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**Tales of the Maggid of Koznitz**

**Rikee H. Gutherz-Madoff**

**A Thesis  
In  
The Department  
Of  
Religion**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TALES OF THE MAGGID OF KOZNITZ**

**Rikee H. Gutherz-Madoff**

This work is a translation of fourteen selected stories translated from the Yiddish from a book entitled “Der Maggid fun Koznitz”. Introductory remarks give insight into the Hasidic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as a focus on Hasidic thought and practice. A brief biographical sketch on the Maggid of Koznitz is included.

DEDICATED TO

MY LOVING PARENTS, SONIA (KRYNG) & JOSEPH GUTHERZ

MAY THEIR MEMORY BE BLESSED

AND

THE 62 BEAUTIFUL SOULS OF THE KRYNG

AND GUTHERZ FAMILIES WHO PERISHED

IN THE HOLOCAUST

**Acknowledgements: Special thanks to my wonderful daughters, Maryn and Tanya, who hold the future in their hands. May you derive much strength from your ancestors. I would also like to thank Professor Ira Robinson for his continued support in this project.**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Introduction.....	1
Hasidism .....	3
The Tzaddik or Rebbe .....	6
The Hasidic Story.....	8
Biographical Sketch of the Maggid of Koznitz .....	11
Hasidic Thought, Practice and Teachings .....	16
The Stories:.....	22
The Heavenly Tribunal Danced With.....	22
A Reason to Fast.....	29
Removed the Accusation .....	30
The Sermon Worked.....	33
Prayed for a Good Year .....	34
Years of Youth .....	36
Uniting the Worlds .....	39
With Rabbi Yochai .....	42
Paid for the Father-in-law .....	45
On Whom to Have Pity.....	47
A Mark Remained .....	48
The Candle Burns the Entire Night .....	49
The Maggid's Street .....	51
From the Pesukim (Verses).....	52

Glossary .....	53
Endnotes .....	56
Bibliography .....	57



## INTRODUCTION

My personal fascination and intense interest in Hasidism was reinforced with the discovery that I am a descendant of the Maggid of Koznitz<sup>1</sup>. As it happened, my 99 year old uncle, upon his death bed, repeatedly asked me if I were “giving over the teachings of the Koznitser *Maggid*”. After some research, I discovered that my uncle in Israel had been speaking continuously to his sons about the Koznitser Maggid before he died. My Israeli cousin also related to me that his parents had a very precious heirloom – a glass wine goblet from the Maggid’s table, and they were sorely distressed when it accidentally broke. Upon discovery of a Yiddish book of stories about the Maggid of Koznitz, I prepared to translate these stories into English so that I could share with others what was becoming so dear to me, and to fulfill the request of a dying uncle.

Some twenty years earlier, I had begun learning about Hasidism from a Lubavitcher Rabbi, and having found Hasidic thought to be very close to my mind and heart. I continued learning regularly, in order to understand the Hasidim as well as to help myself connect with my ancestors whose lives were so heinously severed during the Holocaust. My link to an unknown past became the traditions of Hasidim.

In this thesis, I would like to present fourteen stories about the Maggid of Koznitz, which I translated from the Yiddish.<sup>2</sup> The book from which these fourteen stories were selected is entitled “Der Maggid fun Koznitz” (The Maggid of Koznitz), and was published in Jerusalem by Ateret Publishing in 1987, translated and compiled by Menachem Mendel. It was my intention not to reshape the tales to suit contemporary language or taste and therefore the language, at times, may appear somewhat odd. It was

my desire to attempt to retain, as much as possible, the simplicity and directness of the Yiddish stories. It must also be emphasized that these Hasidic stories do not depict western-style history. Before presenting the stories I have included some background information on Hasidism, the Hasidic Rebbe, as well as certain biographical information on the Maggid of Koznitz, as well as select aspects of Hasidic thought and practice.

## **HASIDISM**

Hasidism, a pietistic Jewish movement, originated in mid-eighteenth century Eastern Europe. The early Hasidim were preachers, *shoheitim*, and rabbis who became identified with the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name), a rabbi and Kabbalistic wonder worker whose teachings became the focus of the new movement. The Baal Shem Tov preached pious ecstasy and fervent affirmation. He also renewed teachings regarding charity, humility and selflessness.<sup>3</sup>

The major focus of Hasidic belief concerned the omnipresence of God in all things and the desire to attain unity with the divine by intense concentration and the abandonment of self. Most striking was the enthusiasm and the intensity expressed in their actions.<sup>4</sup>

Hasidism united Heaven and earth, connecting this world with the World-to-Come. It emphasized the necessity of observing the 613 precepts obligatory upon Jews, but it replaced religious rigidity with religious fervor. Hasidism transformed into a mass movement the piety of inspired individuals and scholars who previously had preferred isolation from the masses.<sup>5</sup>

By denying the reality of evil and building a strong inner world dedicated to cheerful devotion to God, Hasidism actually fostered an optimistic acceptance of the situation in which the Jews found themselves during a particularly chaotic age.<sup>6</sup>

With the impact of the Chelminitzky pogroms and false messiahs, Jewish people began doubting the authenticity of Torah. Many people were disillusioned and alienated, not finding much meaning in Judaism as it was taught and practiced. While the outward

practice of Judaism might have been stronger than it is today, the core was rapidly deteriorating.

Hasidism...allowed for the gateway of God to be opened to everyone – even the lowliest of the low. All that is asked is that a person truly desire God – with all his heart – and that he do his very best to worship and serve Him. There is no place so degraded that God cannot be found there, and no person so wicked that he does not have a spark of Truth. All that we must do is grasp onto that spark and he can climb Jacob's ladder to the loftiest heights.<sup>7</sup>

One major source of Hasidic mysticism is the Zohar. The Book of Zohar is considered to be the most important literary work of the Kabbalah. The Zohar succeeded in establishing itself for three centuries (1500-1800) as a source of doctrine and revelation equal in authority to the Bible and Talmud. Most of the sections of the Zohar seem to be interpretations of Bible passages, or whole series of homilies in which Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai (famous teacher of the second century) and his friends and students interpret the words of Scripture in accordance with their hidden meaning.<sup>8</sup>

Another major source of Hasidic mysticism was Lurianic Kabbalism. Sixteenth century mystics of Safed such as Issac Luria (1534-72) provided much of the cosmology, angelology and demonology of Hasidic belief. Yet, whereas the Lurianic Kabbalah appealed primarily to an esoteric audience and to the more learned, Hasidism had its impact among the masses – emphasis was placed on the mystic in relation to the community and on the transformation of the mystic vision into living experience.<sup>9</sup>

Hasidism shifted the center of gravity in the Kabbalah from metaphysical speculation to mystical psychology, from a theory about the origin and repair of the

cosmos to a method for attaining inner bliss. In many ways Hasidism was a logical extension of the Kabbalah, with a key difference. While Kabbalah brought man to God, Hasidism brought God to man. “Know Him in all your ways” (Proverbs 3:6) became a watchword of the Hasidic world.<sup>10</sup>

Hasidism inspired its followers to pray with fervour and to aspire to lofty sentiments. It received into its ranks the simple masses and treated them with love and understanding; thus doing away with the separation between the scholars and the unschooled in Jewish life, promising everyone the proper Heavenly reward for kind deeds and for unlimited faith in the Creator.<sup>11</sup>

The range of Hasidic devotion extended to all aspects of living, infusing holiness in work, in eating, and in social intercourse. To recapture the enthusiasm of their devotion each time they prayed, the Hasidim made hours of prayer more flexible. The services of the cantor, so important in the large synagogues, were dispensed with and any righteous man could be called on to lead the services.<sup>12</sup>

## **THE TZADDIK OR REBBE**

Besides its teachings, one of the most important ideas of Hasidism is the concept of the Rebbe or Tzaddik. Many of the Tzaddikim or saintly leaders were descendants of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, and they dominated the communal and religious life. The ways of the Tzaddik as a living incarnation of the Torah were observed, worshipped and emulated.<sup>13</sup>

If the ignorant person could not find answers in books, he could find them in the personality of his Rebbe, and he could seek to emulate the customs of his particular court.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the humility which resulted from his awareness of God's presence and his own task, the Tzaddik was filled with the fullness of God and His service, and was ready to act for the people. One of the principal characteristics of the Tzaddik, therefore, is his going out to the people, to save them...the action which the Tzaddik initiates not only carries him out after the people, but also, and primarily, down to them, to be able to find them at all, so that he might love them and bind and heal them, he must descend to their level, seeking them out wherever they may be, in order to raise them.<sup>15</sup>

The Rebbe is often seen as a shepherd protecting his flock.

