

# Heart *And* Soul

By RABBI CHAYIM S. CHASAN

**I**n the town of Hoshakov lived an orphan boy. He prowled the streets, begging for food and even stealing. He continued this for many years, shunned by the citizens, struggling to survive.

In the same town lived another orphan, a girl, who was equally wild. She too terrorized the town with her nightly forays for food.

Finally the town had enough. Banding together, the people decided to rid themselves of these two children, by capturing them, placing them in a wagon, and dropping them off in the middle of the forest. There the two would have to fend for themselves.

Hearing of the problem and the proposed solution, Meir, the town rabbi, disagreed. "Bring these children of G-d to me and let them dwell in my home," he ordered. "I will raise them and make a match out of them."

And so he did. He raised the orphans as if they were his own children, providing them with food, clothing, and education. When they came of age, they married each other.

One year later, Meir and his wife Sara Sosia were blessed with a child of their own — a child they named Levi Yitzchak.

**L**evi Yitzchak, whose *yahrzeit* falls on the 25th of Tishrei, would become famous for a town called Berdichev and for a love he inherited from his father—a love for his fellow Jews. So intense was this love that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev always found the good in every Jew, regardless of that person's faults—and sometimes even *because* of them. If other Torah giants represented the mind of Judaism, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was its heart and quite possibly its soul.

Levi Yitzchak was born in Hoshakov, Galicia (in Poland), in the year 1739 (5500). At a young age he was recognized as gifted and was given private Torah instruction by his father. They remained in Hoshakov for many years, until his father became ill and for medical reasons moved to the city of Yeroslavich. There they continued to study until the boy became known as the *illuy* (genius) of Yeroslavich.

The young man attracted many matchmaking offers. One prospective father-in-law, Yisrael Peretz, from the town of Lubartov, was a Torah scholar and a man of wealth, influence, and philanthropy. He had a daughter named Perl, and he promised to support the young couple if they lived in Lubartov. He added a handsome dowry, and the match was made.

Lubartov was called "Little Jerusalem" because of the number of Torah scholars who lived there. Among them were Rabbi Yissachar Ber, Reb Tzvi Hirsch Peretz, and Rabbi Yosef Teomim (the author of *Pri Megadim*)—these were the great contemporaries of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, those with whom he shared his knowledge.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak spent much

of his time in Torah study. But that did not stop him from worrying about the poor and the guests who arrived to town without food or shelter. He personally tended to their needs, even forbidding his father-in-law's many servants from doing what he felt he himself could do.

He would go to the market to buy fresh straw for mattresses and carry it home himself. His father-in-law rebuked Rabbi Levi Yitzchak for shaming their name and degrading himself as a common laborer. "Go hire a peasant," Reb Yisrael snapped.

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"What you're doing is not worth making a spectacle of yourself."

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was perplexed. "Do you think that I'd let someone else perform this great mitzvah, instead of myself—and pay him yet, too?"

This disagreement would be the first of many between the two of them. Another took place after the son-in-law had learned all he could in Lubartov and desired to find a teacher and mentor in another city. He had heard of Richval, where lived a great rabbi named Rabbi Shmuel Shmelke Horowitz—known to us as Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg. Reb Shmelke, along with his famous brother Pinchas, the author of *Hafla'ah*, were students under the

Vilna Gaon and later under Rabbi Baruch Ber, the Maggid of Mezhirech.

Like Rabbi Shmelke, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak professed an interest in the new movement called Chassidus, and he was introduced to the Maggid of Mezhirech by Reb Shmelke in 1766. Reb Levi Yitzchak became a devout disciple of the Maggid, who was the greatest student of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidus. At the same time, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak developed a reputation for saintliness and compassion. Reb Levi Yitzchak's father-in-law opposed Chassidus, and so the son-in-law's move was the cause of tension.

Reb Levi Yitzchak later served for a short time as Richval's rabbi, until leaving for Zelechov. There he was challenged by *misnagdim* (those who opposed Chassidus), and was forced to leave. In 1775, he became the rabbi of Pinsk. However, history repeated itself: in a decision taken with the approval of the Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was compelled by *misnagdim* to leave Zelechov. He became rabbi of Berdichev, in the Ukraine, in 1785, serving there until his death in 1809.

