

THE LETTER OF THE BESHT TO RABBI GERSHON OF KUTOV

1713
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This is the letter which the Rabbi, R. Israel Besht, may his memory be a blessing for eternal life, gave to our Rabbi and Master, the author, Yaakov Yosef Hakohen, that it be delivered to his brother-in-law, R. Gershon Kutover, who was in the Holy Land. But because of an impediment which came from the blessed Lord, [R. Yaakov Yosef] did not journey to the Land of Israel, and it remained in his hands so as to benefit our people, the Children of Israel.

To the honor of my beloved brother-in-law, my friend who is as dear to me as my [own] soul and heart, who is the distinguished rabbinic scholar, the saint ⁽¹⁴⁾ famous in [the study of] Torah and in piety, the honor of our Master, Rabbi Abraham Gershon, may his lamp shine, and peace be unto all that is unto him and unto his modest wife Bluma and all their children, may they all receive ⁽¹⁵⁾ the blessing of life, Amen 'selah!

I received your holy letter, which you sent along with the emissary ⁽¹⁶⁾ who went from Jerusalem, at the fair in Loka in 1750. ⁽¹⁷⁾ It is written with extreme brevity, and in it is said that you had already written at length to each and every one through the man who traveled to Egypt. ⁽¹⁸⁾ However, those letters which were written at length did not reach me, and this caused me great anguish,

that I did not see your holy handwriting which you wrote in detail. Certainly, this is because of the havoc of the countries, ⁽¹⁹⁾ because of our many sins, the plague having spread in all the countries. For the plague came close to our areas, in the holy community of Mohilov, and the countries of Walachia and Turkey.

Also, [in your letter] it is said that those new interpretations and secrets which I wrote to you, through the scribe, the Rabbi - preacher of the holy community of Polonnoye, ⁽²⁰⁾ did not reach you. This too caused me great anguish, for certainly you would have derived great satisfaction [from them]. However, I have now forgotten a number of them. But I will write to you, in great brevity, some details of what I remember.

For in the beginning of the (Hebrew) year 1746, ⁽²¹⁾ I performed the oath of the ascent of the soul, ⁽²²⁾ as you know. ⁽²³⁾ I saw wondrous things in a vision, ⁽²⁴⁾ [what I had not seen heretofore, from the day that I reached maturity. It is impossible to relate, even to "speak mouth to mouth" (NU.12:8), of what I saw and learned when I ascended there.

When I returned ⁽²⁵⁾ to the Lower Garden of Eden, and I saw the soul of many living and dead, both those known to me and those unknown to me, without limit and number, "running and returning" (Ezek 1:14) to ascend from world to world through the "column"

which is known to those initiated into the Kabbalah, in great and extensive joy, such that the mouth is too weary to tell of it and the physical "ear heavy that it cannot hear" (Isa. 59:1). Also [were there present] many wicked people who had repented, and their sins were forgiven, as it was a time of great acceptability, (27) such that in my eyes too it was exceedingly amazing that so many were accepted [by God] in their repentance -- and you, too, know them. There was amongst them too very great joy, and they too rose up in the above mentioned ascents. And they all as one beseeched me and implored me until I was embarrassed, saying, "To the exalted excellency of the honor of thy Torah! The Lord hath graced thee with a special understanding to perceive and know these matters. Do thou go up with us, and be unto us a help and support." Because of the great joy which I beheld amongst them, I decided to ascend with them.

And I saw in a vision, (28) that the Samael (29) had arisen to accuse, in the midst of this great and unprecedented joy. He executed his deeds -- decrees of forced conversion against a number of souls, that they be killed [and die] unnatural deaths. (30) I was seized with terror and I actually offered my life [to save them]. (31) I beseeched my Master and Teacher (32) to go with me, for it is exceedingly dangerous to go [on such a mission] and ascend to the upper worlds; for since I arrived at my station (33) I had not risen in such ascents. I went up, level after level, until I entered the palace of the Messiah, (34)

where the Messiah studies Torah with all the Tannaim ⁽³⁵⁾ and the righteous people, and also with the "Seven Shepherds." ⁽³⁶⁾ I beheld very great joy there, but I do not know "of mirth, what doth it accomplish?" (Eccl.2:2). ⁽³⁷⁾

I thought that this joy was, Heaven forbid, because of my departure from this world. ⁽³⁸⁾ But they notified me afterwards that I had not yet departed, but that they derived pleasure up above when I performed contemplative unifications ⁽³⁹⁾ below by means of their holy Torah. But the nature of this happiness I do not know to this day.