Perhaps this deeply mystical and complicated relationship can be better understood from the following: "The bond existing between Rebbe and Hasid is supported by deeply rooted supernatural concepts. Kabbalistic thought had propagated the idea that at the time of the giving of the Law (the Torah at Mount Sinai) there were 600.000 Jewish souls. These souls served as the source for all the Jewish souls which

have been created in the succeeding generations, for the multiplication of the Jewish population resulted in the splitting of souls. The attraction that the Rebbe's followers have for the Rebbe can be explained in the yearning of these fragmented souls to reunite with the major and more magnetic portion. This magnetic connection to his followers' souls helps to explain to the Hasidim their Rebbe's ability to spot their shortcomings, to know their thoughts and needs, and to advise them on their future."<sup>16</sup>

The connection between Rebbe and Hasid is further described by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson of Lubavitch in terms of four modes: a) Teacher and student (rav and talmid) or mentor and recipient or disciple. b) Hiskashrus and dveikus (literally meaning being bound and cleaving): This refers to the fusing of Hasid and Rebbe, both becoming bound together in a complete unity through their Torah study and their divine service (avodah). C) Rebbe and Hasid as av and ben (father and son). d) Rebbe and Hasid as maor and or (luminary and light).<sup>17</sup>

The highest of these levels is the mode of luminary and light. Crucial here is the state of being bound inwardly and with one's very being. We are not speaking only of the kind of bond in which the Hasid constantly remembers the Rebbe and the Rebbe constantly remembers the Hasid. We are speaking of a state of being utterly intertwined at all spiritual levels, in such a way that both Hasid and Rebbe complement the true essence of each other like 'or' and 'maor', light and luminary. The luminary reveals a light from its very being (or atzmi), and such light is a revelation of the luminary. Each is dependent on the other, just as with Rebbe and Hasid. And this entire bond finds expression in a manner of inner love<sup>18</sup>.

## **THE HASIDIC STORY**

The Hasidic leaders made use of stories, parables, and of song and dance to make their ideas better understood and to create fellowship among their followers. Their main aim was to elevate spiritually the simple masses and make them appreciate the lofty ideals inherent in Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

It was in this manner that storytelling won an established place in the life of the earliest Hasidim and it became part of the *Shabbos* ritual. On the Shabbos, the men met three times to pray and to share communal meals. At those times, particularly at the third meal when the Shabbos was waning, the Rebbes often wove their teachings into an extended metaphor or parable or told an illustrative tale. The Hasidim added a fourth communal meal, the *melaveh malkeh*, at which it became customary to gather at the Rebbe's table to hear stories of Hasidic saints and sages.

Another ritual occasion, the meal on the *yorzheit* (anniversary of the day of death) of a famous Rebbe, played a significant role in the growth of Hasidic storytelling. At the meal, the Hasidim celebrated the new elevation of the deceased's soul with song, dance, drink and with tales which recalled the Rebbe's deeds.<sup>20</sup>

The sources to which we turn for information about the lives of most Hasidic masters are the Hasidic tales. It is through these stories that we are allowed a peek into the ethos and lifestyle of a vanishing age, in a faraway world.

The previous Lubavitch Rebbe Joseph Isaac, in a letter written in 1932, urged his followers to talk to their children about their Hasidic past as a means of reinforcing their religious identity. "It is the duty and obligation of each one of our people...to tell his children, and members of his household, what he had seen and heard at the homes of his



Hasidic father and grandfather. By means of such stories he would establish the value of God-fearing on a sound basis.”<sup>21</sup>

People were encouraged not only to remember and talk of the past, but to write it down in the form of memoirs, histories, and stories, and to collect more information about it from the elderly who can remember further back.<sup>22</sup>

Reb Shlomo of Radomsk writes-“A story which retells the deeds of Tzaddikim is Torah” and then he continues by citing the Talmud: “The conversation of the Patriarchs’ servants is loftier than the Torah as studied by their sons.” Reb Shlomo explains: “This is so because the conversation – the storytelling – of the servants of the Patriarchs becomes the Torah of the sons.” Reb Nachman of Breslov concurs: “Through telling stories of tzaddikim, one draws down the light of the Moshiach (Messiah) into this world, and repels from it all manner of darkness and tribulations.”<sup>23</sup>

The Hasidic stories lead to many destinations. Some show how the hand of God is revealed – often supernaturally – through the wondrous workings of Tzaddikim. Others highlight the role of the Tzaddik in these wonders. Others conceal a moral, pointing to the reward given the righteous and the punishment to the godless. Still other stories have a didactic target, particularly those dwelling on the holiness of the Tzaddikim in their dealings with their fellows and in their rapport with their Maker. There are stories which teach via an original scholarly insight such as a novel interpretation of a Biblical verse or Talmudic teaching. Many stories fascinate us by the protagonist’s wit, intellectual prowess or sage understanding of human nature.<sup>24</sup>

The following further illustrates the power of the Hasidic story:

There is a story told:

Whenever the Jews were threatened with disaster, the Baal Shem Tov would go to a certain place in the forest, light a fire, and say a special prayer. Always a miracle would occur, and the disaster would be averted.

In the later times when disaster threatened, the Maggid of Mezritch, his disciple, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer." And again the disaster would be averted.

Still later, his disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Lord of the World, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I know the place and that must suffice." And it always did.

When Israel of Rizhyn needed intervention from heaven, he would say to G-d, "I no longer know the place, nor how to light the fire, nor to say the prayer, but I can tell the story and that must suffice." . . . And it did.

Remember the story, tell it, pass it on.<sup>25</sup>

Hasidim believe that tales like prayers, contain the potential to be active agents. The Rebbe often tells a tale to a troubled petitioner in which an identical problem was solved. This in itself may simply be reassuring. But the Rebbe may also conceal a prayer in the tale, or the tale itself may be considered a prayer. The tale may have the power of renewing the event it describes, thereby bringing about a successful conclusion once again. Storytelling has been used to shape desired ends, and therefore can be conceived of as the powerful, even mystical, equivalent of action.<sup>26</sup>

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE MAGGID OF KOZNITZ**

Rabbi Yisrael Hofstein, known as the Maggid of Koznitz, was one of the earliest leaders of Polish Hasidism. He was born in approximately 1737, in the Polish town of Opatow near Sandomiersz. His father was Shabtai, a poor but pious bookbinder and his mother, Perl, was childless for many years until Yisrael was born after she received a blessing from Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov.<sup>27</sup>

The reputation of the Koznitzer was that of a wonder worker without equal. He shared the name Israel with the founder of Hasidism, and many people called him the "second Baal Shem Tov".<sup>28</sup>

The boy received his early Talmudic training from the Rabbi of Opatow, Rabbi Dov Berish Katz, a grandson of "Rabbi Shabtai ben Meir Ha-Kohen (1621-62), author of "Sifsei Kohen". Later, he studied in Ostrowiec under Rabbi Yechezkel (d.1750) and in Horshcow, Volhynia under Rabbi Mordechai Zvi, son of Rabbi Yitzchak Ha-Levi Horowitz, Rabbi of Hamburg and Altona and author of "Mata'amei Yitzchak".<sup>29</sup>

It is reported that he once met Rabbi Haim Voloziner, the leading disciple of the Vilna Gaon and a fervent opponent of Hasidism. Rabbi Haim had a lengthy talmudic discussion with Rabbi Yisrael, and later said that the Koznitzer knew the entire Talmud, along with its major commentaries, by heart, word for word.<sup>30</sup>

In his early youth, Yisrael was the teacher of a small group of Jewish children in a Polish village. He never let anyone make his bed. Once, by accident, someone touched it and discovered that instead of sleeping on straw, he slept on bricks. When he realized

what had been found out, the villagers began to regard him as a holy man, and he subsequently disappeared from the village.<sup>31</sup>

After his father died, he moved to Peshischa, where he was introduced to Rabbi Shmelke, later of Nicholsberg. Rabbi Shmelke introduced him to the Mezricher Maggid (a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov), who was his mentor. It was upon meeting the Mezricher Maggid that Rabbi Yisrael is reputed to have said, "I had studied eight hundred books on Kabbalah, but when I arrived in the presence of the Maggid, I realized that I had not yet begun to study." The Mezritcher Maggid responded. "Blessed be the Holy Name. The Almighty has provided me with a young man who can edit the manuscript of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria's Siddur. (The Hasidim believed that a more perfect vehicle for prayer was the Sefardic liturgy, with modifications made by 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, in place of the more standard Ashkenazi liturgy). Now that you have arrived here, Rabbi Dov Baer foretold, Keser Yitnu will be recited in Warsaw as well" (meaning that more Jews, Polish Jews, would adopt the Lurian liturgy and become Hasidim).<sup>32</sup>

Upon the death of the Maggid, Rabbi Dov Baer, Rabbi Yisrael came under the influence of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, author of Noam Elimelech. There he met Rabbi Zusheh, the younger brother of Rabbi Elimelech, and Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak, later to be known as the famous 'Seer of Lublin'. He was also friendly with Rabbi Levi Yitzchak while he was Rabbi of Zhelikov, before becoming Hasidic Master of Berdichev.