**R**elations with his father-in-law grew strained over the years. Reb Yisrael Peretz tired of supporting his son-in-law and finally demanded that Levi Yitzchak be the provider. He even suggested that his son-in-law go into business.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, hardly the most business-minded of people, hesitated. But his father-in-law offered ten thousand coins and proposed that Levi Yitzchak travel with two businessmen to the famous fair in Leipzig. There he would purchase merchandise and bring

home a profit. These businessmen would guide Levi Yitzchak through the transactions; reciprocally, Levi Yitzchak would gain practical experience. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak

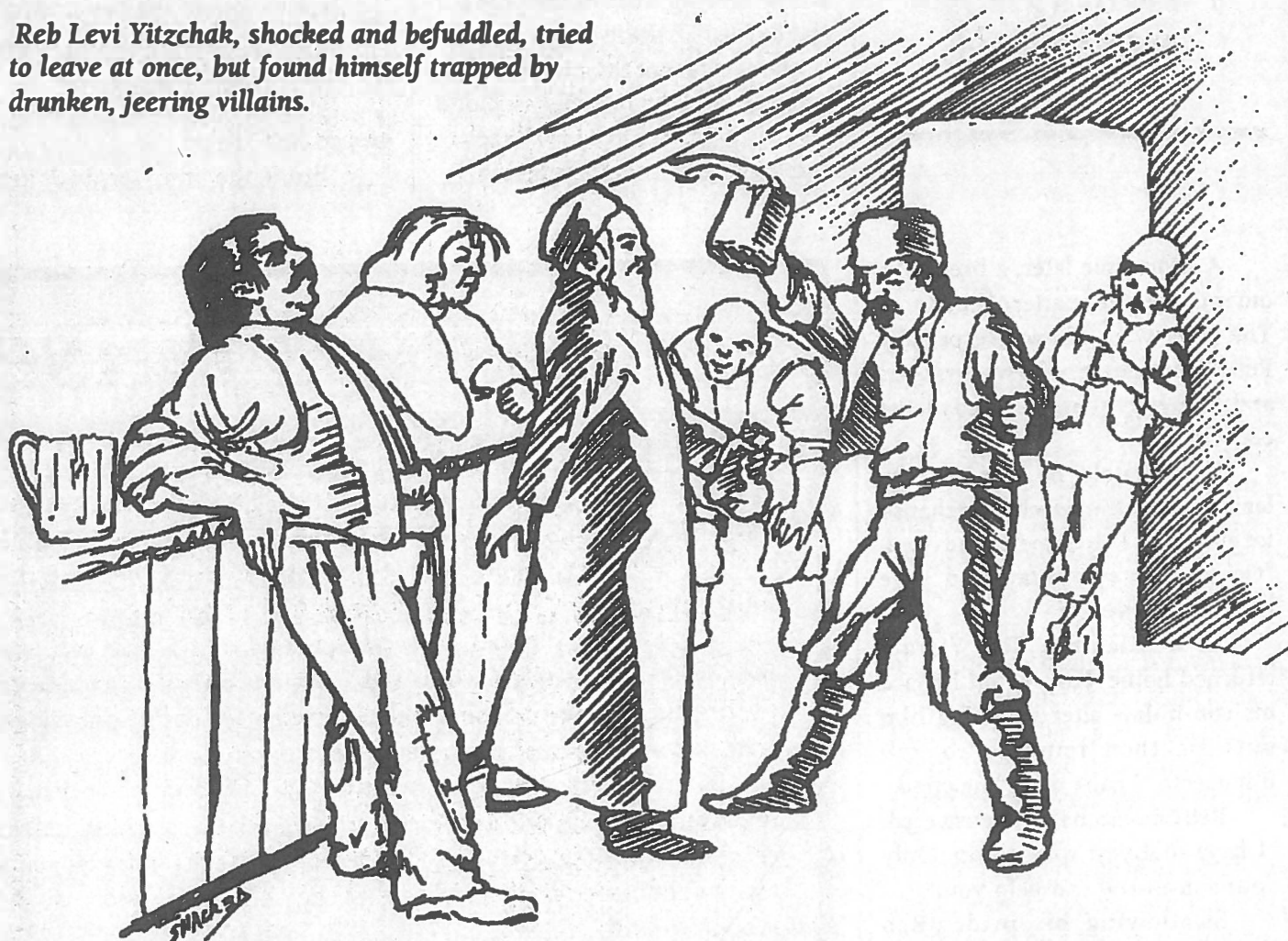
happily reported, they had found excellent investment opportunities.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak told them to go back to the market place and do whatever they had to do. "You'll find

villains. After offering the currency in his bag for his freedom, he was released.

