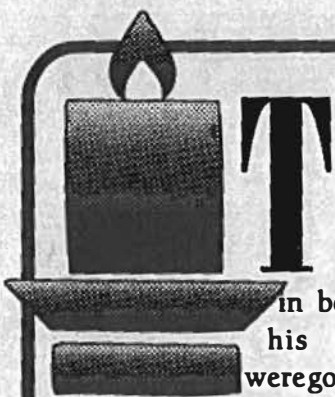


**THE  
BLUE  
FLAME**

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BY DEVORAH KIRSCH

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The old rabbi was lying awake in bed. All of his disciples were gone; he had sent them away, except one, who had refused to leave Mezhibozh. Even though their prayers worked like pills of medicine, he felt their healing powers were needed elsewhere.

The room was silent, the shades at half-mast. Waning sunlight slithered through, making his weary face livid. Yet those eyes glowed softly, like melting wax.

The door opened, and in walked his remaining disciple. "Rebbe, the Gemara *shiur* is over."

"Is learning ever over?"

"I mean, they're gathering for *minchah*," explained the younger man. "Shall I bring them here?"

"No, I'll go there."

Grunting, the old man tried to rise.

The disciple hurried over. "Rebbe, please."

"Nonsense," whispered the man. "I am going to meet the Divine Presence, which dwells in every *minyán*. It's disrespectful, don't you think, to have royalty come to you?"

The disciple didn't dare disagree. Hadn't it been like this ever since the end of Pesach? That was when he, Pinchas, had left Koritz to be with his master, Rabbi

Yisrael, the Ba'al Shem Tov. At the time, noticing how faint his master looked before the ark, Rabbi Pinchas had insisted he sit down.

But the Ba'al Shem Tov had refused. In fact, he had planted his feet ever more firmly and with a voice like thunder drawn upon his seemingly limitless reserves of power.

Pinchas had decided then and there to stay on in Mezhibozh. It was the first time he had ever defied his rebbe's will.

Gently the student propped the bony body forward, and he helped his master onto wobbly legs. In spite

*After "Aleinu," the Ba'al Shem Tov clutched his coat tightly, then advanced and carefully bent his frame onto a high-backed chair.*

of the late spring heat, the Ba'al Shem Tov wrapped himself tightly in his black coat to insulate himself.

"Nu?" he said.

Leaning slightly on his devoted disciple, the Ba'al Shem Tov hobbled from the bed to the door. On the way he bumped against the bureau, nearly knocking over an empty pipe and a tobacco pouch.

The Jews who filled the narrow streets, making their Shavuot preparations, nodded to him and pointed as soon as he passed by. As usual, a row of people was waiting outside the synagogue door with tears and petitions — recovery for a dying child, aid for a daughter's dowry, rescue from kidnapers, and the latest miracle.

"*Ashrei*," chanted the Ba'al Shem Tov before the ark. The curtains shook and the embroidered lions roared back. The voice defied all logic — thin with age and weakness, yet lilting, and sturdy, like a rope of many strands.

The congregants tried to keep their eyes on the wall before them, but eventually all turned to the ark and the lions. After "Aleinu," the Ba'al Shem Tov clutched his coat tightly, then advanced and carefully bent his frame onto a high-backed chair.

He spoke. His voice rose and fell in quiet cadences, while his eyes dissolved into the candlelight. He spoke of the future age, how the Jews would enjoy great abundance

in the world before losing it, and how they would subsequently labor to bring the Mashiach.

His listeners inched forward, hoping for word that the Mashiach would come soon. The time was ripe, with the bitter taste of the false Messiah Shabbetai Zvi finally having left their mouths.

When it turned night, the Ba'al Shem Tov finished and the evening prayers commenced. After *She moneh Esrei*, all eyes turned to the chassidic leader.

He gripped the lectern. "Blessed are You, Hashem, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer."

"Amen."

"Today is the forty-ninth day, which is seven weeks of the Omer."

The others repeated the blessing, soared by wings of purity and exalted to reach the final rung in their heavenly ascent.

After the final *Kaddish*, the Ba'al Shem Tov turned to leave. When he nearly stumbled, Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz hurried over. The other Jews watched in consternation as their leader was helped to the door.

At the threshold the Ba'al Shem Tov, turned and said:

"Before my dear wife passed away, I used to believe that, like Eliyahu HaNavi, I would rise up to Heaven in a storm — intact, not dead or broken. But after her soul was taken away, I realized that I had become only half a body, and that this was no longer possible."

