

THE BA'AL SHEM TOV



The holiday of Shavuot
marks the yahrzeit of
Rabbi Yisrael ben Eliezer.

LIGHTING

By CHAYIM S. CHASAN

The holiday Shavuot marks the *yahrzeit* of a very special soul — a soul so pure that it was said to have left *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden) when it was in its purest state: before Adam tasted of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. This soul would come down to purify the hearts of other Jews.

Rabbi Yisrael, the Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of the chassidic movement, was destined for leadership. But unlike with many other religious giants, his leadership was not immediately noticeable. Considered simple by his townspeople, the Ba'al Shem Tov spent the first thirty-six years of

his life quietly teaching children and remaining hidden from public view. Only later, when his philosophy crystallized, did he reveal himself as a powerful medicine for an ailing Jewish populace.

Like many Torah giants, the Ba'al Shem Tov had saintly parents. His father, Eliezer, who was famous for his hospitality to strangers, once encountered a beggar who aroused public anger by carrying a sack into town on the Sabbath. After taking him home

and bestowing lavish attention upon him, Reb Eliezer escorted the beggar to the town limits at nightfall and presented him with a bag of food for his journey.

CUTTING DOWN

Although during his youth the Besht preferred to hide his powers, he relied on them whenever trouble against the Jews reared its ugly head.

It happened once that a Polish Jew became ill and needed to enter a gentile hospital. While there he was harassed and taunted constantly by the other patients, who never missed an opportunity to vent their hatred of the Jews.

One day an old man came to visit his grandson, whose bed lay near the Jew's. Watching the other men crack jokes and making snide remarks, he

turned to them and said, "Leave this poor man alone. Don't you realize what happens when you go too far in harming the Jews?"

"Since when are you so friendly with them?" jeered one.

"I'll tell you." He proceeded with a story:

In the village next to mine lived many Jews, among them one who would grow up to become the man the Jews call the Ba'al Shem Tov. At the time of this story he was still a young teacher, whom everyone called Yisraelik the Tutor.

Like his friends, he went every Friday to the

THE WAY

To Eliezer's surprise, the beggar revealed himself as Eliyahu HaNavi. "I have been sent to test you, Reb Eliezer. You have proven yourself a worthy man, worthy of being the father of a great man who will light the way for the Jews." On the eighteenth day of Elul in the year 5458 (1698), his wife Sarah gave birth to the son they named Yisrael.

According to chassidic tradition, this pure soul had come down to earth once before — in the body of a pious Jew from Safed, in the Holy Land. Because of a certain act he performed on his bar mitzvah, this man merited a visit from Eliyahu HaNavi and a

The future founder of Chassidism grew up in poverty in the rural Carpathanian mountains, near present-day Rumania.

revelation of the coming of the Mashiach. When asked by Eliyahu to reveal the special act he had done, the man replied, "What I did, I did only for the glory of G-d, and I may not reveal it to others. If this means that you too will not divulge to me the secret of the redemption, then I forego that knowledge. It is a basic tenet of mine that a man's deeds should be solely for the glory of G-d."

Eliyahu HaNavi taught him the secrets of the Torah anyway, while the man continued to lead an intensely private life solely for G-d. When the man from Safed died, the Heavenly Court ruled he would again descend to the

TO SIZE

bathhouse, to prepare for his Sabbath. One Friday, a group of our boys who had always watched him come and go decided to have some fun. So what did they do? They waited until he came as usual to the bathhouse, then ganged up on him and beat him with sticks and stones.

But their fun didn't last too long. Why? Because no sooner did they start than the earth opened up and swallowed up half the gangleader's body! Like a tree he was firmly planted in the earth from his waist down, and was simply unable to get out.

Yisraelik calmly walked away, while in terror

the other gang members ran to get picks and shovels and tried to dig out their friend. In vain. The minute they touched the ground, it moved, and their leader began to sink even deeper.

The boys then ran to get their parents and other adults. Soon the whole town came running to aid this poor boy interred in the ground.

But like the gang members, they found that their efforts only caused the boy to sink further. Finally the elders demanded an explanation as to what had happened. After hearing about Yisraelik, they had little choice but to await his return. When

world, where this time he would reveal himself as a man with a new way of Torah life, a man who would fill the earth with wisdom and hasten the coming of the Mashiah. Such a man was the Ba'al Shem Tov.



