

"Where are you going?" asked Rabbi Uziel. "Perhaps I can give you a lift. Why should you tire yourself out going on foot when you can ride in comfort with me?"

"I am going to Mezrich," said the man.

"Perfect. We will be passing that town, and it will be my pleasure to take you to your destination."

The man smiled. "Thank you so much. I will gladly take you up on your offer."

Rabbi Uziel helped the man into the carriage. Then he gave the signal to his coachman, and they continued on their way.

Rabbi extended his hand. "My name is Uziel Meisels. And what is yours?"

"I am Elimelech. You can call me Meilech."

"You look like a *talmid chacham*, Reb Meilech. I would love to hear some words of Torah from you."

Rabbi Meilech shook his head. “It is true that I try to learn a little bit, but I can see that you are the one who is the *talmid chacham*. And you are obviously wealthy. Torah and greatness in one place! No, Reb Uziel, it is you who should be saying words of Torah.”

“Well, perhaps later. By the way, Reb Meilech, where are you from?”

“I’m from Lizhensk.”

“Lizhensk? You are certainly a long way from home. And you’re going to Mezrich?”

“Yes.”

“Very interesting. Why are you going to Mezrich? What business do you have there?”

“That is where my *rebbe* is. I am going to learn Torah from him.”

“And who is your *rebbe*?”

Rabbi Meilech’s face lit up. “The Rebbe Reb Ber, the holy Maggid of Mezrich.”

Rabbi Uziel stroked his beard and knitted his brows. “You are not a young boy anymore, Reb Meilech, and I can see just by looking at you that you’re a real *talmid chacham* in your own right. Why then must you travel so far to learn Torah? Is he such a genius? Does he have what no one else possesses?”

“My *rebbe*’s greatness in Torah has no bounds. The entire world is open before him, and when he speaks, I catch glimpses of the ultimate truth of the universe.”

Rabbi Uziel was intrigued. “If he is indeed so great, I would like to meet him and see his greatness for myself. Do you think I could come with you to Mezrich? Would he meet me?”

“I’m sure he would,” said Rabbi Meilech.

When they reached Mezrich, Rabbi Uziel got off the carriage together with Rabbi Meilech. He instructed his coachmen to stable the horses and get him a room at the inn. Then he walked together with Rabbi Meilech to the house of the Maggid of Mezrich.

The attendant who opened the door solemnly shook their hands. He nodded familiarly to Rabbi Meilech and asked both of them to wait. It would be a few minutes before the Maggid could see them. Other than that, they did not speak. The attendant did not ask who Rabbi Uziel was. As they waited, Rabbi Uziel saw that Rabbi Meilech grew more excited by the minute, and he too felt his breath quicken with anticipation.

Finally, the door opened, and they were shown into the Maggid's presence. Rabbi Uziel took one look at the Maggid's face, alight with a spiritual glow such he had never seen before, and he shrank back.

"Now, whom should I greet first?" said the Maggid. "Should it be you, Meilech, because you are a *talmid chacham*? But our guest is also a *talmid chacham*, and a wealthy man besides. Perhaps I should greet him first." He closed his eyes and mulled over this question for a moment. Then he looked up. "*Shalom aleichem*, Meilech! *Shalom aleichem*, Rabbi Uziel!"

Rabbi Uziel was so flabbergasted that he took him a moment to gather his wits and respond. How could the Maggid, who had never laid eyes on him, know his name?

"*Aleichem shalom*," he finally managed to say.

"Where are you from, Rabbi Uziel?" said the Maggid.

"Ryczywohl."

"Ah, Ryczywohl. So, you know my *talmid* Rabbi Levi Yitzchak."

"Yes, I do."

"What do you say to his brilliance and vast knowledge? He is an amazing genius. Wouldn't you agree?"

Rabbi Uziel did not want to contradict the Maggid, but he felt compelled to answer honestly. He cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

"Actually," he said, "I am not very impressed with him."

The Maggid lifted his eyebrows. "And why would you say that?"

"Because on a number of occasions I've pointed out errors and inconsistencies in his *derashos*, and each time, he nodded his head and retracted."



“Indeed?” said the Maggid. “I would like to hear more about this. Do you happen to recall any of these *derashos* that you refuted?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good. Then tell me what he said and also the errors you pointed out.”

Rabbi Uziel had an extraordinary memory, and he was able to repeat several of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s *derashos* almost word for word. Then he posed the arguments by which he had forced Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to retract them.

“Very well,” said the Maggid when he was finished. “I want you to listen closely while I explain to you what Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said and meant, and you will see that there was no basis at all for the objections you raised.”