In 1765, Rabbi Yisrael became Maggid of Koznitz, a town northeast of Radom, about 60 kilometres south of Warsaw. There he headed the Yeshiva and preached on Sabbaths and Holidays. He also preached in the neighbouring towns of Magnuszow and

Grice to supplement his meager income. He had a great love of learning, brilliant scholarship, a gentle and persuasive tone and his use of Torah texts were always illuminating. He once said, “He who studies Torah for its own sake becomes a chariot riding in the Name of God. Holiness rests upon him, and all the angels listen to him.”<sup>33</sup>

Rabbi Yisrael was also a prolific writer. Among his sixteen published works are “Avodas Yisrael” (Josefov, 1842), which is his principal work on Hasidism with discourses on the Torah and “Pirkei Avos”; “Or Yisrael” (Czernowitz, 1862) and “Nezer Yisrael” (Vilna, 1822), both of which are works on Kabbalah, and “Beis Yisrael” (Warsaw, 1864) on tractates Pesachim, Betzah, Chagigah and Moed Katan, which is his principal halachic work.

Rabbi Yisrael also wrote “Geulas Yisrael” about the Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah ben Batzalel Low of Prague), with whom he was deeply fascinated. His writings and responsa demonstrate his mastery of halachah and earned him the respect of his contemporaries.

His literary productivity as well as his many community commitments are all the more astounding given his physical frailty. He was often too weak to rise from his bed and had to be blanketed to keep warm. He had to be carried daily to the Beit Midrash. However, his overwhelmingly strong spirit overcame his physical disabilities.

Rabbi Yisrael did not forget the poverty of his early years and he was a father to many orphans, bringing them up in his own home. When a fire ravaged the Koznitz Jewish Quarter in 1778, he financed the rebuilding of an entire street known as ‘The Maggid’s Street’ and allocated houses to the poor. Wanting no material comforts, the Maggid himself lived simply, in austere surroundings. He did not, however, prescribe this

for others. He once asked a wealthy Hasid, "What do you eat every day?" Replied the rich man, "Very little. My needs are simple. Bread salt and water are enough for me." The Maggid reproved him. "Your way is not the good way. You should eat fattened chickens and drink wine. For if you eat well, you will give bread to the poor. But if your menu consists of dry bread, you will begrudge the poor even stones."<sup>34</sup>

He was modest in his ways, unassuming, devoid of worldly ambition, and highly revered by his colleagues. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov once said, "I have heard a 'bas kol' (heavenly voice) proclaim that he who lives in the generation of the Maggid of Koznitz and has not looked upon his face will not be worthy to welcome Moshiach (messiah) when he comes."<sup>35</sup>

His reputation for learning and piety spread. It was not long before thousands flocked to hear him teach. All the Hasidic leaders of his time made it a point to visit the Koznitzer and drink of his wisdom. The Maggid's fame spread beyond the Jewish community as well, as even noblemen paid him homage. Polish nobles such as Adam Czartoryski. Josef Poniatowski and Prince Raziwill visited him and consulted him. Adam Czartoryski was childless and Rabbi Yisrael offered a special prayer on his behalf. "O Master of the Universe, You have so many gentiles, let there be another one!" Czartoryski was blessed with a child and never forgot his debt to the Maggid.

Rabbi Yisrael was deeply concerned with the welfare of Jewry as a whole. He was one of twenty-four delegates who urged the Russian Government to abolish the tax on "shechitah" (ritual slaughtering). As with most Hasidim, Rabbi Yisrael opposed Napoleon. It is related by Hasidim that Napoleon himself came in disguise to plead with the Maggid but it was in vain, since the Rabbi interpreted the verse in Shemos(18:18)

“navol tibol” as ‘Napol tipol’ (i.e. Napoleon will fall). Rabbi Yisrael fought Napoleon with his prayers, fearing that Napoleon’s “enlightened” attitude toward the Jews would culminate in assimilation.

Rabbi Yisrael also attracted a number of magnates to his court who were able to negotiate on behalf of the Jewish community. One such individual was Yosef Manelsburg of Kazimiersz, owner of a salt monopoly, who was able to employ over five thousand Jewish families in his various enterprises.

As a passionate bibliophile, Rabbi Yisrael owned a fine collection of early prints of Kabbalistic manuscripts. Some of his most noted disciples were Rabbi Yitzchok Meir, founder of the Gur dynasty, and Rabbi Sholom Rokeach, progenator of the dynasty of Belz.

Rabbi Yisrael died October 8, 1813, erev Sukkoth (14 Tishrei 5574). A father to his Hasidim and to all Jewry, a statesman and a scholar, the Maggid was one of the most powerful pillars of Polish Hasidism.

It is noteworthy to mention that a number of Rabbi Yisrael’s disciples became prominent Hasidic leaders. In fact, the Hasidic dynasty that was started with the Maggid of Koznitz has its continuation at the present time in the United States, in the Holy Land (Israel) and in other countries.<sup>36</sup>

## **HASIDIC THOUGHT, PRACTICE AND TEACHINGS**

As an integral part of the Torah tradition, it is important to point out that Hasidism does not innovate. Its teachings and practices are not something new or novel that came into being for the first time with the founding of the Hasidic movement. Each one is deeply rooted in the Torah of Sinai. Any aspect of originality lies in new emphasis rather than substance.<sup>37</sup>

The founder of the movement, the Baal Shem Tov, emphasized the principle of Ahavas Yisrael, the commandment to love a fellow Jew as oneself. He encouraged and taught the poor, unlettered and oppressed masses of Jewry who at that time were separated from the scholarly elite by whom they were regarded as inferiors. The Baal Shem Tov emphasized the holiness of every Jew, stressing that everyone can serve G-d no matter what his background or endowments. He also re-emphasized the importance of joy in the service of G-d and performance of mitzvot (commandments). Furthermore, he taught the deepest doctrines of the 'esoteric' part of Torah in a way that even the simplest Jew could understand, expressing these profound ideas through parables, stories and aphorisms.<sup>38</sup>

In the stories that follow, several aspects of Hasidic thought and practice are revealed. In the first story, 'The Heavenly Tribunal....', the protagonists never abandon their belief in G-d. Rather they rely on their fellow man in time of need, they place their full trust and faith in G-d, always believing that G-d's help can come in the blink of an eye. Because of their deep faith, the couple is rewarded with a child. Reminiscent of the birth of Isaac whose parents were advanced in age, as well as of the Baal Shem Tov, this



story also emphasizes another important point found in Hasidic thought – that everything, every moment, every action, played out here in this world, is registered in the upper worlds, i.e. in the heavens, and the Tzaddik is in tune with what happens in the heavens. The Tzaddik is considered as the intermediary or the channel which transfers the divine grace from the higher worlds to his contemporaries.

From this story we are also introduced to the Hasidic custom of dancing on Shabbos. Hasidic men expressed their joy and passion for God by dancing – not only on Simchas Torah (Festival of the Law), but also on every Shabbos.

The second story, 'A Reason to Fast', deals with the custom of fasting with the intention of sharing the Messiah's pain for the troubles of Yisrael. It is recorded that the Maggid of Koznitz lived an ascetic life during part of his early years, as was the practice of many Tzaddikim. Let us try to understand the purpose and function of asceticism for the Hasidim. In "Likutei Amarim", Chapter 32, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains:

"...To view one's body with scorn and contempt, and finding joy only in the soul alone – is a direct and easy way to attain the fulfilment of the commandment, "Thou shalt love thy fellow as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18) toward every soul of Yisrael, both great and small... For, whereas one despises and loathes one's body, while as for the soul and spirit, who can know their greatness and excellence in their root and source in the living God? Being, moreover, all of a kind and all having one Father – therefore, all Israelites are called real brothers by virtue of the source of their souls in the One God; only the bodies are separated. Hence in the case of those who give major consideration to their bodies while regarding their souls as of secondary importance, there can be no true love and brotherhood among them, but only (a love) which is dependent on a (transitory) thing. (Avot 5:16)"

The tendency towards asceticism takes the focus off the body onto the soul, thus helping the soul to connect more easily with other souls. This attempt at unification is

seen as a step toward fulfilment of the messianic dream, a dream maintained by Jews in exile.

It is the way of the Tzaddik that when he is distressed or in exile, he is not preoccupied with his own soul's anguish but is concerned because the souls of Israel are the limbs of the Shechinah (Divine Presence), and in all likelihood His mighty Shechinah is impaired. It is about this that the Tzaddik protests.

In order to truly love one's fellow Jew one must view negativity (i.e. negative traits, behaviour, speech, etc.) as merely soiled garments which need to be laundered or changed. To hate the traits is acceptable, providing that one loves the soul inside which is connected to God, (the Godly spark within each soul). If there were true unity amongst all Jews, then it is assumed that 1) the Third Temple would be rebuilt, since the Second Temple was destroyed because of causeless hatred amongst Jews, and 2) that the rest of the world would benefit as well. The first step to take is within each Jew himself.

Hasidism often viewed the self as an entire world. This brings the discussion to another story 'Uniting the Worlds' which deals with the difficult concept of tikkun (literally meaning 'repair'). Hasidic thought has it that certain tikkun or repair is required here in this world, and that only when the repair is accomplished can we achieve the messianic dream. How does one begin to repair the world? The answer begins with oneself.

It is assumed one is involved daily in a battle between the Good Inclination (Yetzer Hatov) and the Evil Inclination (Yetzer Harah). Victory over these daily battles is the goal one must have. Hasidism teaches that when one recites tehillim (Psalms of David), that the many wars cited in these psalms should be interpreted as wars fought

against the Evil Inclination. Furthermore, according to Hasidic thought, the war against Amalek, who attacked the Jews on their way out of Egypt, is also interpreted as the war against one's own evil inclination.