It was evening when he returned to his own inn. There the merchants

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reluctantly agreed and, after the preparations were made, he set off.

No sooner did they arrive at a Leipzig inn than Reb Levi Yitzchak took off for the local *bais midrash*. He studied throughout the night, completely forgetting his purpose there and continuing into the next evening. At last he returned to the inn. There he found the businessmen at their wits' end, having looked high and low for him. Nevertheless, they

me in the *bais midrash*," he said.

While walking back, he lost his way and ended up in a completely different part of town. He caught sight of another inn; not till he was inside did he realize where he had wandered.

The inn was a meeting place for highwaymen and criminals. Reb Levi Yitzchak, shocked and befuddled, tried to leave at once, but found himself trapped by drunken, jeering

anxiously asked him for the money to make a purchase. To their dismay, he told them he no longer had the money, and they returned to Lubartov empty-handed.

Upon hearing the story, a furious Yisrael Peretz ordered his son-in-law out of the house, never to come back. Saddened, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak went to learn in the *bais midrash*, where a few kind souls took pity on him and gave him something to eat.



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A short time later, a fire broke out in the gentile quarter of Lubartov. The Jews were blamed, especially Reb Yisrael Peretz, who was arrested and, for a heavy bail, released till the court date.

Immediately he went to the famous Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk for guidance. Reb Elimelech advised, "Go to your son-in-law and have him pray for you."

In a dilemma Reb Yisrael returned home. How could he face his son-in-law after throwing him out? He then returned to Reb Elimelech. "I can't do it," he cried.

Reb Elimelech sternly answered, "I have told you what to do. Only your son-in-law can help you."

Swallowing his pride, Reb Yisrael went to the *bais midrash*. He found his son-in-law there, sitting and learning.

"*Shalom aleichem*, Father-in-Law," Reb Levi Yitzchak said cheerily. "How are you?"

"Forgive me, Levi Yitzchak," answered Yisrael Peretz. He then explained what had happened and how he was sent by Reb Elimelech.

Reb Levi Yitzchak shut his eyes in meditation and prayer, then asked for a bottle of liqueur. After pouring two cups, one for himself and the

other for his father-in-law, he cried, "L'chaim! Everything will go well. Don't worry. After the court date we ourselves will go to Reb Elimelech and drink l'chaim with him."

The court date came. But there was no hearing; a fire had broken out and burned all the legal documents. Without evidence the court couldn't convene, and the matter was laid to rest. Yisrael ran to Reb Levi Yitzchak and they went to Reb Elimelech.

But the story did not end there. When they arrived at the great man's study, Reb Elimelech gave them with a pouch — a pouch full of currency.

"I believe this is yours?" the *tzaddik* asked.

In amazement the two grasped the pouch and counted the coins. Not one was missing.

"Where did you get this?" gasped Reb Yisrael.

"From the inn," replied Reb

## Praise

**R**abbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev's philosophy can be summed up well by his declaration that "No one has the right to say anything evil about the Jewish people, but only to intercede for them." A fine illustration of this principle emerges from the following story:

When Succos would come about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was particularly diligent. He would spare no time or expense to locate the finest *esrog*; he made sure well in advance to acquire one which was outstanding in form and appearance.

Back then *esrogim* were not always easy to come by; one year, in particular, there was a severe shortage, and it was feared that no *esrogim* would be available. Reb Levi Yitzchak sent out messengers everywhere to locate an *esrog*; at last they found one and brought it back to him.

With utmost care the rebbe wrapped up the precious object and locked it away, planning to take it out only on Succos morning, when the mitzvah was to be performed. So great was his anticipation that on the first night of the holiday he could hardly sleep.

His *shammass* (attendant) also could barely sleep. He kept thinking of the *esrog*, the only one in town, and how he, the servant, would be last in line to make the blessings over it. After the rebbe came the *dayanim* (rabbinic judges), the students, the communal leaders, and the community itself. Only after everyone had taken their turn would he have his opportunity.