The future founder of Chassidism grew up in poverty in the rural Carpathian mountains, near present-day Rumania. When he was five years old, his father died, but not before he instructed his son, "Do not fear anyone or anything in this world, except for Hashem. Love every single Jew with your whole heart and with the flame of your soul, regardless of who or what he is." These words would greatly shape the Ba'al Shem Tov's character.

Young Yisrael spent much of his early life helping a *melamed* (teacher) run errands. It was said that Eliyahu HaNavi himself visited the boy almost every day after hearing the boy's heartfelt *Kaddish* for his father. After his mother's death, the orphaned Yisrael was entrusted to the community to look after his education.

Yisrael, though a good student, had ideas of his own, and every day for the next two years, after studying with the teacher the community had hired for him, he would run off to the forest to pour out his private prayers to G-d or to simply review what he

had learned. Sometimes he even slept there during the night.

It was in the forest that Yisrael had a fateful encounter. A Jew, wrapped in a *tallis* and *tefillin*, was praying alone and with great fervor. As Yisrael slipped behind the trees to listen, the man finished praying and reciting *Tehillim*. Then he placed his books into his pack and began to walk away.

Yisrael stepped out and introduced himself, explaining that he knew this man was one of the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim* who exist in every generation. The man opened a Gemara and studied with Yisrael. Then together the two wandered from village to village, learning and living off charity.

This went on for three years, the whole time Yisrael never even knowing his friend's name. The man introduced Yisrael to other hidden *tzaddikim*, with whom Yisrael continued learning. By the age of sixteen, young Yisrael was steeped in Kabbalah and other Torah mysteries. He now prayed according to the liturgy of the holy Arizal and used to recite the hidden names of G-d.

One day young Yisrael stayed at an inn run by a Jewish man and his wife. The couple, though illiterate and ignorant of the prayer service, would recite the few *pesukim* they knew in praise of Hashem.

One day young Yisrael stayed at an inn run by a Jewish man and his wife. The couple, though illiterate, would recite the few *pesukim* they knew in praise of Hashem.

the Jew finally reappeared, they rushed over to him and begged him to free the boy.

Yisraelik shrugged. "It's his own fault. Why does he start up with Jews? If he promises never to touch another Jew, but rather to do his best to help them for the rest of his life, I will free him."

The boy agreed at once. Then the earth immediately crumbled and collapsed around him, like a sand castle, and he picked himself up out and brushed off the rest of the dirt, as if he had had a simple fall.

"But," Yisraelik continued, "you must be punished for your behavior. I can see you are a growing boy, on the way to becoming a tall man. No longer. Henceforth you shall remain at your present height, as a sign that you must never again molest a Jew." The others listened enthralled as the grandfather finished. "I knew this boy when he was an old man," he said. "He was still the size of a youngster. And ever since I heard this story I have been very careful not to cause any trouble or discomfort to a Jew. I advise you all to do the same!" JJ

When Yisrael later involved himself in his own mystical prayers, Eliyahu HaNavi appeared to him and exclaimed, "Here you are, trying to concentrate on holy names hidden in the verses of Psalms, while Aharon Shlomo, our innkeeper, and Zlate Rivke, his wife, do not even know the significance of the verse which they always recite: 'Blessed be His holy name forever, *Baruch shem kevod malchuso le'olam va'ed.*' Their words shake the Heavenly realms with more impact than many a combination and concentration of men."

Eliyahu HaNavi described the pleasure in Heaven that results when men, women, and children exclaim their praise to G-d — especially simple people. "When I heard this," the Ba'al Shem Tov later explained, "I decided to adopt a special way of serving G-d — by urging all Jews, men, women, and children, to say the praises of the A-mighty. I always used to ask them about their health, their children's health, about their livelihood, and they would answer with the different praises of Hashem, each in his own way."



An approach like this came at the right time in Jewish history. Scarcely a century had passed since the massacres of the Ukrainian fanatic Bogdan Chmielnicki, followed by the emptiness of the false messiah Shabbetai Zvi. Many of the east European Jews, devastated and destitute, had no one to turn to for spiritual support. Too ignorant to study Talmud, they were snubbed by an aloof rabbinate, and many turned instead to miracle workers — itinerant Jews called *ba'alei shem*, "masters of the name," because their "good name" inspired confidence.