The Maggid of Koznitz tried to encourage Jews in their battle against the Evil Inclination: "The Evil Urge comes to a person and says, 'How can you repent? You are so filled with sins!' This is not the truth. A person who truly wants to repent must say, "It is true that I am full of sins, but the past is the past. I will look only toward the future, and from now on I want to repent and return to God with all my heart." Our sages teach us that the word 'now' (Atah) alludes to repentance.<sup>39</sup>

The Maggid of Koznitz further encourages with his teaching:

"In the Passover Haggadah, we say, "At first our fathers worshipped idols, but now God has brought us close to His worship." The authors of the Haggadah arranged that we should speak about this at the time of our redemption. From this we learn the lesson that a person should not say, "I have done so many evil deeds until now. There is no way for me to be rectified and come close to God."

One should say the precise opposite and resolve to repent at least from this day on. He should say to himself, "Is it not true that our forefathers originally worshipped idols? Nevertheless, God brought us close to His worship."

The Midrash teaches us that Abraham was 48 years old when he first recognized God. (He was concerned with the sins of his youth, but) God consoled him by saying, "Dew is your childhood" – "your childhood shall be pure like dew" (Psalms 110:3).<sup>40</sup>

Another teaching of the Koznitzer warns us of the tricks of the Evil Inclination (or Evil Urge):

"The Evil Urge constantly tries to cool one off and discourage. He comes to entice humanity with many tricks, disguises and ideas. The Evil Urge says to man, "Why are you exerting yourself for nothing? You have done so many innumerable sins that it is impossible to repent them all. When you study Torah and worship, you do so without feeling, and regarding you it is written, 'the offering of the wicked is an abomination' (Proverbs 21:27). You have no pleasure in this world, and your hope in the Future World is also futile, so the end result will be that you will inherit Gehenna (hell) twice. Rejoice in your youth, eat,

drink, and be merry today, and do not worry what tomorrow may bring in the Future World.

If you see individuals who are called righteous, pious and men of deeds, and they constantly toil in Torah and worship, do not be impressed by appearances. Altogether they are impure, (paraphrasing Psalms 53:4), for who knows what they do when there is no one to see them?

The Evil Urge presses on in this manner, cooling off one's relationship to God and leading one to go against His teachings. In the end, this person is brought like an ox to the slaughter. God therefore tells us, "Remember what Amalek did to you...how he cooled you off on the way." (Deuteronomy 25:17,18).<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to note that Hasidic thought reminds us that the word in Hebrew for Amalek is equivalent to the Hebrew word for 'doubt' (sofek). (Each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value and when one word is equivalent in value to another, there is a relationship in meaning. This thinking is referred to as Gematria.)

Hasidism also placed great emphasis on prayer as a means of connecting the individual to God. Emphasis was placed on enthusiasm and deep concentration during prayer. This practice is revealed in the story 'Prayed for a Good Year', where the petitioner is so deeply absorbed in prayer that he does not hear what is happening around him. In the attempt to bring Godliness down to the individual, prayer was (is) the main weapon. Although prayer had traditionally been the Jews' weapon in the face of all enemies, Hasidism focussed on prayer with great emphasis and enthusiasm. As a means of encouraging Jews to pray to God and petition Him for all their needs and requests, the Maggid of Koznitz once said:

"We are bits of dust, full of sin and evil. Still we are worthy of speaking and petitioning before the King of Glory, the Creator of all, of whom it is said, No thought can grasp Him at all" (Tikuney Zohar 17a).

We can also call God “You”, as if we were speaking to another person standing in front of us. This is certainly a great expression of God’s love. It is the miracle of God’s love and mercy toward all creatures.”<sup>42</sup>

## **THE STORIES**

. . .In each tale. . .the reader should perceive His awesome deeds. He should infer the moral of each tale, so that he will be able to attach his heart to the fear of God, the beliefs of the sages and the power of the Holy Torah.<sup>43</sup>

### **THE HEAVENLY TRIBUNAL DANCED WITH**

Rabbi Shabtai Hofstein, otherwise known according to his trade, Rabbi Shabtai the Bookbinder, did not come from such a prestigious family, but he himself was a very honest Jew and served *Hashem* with holiness and purity and with great devotion.

He lived in the city of Opatow, in Poland and made a living from binding books. All his years he was a poor man, and had barely enough to survive. However, being a man of great faith, he was always happy with what the Creator gave him. He never complained to anyone about his lot. Quietly, he bore the yolk of his life, never complaining, always happy to be able to sit and learn Torah.

Regarding his wife, the righteous Perl, she never complained about their position, and so they lived many years.

One thing, however, disturbed their quiet life. All those years since their wedding, they did not have any children, yet they were already advanced in years. They never gave up hope that, if it is God's will, they would have a child of their own.

In their older years, Rabbi Shabtai could no longer earn money. In order to live, he had to begin selling objects from their home. He told his wife not to tell anybody about their severe difficulties.

When they had sold everything they had in their home, and there was nothing left to sell, they actually began fasting from Shabbos to Shabbos. What they had they saved for Shabbos in order to be able to get a few candles, a *challah*, a little wine for *kiddush* with a little fish and meat in honour of the Shabbos.

And there came one erev Shabbos (before the Sabbath) when there was actually nothing left in the house to pawn. Rabbi Shabtai's wife was very sad and sorrowful within. Only from time to time could one hear a tragic sigh being emitted from her aching heart.

Friday morning, Rabbi Shabtai took his *tallit* and *tefillin* and went to pray. Once more he reminded his wife not to tell anyone about their plight. If it is Hashem's will. He will help.

When Rabbi Shabtai left, Perl starting cleaning for Shabbos. She also put up some pots of water on the stove and heated the oven so that the neighbours would see something cooking for Shabbos, so that they should not think that they actually had no food for Shabbos.

While cleaning, she swept something out of a corner. It was an old piece of clothing from her wedding. She had this piece of clothing in her hands many times but never thought of it. But only now did she notice that in this piece of clothing there were silver buttons sewn in.

She cut off the few silver buttons, ran to the goldsmith and right away she had a few 'gilden' with which she immediately used to buy the necessities for Shabbos.

Only now did she see how right her husband had been, that the salvation from God, blessed be He, comes when one had great faith. Now she would have a proper Shabbos, with fish and meat, with challahs and wine, with candles and they would be able to celebrate the holy Sabbath with all the good things.

With great joy did she begin working to prepare for Shabbos. One thing bothered her, however. How would she let her husband know about their good fortune so that his heart would be pleased, that God had helped them to be able to enjoy Shabbos.

She decided, however, that when he would come home at night from 'davening' (praying), he would see everything in the house, and his joy would be even greater.

At nightfall, everything was ready. Perl lit many candles in the home in honour of Shabbos, and she started to daven herself and thank God for the great kindness which He dealt her.

After Kabbalos Shabbos (welcoming the Sabbath), when people started going home from davening, Rabbi Shabtai also started going home. He was very concerned. Who knows if his wife kept her promise and told no one about their sorrow and dire need? She is still a woman and her sorrow is greater than his. In a desperate time, she can't find solace in the holy books, as he could.

As he approached his home, he saw much light coming from the windows, even lighter than usual; he had no doubt that good people had helped them in their need, and thus he would have betrayed the law that advises not to take from people what you can get from heaven.



He decided not to confront his wife about her promise, so as not to disturb the Holy Shabbos with negative talk.

Rabbi Shabtai entered the home with a sanctified 'Good Shabbos', said *Sholem Aleichem* (a prayer of peace said on Shabbos), the blessing in praise of his wife, and made kiddush. His wife brought him a fine portion of fish, not at all the way it had been in the past few weeks at home. Rabbi Shabtai did not ask his wife any questions, from where she managed to get all this, but his wife saw his questioning look and decided to tell him everything.

When Rabbi Shabtai heard how G-d had helped him, and he didn't have to rely on other people, he started to dance with great joy and to thank G-d for the great kindness which he had bestowed upon him.

On that very same Friday night, the Holy Baal Shem Tov was sitting at the table with his colleagues. When the Baal Shem Tov finished saying kiddush, a smile spread across his lips; all his students wondered why he suddenly started smiling, but nobody was brave enough to ask, out of their great awe of the Baal Shem Tov.

After the ritual washing of the hands and when they had seated themselves at the table, the Baal Shem Tov once again started to smile, and after the meal was over, the Baal Shem Tov smiled again. The students couldn't figure out why he was smiling, but were anxious to find out.

When the Holy Sabbath ended, after *Havdalah* (the ritual that marks the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new week), one of the Baal Shem Tov's great students, Rabbi Wolf Kitzes, approached him and asked what had happened to make the Baal Shem Tov smile the way he had.

If you want to know what the great happiness was, answered the Baal Shem Tov, get ready to take a trip, and all will be explained.

The Baal Shem Tov and his students immediately set out on a voyage. They travelled until they came upon the village of Opatow. In the village, the people found out that the Baal Shem Tov had arrived and the townsfolk began scurrying around where the Baal Shem Tov stayed.

