

*Auxiliary Text  
of  
Source Material  
for*



**"RABBI ISRAEL  
BAAL SHEM TOV  
and the rise  
of  
HASIDISM"**



*A series of three lectures  
by*  
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RABBI ISRAEL BAAL SHEM TOV

and the Rise of Hasidism

Significant Dates

about 1700 - Birth of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov (the "Besht")

about 1734 - The "revelation" of the Besht

about 1749 - The Besht moves to Mezhibozh

1760 (Second day Shavuot) - Death of the Besht

before 1700 to 1781 - R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoye

1704-1773 - R. Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezeritsch

1720-1797 - R. Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna



# I. CONDITIONS OF THE TIMES

## A. from "Tifereth Maharaal" (by R. Aryeh Leib, the "Spoler Grandfather"):

It was the habit of the anti-Semites that when they held a Jew who was unable to pay a debt, they would cast him into a deep pit. From a hole at the top of it they would, once a week, hand down bread and water which was supposed to last for a whole week. Thus the prisoner would remain in solitary confinement until the lord's birthday. The custom of these lords or noblemen was to make a big party at this occasion, inviting their friends and fellow-noblemen. When their hearts were gladdened with wine they would bring the Jewish prisoner before them and order him to entertain them by dancing. While the music played, the Jew was to dance.

But it was no ordinary dance, for they prepared beforehand a bear-skin, and the Jew was to wear this and then to dance the various kinds of dances, depending upon the music. A servant was chosen who would lead the Jew-bear to the palace and into the chamber in iron chains, as though he were a live bear. This servant would be the dancing partner of the Jew-bear.

Before the dance began, the lord made the following declaration to the Jew: "If you dance well, and follow the music and your leader (the servant who was his dancing partner), and if you entertain us and make us happy, then you may go home a free man. Furthermore, if we decide that you have danced better than your leader, you may attack him and beat him; just as a real bear would do to a cow. But if you do not dance well, and fail to make us gay, then your leader will take you to the dogs -- and you will have to dance with them!"

Wild and vicious dogs were, of course, waiting in the yards. If the Jew was found wanting and thrown to the dogs, he was immediately torn to shreds and devoured. It is understood that the Jew, who had been in this solitary confinement for a long time, subsisting on nothing but bread and water, barely had the strength to walk, let alone to dance while dressed in a heavy bear-skin.



B. from the same book:

All the people of the town (Zlatopoly) were ignoramuses and complete boors. Judaism was in a very sad state with them. They knew nothing of netillat yadayim before eating bread, and had fundamental misconceptions regarding the Laws of Family Purity. For a long time there was no Mikvah in the town, and several small villages shared one Mikvah, one etrog, one Rabbi, and one shochet -- all of similar quality. . .

The one thing that did concern them was the office of Shammash (sexton). This functionary they regarded as a kind of sacrificial goat who was to be willing to suffer all the punishment and woes for all the townsfolk.

The first such woe was the Tokhachah (the Biblical portion dealing with the dreadful punishments in consequence of disobedience) read twice every year. They entertained a superstition that the man who was called up to the Torah for this aliyah, unless he was a completely righteous person (and who is?), would die before the year was over. Hence, their only solution was to engage a sexton who would be willing to receive this ill-fated aliyah. Even then, whilst the sexton would read the tokhachah, many people would place their forefingers in their ears, so as not to hear the dreaded words. In fact, some people would not even come to synagogue at all that Sabbath, making it difficult to obtain a minyan. In brief, that Sabbath was as dismal as Tisha B'av. . .

a second problem concerned the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The Shofar was for them an object so frightening that they were afraid to look at it, let alone touch it! Here too they believed that if the one designated to blow the Shofar was not completely sinless he would not survive that year. Hence this task too was assigned to the sexton, on the reasonable grounds that his life was in danger anyhow because of the reading of the Tokhachah.



Now since it was difficult to find people willing to expose themselves to such great dangers, the only candidates for the position of sexton were very poor old men who could find no other employment, and who felt that their days were numbered anyhow. Of course, given their advanced age and state of undernourishment, such people did not live too long. This, in turn, tended to corroborate the superstitions of the townsfolk who attributed the high mortality rate of their sextons to the dreaded Tokhachah and the frightening Shofar.