I asked the Messiah, "when are you coming, sir?" He answered me, ⁽⁴⁰⁾ "By this shalt thou know it" (Ex.7:17): when your teaching will become renowned and revealed throughout the world, and when 'thy springs [will] be dispersed abroad' (Prov.5:16), [imparting to others] what I taught you and you apprehended, [so that] they too will be able to perform contemplative unifications and ascents [of the soul] like you. Then will all the "shells" ⁽⁴¹⁾ perish and it will be a time of acceptability ⁽⁴²⁾ and salvation." I was bewildered at this [response]. I had great anguish because of the length of time he implied it would take until he came, and I wondered]when it would be possible for this to occur.

However, while I was there I learned three remedies (43) and three holy Names, (44) which are easy to learn and to explain [to others.] So was I assuaged and I thought that perhaps, in this manner, my associates (45) might also be able to attain my level and category, that is, they will be able to practice ascents of the soul and learn and apprehend [supernal mysteries] as I do (46). But all my life I was not granted permission to do this. (47) I pleaded on your behalf [that I be permitted] to teach [it to you,] but I was not at all granted [such] permission, and I am under oath [not to do so.] (48)

But this I can tell you, and may the Lord be thy help: (49) "before the Lord is your way" (Jud. 18:6), and do not depart [from it,] (50) especially in the Holy Land. [With] every single utterance, and all that comes out of your mouth, during the time of your prayer and your study, intend to unify a Name. (51) For in every single letter there are worlds and souls and divinity, and [these] ascend and bind up with each other and unite with each other. Afterwards, the letters bind up and unite with each other and a word is formed, and they unite in a true unity with divinity. Include your soul with them in every single step of the above. [Then] all the worlds unite as one and rise up, and there is [thus] great joy and pleasure without

limit, as you meditate on the joy of bride and groom, (52) in smallness (53) and corporeality; (54) and certainly in a high level such as this. (55) Certainly the Lord will "be thy help," (56) and wherever you will turn you will prosper and succeed. (57) "Give to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser!" (Prov. 9:9). Also, pray for me with this intention [in mind], that I be privileged "to cleave unto the inheritance of the Lord" (I Sam. 26:19) whilst yet alive; and also [pray for] the remnant [of Israel] that is outside the Land of Israel.

And I also prayed there: (58) "Wherefore hath the Lord done thus; what meaneth the heat of this great anger?" (Deut. 29:23), that so many Jewish souls were given over to Samael to be killed --- and of them a number who were baptized and then killed! They gave me permission to ask Samael himself. And [so] I asked Samael : "Wherefore hast thou seen concerning this matter" (59) and what is his thinking about this, that they should become apostates and then be killed? (60) He answered me, "my intention is for the sake of Heaven," (61) [for if they remained alive after their apostasy, then when other decrees and libels would occur, they would not sanctify then Name of Heaven but all would convert in order to save their lives. Therefore his action was such that those who converted were killed afterwards. Thus, no Jew would convert, but would sanctify the Name of Heaven].

And so it happened afterwards, because of our many sins, that in the holy community of Zaslav (62) there was a blood libel against several souls; two of them converted and were later killed, and the rest sanctified the Name of Heaven with great sanctity, and died unnatural deaths. Then there were blood libels in the holy communities of Sibatuvka and Dunawitz, (63) and there no one converted after they had seen what happened in Zaslav. Rather, all of them laid down their lives for the sanctification of the Name. They sanctified the Name of Heaven and withstood the trial. In the merit of this [martyrdom] may our Messiah come and avenge us: may He make expiation for His land and for His people. (64)

And on Rosh Hashanah of 1749, (65) I performed an ascent of the soul, as you know, and I saw a great accusation [against Israel], until Samael was almost given permission to destroy entire countries and communities, and I offered up my life and prayed, "Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, and let us not fall into the hand of man." (66) And they granted me permission that instead of [the anti-Semitic persecutions] there shall be great weaknesses, something the likes of which had not occurred in all the lands of Poland and other countries close to us. And that is what happened, that the weakness spread exceedingly, such that it cannot be related, and the plague too [spread] in other countries. I indulged in intense discussion with my group (67) [and we decided] to recite the Ketoret (68) early in the morning in order to nullify the judgements mentioned

above. Then they revealed to me in a vision of the night,
"But did not you yourself choose [the plague, by saying,] 'let
us fall now into the hand of the Lord,'" as mentioned above,
"why then do you wish to nullify the decree of plague ? Surely,
an accuser [does not become a defender]!" (69) From then on,
I did not recite Ketoret, and I did not pray about this. But
on Hoshanah Rabbah (70) I went to the synagogue with all the
world, (71) [and I tried to intercede on behalf of Israel] by means
of several oaths, (72) because of [my] great fear [for the safety
of the people] , and I recited Ketoret once so that the plague
not spread to our surroundings. And in this we were successful,
with the help of the Lord.