The Maggid patiently explained to him what Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had said, and as he spoke, and as the structure of the argument were reconstructed with great clarity, all the objections were shown to be baseless. Rabbi Uziel suddenly realized that this was exactly what Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had intended, that it was he who had misunderstood. He found it deeply disturbing that he should have missed the essential points of the *derashos* when the logic was so clear. And at the same time, he was overcome with amazement at the genius of the Maggid before whose eyes, it seemed, the entire Torah, the revealed and the hidden, lay open like a book.

“Rebbe, you are the light of Israel!” he cried out. “I am so grateful that I now see the truth in Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s words. It is so clear now that I cannot imagine how I did not see it before. But I don’t understand why he retracted. Why didn’t he just answer my questions?”

“He certainly could have done that,” said the Maggid. “But he does not care about his own honor, and he didn’t want to humiliate you.”

As soon as he left the room, Rabbi Uziel sent the carriage and coachman back with a message to his family that he would be staying in Mezrich for

an extended time. He had found the wellspring of Torah from which he would drink for the rest of his life.

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When the Almighty considered the enterprise of creation, the Midrash tells us, the divine aspect of Truth objected. So, what did the Almighty do? He took Truth and hurled it to the earth, as it is written (Tehillim 85:12), “Truth will sprout from the earth.”

What is this Midrash telling us? What was Truth’s objection and how did the Almighty’s action address the objection? What is the meaning of the Almighty hurling Truth to the earth?

The mission of a person in this world, explains Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, is to be a seeker of truth. He should try to discern the ultimate purpose of his existence and avoid being distracted from this quest by the demands of everyday life. He should try to distinguish what is true and meaningful in life from what is false and illusory.

The divine aspect of Truth objected to creation, because it was almost inevitable that humankind would be distracted by the needs and rewards of material existence and would thereby be deflected from the quest for truth. Instead of drawing closer to the Almighty, humankind would drift further and further away from Him.

The Almighty considered this a valid objection, and He responded by hurling Truth to the earth. In other words, He implanted the need for Truth in the selfsame material world that threatened to be a distraction. He made it that all relationships required truthfulness. A person would not be able to conduct a solid relationship with his spouse, his children, his friends or his business associates if he were known to be a liar; of course, they could still lie and conceal their duplicity, but that would prove a difficult task. Therefore, in order to function in society people would need to condition themselves to be truthful. Once they developed within themselves a healthy

respect for the truth, they could be truthful with themselves and embark on the quest for the ultimate truths in life.

## The Power of a Tzaddik

Right after Purim, the Chassidim who had spent the joyous day in Berditchev with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak began to disperse. Many had long distances to travel before they reached their homes, and as the roads were still muddied by the melting snow, an early start was important. Although they would be separated from their holy *rebbe*, they hoped the inspiration they had derived from Purim with him would linger on until the next time they could be with him. Those Chassidim, however, who stayed on in Berditchev for Pesach were elated that the *rebbe* would transport them straight from the exhilaration of Purim into the exaltation of his Seder table. The anticipation was almost too much to bear.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai of Pintchov yearned to stay in Berditchev with his beloved *rebbe*, but he knew that this year he could allow himself that singular spiritual pleasure. His wife was expecting, and his place was at home by her side. But getting home would not be a simple matter. With a sad sigh, he went to take leave of the *rebbe*.

“I’ve been here several weeks,” he said, “in the holy presence of holy *rebbe*, but I’m afraid I have to return home for Pesach. My wife is expecting, and I’m afraid I can’t spend even another Shabbos here. I must leave right away.”

“Of course,” said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak.

“But I have a problem,” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai. “I heard a rumor that the border I have to cross to get home was closed just recently. I’m hoping that it’s not true.”

“It is true,” said the *rebbe*.

“Then what shall I do?” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai, wringing

his hands. “If it’s really closed I’ll need an official pass to get through, and I don’t have one.”

“Don’t worry. Before you leave, come in here, and I’ll give you a pass.”

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai was puzzled by the *rebbe*’s response, but he had learned never to question him. With a confident heart and a buoyant step, he prepared to leave Berditchev.

The next day, he went to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to take his leave and receive the *rebbe*’s *berachah*.

“And now for your pass,” said the *rebbe*. He took a blank sheet of paper and dipped his quill into the inkpot on his table. Then he made a small dot on the paper and examined it. Satisfied, he folded the paper and handed it to Rabbi Avraham Mordechai.

“*Tzeis ’chem lechaim uleshalom,*” he said. “Go for life and in peace.”

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai put the paper into his pocket. He could not imagine how that paper with its single dot of ink would get him across the border, but he asked no questions.

Two days later, he reached the border crossing. With security tightened, a long line of travelers had formed near a small guardhouse that stood at the roadside. The royal colors fluttered from a flagpole, and armed soldiers stood on both sides of the road glowering at the travelers as a border guard examined their identification papers and took their passports.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai’s heart beat faster and faster as his turn approached. Finally, he stood face to face with the guard holding the pile of collected passports.

“Your name,” said the guard.