After davening, the Baal Shem Tov went to the Head of the Village and asked that he send for the bookbinder, Rabbi Shabtai, so that he could speak with him.

The Head of the Village couldn't understand why the Baal Shem Tov wanted to see the Bookbinder, but brought him anyway, and soon Rabbi Shabtai stood before the Baal ShemTov.

"And now," the Baal Shem Tov said to him, "tell me everything that happened last Friday night. Don't leave out any detail."

Rabbi Shabtai immediately started to tell the Baal Shem Tov and his students and all who had assembled there about how difficult life had been in the past several weeks, how difficult it had been just to get through the week, how he had to slowly sell all the objects in his home in order not to have to rely on other people. He told them what had happened erev Shabbos, when he had nothing to eat for Shabbos, how he decided not to ask anybody for help. but to rely totally on G-d, that He would give him what he needed. He told them how he came home Friday night after davening and was overjoyed to find everything in the house, all the good things for Shabbos.

"When I heard from my wife", Rabbi Shabtai concluded his awesome story. "how G-d had helped us so that we didn't have to depend on strangers. and so that my wife

could keep her promise, my heart was overcome with joy, and I showed my great gratitude to G-d with a joyous dance – three times that Friday night I broke out in a joyous dance in gratitude to God. After all the onlookers heard the interesting story that Rabbi Shabtai told them, the holy Baal Shem Tov spoke:

You should know, that at the time that the bookbinder broke out in a joyous dance on Friday night, expressing his gratitude to Hashem, there was a great '*simcha*' (celebration) in all the worlds, and the heavenly tribunal danced with and joined in his happiness. Now you can understand, the Baal Shem Tov explained to his students, why I smiled Friday night, because I saw the great simcha going on in the upper worlds, so it brought me a unique simcha.

And now, the Baal Shem Tov explained to Rabbi Shabtai, you should know that in heaven it is arranged that you choose whatever your heart desires, either wealth so that you can live out your years in richness and honour, or a child.

What use is wealth, responded Rabbi Shabtai. I would rather Hashem give me a child who would grow up to be an earnest Jew, and a talmid chachem (learned in the Torah).

You will have it, answered the Baal Shem Tov. So the Baal Shem Tov declared that, just as Rabbi Shabtai had enlightened and had created such joy in the heavens, so would heaven enlighten and bring him joy, by giving him a son who would make Jewish hearts happy with salvation and positive pleas.

Less than a year passed when Perl, Rabbi Shabtai's wife, bore him a child. The couple was already over sixty years old. It is impossible to imagine the joy that they experienced, as well as the joy that the entire town experienced along with them.

The Baal Shem Tov was invited to the Brit (circumcision) and was honoured with the position of *Sandek*. The Baal Shem Tov recommended a name for the child – Yisrael. (the same as the Baal Shem Tov's first name), who later grew to become the world-renown "Holy Koznitzer Maggid".

## **A REASON TO FAST**

Rabbi Shabtai was a concealed (like the 36 hidden Tzaddikim) great servant of Hashem. He was extremely fastidious in his observance of the *mitzvot* (commandments). With every little thing that he did, he had his special custom. In this way, Rabbi Shabtai also fasted on all the fast days in his life, just as the holy books instructed, how much to fast for various sorts of sins of which he suspected himself.

In his elder years, when Rabbi Shabtai was with his son, the Holy Maggid of Koznitz, he went to him with this question: As I have (thank God) fasted for all the fast days in my life, all which are prescribed in the Holy Books, and as I have enough strength (thank God) to fast further, I want to ask your opinion for what reason shall I fast further?

With great awe and respect, the Koznitser Maggid answered him: The holy sages (blessed be their memory) tell us that Moshiach (the Messiah) sits and suffers sorrow and pain, he suffers his woes for the troubles of Israel and the sins of the generation, as the prophet says in Isaiah Ch. 53 Verse 4 – Indeed he has borne our diseases, he is desecrated because of our sins, sick because of our transgressions.

Therefore – the Koznitser Maggid continued – if someone has strength to fast more than he has to he should fast with the intention of easing the pain of the Moshiach, he should pray to G-d that this pain which he takes on himself, should be taken away from Moshiach a little, from the pains which he suffers from the troubles of Israel.

Rabbi Shabtai took advice from his son and from that time on he always fasted with the intention of sharing Moshiach's pain for the troubles of Israel.

## **REMOVED THE ACCUSATION**

That the Maggid was strict about honouring his father, Rabbi Shabtai (blessed be his memory), we can see from the following story which took place with the Koznitser Maggid at the time when he still was a young man and found himself in a village near the town Chentshn, as a tutor in the family of a rich man in that locality.

When it was close to Pesach, the Maggid wanted to travel home for Yom Tov. The Head of the House, for whom he worked as a teacher, noticed that the Maggid was a great scholar and an even greater God-fearing man, so he didn't want the Maggid to bother himself on the way to Opatow, so he said to him: - I have a plan for you to come home quickly and not have to spend too much time on the way. I'm travelling to Chentshn for Shabbos (the Sabbath), because I want to hear the sermon that the Rav will give this Shabbos, on *Shabbos Hagadol*; in the town there is also the Rav's in-law who also lives in Opatow, so on Sunday you can go with him on the wagon.

The idea appealed to the Maggid and for Shabbos he drove to Chentshn together with his employer.

When they arrived in the town, they both immediately went to the Rav of the town to greet him. At another occasion the employer had once told the Rav of the town that in his town there was a young man, a teacher, who is a great genius and a great 'fearer of heaven'. Now, when he went to greet him, he hinted to the Rav that this was him, the young man about whom he once spoke.

At the Rav's house there were important individuals from the town and the Rav himself felt very uncomfortable, and when he looked at the thin young man who was

merely skin and bones, it seemed to him incredible that this thin young man who surely looked like a young boy, should actually be a Torah genius.

“From what town are you?” – the Rav asked the teacher with great disparagement. “From Opatow” – came the answer from the Maggid. “And who is your father?”

His father’s name is Rabbi Shabtai – the employer whispered in the Rav’s ear – and by trade he is a bookbinder, a binder of books.

Very nice! – the Rav said with a smile – we are then binders, from the same family.

How so? – the Employer asked.

Quite simple – the Rav answered – I am a Levi, and as it is known, the family of Korach is also Levi, and his father is also a ‘Korach’ of books...

The entire audience broke out in laughter upon hearing the little joke. The Maggid was left as if he had been slapped in the face and didn’t say another word. He left the Rav’s house and didn’t get together with him again.

The next day, when the Rav held his Shabbos Haggadol sermon, the Maggid came to hear him. The Maggid stood right opposite the Rav. The Rav started to deliver a deep Talmudic discourse. But right from the beginning, the strange young man stopped him at every sentence. The Rav asked a question, the young man showed that it wasn’t a question. The Rav gave an answer, the young man showed that it wasn’t anything at all, given that there is a clear passage in the Talmud that says the opposite, and there is also a famous commentary on the Talmud which indicates the opposite.

The Rav became very confused and had to stop in the middle of the discourse. He saw that he couldn’t match up to the young genius. He was, however, very angry that he

disturbed him in the midst of the discourse, and he said to the nearby people that it would be right for the young man to learn a little lesson, that he shouldn't do that again.

But no sooner did they turn around when the Maggid was no longer in the shull.

At the end of the Sabbath, the Maggid came to the Rav's house to apologise, begging his forgiveness for having disturbed him in the middle of his sermon. The Rav was, however, very upset and did not want to forgive him. So the Maggid told him:

“You should know, Rebbe, that you were sentenced to death. When I came to greet you before the Sabbath, you embarrassed me in public, in front of all the important people of the congregation who were with you in the room – that in itself was a great sin, but even worse than that you enjoyed making fun of my honest father whose trade is bookbinding, and you dragged his name in the mud, and therefore the death sentence was decreed upon you from heaven. I, however, made an effort to lighten your sentence and regarding the embarrassment which I caused you during your sermon, I worked it that the evil decree be annulled.

The Rav saw the justice of the statement, and started to feel that the young man who stood before him was not a simple man, but a very special Jew, and he apologised and they made amends.



## THE SERMON WORKED

It was also told how the Maggid always conducted himself when he would come to Opatow to prostrate himself at his father's grave, that they honoured him by asking him to give a sermon in the town's large *shull* (synagogue). Once when they honoured the Maggid by asking him to give a sermon, he declined and didn't want to give one. When they approached him to find out the reason for it, the Maggid asked: "A year ago, I gave a sermon here, but what good did it do? Have you become better than before?"

All of a sudden, someone approached the Maggid, a simple craftsman, and asked: "Holy Rabbi! How can you say that! I can testify that since a year ago, when I heard your sermon in which you spoke of the mitzvah of 'I HAVE PLACED *HASHEM* (GOD) BEFORE ME ALWAYS', plain and simple<sup>1</sup> - since then the holy name stands before my eyes, carved in black fiery letters on a white fire, and I constantly shiver because of it.

"Really! Really!", the Maggid called out with great enthusiasm – "In that case, I will also now give a sermon."