Walking all over towns and villages (*shtetlach*) in eastern Europe and garnering followers, the adult Yisrael spoke with all Jews, especially the more common ones. To him, a simple Jew could accomplish just as much through everyday acts as a learned man

could with his volumes of Talmud. Although learning certainly was important, a Jew could serve G-d in everything he said or did. The Ba'al Shem Tov (called "Besht" for short) also emphasized joy in prayer and service, even singing and dancing.

Although he did have a "court," with visitors seeking blessings and advice, the Ba'al Shem Tov never ran his own yeshiva. He remained more of a preacher, counselor, and faith-healer, although a

number of his sayings and miracles have been preserved by his disciples. These men later refined the role of a rebbe as scholar and spiritual advisor.

Like any innovator, the Besht had his share of opponents, called *misnagdim*, including his own brother-in-law, Rabbi Gershon (who later became a chassid). Rabbinic scholars considered Chassidus a cover-up for boorish behavior and challenged the Ba'al Shem Tov and his followers. This challenge would erupt into often violent clashes later in the century, with scholars like the Vilna Gaon even banning chassidic works and excommunicating its followers.

But until the end of his life the Ba'al Shem Tov maintained his father's principles and his unconditional love of every Jew, who he believed could attain closeness to G-d regardless of learning level or background. This love was brought to every town in eastern Europe, with the help of his disciples, and was eventually transformed into a mass movement involving millions of followers.

Although in time Chassidus became more intellectualized, with chassidim becoming Torah scholars and establishing their own yeshivos, its emphasis on joy and spirituality remains the cornerstone of the chassidic approach.

By the time the Ba'al Shem Tov left this world, on Shavuos of 1760, he had revealed much more than Torah secrets. He had ignited a fire that through a unique way of life sparkles in every Jew. ¹ JR

By the time the
Ba'al Shem Tov
left this world,
on Shavuos of
the year 1760,
he had
revealed much
more than
Torah secrets.