## II. THE BAAL SHEM TOV

(from Martin Buber's "Tales of the Hasidim" )

### A. His Soul

They say that once, when all souls were gathered in Adam's soul, at the hour he stood beside the Tree of Knowledge, the soul of the Baal Shem Tov went away, and did not eat of the fruit of the tree.

### B. His Disciples

It is said that the soul of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer refused to descend to this world below, for it dreaded the fiery serpents which flicker through every generation, and feared they would weaken its courage and destroy it. So he was given an escort of sixty heroes, like the sixty who stood around King Solomon's bed to guard him against the terrors of night -- sixty souls of zaddikim to guard his soul. And these were the disciples of the Baal Shem.

### C. A Miracle

It is told:

The summits of the mountains on whose gentle slopes Israel ben Eliezer lived were straight and steep. In hours of meditation he liked to climb these peaks and stay at the very top for a time. Once he was so deep in ecstasy, he failed to notice that he was at the edge of an abyss, and calmly lifted his foot to walk on. Instantly a neighboring mountain leaped to the spot, pressed itself close to the other, and the Baal Shem pursued his way.

### D. The Search for God

The Baal Shem said:

"We say: 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,' and not: 'God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' for Isaac and Jacob did not base their work



on the searching and service of Abraham; they themselves searched for the unity of the Maker and his service."

E. The Torah

Concerning the verse of the psalm: "The law of the Lord is perfect," the Baal Shem said:

"It is still quite perfect. No one has touched it as yet, not a whit and not a jot of it. Up to this hour, it is still quite perfect."



### III. G-D IS OMNIPRESENT

#### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

Everything in the world is filled with the blessed Creator. All that which is done in the world as a result of man's thoughts, no matter how trivial, all results from divine Providence. Therefore, let there be no difference to you whether something you want is granted or not, since all issues from the Creator, and He knows what is best for you.

#### B. from the same book:

One must believe with perfect faith, without any distraction, that the whole world is full of His glory, and in every object is His blessed vitality.

#### C. from "Shaar Ha-yihud ve'ha-Emunah", Ch. I (by R. Shneour Zalman of Ladi):

It is written, "Forever, O Lord, Thy word standeth fast in Heaven" (Psalms 119:89). The Baal Shem Tov, of blessed memory, explained that "Thy word" refers to the divine command "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters" (Genesis 1:6). The letters and words of this command forever stand fast in the firmament of the heavens, and are enclothed forever in all the heavens, giving them life... And this accords with what the Ari, of blessed memory, said: even in mute matter, such as stones and soil and water, there exists a form of soul and spiritual vitality, in the sense that there are enclothed in these objects the appropriate letters and words of one of the Ten Words by which G-d created all. It is these which vitalize and sustain all such matter ex nihilo... And even if, for instance, the word "stone" is not explicitly mentioned in the Biblical record of the Ten Words, nevertheless (as is mentioned in "The Book of Creation") the stone draws its vitality through various combinations and permutations of the original letters until there derives the (numerical value) of the word "stone." It is this which is the source of the existence of the stone; and so for all creations in the world.



#### IV. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

##### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

One must not accept literally the term "evil," for what we call "evil" is indeed a form of the good, but it is the lowest level of the good.

##### B. from "Deggel Mahaneh Ephraim" (by R. Moshe Hayyim Ephraim):

Our teacher Moses was born with the characteristics of a complete Rasha, and with a predisposition to all evil qualities; but he revised and transformed all these evil traits and endeavored to acquire only good traits.



## V. DEVEKUTH

### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

Sometimes it happens that a man is engaged in speaking to others and so cannot study. Yet one must be attached (davuk) to God and meditate on the "unifications." Similarly, a man is travelling and cannot pray or study properly. He then must try to serve Him in other ways. One ought not to feel anguish because of this, for God wants us to serve Him in many ways, sometimes one way and sometimes another. That is why it was destined for him to be engaged thus in conversation and travel, so that he might come to serve Him in this particular manner.