It was at that time the *Parsha of Beshalach*, (the week in which the Torah Portion of Beshalach was read) and the Holy Maggid started his sermon with the *Haftorah* 'DEVORAH WOMAN PROPHET'<sup>2</sup> deriving from it an incredible reproof, that the audience was weak with lament, and it is impossible to describe how great their arousal for repentance was.

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory phrase in the Shulchan Aruch

<sup>2</sup> Judges 4:4

## **PRAYED FOR A GOOD YEAR**

It was in the year 1737 (5497) that the following story took place in the town of Opatow. In the town there was a Jew who was very involved with the Polish government and was often found mingling with the higher officials. It was rumoured that he did not avoid or refuse to eat non-kosher foods nor drink wine together with the nobles, thus disregarding the laws of *Kashruth*.

One day, this same Jew decided that he wanted to lead the prayers on *Yom Kippur* and take on the special role of saying *Kol Nidre*. The congregation was very upset that this man, who was so obviously sinning regularly, would represent them on *Yom Kippur*. It is understood that this was not acceptable to the community; but this Jew was stubborn and he lobbied the local governor that he should talk to the congregational officers and allow him to do this.

It is understandable that they couldn't go against the governor in this case, but the community was terribly upset at such a desecration, that such a sinner should be so brazen as to take advantage of the congregation, especially on *Yom Kippur* night, the holiest day of the year.

Since they couldn't chase him away, because of the governor's decision, the congregation started banging on the tables and bookstands with the '*machzorim*' (holy prayer books used on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), which were bound with wooden slats. There was such a great tumult that you could not hear even one word of his praying. When he finished praying, and left the podium, the real cantor got up and did *Kol Nidre*.

Because of the tumult and the banging, many books were torn and the wooden slats broken. After prayers, when the congregation wished one another a good year, they went over to Rabbi Shabtai and said, "So, Rabbi Shabtai, you prayed today for a good and prosperous year!" They meant to say that he would have a lot of business binding torn books. (Rabbi Shabtai was a bookbinder). "Yes", said Rabbi Shabtai, "I prayed for a good year and I hope that God will answer my prayers and grant me a son." Apparently, Rabbi Shabtai was so intensely absorbed in his own praying, that he did not hear the tumult in shull (synagogue). He was so deeply praying to God for a son that he thought the loud noises were the '*kavanah*' (deep concentration or intention) of the other people's prayers.

The next year, the Koznitser Maggid was born to him and his wife.

## YEARS OF YOUTH

The little Yisroelke spent his early childhood years in Opatow. In those years, Rabbi Shabtai lived with great trepidation and fear. His only son, who was born to him when he was elderly, and who was more precious to him than the eye in his head, his only son who was born to him at a time when he thought he might die, for whom he had prayed to heaven for a superior soul, his Yisroelke, was a very weak child, sickly and thin.

The doctor was often in Rabbi Shabtai's home, and the whole town of Opatow fainted with weakness because his life was constantly in danger. The reason for this was that he was born to his father, Rabbi Shabtai the Bookbinder, in his elder years and therefore he was always very weak and pained, and constantly had to be lying in bed, covered in blankets, in order to keep him warm.

Because of the child's weakness and poor blood, everyone felt an obligation to the parents to commiserate with them because of his health, and to come with advice and remedies in order to bring the frail child help and recovery.

The little Yisroelke became very popular and known in the whole town. Furthermore, he was of excellent and exceptional appearance. His clear, white face shone like the sun at midday, and his eyes were lit with a holy fire, that all had to admit that the '*shechinah*' (divine presence) rested on him.

When the little one began to grow, one immediately noticed that this was not an ordinary child. Moreover, he was distinguished with his intelligence and brilliance which astonished everyone.

Aside from the fact that the little one started learning from the age of three, as was the custom, his father Rabbi Shabtai also started learning with him, wanting to fulfil the *mitzvah* (commandment), “You will teach them to your sons”. And so Rabbi Shabtai had the opportunity to convince himself of the wonderful, precious gift that God gave him, because the child revealed a great grasp and diligence, and it was already proclaimed that he was born to greatness.

But the strong diligence in learning weakened him further. The father and the mother hovered over him and didn't leave him, so that he shouldn't strain himself. But this helped little. Very often, in the middle of the night when Rabbi Shabtai would get up from his couch and go to his son's bed, he noticed to his great surprise how he wasn't sleeping, but he was struggling over what he had learned that day.

And very often, the little Yisroelke was sick, having the tendency to faint, and he would lie weakened as if life was fading from him. The only worry that Rabbi Shabtai and his wife had (since they were elderly) was that they should live to raise their child, their only precious child, who had already in his early childhood revealed his greatness, and G-d, blessed be He, had helped, and little Yisroelke grew steadily with his greatness and learning. Although he was by nature a very timid child and didn't reveal his talents, the whole town was still proud of the illustrious child.

The town of Opatow was known as a town of famous rabbis and '*geonim*' (eminences) and distinguished young students – a town that tasted of Torah and *Yiddishkeit*. In the town there were many study groups. Amongst them was the group called 'The continual light of Shabbos' of which many craftsmen participated, and also Rabbi Shabtai was a member.

The teacher of the group was the Rav Hachosid Rabbi Moshe Nathan Nuteh Shapira, and when the little Yisroelke was seven years old, his father inscribed him as a member of the group and paid membership money. This is what we read in the Pinkus (journal) of the group 'The continual light of *Shabbos*'.

"In Chol HaMoed Pesach 5504 (1744), accepted into the group the small boy Yisrael, son of Rabbi Shabtai, and his father gave as initiation dues, three coins of silver."

The Koznitser Maggid was very grateful to this group with whom he participated in his youth, and until his last years, he would pay his annual dues regularly.

## UNITING THE WORLDS

It seems that Rabbi Shabtai was one of the most distinguished and most loved people from the town of Opatow, and many times he was chosen to be *Gabbai*, appointed by the people as elector, one of the counsellors.

Also, his only son, the Holy Koznitser Maggid z"l (zichrono levrachah, which translated from the Hebrew means 'blessed be his memory'), held his father in the highest regard, and he grew up at his father's side. Rabbi Shabtai passed away in the year 1761 (5521) and was buried in the old cemetery in Opatow; on the the gravestone, which was likely placed by his son the Maggid, is said: "Po nikbar ( here is buried), a righteous man, the elder Rabbi Shabtai, son of Rabbi Zev Wolf z"l, died on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> of Shevat, may his soul be bound up in the web of life". The holy Maggid z"l, often went to prostrate himself by the grave of his father in Opatow.

Later, when the author of "Ohev Yisrael" became the Rav in Opatow, the Maggid travelled to Opatow, to visit the grave of his father and at the same time to visit the Ohev Yisroel who was the Rav in the town.

When the news came that the Maggid was coming to Opatow, there was a great tumult in the city, and thousands of people gathered to receive the Tzaddik of the generation.

The day that the Maggid came to the town was really like a *Yom Tov* (a holy day). The shopkeepers and the craftsmen dropped their utensils, the Torah scholars left their houses of study and the whole city – men, women and children – led by the beloved Rav,

the Tzaddik and the holy Ohev Yisrael z"l, went outside the city to greet the Koznitser Maggid.

In this manner, the Maggid came to Opatow and arrived at the home of the Rav. Already gathered there were the greatest Torah scholars and honoured people of the city. At the time that the Koznitser Maggid found himself in Opatow, the house was besieged with people who had come to him to be blessed, or to ask advice. The Maggid, who was known to be quite thin, nothing but skin and bones, sat and heard all the requests. When it came time to pray, however, he became strengthened like a lion and prayed with great enthusiasm.

It is told, that one time after praying, the Koznitser Maggid called to the Opatow Rav: "Tell me, Opatow Rav, what happened that before praying I saw in your Beit Medrash, that *Adam Harishon* (the first man) came in and spoke with you!"

"The story goes as follows", the Opatow Rav answered him. "When I came in to the Beit Medrash, put on the *Tallit* and *Tefillin*, I was ready to pray, but I waited for you until you were ready to pray. Meanwhile I became deeply absorbed in thinking about the sin of Adam and I attempted to defend and justify his action, and to be his advocate; therefore he came to thank me.

It is told that one time, when the Koznitser Maggid chose to go to the cemetery, the snow was very high; the Opatow Rav sent people out to clean the snow around his house up until the grave of Rabbi Shabtai, so that the Koznitser Maggid could easily make his way to his father's grave. Also, the Opatow Rav escorted him to the cemetery.

It is understood that a large crowd accompanied the two Tzaddikim, in order to watch the Tzaddik at his father's grave. The crowd climbed up onto the fence of the



cemetery and waited for the two Tzaddikim. When the Maggid came close to the cemetery, he started waving his hands in all directions. The crowd immediately came down and drew closer to the Tzaddikim. One of the bolder Hasidim asked the Opatow Rav why the Maggid was so impatient with those who stood up above, and why he motioned with his hands for them to come down.