The Jewish Reader

ב"ה
\$1.75

Sivan 5752

Vol. 4, No. 10

June 1992

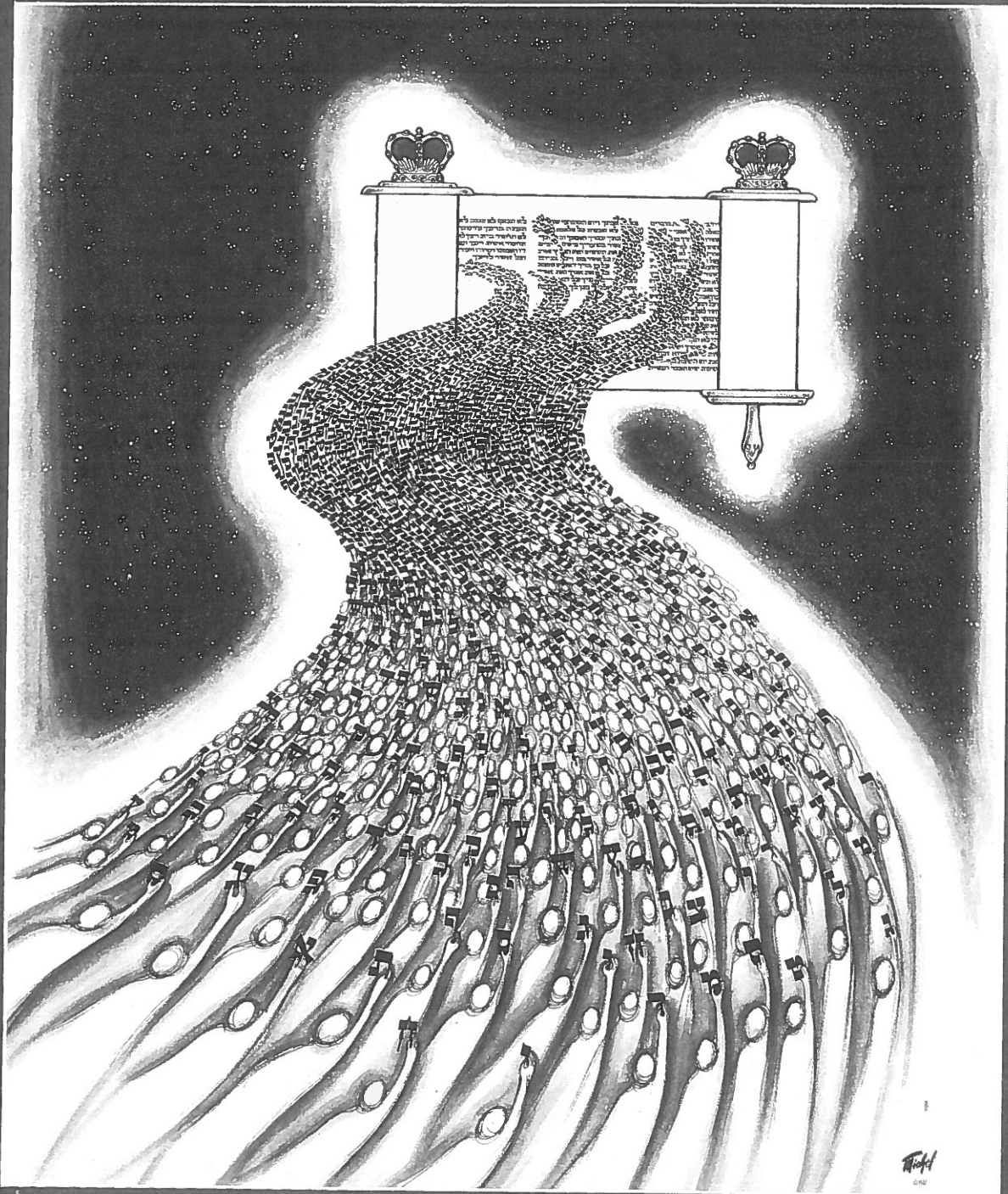


Table of Contents

3

The Blue Flame

By Devorah Kirsch
The Ba'al Shem Tov's last Shavuos.

8

Unshaken As The Continent

By Chani Gerstner
The final episode in the Cordoba saga.

16

Torah Highlights

By Avraham M. Goldstein
Shavuos and the giving of the Torah.

18

Our Story

By Mordechai Zahavy
The years before the Inquisition.

21

Lighting The Way

By Chayim S. Chasan
Life of the Ba'al Shem Tov.

28

A Masquerade

By Feigy Herskovits
A woman recalls an old friend.

Mayer Bendet,
editor
Avraham M. Goldstein,
managing editor
Chayah Sarah Cantor,
associate editor
N. Nodel, Shmuel Shaked,
illustrations
Fayge Silverman,
teacher's guide
Michel Schwartz,
cover art

This Month, Page 17
Our Wonderful World, Page 32

THE JEWISH READER (ISSN1049-1538) is published monthly, except July and August, by HaChai Publishing, 156 Chester 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, 156 Chester Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. Reprinting of any part of this publication without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.
All requests, subscriptions should be addressed to:
The Jewish Reader, 156 Chester Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718)633-0100
All requests, manuscripts should be addressed to:
The Jewish Homemaker, 705 Foster Ave., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11230. (718)692-3900



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.

This Publication is made possible by a grant from the educational division of the



Laboratories

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

Shana Cofsky
Gittel Erps
Rivka Fisch
Rivkah Gottdiener
Henny Hoffinger
Mordechai Kirschenbaum
Miriam Klein
Esther Landau

Rivka Faiga Leizerson
Sury Lowensohn
Levi Mayer
Leah Miller
Mordechai Moshen
Avi Dov Orzel
Mordechai Perr
Brenna Leah Radcliffe
Miriam Silverstein
Yitzchok Elchonon Spiro
Chaya Rivka Steinhauser
Simmy Tarshish
Rivka White

ATTENTION PARENTS!

We ask you to judge for yourself the importance of a magazine like ours, which is aimed at enhancing the enjoyment of education by your children. Take advantage of this fine educational tool now.

DON'T DELAY!

Take advantage immediately of this unique and INTERESTING, EDUCATIONAL, ENTERTAINING magazine offer.

Cut along dotted line and send.



SEND ME 1YEAR 2YEARS Gift Subscription
Enclosed please find check for \$ _____, payable to
The Jewish Reader. Magazine to be mailed to:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Please send a gift card from:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Subscription rates: 1 year (10 issues) \$12.50. 2 years \$23.00. Canada and Foreign US\$15.50 per year, US\$29 for 2 years. Group subscriptions: 10 or more to one address \$10.00 each; outside USA \$12.50 each.

THE JEWISH READER, 156 Chester Avenue, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11218