I wanted to elaborate and speak at length, but because of
the tears when I recall your departure from me, I am not able
to speak. But I do beseech you to review all my words of
admonition which I told you several times. Let them always be
in your thoughts, to meditate on them and ponder them scrupulously.
Surely you will find in every word all kinds of sweetness, for
what I told you "is no vain thing" (Dt. 32:47). For the Lord
knows that I do not despair of journeying to the Land of Israel,
if that be the will of the Lord, to be with you together; but
the time is not ripe for it. Also do not be aggrieved that I have
not sent you money, for it is because of the treachery of fate (73)

that befell me, because of the plague and the famine and the many young children of our family who are dependent upon me to support them and provide for them, in addition to other poor Jews. "Our money is all spent...there is naught left but our bodies!" (Gen. 47:18). But the Lord willing, when the Lord shall enlarge, etc., then certainly, etc. (74)

Also, my grandson, the worthy young man, the honorable Ephraim, (75) is a great prodigy in the essence of study. (76) Surely, if the time is opportune for it, how fitting would it be [for you] to come here by yourself so that we may see each other face to face and to be happy in our happiness, as you promised me. (77)

I also very much beseech you concerning the renowned Rabbi, the saint, (78) our Master Yosef Katz, (79) a servant of the Lord, that you draw him close with both hands (80) and [offer him] all kinds of benefit, for his deeds are acceptable before the blessed Lord and "all his deeds are for the sake of Heaven." (81) [I also request of you] to write on his behalf to the wealthy people to provide adequate support and arrange for proper maintenance for him, (82) for certainly he will be [a source of] satisfaction to you if he will be in your company.

Such are the words of your brother-in-law who looks forward to seeing you face to face and prays for length of days for you and

your wife and your children, and seeks your welfare all day and
also nights for length of good days, Amen, selah.

Israel Besht

of the holy community of

Medzhibozh

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Notes

- (1) See Ben Zion Dinur, Be 'mifneh ha-Dorot (Jerusalem:1954), p.181 ff.; Isaiah Tishby, in Zion 32 (1967), p.29 ff.; Abraham Rubinstein, in Sinai 67 (1970), pp.120-139; Gedaliah Nigal, in Sinai 69 (1972), pp.150-159; Mordecai Shrager Bauminger, in Sinai 69 (1972) pp.250-269.
- (2) See Rubinstein and Bauminger, loc.cit.
- (3) See Bauminger, loc.cit., nn.52,65.
- (4) Translated into English by Dan Ben-Amos and Jerome R. Mintz, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press, 1970).
- (5) See in detail in the article by Joseph G. Weiss in Zion, 16 (1951).
- (6) Gershom Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, pp. 15-17.
- (7) See Nigal, loc.cit., on the significance of this discipleship of the Besht.
- (8) Simon Dubnow, Toledot ha-Hasidut, p.62.
- (9) Tishby, loc.cit.
- (10) Scholem, in "The Neutralization of Messianism in Early Hasidism," in Journal of Jewish Studies (London: Fall, 1970), reprinted in Scholem, The Messianic Idea in Judaism (N.Y.:Shoken, 1971), pp.176-203.
- (11) Sanh.96b; Rubinstein loc.cit. p.134.
- (12) Ben-Amos and Mintz, op.cit., No.41.
- (13) Nigal (loc.cit., p.156) considers the role of Ahijah, "teacher and master" of the Besht, as primarily one of hamtakat ha-dinim. In our letter too, the Besht seeks Ahijah's assistance specifically in executing the function of hamtakat ha-dinim.
- (14) Hasid, which at that time did not yet acquire the meaning, which it later did, of a member of the Hasidic movement.