At first the *shammass* accepted his lot; after all, didn't he have the privilege of serving the *tzaddik*? However, lying in bed that

Elimelech. "The inn where your son-in-law stayed. The proprietor came and gave the pouch to me. She said a Jew had left it there to ransom his life. But no one could go near it. Whoever tried just froze and shook with fright till he ran out. One by one they left, until the inn was empty.

"Obviously the pouch was bad for business, so the lady decided to track down the owner. But no one knew who he was, so she came to me,

hoping I'd at least get it off her hands."

On that day the name of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak resounded far and wide as a leader and holy man. (Undoubtedly, too, he and his father-in-law were reconciled.)

**A**t the age of forty-five, Reb Levi Yitzchak was offered the rabbinic post in Berdichev, where he would earn everlasting fame for his warmth and jovial kindness.

## and Joy

night, he began to nurture an idea, and he too eagerly awaited the dawn.

Daybreak came. While the rebbe went to the mikvah to purify himself in preparation for the mitzvah, the shammas ran to the closet, opened the lock, pulled out the silver casing containing the esrog, and opened it.

When he beheld the esrog, the shammas raised it high and with the lulav recited the blessings. Suddenly he froze, thinking he had heard footsteps. Frightened, he put down the lulav and prepared to wrap up the esrog. In his haste and nervousness, however, he dropped the esrog, causing the pittum (stem) to break.

He realized that the esrog was now pasul (invalid). The rebbe would not be able to do the mitzvah. And it was not only Rabbi Levi Yitzchak; the entire community would lose out on the opportunity to perform the ritual because of the shammas's carelessness. Moreover, it was the first day of yom tov — too late to obtain another. What was he to do?

At last he wrapped the esrog, along with the pittum, and returned the broken fruit to its casing. Then he placed it back in the closet, under lock and key. But when he heard the rebbe approaching, he knew he could not attempt to fool him.

Like a baby the shammas wept, and he threw himself before the rebbe. He related what had happened, fearing the consequences.

In a calm and gentle voice, the rebbe said, "Get up, my son." Then he turned to the sky, and with outstretched hands cried, "Almighty King of the universe! Come and see how true and faithful are Your servants. Even the shammas cannot wait to fulfill Your commandments. Your people are worthy of Your mercy."

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*They came,  
wanting to study  
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Here he became a rebbe for thousands. They came, wanting to study with him, seek his advice, or ask for his blessings.

He befriended everyone, rich or poor, saint or sinner. When asked why he spent so much time with simple folk, he answered, "When I die and seek my place in the world to come with the great saints and scholars, and they try to push me out, saying that I, a simple man, cannot be with them, I shall answer that in my lifetime I befriended simple men, and as a reward, these saints and scholars should befriend me."

Reb Levi Yitzchak is noted for his *Kedushas Levi*, a classic chassidic work on Chumash. He embodied the very spirit of Chassidus with his belief that every Jew, regardless of his or her station, contains some merit and has a link to G-d. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak believed in the importance of joyous service of G-d, and stressed *deveikus* — striving to become close to Hashem.