The Opatow Rav smiled and said: “The Tzaddikim did not mean you, but this is what the story is: When the Maggid came to the cemetery, all the souls came out to greet him, and the Maggid made a gesture with his hands that he is declining this honour, and only then did the souls return to their place. When the Maggid stood near his father’s grave, he was in an ecstatic state (*‘fardveikit’*\*) Later when he got ready to leave the cemetery, he called out: “My father was a bookbinder, he bound the holy books. I, too, was just now a binder and I united the worlds, one with the other!”

\*when souls sensed a Tzaddik in their midst, they requested TIKKUN (repair) in the other world.

## WITH RABBI YOCHAI

Another story was told, from which one can see the great awe and respect that the Maggid felt for his father Rabbi Shabtai z"l.

The story was told by the Tzaddik, Rabbi Yosele Dombrover z"l who was a son-in-law of the Koznitser Maggid's son, Rebbe Rabbi Moshe Eliakim Briah z"l.

It was Rabbi Yosele's custom, each year, to travel to Mogelnitze, to prostrate himself at the grave of the Holy Tzaddik of Mogelnitze, the holy Rabbi Chaim Yechiel Meir z"l. whose *yarzheit* (anniversary of his death) falls on the fifteenth of Iyar, because Rabbi Yosele was an enthusiastic Hasid of the Mogelnitze Hasid, and from there he used to travel home by way of Koznitse and prostrate himself at the grave of the Koznitser Maggid on Lag B'Omer.

The supervisor of the holy graves of the Koznitser Maggid's Ohel (grave) was the elder Hasid Rabbi Moshe z"l. One time he approached Rabbi Yosele with a question, what is the reason that he always visits the Maggid's grave on Lag B'Omer?

The story goes as follows – Rabbi Yosele answered him – it happened in the time when I was supported by my father-in-law. Once, on Lag B'Omer, my father-in-law called me and a few other youth and said: "If you want to be in Meiron today at the grave of the holy Tana Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai z"l, you can prostrate yourselves at the grave of my father, the Maggid z"l; you will get the exact same impact as if you were in Meiron."

Do you know why? The father-in-law continued – first I will tell you a story that happened to my father, the Holy Maggid z"l. It was the custom of my father, to celebrate

the *Simchat Torah Hakkafoth* with great enthusiasm; he danced and rejoiced with the Torah until his soul gave out.

Once, on Simchas Torah, the father z"l, celebrated the *Hakkafoth* with such incredible enthusiasm, greater than any other year, you could see that he was extremely happy. The holiness was really burning in him. We didn't know and we couldn't tell where it was coming from. I myself couldn't even ask my father about it. But my brother-in-law Rabbi Avi Ezra Zelig Shapira z"l (the father of the Mogelnitser Rebbe z"l) did ask my father why today was such an outstandingly joyous *Hakkafoth*, because everybody noticed that today something special happened with my father.

Since you already asked me, my child – my father answered him – I will reveal to you what happened to me today, so that you should know that my father, Rabbi Shabtai z"l is in *Gan Eden* (paradise), in the same realm as Rabbi Yochai z"l, father of the godly Tana. Today, Rabbi Yochai asked my father to take him to me, he wants to see how I celebrate the *Hakkafoth* and that's why he foretold, that when Lag B'Omer came, he would take him to Meiron, to participate in the celebration of the anniversary of the death of his son Rabbi Shimon z"l. My father did what he did on account of this and both stood at my side at the time of the *Hakkafoth*.

And as soon as Rabbi Yochai stood near me at *Hakkafoth* – the Maggid came out – the holiness from him radiated such a fire in me, that I really almost expired (left my body, my earthly vessel) because of the great light.

From this I understood – my father-in-law told me – that just as my grandfather Rabbi Shabtai z"l, the Maggid's father, has a special relationship with Rabbi Yochai z"l, his son has the same relationship with the holy Tana Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, another

relationship with his son, my father, the Holy Maggid, and therefore we can feel on Lag B'Omer when we are at the grave of my father, the Maggid, something similar to what one feels when one finds oneself on the same day in Meiron at the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

## **PAID FOR THE FATHER-IN-LAW**

After his father, Rabbi Shabtai z"l died in 5521, the Maggid came home and lived in Opatow for a short time, and it was then that he became close to the Holy Maggid Rabbi Avraham from Pshischeh z"l. Afterwards he travelled to Pshische, where he settled. But even here, the Maggid knew how to conceal his greatness in Torah, with his worship of creation, and in this way very few knew of his greatness. There were, however, a few who could notice very early on, one of whom was the well-known Pshischer Rabbi Yissachar Berish z"l, who pledged to support the young illustrious boy with all his needs, and in that way he supported him for many years.

It is also told that in those years Rabbi Berish had to marry off a daughter. On the advice from the Maggid Rabbi Berish, who was a great '*Nagid*' (wealthy person), he travelled to Hamburg, to the Yeshiva of the Baal Tiferet Tzvi, who then the Rav in the three communities (Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbeck), and there he chose as a son-in-law, a nephew of the Gaon Baal Pnei Yehoshua z"l, a well-known sharp-witted person Rabbi Nathan Yechezkel z"l.

Years later, Rabbi Nathan Yechezkel to whom the father-in-law left a large amount of riches, became very impoverished and he fell to such a level that he had to rely on support. When the Maggid learned about this, he felt deep sorrow. He pondered pleadingly. His father-in-law supported me quite a few years and thanks to him I was able to sit and learn; why should his child (and such a great scholar besides) fall to such a low level?

The Maggid sent for Rabbi Nathan Yechezkel that he should come with his entire household to Koznitz. There he let him rent an honourable flat and each week the Maggid sent him five dollars salary, as long as he lived.

## ON WHOM TO HAVE PITY

It was once told to the Koznitser Maggid that one of his *Hasidim* lived in great poverty and need. He doesn't have a piece of bread to eat, he sits day and night learning Torah and praying. The entire town of Opatow sees that after *Maariv* (evening prayer), he learns until midnight, says the midnight prayers (*tikkun chatzos*), goes to sleep on an empty stomach on one of the benches in the Beit Medrash. The sorrows of this *Hasid* – the Jew explained – cannot be imagined. We must see to it that something be done for this impoverished individual.

So, it is understood – the Maggid answered – we must see to it that something be done for this precious Jew and I will certainly help him. I will, however, help him, not out of pity, on the contrary, I am envious of him, deeply envious, because I have pity on a Jew who does not learn, does not *daven maariv*, doesn't know about the midnight prayers, goes to sleep with a full stomach on a soft bed – this is the kind of Jew we should take pity on, this kind of Jew only G-d himself must come and help.

## A MARK REMAINED

When the Koznitser Maggid was once in the town of Brody, he stopped at a house and had a strange thought. His travelling companions wondered what the Maggid saw in that old house. Upon questioning him, the Maggid answered:

- I see a great *tumeh* (contamination) that is emanating from this house.

They started to question around and found out that in that house the *Mitnaggedim* (opponents of Hasidim) burned the book '*Toldot Yacov Yosef*'<sup>3</sup> of Polonye z"l, and consequently the house became filled with a contaminated spirit, which the Holy Maggid immediately sensed.

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<sup>3</sup> The book. Toldot Yaakov Yosef, is most significant as the main source for the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism.



## **THE CANDLE BURNS THE ENTIRE NIGHT**

At seven years old, the Maggid of Koznitz studied in the *Yeshiva* of the renowned scholar Rabbi Yechezkel of Ostrovitz. However, at night, when the Yeshiva boys went to sleep, little Yisroelke used to stay in the Yeshiva, learning alone half the night and sometimes all night. His father, however, warned him not to tire himself out, because he was very weak.

Rabbi Shabtai loved his only son like the eye in his head, and did not believe in striking him even when it seemed necessary.

It is told that once, on Chanukah, his father refused him permission to go to the *Beit Medrash* after kindling the Chanukah lights, because many of the boys would play cards and did not learn. Rabbi Shabtai advised him, rather, to stay at home and rest. The young Yisroelke, however, assured him that he was going to the *Beit Medrash* to go over the *Shiur* and that he has no interest in avoiding learning.

Therefore – Rabbi Shabtai said – take with you a candle of the size that cost no more than three small coins and learn as long as the candle burns, and so if you stay longer, I will have a sign that you spent time with the boys in nonsense and played cards.

Yisroelke took the candle and sat down to learn. The angels in heaven, however, had such pleasure in his learning (study), that a miracle occurred and the candle burned all night.

The young diligent student completely forgot, so deeply entrenched was he in his learning. He had a sign, however, that as long as the candle burned, he must continue learning.

Suddenly he sees that dawn is breaking and the early risers are starting to come for the first *minyán*. So Yisroelik closed the *Gemorah* , and went home to bed.

His father, Rabbi Shabtai, did not sleep the whole night. He knew that the candle should burn for an hour, two or three, and here a whole night passed. Likely, he was drawn in to the card playing. Therefore, Rabbi Shabtai reprimanded him and even beat his son...

The Maggid, in retelling this story years later, commented:

My father z"l. knew that I never lied and he would have believed me had I told him that I had studied all night. However, I thought it would be sinful to spare myself a beating by making use of the honour of the Torah , and that is why I chose to be beaten and bruised in silence.