### B. from the same book:

If you see, perchance, a beautiful woman, think thus: from whence does she derive this beauty? If she were dead, she would not have the same face, but would be very ugly. Obviously, it comes from the divine power that is imminent in her; it is that which grants her this capacity for beauty and freshness. Therefore, the root of the beauty is the divine power. Why then shall I pursue the branch (or: derivative)? It is better for me to cling to the Source and Root of all the worlds where reside all forms of beauty. The same holds true for all material objects: whether it be a beautiful vessel, or delicious food, etc. ... consider that it is all kept in existence by its spiritual roots.

## VI. RELIGION AND CHARACTER

### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

Never think that you are greater than your friend because you serve God with greater devekut; for you are like any other creature created for His service. God has not given your friend the same understanding He has given to you. In what way, therefore, are you more worthy than the worm which also serves its Creator with all its strength and understanding?



B. from the same book:

A man ought to think that he is a worm, and that all other such small creatures are considered his friends in the world; for all are created and have no ability other than what the Creator gave them. Let him always bear this in mind.

C. from Besht, quoted in "Toledot Yaakov Yosef" (by R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye):

"Thou are our God" (atta Hu Elohenu -- literally: "Thou-He-our God"): First we address ourselves directly to God, second person, then we speak about Him, third person. For if a man considers that he has achieved devekuth with Him, that he stands directly before Him -- then indeed he is far removed from Him. But if he believes that he is yet distant from Him, then he is truly close to Him. Thus if a man thinks "Thou" -- it is only "He"; but if he think "He" -- then He is indeed "our God."

D. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

A person ought to try hard to develop the trait of zerizut (eagerness, liveliness): he should wake up from his sleep with zerizut, for he is renewed, he has become a different person. So everything he does should be carried out with zerizut.



## VII. THE OBLIGATION TO BE JOYOUS:

### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

A man's thought should always be elevated, in the higher world, meditating in the service of God, cleaving (devekuth) to Him and trusting in Him that he will achieve his goals. This is a great principle: the thought with which you began your day when you arose is the one you should carry with you throughout that day.

### B. from the same book:

Weeping is a great evil, for a man ought to serve God in joy. Only if one cries out of joy can it be considered a virtue...If a fear opens the gates (of Heaven), joy breaks them down altogether.

### C. from the same book:

Sometimes the Evil Urge deceives a man and tells him that he sinned a great sin, whereas it was only a mere stricture, or perhaps not a sin at all. The intention of the Evil Urge is to cause man sadness thereby, so that as a result of sadness man will neglect the service of God. Man must understand this deception, and say to the Evil Urge: I don't care about that stricture, for all you want is to dissuade me from the service of God. You are lying. And even if it be true that I transgressed in some measure, I will cause more satisfaction (nachat ruach) for my Creator by not concerning myself with that stricture, whereby you intend to induce sadness in me. On the contrary, I shall serve Him in joy -- for this (service of the Lord in joy) is a great fundamental.

## VIII. PRAYER

### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

Before commencing to pray, one ought to think that he is prepared to expire in the course of that prayer because of great kavvanah (intention).



There are people whose kavvanah is so intense, that they can expire because of two or three words uttered before God.

B. from the same book:

His soul told him (the Baal Shem Tov) that the reason he was privileged to have revealed to him celestial secrets was not that he studied much Talmud and Posekim, but because of prayer; for he always prayed with great kavvanah.



## IX. INFLUENCING OTHERS

### A. from "The Last Testament of R. Israel Besht":

There are two kinds of Zaddik, and both are complete Zaddikim, but there is this difference between them: One is always immersed in devekuth with God, and faithfully performs the service required of him. But he is a Zaddik only for himself, not for anyone else; i.e., he does not bring the influence of his righteousness to bear on others. The second kind is compared to a fruit-bearing palm tree ("the righteous will flourish like the palm tree" -- Psalm 92), i.e. he produces precious results and increases good in the world. This is what the Sages intended when they said, "in the place where a baal teshuvah (repentant person) stands, the complete Zaddikim cannot stand." For the second type Zaddik mentioned above may be called a baal teshuvah, literally a "master over repentance," for he uses his influence to encourage others to repent and return to the right ways; therefore his reward is far greater than the first type mentioned, although he too is a "complete Zaddik."

### B. from "Amtahat Binyamin":

R. Israel Baal Shem Tov once said to a contemporary Zaddik who preached in public: "How can you consider yourself qualified to reproach others? You have never known sin all your days, and you do not mingle with others sufficiently to know their sins."