

# LEADER OF LEADERS

**T**he 19th of Kislev marks the 219th *yahrzeit* of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezhirech.

Rabbi Dov Ber became famous as the chief disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the eventual heir to his position as leader of the chassidic movement. Although the Ba'al Shem Tov initiated the chassidic movement, the "Maggid of Mezhirech" was the man who spread it throughout Eastern Europe.

Reb Dov Ber's father, Reb Avraham, was a Torah scholar who was said to be a direct descendant of Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi, the author of the Mishnah. Reb Dov Ber's mother was the daughter of Rabbi Shalom Shachne, also a distinguished personage.

Born in the city of Lukatch around the year 1704 (5464), Reb Dov Ber was recognized in his youth as a leading Torah scholar. He studied at the yeshiva of Rabbi Yehoshua Falk, the author of *Pnei Yehoshua*, one of the most important works of commentary on the Talmud.

**R**abbi Dov Ber was poor, and supported himself by teaching in the town of Torchin. Afterwards he became a preacher in Koretz and Rovno. Even his stay at Mezhirech, in central Poland, was not a permanent one, since he spent the end of his life in Annapol.

Reb Dov Ber fasted constantly, in order to separate himself from worldly pleasures. Unfortunately, this practice affected his health: he later needed to use walking sticks in order to get around, and he remained a partial invalid for much of his life.

Once, before he became a chassid, he fasted for seven weeks, from Shabbos to Shabbos. When consequently he became quite weak and ill, he was advised by friends to go to the Ba'al Shem Tov, who was known to be a miracle worker. Reb Dov Ber refused, saying, "I trust in G-d, not people."

He changed his mind after a visit to his old mentor, the Pnei Yehoshua. This Torah giant also advised him to go to the Ba'al Shem Tov. Reb Dov Ber did, and the Ba'al Shem Tov was able to heal him. This marked the beginning of a fruitful relationship: Reb Dov Ber decided to study regularly under this extraordinary leader, turned to Chassidism, and eventually headed the rabbinic court (*bais din*) of Mezhirech.

When the Ba'al Shem Tov died, in 1760 (5520), his son Tzvi took over. But one year later, on Shavuot, while studying the Torah, he announced that his father had appeared to him and commanded that the leadership be handed over to Reb Dov Ber. Reb Tzvi rose and traded places with his father's student.

Reb Dov Ber reluctantly accepted, although he was not interested in becoming famous. He in fact refused to move to Mezhibozh,

where the Ba'al Shem Tov had lived, and stayed in Mezhirech. Thus he became known as the "Maggid (Rabbinic preacher) of Mezhirech."

The Maggid taught meticulously, keeping his daily lesson plan even when overburdened by the stream of visitors. "If I stopped learning in order to see people," he said, "then they wouldn't have anyone to go to." He knew that, in order to properly advise people, he had to continue his Torah study, no matter how difficult his schedule.

Unlike the Ba'al Shem Tov, who wandered from town to town to converse with the common folk, Reb Dov Ber spent most of his time in Mezhirech. Part of the reason was physical: he continued to suffer ailments and found any kind of walking difficult. Instead, he received audiences at home. Again unlike the Ba'al Shem Tov, who recruited many uneducated Jews, the Maggid aimed for the intellectuals. His followers

numbered many prominent scholars, including Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac of Lublin, Rabbi Pinchas Horowitz (author of the *Hafla'ah*), the Rebbe Reb Zusha, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, and Rabbi Elimelech of Lyzhansk.

In every village and town (*shtetl*) Jews flocked to this dynamic new movement, which offered intense spirituality in all facets of life. Eventually the Maggid's disciples set up their own dynasties, further developing Chassidus and making household names of the towns where they settled, such as Bobov, Belz, Klozenberg, Ger, Lubavitch, Vizhnitz. The names of these towns connote certain styles of Chassidus, each with its own philosophy, and each with its own flavor.

By the time of the Maggid's death in 1772 (5533), Chassidus had firmly taken root. The movement flourishes today in Jewish neighborhoods throughout the world. **JR**

**R**abbi Dov Ber devoted himself to the poor. They kept the Maggid busy, passing through Mezhirech, asking for help from the townspeople. Often he accompanied the poor from house to house in their quest for funds.

It once happened that he went four times the same day, with four different beggars, to the same house for a donation. At the fourth time the owner, a wealthy man, said angrily, "This is the last time you will bother me today. I don't want to hear from you anymore. Go learn with the youngsters. That's what you're paid to do."

Insulted, Reb Dov Ber walked away. When he met up with a fifth man, who was also begging for alms, the Maggid said that he preferred to wait until the next day to go around with him.

At once the man began to cry. "I have no money. I am desperate, and I have to leave town tonight. You must help me."

The Maggid promptly took him to the rich man's house.

To his surprise, the rich man put on quite a different face. "Come in," he bade. He received the two visitors cordially and handed over a nice sum.