## **THE MAGGID'S STREET**

Due to his great love for his fellow Jew, the Holy Maggid was deeply involved with charity and kindness without measure. The great Tzaddikim of his generation give witness to this, that he was a father of orphans. In his home, orphans lived for many years, until he married them off.

All the monies that used to come to his house from *pidyon hanefesh letters* and *kvitlech*, the Maggid used to distribute to the poor and to Talmidei Chachamim (those who studied Torah), to orphans and to widows.

In the year 1778 (5538), a fire broke out in the town, and most of the houses were destroyed by smoke. The Maggid put all his efforts into raising money to rebuild the houses.

In Koznitz, there is a street which the Maggid totally rebuilt and distributed the houses to the poor. Thus, the street was named "The Maggid's Street".

Also, the synagogue in the town was renovated by the Maggid and he invested a lot of money in it, in order for it to be beautiful and well lit, as is fit for such a holy place.

## **FROM THE PESUKIM (VERSES)**

One time a Jewish woman came to the Koznitser Maggid z"l, and gave a *kvitl* (letter of request), stating that her child is confused in her mind . She had already been to doctors and they haven't found the reason for this and they cannot help. Also the professor where they last were, told her that there is nothing to do for the child.

The Maggid began mixing up the *tehillim* which were lying on the table. Afterwards he called over the mother:

- Your child's name is "Yoel" (Yud, Vav, Aleph, Lamed), the first letters of the posuk (Tehillim 115) (Aznaim Lahem V'lo Yishmayoo), they have ears and do not hear; and again from the other part of the posuk (verse) (Af Lahem V'lo Yirichun), they have a nose and cannot smell. Therefore the child suffers in the ears and in the nose. Thus the mother should go with the child to an ear and nose doctor .

The mother did so and the doctor managed to find the root of the sickness in the ears and in the nose. And the child became healthy again .

The father of the child later came to the Maggid to tell him about the miracle, that the child is already fully cured with God's help.

The Maggid answered:

- I know that your child is cured. I learned it from a posuk (verse) in Tehillim 118 Eil Yud V'yaer Lanu (G-d will enlighten us) – is once again the first letters of Yoel, that the Blessed One will enlighten him!

## **GLOSSARY**

*Beit Medrash* – house of learning

*Challah* – thrice-twisted bread used on the sabbath

*Daven maariv* – pray the evening prayer

*Fardveikut* – being in the ecstatic state of cleaving to the Creator

*Gabbai* – person responsible for the proper functioning of synagogue or other communal body; a kind of organizing secretary to a Rebbe

*Gemorah* – that part of the Talmud that discusses and explains the mishnah; loosely, the Talmud as a whole

*Haftorah* – excerpt from the Prophets read each Sabbath and Festival

*Havdalah* – literally, separation; benedictions pronounced over wine at nightfall at the conclusion of a sabbath or festival to mark it off from the ordinary weekdays that follow

*Hashem* – literally, the name, referring to G-d

*Hasid* – one who follows Hasidic tradition; literally, a righteous person

*Hasidim* – disciples and descendants of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement

*Kavanah* – deep concentration in prayer; sincere, deep intention during the performance of a mitzvah

*Kashruth* – Jewish dietary laws

*Keser Yitnu* – from the kedushah of the sabbath musaf (additional) prayer in the sephardic ritual

*Kiddush* – sanctification; blessing over wine expressing sanctity of shabbos or festival

*Kol Nidre* – service on Yom Kippur absolving all vows

*Kvitlech (kvitl)* – letters or notes of request or petitions to the Rebbe

*Maariv* – evening prayer

*Machzorim* – holy prayer books used on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

*Maggid* – preacher

*Melaveh malkeh* – after the sabbath, a Saturday night event to bid goodbye to the Sabbath Queen

*Minyan* – a group of ten Jewish males, required for prayer

*Mitzvot* – literally, commandments or connections, relating to the 613 commandments based on the laws in the five books of Moses

*Parsha of Beshalach* – Torah portion Beshalach

*Pidyan Hanefesh letters* – literally, redemption of the soul notes, accompanied by donation for charity, requesting Rebbe to intercede in prayer for the writer

*Rav* – Rabbi; Rebbe

*Sandek* – one selected to hold the baby boy during his circumcision

*Shabbos* – the holy sabbath; the seventh day of the week

*Shabbos Hagadol* – literally, The Great Shabbos; the Shabbos before Passover

*Shechinah* – divine presence

*Shiur* – lesson in Torah

*Shohetim* – slaughterer of kosher animals, for consumption

*Sholem aleichem* – literally, peace to you; song sung at the onset of the sabbath

*Simchah* – joy; celebration

*Simchas Torah Hakkafoth* – hakkafoth literally means circuits, the sevenfold procession made with the Torah scrolls in the synagogue on Simchas Torah, and accompanied by singing and dancing

*Tallit* – traditional prayer shawl with tzitzit (fringes) worn by Jewish males

*Tefillin* – leather straps and boxes worn on head and arm by Jewish males in weekday prayers

*Tehillim* – the Psalms of David

*Tikkun chatzos* – midnight prayers traditionally said by hasidim

*Tumeh* – contamination

*Yeshiva* – a place where one learns Torah on a higher level

*Yiddishkeit* – Jewishness ; Judaism

*Yom Kippur* – Day of Atonement

*Yom Tov* – literally, good day, referring to the Holy Days or the Festivals

*Yorzheit* – anniversary of a person's day of death

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In Polish, the name 'Koznitz' is spelled 'Kozienice'
- <sup>2</sup> These stories were translated from a book "Der Magid fun Koznitz", Ateret Publishing, Jerusalem. by Menachem Mendel, 1987
- <sup>3</sup> Ben-Amos, Dan and Jerome R. Mintz, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, The Earliest Collection of Legends about the founder of Hasidism, p.xxi
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>5</sup> Aron, Dr. Milton, Ideas and Ideals of the Hassidim, p.277
- <sup>6</sup> Seltzer, Robert M., Jewish People Jewish Thought, p.493
- <sup>7</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, p.3
- <sup>8</sup> Scholem, Gershom, Zohar, The Book of Splendor, Introduction
- <sup>9</sup> Ben-Amos, Dan and Jerome R. Mintz, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, p.xxii
- <sup>10</sup> Seltzer, Robert M., Jewish People Jewish Thought, p.492
- <sup>11</sup> Aron, Dr. Milton, Ideas and Ideals of the Hassidim, p.281
- <sup>12</sup> Mintz, Jerome R., Legends of the Hasidim, p.26
- <sup>13</sup> Ben-Amos, Dan and Jerome R. Mintz, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, p.xxii
- <sup>14</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, p.5
- <sup>15</sup> Dresner, Samuel H., The Zaddik, p.148,149
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p.100-101
- <sup>17</sup> Schneerson, R'Yosef Yitzhak of Lubavitch, Likutei Dibburim, An Anthology of Talks, translated by Uri Kaploun, p.116
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>19</sup> Aron, Dr. Milton, Ideas and Ideals of Hasidim.
- <sup>20</sup> Mintz, Jerome R., Legends of the Hasidim, p.4
- <sup>21</sup> Rapoport-Albert, Ada, "Hagiography with Footnotes: Edifying Tales and the Writing of History in Hasidism", Igrot Kodesh, Yosef Yitshak xi, letter no. 3886, p.187
- <sup>22</sup> Essays in Jewish Historiography, p.153
- <sup>23</sup> Zevin, Rabbi Shlomo Yosef, A Treasury of Chassidic Tales, p.xvii
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*, introduction
- <sup>25</sup> The Jewish Storytelling Coalition, from the internet at <http://www.ultranet.com/~jewish/story.html>
- <sup>26</sup> Mintz, Jerome R., Legends of the Hasidim, p.8
- <sup>27</sup> Rabinowic, Rabbi Tsvi, Hasidic Rebbes, From the Baal Shem Tov to Modern Times
- <sup>28</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, p.133
- <sup>29</sup> Rabinowic, Rabbi Tsvi, Hasidic Rebbes, From the Baal Shem Tov to Modern Times
- <sup>30</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, p.134
- <sup>31</sup> Aron, Dr. Milton, Ideas and Ideals Of the Hasidim, p.178
- <sup>32</sup> Rabinowic, Rabbi Tsvi, Hasidic Rebbes, p.75
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p.76
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p.77
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>36</sup> Aron, Dr. Milton, Ideas and Ideals of the Hasidim, p.182
- <sup>37</sup> Schochet, J.I., Hasidic Dimensions, p.15
- <sup>38</sup> Schneerson, Rabbi Menachem M., On the Essence of Hasidus, Kehot Publication, p.xiv
- <sup>39</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, excerpt from The Maggid of Koznitz' Avodath Yisrael, Shavuoth (58a)
- <sup>40</sup> *ibid*, Avodath Yisrael, Pesach (45b)
- <sup>41</sup> *ibid*, Tetzaveh (33b)
- <sup>42</sup> Kaplan, Rabbi Aryeh, The Light Beyond, excerpt from The Maggid of Koznitz' Avodath Yisroel, Lech Lecha (6a)
- <sup>43</sup> Ben-Amos, Dan and Jerome R. Mintz, In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov, preface.



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