He chuckled. "So you must forgive me for my slowness of movement. I am now only half a man."



It was a golden Shavuot dawn. While the study hall echoed with

sleepy voices, the Ba'al Shem Tov gazed commandingly at two men hunched over their Mishnayos. The men put down the volume, hurried over, and followed



"A soul is preparing to leave this world."

their rebbe into an alcove behind a small library.

The Ba'al Shem Tov stood there a few moments. His skin, beforehand a moony white, now looked as crumbly as the parchment of an ancient Torah scroll. His eyes still burned, but not with redness; they were rather like a flame being drowned by waves of sinking wax. He had stayed up all night like everyone else, as was the holiday custom, to learn Torah. He had even given a discourse on the revelation at Mount Sinai.

"Reb Yankel, Reb Shloimie," he began. "You two are long-time members of the *chevra kaddisha*, the burial society, no?"

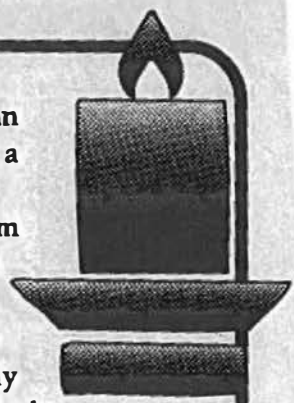
They nodded.

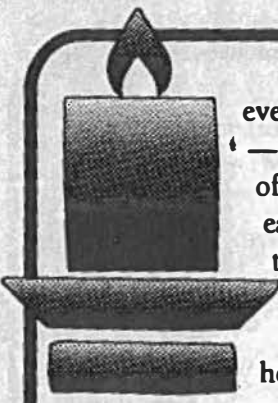
"Then I expect you to be most adept," he continued. "A soul is preparing to leave this world. I will tell you now how to prepare."

The two men blinked in bewilderment. Neither of them knew of anyone in the town who was critically ill.

The Ba'al Shem Tov raised his left arm. "The soul will pass first through this arm, which has lain *tefillin* every day since bar mitzvah, then upward, through the shoulders and chest, which have donned a *tallis* faithfully."

He continued by pointing to





every single limb — and counting off a mitzvah for each one — until he came to his forehead.

“And on this head, which has never been bare of skullcap, the soul shall finally depart, to rejoin with its source.”

The men finally understood, and they gasped in unison.

“You, Rebbe! G-d forbid! Heaven should grant you many long years!”

The Ba'al Shem Tov faced the window, whence the light penetrated his skin like a paper lantern. “I expect you to rely on your expertise with those who have passed on before me.”

He turned from the window. “Now, please. I would appreciate your sending me Reb Simcha and Reb Yitzchak Alter. To such close and faithful friends I owe a few words of gratitude.”

Wiping away their tears, the two men backed away and hurried out of the alcove. The Ba'al Shem Tov called out, “And please send for my disciples. I know they have come here to see me. I shall not let them down. I will even have them here for the holiday services, in private.”

His hands groped for a well-worn prayer book. “Now, please,” he said apologetically. “I want to

busy myself with my Creator for a bit more.”



In the late morning, as the sun cast a gaudy yellow over the street, crowds of yawning Jews straggled home. Only one man hurried against the traffic.

Clutching his tallis, Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka beat heavy footsteps into the mud-baked earth until he arrived at the door of the study hall. He pushed it wide open and, once inside, threw himself before the ark.

“Master of the universe!” he called. “My rebbe and guide, the Ba'al Shem, lies at death's door. I beg You, grant him long life — for my sake, and for the sake of the Jewish people!”

*The Ba'al Shem Tov smiled. “Why do you weep? Why concern yourself over an old man? I already know where I am going. Simply out one door and into another.”*

Elsewhere, the Ba'al Shem, lying placidly in bed, raised his head and turned to his servant.

“In vain,” he murmured. The servant stopped, startled.

“What, Rebbe?”

“At this moment, my dear disciple Nachman is beseeching the gates of Heaven for my speedy recovery. But it is in vain. He cannot get in at the door by which he used to enter.”

The servant hurriedly darkened the room, then exited.

He found the vestibule crowded, with men in shiny black and women in holiday gingham reciting Tehillim and jostling each other in order to be the first to see the holy Ba'al Shem Tov. Outside it was a beautiful Shavuos day, a day which seemed to leave no room for sadness or mourning.

Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz stood before the crowd, which swayed in time to his singsong phrasing of Tehillim. At the sight of the servant slouching by he gestured questioningly.

The servant took a long, poignant breath. “I just heard him say, ‘I give you those two hours.’” At last the servant could not hold back any longer, and he wept. “I know what he is saying. He is telling the Angel of Death not to torment him two more hours. He is about to leave this world.”

Rabbi Pinchas shook his head. “No. He means he has two more hours to be in this world. And it was not the Angel of Death he was addressing.”

“It was not?” asked the servant.

“No. He was saying that he would give Hashem a gift of those

two hours." Rabbi Pinchas cried. "Who else would spend his last two hours this way? It is a true sacrifice of the soul."

The servant motioned to the crowd. "Don't push! Keep in order. No use fighting — the Ba'al Shem Tov will be here." He muttered to Rabbi Pinchas, "Imagine! Instead of saving his strength, what does he insist on doing? Coming out and meeting the people!"

"What did I tell you?" replied Rabbi Pinchas. "A gift of two hours."

The study door opened. Weakly the Ba'al Shem Tov emerged, his

face by now a pasty yellow. He inched forward, then opened his mouth.

The words were soft but not sad. They drifted along the wooden walls and out into the crisp sunny air of spring. Only after he finished did he sigh, like someone about to take leave of his beloved family.

That Shavuot afternoon, the Ba'al Shem Tov gazed upon his disciples. There, of course, were Pinchas of Koritz and Nachman of Horodenka. But others huddled there too, among them the Ba'al Shem's son Zvi and Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch. This heir to the throne stiffened, trying to fight back his tears.

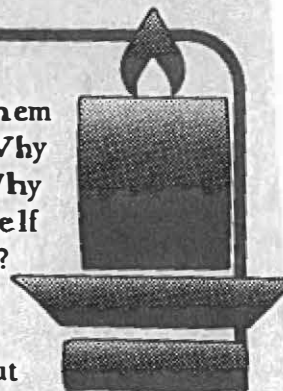
The Ba'al Shem Tov smiled. "Why do you weep? Why concern yourself over an old man?"

I already know where I am going. Simply out one door and into another." He waited a few moments, then continued, "Now I know for what I was created."

Grunting, he propped himself up, while the servant hurried over to adjust the cushions.

"What do you think happens to

*(Continued on page 26)*



**"My rebbe and guide, the Ba'al Shem, lies at death's door. I beg You, grant him long life — for my sake, and for the sake of the Jewish people!"**

## The Blue Flame

(Continued from page 7)

a soul when it leaves this world? Do you think it just shrivels up and disappears, like a dried caterpillar skin? No. It flies higher, like a butterfly."

His eyes suddenly were on fire, and he gasped for breath. "Up there . . . in the sky . . . do you see what I see? Or do you see only clouds?"

His audience was wordless.

"There . . . I see a pillar of fire. A pillar which the souls, after death, mount from the lower paradise to the upper paradise, to the very Tree of Life.

"I shall surely return, but not as I am now."

With that he sagged into the cushions.

The men quickly murmured, "And let the graciousness of the L-rd our G-d be upon us."

Suddenly the holy man shot up again and whispered words they could not hear. But they knew it wasn't to them he was speaking. He was addressing the Heavenly throne, where he was directing his soul.

He again fell and stretched out on the mattress. But again, over and over, he sat up to continue his intensive dialogue.

At last he lay there, nearly extinguished.

"Please cover me," he bade.

Quickly one of the men pulled

up the sheet.

But the body heaved up and down with breath, the eyes still flickering.

Then came the whisper. "My G-d, L-rd of all worlds!" Then a verse: "Let not the foot of pride come upon me."

And the fire went out.



*Suddenly the holy man shot up again and whispered words they could not hear. But they knew it wasn't to them he was speaking. He was addressing the Heavenly throne, where he was directing his soul.*

The funeral was large, as expected, the cortege spilling past the cemetery confines. As the crowd of mourners walked away, Yankel and Shloimie, the two members of the *chevra kaddisha* who had supervised the burial, caught up with Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz.

"Amazing!" puffed Yankel. "If only you had been there during the *taharah*."

"What happened?" asked Reb Pinchas.

"While we were tending to the body, we saw a light — a light! It rose through the room and out the window."

"Not just a light," added Shloimie. "It was a blue flame!"