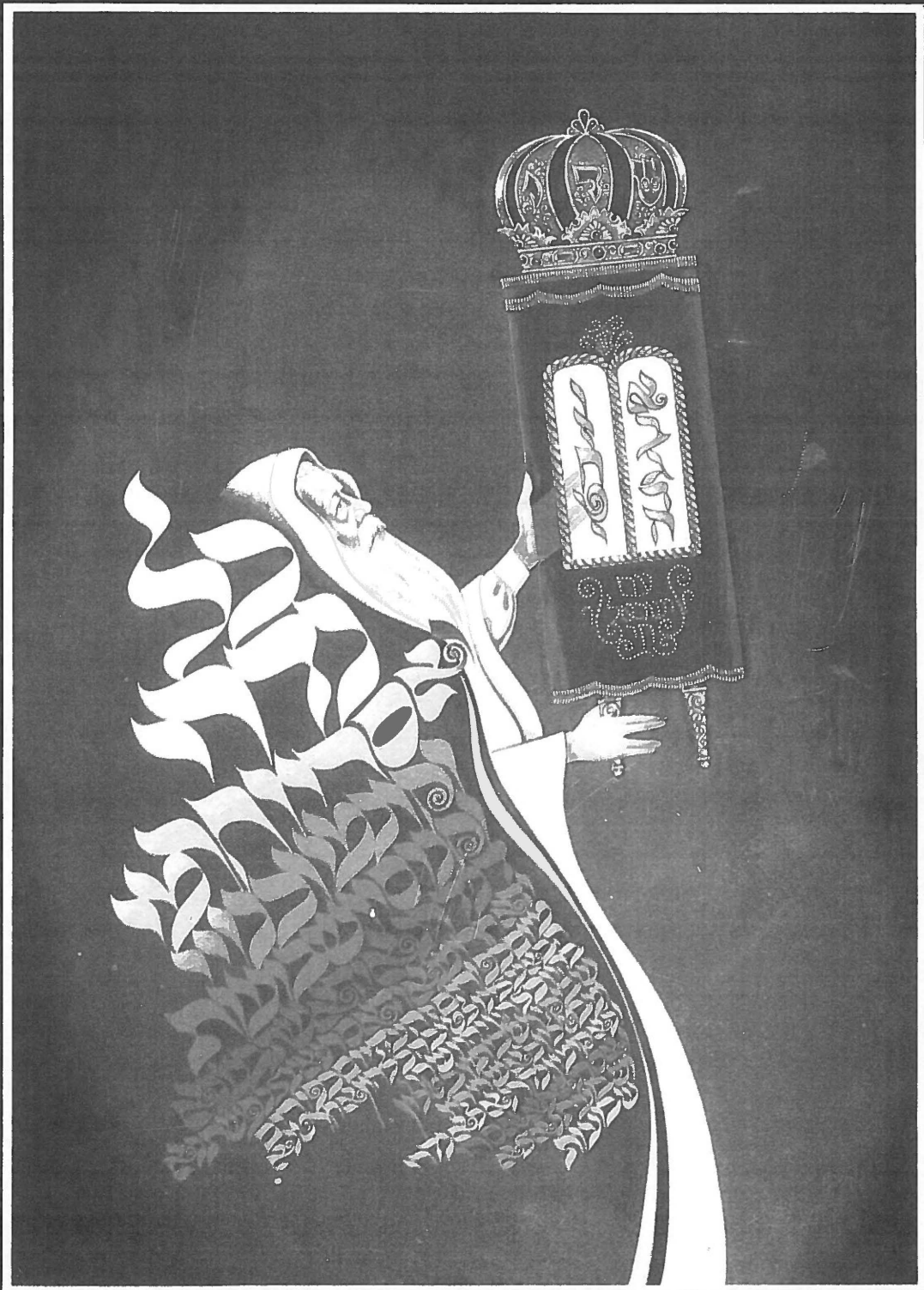
Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did not found a chassidic dynasty; there is not a long list of Berdichever rabbis. But his influence on Chassidus and on Judaism in general has continued until this day. JR

# The Jewish Reader

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## TO OUR READERS

As we begin the fourth year of *The Jewish Reader*, we would like to thank you for your support in the past. We plan to make this year an enjoyable one for our readers, old and new.

All your favorite sections are back — “News In Review,” “Our Wonderful World,” “Our Story,” and “Torah Highlights.” Also, in the Cheshvan issue, a fictional series about Jewish life in 17th century America will make its debut.

Meanwhile, the Tishrei issue is packed with exciting stories. In “The Guest,” a wealthy host is puzzled by a chassidic rebbe’s strange behavior at Succos. Turn-of-the-century Chicago is the site of a new immigrant’s battle to remain religious. Finally, the *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev occurs in Tishrei. “Heart and Soul” is a biography of this great chassidic master, who is famous for his optimistic portrayal of the Jewish people. He constantly pointed out their good attributes and called on Hashem to help them.

With the dawn of the New Year, we wish all of you a *Kesivah vachasimah tovah!*

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# MAIL ROOM

### Fan of Ohr HaChaim

I really thought your stories about the Ohr HaChaim were very good (Sivan). The story of how he had to leave his home (“The Silence and the Exile”) is one of my favorite Jewish Reader articles. I hope you’ll have other stories like that in the future.

My friends who don’t get your magazine are always coming over to

borrow it, which is fine, as long as I’ve finished!

Shira Taub,  
Brooklyn, NY



### CORRECTION

In the Sivan issue, the cover was not described properly. In memory of youths who died in the Holocaust, it depicted Hebrew names superimposed over the faces of children.

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