As they left, the rich man said to the Maggid, "Seeing that you came back today after being insulted by me so many times, I figured that you truly needed the money. So how could I turn you down?"

Walking away, Reb Dov Ber asked the poor man, "Was it really an emergency, as you said — that you're leaving town tonight?"

"No," answered the man, "but I thought that by saying it I'd get results."

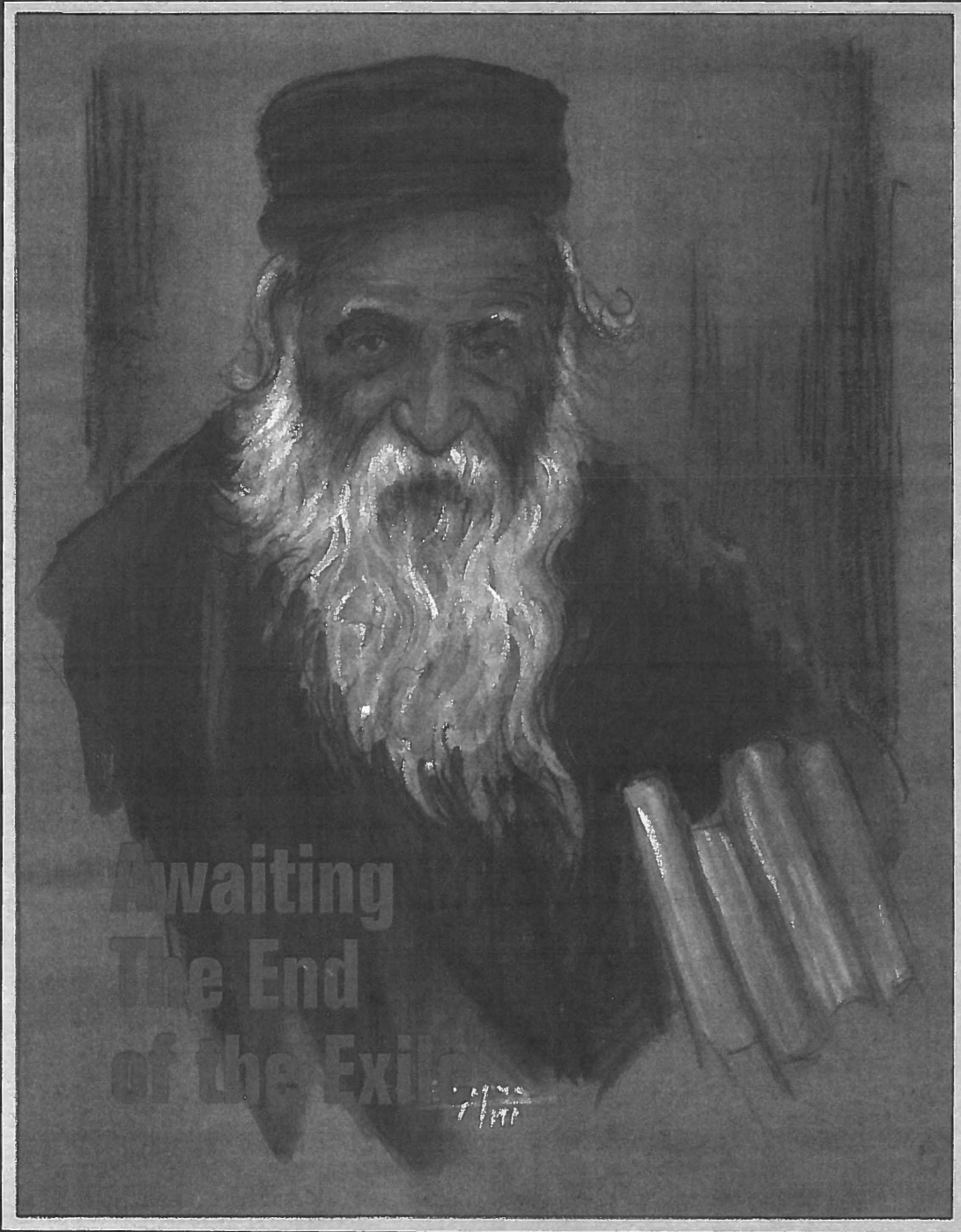
"Well, then," answered the Maggid, "that is why the man changed his mind. For if your case had truly been an emergency, he wouldn't have given us anything. That man does not have the merit to help those who are truly needy!"

# The Jewish Reader \$1.75

Kislev 5752

Vol. 4. No. 3

November 1991



Awaiting  
The End  
of the Exile

7/77

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THE JEWISH READER (ISSN1049-1588) is published monthly, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Second-class postage paid at Brooklyn, N.Y.

Subscriptions: 1 year 10 issues \$12.50, Foreign \$US15.50

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE JEWISH READER, 705 Foster Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Reprinting of any part of this publication without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.

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