Shortly later, the Ba'al Shem Tov's son Zvi was gesticulating before a group of listeners in the synagogue. "I saw him! I saw my father! He came to me, looking like a mountain!"

"A mountain?" exclaimed one man.

"I tell you, a mountain, just like Sinai on Shavuot. It was full of fire, and it burst into millions of sparks. But I knew it was him.

"I asked him, 'Father, why do you appear in such a shape?' And do you know what he answered? 'In this shape I served G-d.'"



Several years afterward, Rabbi Zvi was walking home late at night when he found himself lost along a river. This river was notorious for its current, which had drowned a woman many years back. The river had been cursed by the Ba'al Shem Tov, who caused it to dry up. But when the river complained to Heaven, the decree was changed. It was ordained that at some future time the river would over-

flow its banks for a few hours. At that same moment, one of the Ba'al Shem Tov's descendants would try to cross the river and would need rescue from the Ba'al Shem Tov.

That time had come. In the darkness Rabbi Zvi failed to see the tiding waters, and when he stepped into the spongy sand he was immediately swept away.

He groped the air and wheezed,

trying to pull himself above the swirling waves. All he could see was black — water, shore, trees, and the sky, which was starless and still.

Suddenly he beheld a pinpoint of light, which grew larger and rounder. Like a sun, the light burst into tongues of flame, rising and licking the air.

Mustering all his strength, Rabbi Zvi pushed himself forward, and like a fish he arched his back against the current. Finally he floated forward,

until he stretched his arm toward the pulsating orb.

At last his body touched the muddy riverbank.

"Father," he whispered in dazed surprise.

But the circle of light had faded. All Rabbi Zvi could see was a fading blue flame amid a black background. And with grateful tears he bid farewell to the fiery soul of his father, the Ba'al Shem Tov. JB



Finally he floated forward, until he stretched his arm toward the pulsating orb.