“Avraham Horowitz.”

“Your papers, please.”

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai handed him the paper. The guard added it to his pile.

“All of you wait here,” he commanded, “until the captain approves your papers.”

He turned and entered the building. A few minutes later, he returned with the passports, gave them back to their owners and sent them on their way. Only Rabbi Avraham Mordechai did not receive his documents.

“You,” said the guard, pointing at Rabbi Avraham Mordechai. “Come with me.”

If Rabbi Avraham Mordechai had been nervous before, he was terrified now. “You can imagine how I felt, Eizik’l,” he would later say to his son-in-law Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Komarno. “Even though I had faith, I was frightened. I remembered that even Yaakov Avinu was worried that because of his sins the Ribono Shel Olam would not fulfill His promise to him, so what could I say? I had no guarantees. I begged the Ribono Shel Olam to protect me in the *zechus* of my holy *rebbe*, Levi Yitzchak ben Sarah Sosha, and I stepped into the guardhouse.”

The captain was sitting at his desk, but when Rabbi Avraham Mordechai entered the room he immediately stood up and came to full attention. Then he grabbed a chair and placed it in front of the desk.

“Please be seated, sir,” he said. “Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

“No, thank you,” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai, puzzled by the captain’s unexpectedly respectful and solicitous behavior.

“Might I inquire, kind sir,” said the captain, “as to who you might be?”

“I am a rabbi returning home.”

The captain chuckled. “You enjoy jesting, sir, and so do I, of course. But I would really like to know who you are.”

“I told you,” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai. “I’m a rabbi.”

“But that is impossible!”

“Why is it impossible? Look at my beard, my sidelocks, the fringes on my garments. I’m a rabbi, I tell you.”

It slowly dawned on the captain that Rabbi Avraham Mordechai spoke the truth, but that confused him even more.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “If you really are a rabbi, how can it be that you are so close to the king?” He held up the paper in front of Rabbi Avraham Mordechai’s face. “Look! Your papers bear the king’s own signature. Not many people are accorded this honor.”

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai stared at the paper but saw only the tiny dot of ink in its center.

“So how is that you are so close with the king?” asked the captain.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai remained silent.

“Of course,” said the captain, “I understand. It is not for me to inquire too much into matters that do not concern me. But I am at your service, sir. Whatever you need, just ask for it. It would be my greatest honor to accommodate you. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Well, there is something,” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai.

“You wish is my command.”

“I am still far from my destination, and it is important that I get there quickly. Could you provide me with a coach and fast horses?”

“Instantly!” said the captain. He gave the order, and within a very short time, a comfortable coach and two fresh horses were standing before the guardhouse.

When Rabbi Avraham Mordechai came home, he looked at Rabbi Levi Yitzchak’s letter once again, and still, he saw only the single black dot. He put the letter into the strongbox in which he kept his most precious valuables and locked it with a key. Perhaps he might need it again someday.

Sometime later, one of his cousins, a respected *talmid chacham*, approached him. “You know, Avraham Mordechai, that I’m a Misnaged,” he said. “I’m opposed to the Chassidim, but I respect you as wise and pious man. I know that you always travel to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. Why don’t you tell me what you see in him?”

“Come,” said Rabbi Avraham Mordechai. “I’ll show you a truly wondrous thing.”

He took down his strongbox and opened it with the key. The cousin looked on in anticipation as I’ll show you something lifted the lid of the strongbox. Rabbi Avraham Mordechai reached into the box for the letter, but it wasn’t there. He rummaged frantically through all its contents but there was no sign of the letter. It had vanished into thin air.

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai related this amazing story to his son-in-law Rabbi Yitzchak Eizik of Komarno, who told it to his son Rabbi Elazar of Komarno. One time, Rabbi Elazar shared a Rosh Chodesh *seudah* with Rabbi Shlomo Spira, the rabbi of Munkacs and the author of *Shem Shlomo*.

“Tell me a story you heard from your father,” said Rabbi Shlomo, “but only a story that has never been published. I’ve already read all those that have been published.”

“Very well,” said Rabbi Elazar. “My father once told an interesting story that happened to my grandfather Rabbi Avraham Mordechai of Pintchov when he was in Berditchev.” Then he proceeded to tell him the story of the paper with the ink dot.

“Who knows how many favors,” commented Rabbi Shlomo, “the *malachim* exacted in return for this favor for the Berditchever?”

Rabbi Elazar nodded. “I had the same thought. But then I thought that my grandfather needed that favor because he had no other way of getting home. At that moment, it was important.”

Rabbi Shlomo told the story to his grandson Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spira, the author of *Minchas Elazar*, who later also became the rabbi of Munkacs. Years later, Rabbi Chaim Elazar told the story to a group of Chassidim in Beregszasz, among them his *talmid* Rabbi Yitzchak Adler. Afterward, Rabbi Chaim Elazar asked Rabbi Yitzchak Adler to accompany him to Nyíregyháza for a *bris*.