- (15) "May they all stand upon...the blessing," referring to Dt. 27:12,13.
- (16) The term normally refers to the fund-raisers who visited Jews in the Diaspora to gather money for schools and other public institutions in Palestine.
- (17) Hebrew: 5510. The fairs in Loka were held in Elul or Nisan; Bauminger, loc.cit., p.65.
- (18) The reference is to another such emissary.
- (19) Severe epidemics spread across much of Eastern Europe in 1750, interrupting the massacres of many Jewish communities in the Ukraine by the Haidamaks.
- (20) Yehudah Leib, the mokhiah of Polonnoye.
- (21) Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) of 5507.
- (22) The "ascents of the soul" are the mystical experiences of the soul rising, level beyond level, towards God. This spiritual adventure is initiated by a hashbaah or oath involving the divine Names in their various configurations and permutations.
- (23) Rubinstein deduces from this that R. Gershon was already aware of this particular vision. Bauminger prefers to interpret it as a reference to the techniques employed by the Besht, which were known to R. Gershon.
- (24) What follows in brackets ---the remainder of this paragraph, all the next paragraph, and the beginning of the one following, -- is found only in the Korecz edition and not in Krenkel's version. Bauminger (p.84) argues rather unconvincingly that this passage is inauthentic because the Besht later is perplexed by the reason for all the joy.

- (25) From the upper worlds.
- (26) A term, from Ezekiel's vision of the Divine Chariot, referring to the angels rushing in both directions, and used in Kabbalah for the principle of alternation of recoil and advance, as a feature of the pneumatic experience.
- (27) Based on Ps. 69:14; a time when G-d is most accessible to human prayer, a time of divine compassion.
- (28) This is the end of the passage that appears only in the Korecz version.
- (29) The chief demon, head of the Satanic forces.
- (30) The reference is undoubtedly to the Haidamaks who decimated many Jewish communities of the Ukraine. They gave the Jews the choice of baptism or death, and in some cases where Jews submitted to forced conversion to Christianity they were killed anyway.
- (31) The experience of ascent of the soul and intercession on behalf of Israel is fraught with great physical and spiritual dangers. See Ben-Amos and Mintz, ^{op. cit.,} ~~In Praise of the Beal Shem Tov (Bloomington/London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972),~~ No. 41.
- (32) Besht considered the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh as his teacher. See Gedaliah Nigal, loc.cit.
- (33) The text is unclear. It may refer to the time he attained general intellectual maturity, or the time he achieved spiritual-mystical eminence.
- (34) In pre-medieval Kabbalah, the pneumatic ascends through spiritual phases known as hekhalot or palaces.

- (35) Palestinian teachers of the Oral Law, who flourished during the first two centuries C.E., and whose teachings form the substance of the Mishnah, core of the Talmud.
- (36) Adam, Seth, Methuselah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David.
See Suk.52b and Rashi, ad loc.
- (37) That is, he does not know the reason for the happiness in the palace of Messiah.
- (38) The righteous, in the upper worlds, take delight in welcoming the souls of other righteous who enter their realms after death in this world.
- (39) Yehudim, Kabbalistic meditations performed on divine Names revealing the underlying unity of G-d.
- (40) What follows comes from the Korecz version. The Frenkel text records only the response, "until your teaching is spread in the whole world," and then omits all of this and the next two paragraphs.
- (41) Kelipot, "shells" or "husks," the Kabbalistic term for the non-divine, and hence the powers of evil.
- (42) See supra, n.27.
- (43) Segulot, various kinds of cures employed by folk healers. These may range from herbs to incantations to magical practices as means of assisting the distressed.
- (44) Holy Names were similarly used by baalei shem in applying the "practical Kabbalah" to such diverse items as healing the sick, enabling barren women to give birth, initiating mystical experiences, etc.

- (45) Anshei gili. Two interpretations are possible: either it refers to all his contemporaries, or to his associates and disciples in his immediate circle. In the first case, Besht would be referring to the popularization of Hasidism amongst all Jews. In the second, he would be intending the disclosure of the three segulot and holy Names to his closest disciples in an attempt to have them achieve as rich a charismatic life as his own. The context clearly favors the second interpretation. So for B.Z. Dinur op.cit., p.182, n.6, and Abraham Rubinstein, loc.cit. p.135.
- (46) That is, by using the holy Names he learned in Heaven, he hoped to enhance the spiritual lives of his students and help them achieve "ascents of the soul."
- (47) Hence, despite his desire to have others achieve his rank, the Besht remains spiritually preeminent.
- (48) This may be an oblique reference to Besht's desire to entrust R. Gershon with future leadership of the group, but the refusal of Heaven to endorse his choice. Cf. Ben-Amos and Mintz, op.cit. no.46. Rubinstein (loc.cit., p.136) suggests that these secrets -- and hence the authority of spiritual leadership of the movement -- were given to R. Dov Ber, the great Maggid.
- (49) The expression is partly based on Dt.33:26.
- (50) The Hebrew is unclear, and the plural form of "depart" does not accord with the singular in the first half of the sentence. The use of the particular plural form is probably a reference to Prov. 3:21 or 4:21. The import of the sentence seems to be to encourage R. Gershon to continue in his (Hasidic) way, and to pay special attention to what follows.