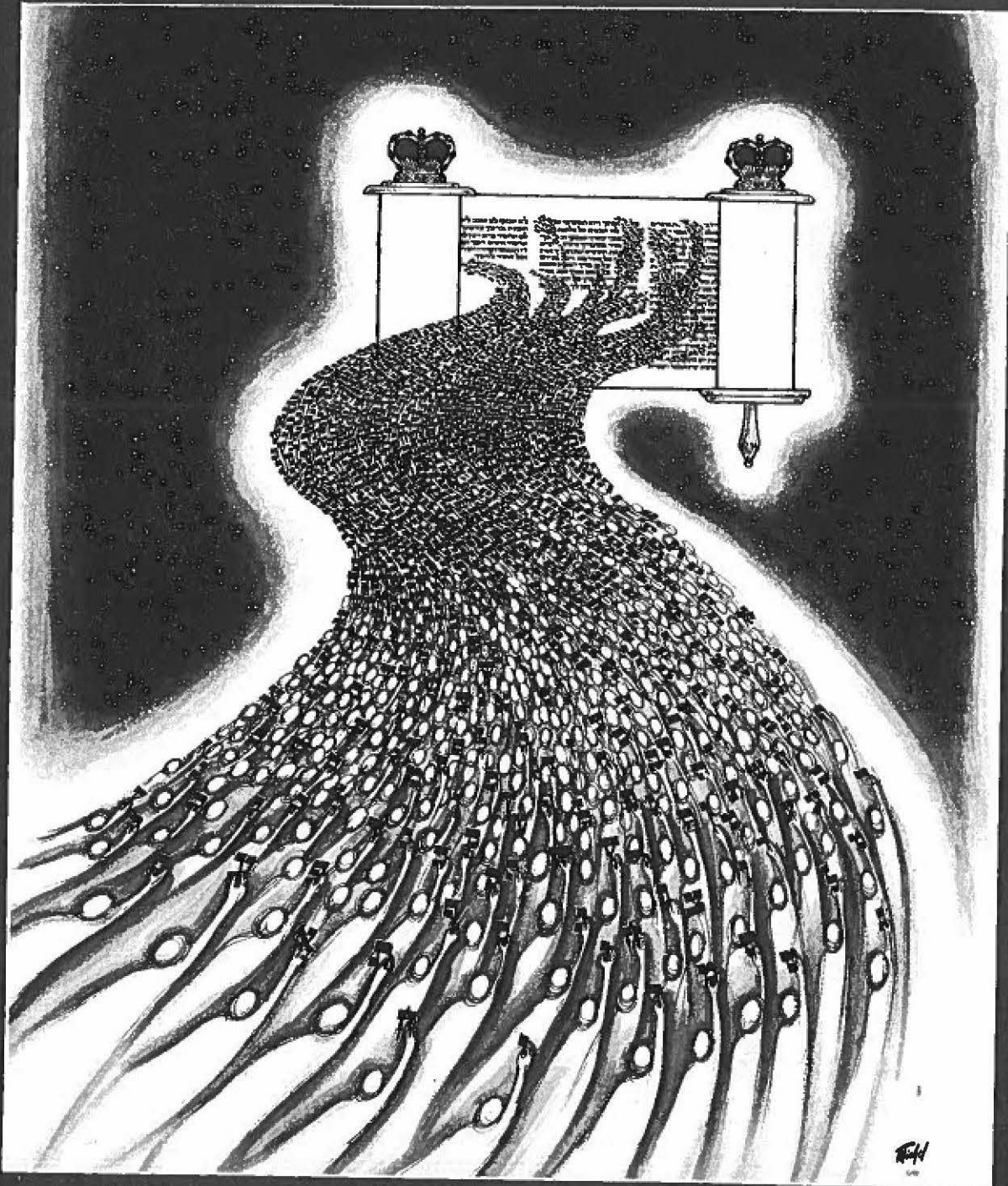
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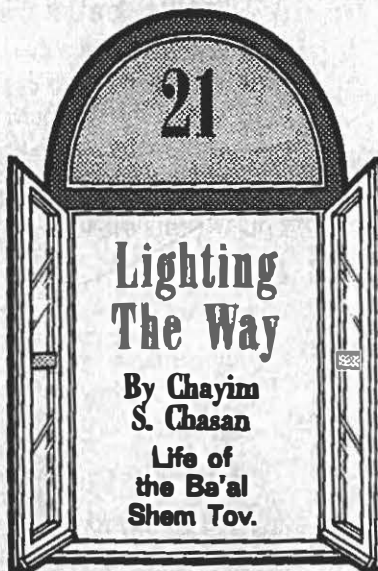
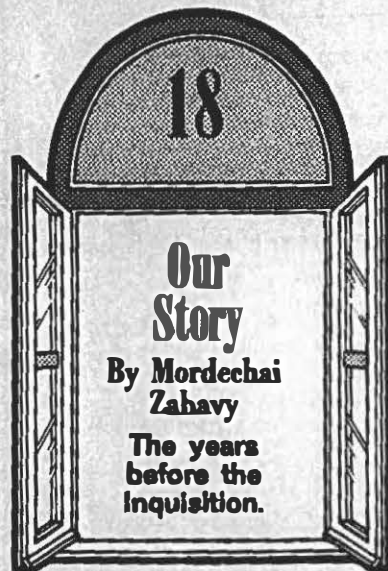
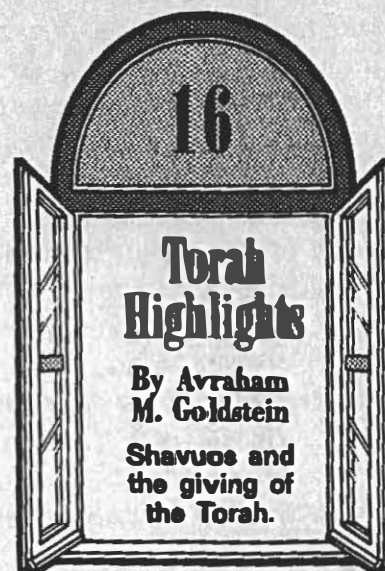
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## TO OUR READERS

It has been 232 years since the Ba'al Sh'em Tov passed away. There is no question that the founder of the chassidic movement has had a greater impact on the thinking of contemporary Jewry than any other man.

"The Blue Flame" tells the story of the Ba'al Shem Tov's passing. And "Lighting the Way" is a biography of his life.

Our Sages teach that the most important statement in the Torah is "Ve'ahavta lere'acha camocha, You must love your neighbor as yourself." Do we always observe this mitzvah properly? In "A Masquerade," a Writing Contest-winning story, this subject is examined in a searching manner.

With the days of summer upon us, we at *The Jewish Reader* thank our readers for helping make this another great year. We wish all of you a Happy Shavuot and a Happy and Healthy Summer!

Last month's cover art, an abstract depiction of the forty-nine days of the Omer, was by Ayala Stern.

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We thank the following young men and women for entering our Writing Contest.

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