“As it happens,” said Rabbi Yitzchak, “there is a border between



Beregszasz and Nyíregyháza, and I do not have a pass to get across. If the *rebbe* can give me a pass, I would happily accompany him anywhere.”

Rabbi Chaim Elazar smiled. “You want me to give you a pass such as the one Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev gave Rabbi Avraham Mordechai of Pintchov?”

“Yes, I do,” said Rabbi Yitzchak.

“This cannot be done these days,” said Rabbi Chaim Elazar.

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**F**or all his righteousness, Noach did not fulfill his purpose in this world. According to the Arizal, he was punished by having to return to the world after he died as a *gilgul*, a reincarnation. He came back as Moshe.

Why was Noach punished? Because, says the Arizal, he failed to rebuke his generation. Therefore, he returned as Moshe, who constantly taught and rebuked the people. But why indeed didn’t Noach rebuke the people of his generation? Furthermore, we find no mention in the Torah that Noach prayed to The Almighty to spare his generation from destruction. Why indeed didn’t he pray for them?

There are two types of *tzaddikim*, explains Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. There is one type of *tzaddik* who is focused inwardly. He serves The Almighty with great diligence and sincerity, but he does not reach out to others. There is also a different type of *tzaddik* who is the opposite of insular. He reaches out to other people and draws them closer to The Almighty. He is the *tzaddik* that the Talmud describes (Kiddushin 40a) as “good for Heaven and good for people.” These two types of *tzaddikim* are represented respectively by Noach and Avraham.

Noach was an insular *tzaddik*. He “walked with the Almighty,” as the Torah tells us (Bereishis 6:9); in other words, he walked only with the

Almighty and with no one else. He withdrew from the world and society and served the Almighty in the privacy of his own life. Avraham, on the other hand, was an expansive *tzaddik*. He went out into the world and proclaimed the greatness of the Almighty. He reached out to people wherever he went and drew them closer to the Almighty.

The Torah speaks about Noah's *toldos*, his progeny, but nowhere does the torah speak about Avraham's *toldos*. Why not? Because the number of Avraham's progeny was vast. The Talmud tells us (Sanhedrin 99b) that teaching someone Torah is considered like fathering him. And indeed, the Torah tells us (Bereishis 12:5) about the people Avraham made in Charan. How did he "make" them? By teaching them Torah, as Targum translates. All these people were thenceforth considered Avraham's children, and they were too numerous to enumerate. But Noah, who did not reach out to other people and teach them Torah, only had three children, and there are the *toldos* that the Torah enumerates.

Why was Noah so insular? Why didn't he reach out to his generation? We find a clue when the Torah tells us (ibid. 7:7) that Noah entered the ark because of the waters of the Flood. Rashi explains that Noah was "of little faith" and did not enter the ark until he was forced to do so by the rising waters. How can we understand this statement that he was of little faith when the Torah specifically tells us (ibid. 6:9) that he was "righteous and unblemished"?

It would seem that Noah's lack of faith was in himself. He was exceedingly humble, and although he was certainly righteous and unblemished, he saw himself as being no better than anyone else. He did not think he was worthy of rebuking other people, and although the Talmud tells us (Moed Kattan 16b) that a *tzaddik* has the power to nullify divine decrees, he did not consider himself capable of exercising such great power through his prayers. He reasoned, therefore, that if he were to be saved so would the rest of the people of his generation be saved, so there was no point in entering the ark. Only when the rising

waters practically engulfed him was he forced to enter the ark against his better judgment.

The difference between an insular *tzaddik* and an expansive *tzaddik* with regard to effecting change in the world can also be understood on a deeper level. It is quite possible that only the expansive *tzaddik* who reaches out to other people has the power to nullify decrees. The insular *tzaddik* is guided by the divine letters of the Torah, while the *tzaddik* who reaches out is the one who guides the divine letters. In other words, reaching out to others endows the *tzaddik* with tremendous power, a power so great that he can nullify decrees and virtually bend the world to his will. How do we explain the connection between reaching out and this power?

It is because the *tzaddik* who reaches out to rescue the divine spark from the grip of the *klippas*, the impure husks that capture them, he must come into contact with the physical world. There is tremendous power and passion in the physical world, and when the *tzaddik* reaches out to rescue the divine sparks he is touched and affected by that power and passion. But being a sincere and dedicated *tzaddik*, he is not brought down from his high spiritual level. Instead, he is able to capture that passionate power, harness it to his service of the Almighty and, thereby, raise it to a much higher level.

Noach, who was too humble to reach out to other people, never had the opportunity to infuse his service of the Almighty with this passionate power, and therefore, he was not able to nullify a divine decree. That power was wielded only by *tzaddikim* like Avraham and Moshe.