- (51) The Kavvanah or sacred intention behind every utterance of prayer or study of Torah must be another Yihud or "unification"; see supra, n.39.
- (52) The "Bride" refers to the Shechinah or Malkhut (lowest of the Ten Sefirot), and the "Groom" to the upper Sefirot, especially as represented by the sixth, Tiferet. The mystical "unification" effected by the meditation on the Names is that of the male principle -- the nine upper Sefirot -- with the female, Shechinah or Malkhut.
- (53) "Greatness" and "smallness" are regarded by the Besht as two modes that characterize all things, especially in relation to the Creator. When man is "in greatness," he is fully inspired, acts out of selfless love, is in direct devekut (communion) with G-d, and his contemplation is clear and uninterrupted. When he cannot summon up such inspiration; when his concentration in devekut is broken; especially when he is disturbed by mundane thoughts -- he is in a state of "smallness." Besht taught that man must serve G-d in "smallness" as well, and use the very obstacles to devekut as a way of reaching Him.
- (54) "Corporeality" is the collective term for all mundane impediments to sustained contemplation of and communion with G-d. It is that which determines the state of "smallness." Besht held that we must "elevate" or sanctify the alien or distracting thoughts, and serve G-d by transforming the corporeal into a mode of worship.
- (55) That is, in the state of "greatness."
- (56) Supra, n.49.

- (57) Based on Prov. 17:8.
- (58) In the "palace of the Messiah." Besht now resumes the narrative concerning his mystical experience.
- (59) Based on Esther 9:26.
- (60) Apparently, Jews who refused baptism and chose martyrdom were tortured to death, while those who converted were killed without being tormented. Besht seems resigned to the death of the martyrs, and prays that at least the weak ones, who submitted to apostasy, should be spared (Rubinstein, loc.cit. p.137f.).
- (61) Based on Avot, 2:12. The Korecz text ends the sentence here. The meaning is not entirely clear. Rubinstein (loc.cit.) takes this as a reflection of the historical fact that many Jews, seeing that apostasy did not help them escape death, "sanctified the Name" by reaffirming their Judaism. This is partially confirmed by the passage that follows, but the meaning is still vague. The bracketed passage that follows, which does not appear at all in the Korecz version, comes from the Frenkel text where it appears in parentheses (perhaps to indicate the omission in Korecz).
- (62) A pogrom did occur in Zaslov in 1747. See M. Dubnow, Toledot ha-Hasidut, p.61, n.1.
- (63) Dunawitz, or Dunaigrod, in Podolia, experienced a pogrom in 1748. Dubnow (loc.cit.) believes Sibatuvka or Subatuvka is an error, and probably the author meant Shepetovka.
- (64) Dt. 32:43, according to Onkelos.
- (65) New Year, 5510.
- (66) Paraphrase of II Sam. 24:14, in which David, responding to the prophet Gad who offered David the choice between pestilence or

the enemies' sword, chose the former, preferring death by natural means ("the hand of the L-rd") to decimation by the foe ("the hand of man"). Besht is asserting that he prayed for a plague in preference to the Haidamak pogroms. See supra, n.19.

- (67) Havurah, the intimate circle of the Besht's disciples.
- (68) The Scriptural portion concerning the incense to be offered in the Tabernacle, Ex. 30:34-37, and a series of Talmudic passages concerning the incense. These are normally recited as preliminaries to the regular morning service, and are considered a special means of nullifying evil decrees. See Nu. 17:8-15, where Aaron burns the incense as a means of atoning for Israel's sins and staying the plague. See Shab. 89a, and Rashi to Nu. 17:11.
- (69) Ber. 59a; R.H. 26a; et passim. That is, you cannot change roles and seek to void that which you chose.
- (70) The seventh day of the festival of Sukkot (Tabernacles). Thus, the spiritual intercession of the Besht lasted for twenty-two days -- from Rosh Hashanah (1st of Tishri) to Hoshanah Rabbah (22nd of Tishri). The latter is considered the very last day of judgment, following that of Yom Kippur. See Zohar III, 31b.
- (71) Meaning, the entire community.
- (72) See supra, n. 22.
- (73) Zeman -- fate, or time.
- (74) That is, when I will be able to afford it I will send you money. The brevity of the style is an act of delicacy towards R. Gershon's feelings and a general aversion to elaborate on material matters.