

A Tzaddik and His Students

Many Jews are attracted to spirituality but never think to look in their own religion to find it. Still more are unaware that chassidic philosophy and its practice are the “soul” and spiritual core of Judaism.

The starting point of the chassidic way of life is a chassid’s connection to his or her Rebbe. But like many of the more spiritual concepts in Judaism, the role and function of a Rebbe -- and the chassidic movement in general -- has been largely cloaked in mystery, misinterpreted, or simply unknown.

In this book, **A Tzaddik and His Students: *The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship***, Rabbi Shloma Majeski takes the reader on a step-by-step journey into the spiritual world of the Rebbe-chassid relationship, explaining the nature and purpose of a tzaddik/Rebbe, his connection with his chassidim, and the relevance of this phenomenon in the lives of every human being today.

Rabbi Shloma Majeski is the dean of Machon Chana Women’s Institute of Jewish Studies in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, home of the World Headquarters of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement. A renowned lecturer on chassidic philosophy for over thirty years, Rabbi Majeski is the author of the acclaimed book *The Chassidic Approach to Joy* and a tape series entitled “The Basic Principles of Chabad Chassidic Philosophy.”



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בס"ד

A Tzaddik and His Students: THE REBBE-CHASSID RELATIONSHIP

By: Rabbi Shloma Majeski

(Chapter 4)



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For further reading about this and other topics in chassidic philosophy, information on how to obtain Rabbi Majeski's book *The Chassidic Approach to Joy*, and his tape series on chassidic philosophy, contact your local Jewish bookstore, sie100@aol.com, or call 718-778-5436.



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אשת שדי"ר כ"ק רבותינו נשיאינו

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שיחיו

higher spiritual plane. Everything assumes a deeper dimension, which is the G-dly and spiritual purpose of all existence.

In sum, one of the functions of a Rebbe is to reveal G-d's presence in the world. One of the ways he accomplishes that is through the performance of miracles.



IN HONOR OF
Chaim Yitzchok שיחיו Spiegel
 On the occasion of his chassidic birthday,
 Shabbat Parshat Eikev, 20 Menachem-Av
 May he go from strength to strength
 in health, happiness, Torah and *mitzvot*.

*

DEDICATED BY HIS WIFE
Ruchama שתחיו Spiegel
 and family שיחיו

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MIRACLES

In the previous chapter, an equivalence was made between a *tzaddik* and the *Beis HaMikdash*. Just as the *Beis HaMikdash* is filled with G-dliness which then radiates to the entire world, so, too, a *tzaddik* is a conduit for revealing G-d's presence in the world. Throughout history, this has always been true of *tzaddikim* in varying degrees, but it is most pronounced in the times after the destruction of the Temple.

Having learned that a *tzaddik* is a vessel for the indwelling of G-dliness, other spiritual phenomena associated with a *tzaddik* such as the performance of miracles, prophecy and *ruach hakodesh*, and conveying advice and blessing become easier to understand.

This chapter will focus on a *tzaddik's* performance of miracles and how this contributes to a Jew's Divine service.

What's All the Fuss?

A Rebbe's performance of miracles (*mofsim*) is a major aspect of the chassidic way of life as is relating the stories of these miracles to others. So intrinsic are miracles to Chassidism that when a person hears a story of a miracle performed by a *tzaddik*, he often assumes that the Baal Shem Tov or another chassidic Rebbe is involved.

Obvious questions arise: While witnessing a miracle is certainly an extraordinary experience, why is so much emphasis placed on telling stories about it? Why do conversations at chassidic gatherings inevitably evolve into discussions about the miracles that their Rebbe has performed? And why does a large part of a chassidic child's education revolve around learning about miracles performed by the various chassidic Rebbes?

Why does a Rebbe perform these miracles? What purpose is he fulfilling? Even though *tzaddikim* have performed miracles from the beginning of time, why did the open performance of miracles in an ongoing and frequent way only begin in the times of the Baal Shem Tov?

And finally, what function does the miracle itself serve?

Through stories and information from various Torah sources, these questions will be addressed — and hopefully answered — throughout the chapter.

Our discussion will focus on the origin of miracles and their role in the Rebbe-chassid relationship. There may be people who are skeptical of the concept of miracles altogether, but that is a separate discussion. The objective here is to explain the purpose of miracles and the fact that their performance by *tzaddikim* is a Torah-based phenomenon and not an innovation of the Baal Shem Tov.

Miracles in the Torah

The performance of miracles by a Rebbe is one of the basic and fundamental principles of Torah, and stories of the performance of miracles by *tzaddikim* are found throughout the Torah itself. The *Book of Exodus* is replete with accounts of the many miracles that were performed through Moses: the Ten Plagues that were brought upon the Egyptians, the striking of the rock to bring forth water in the desert, the

that allows us to receive the food coming from the people who are preparing it outside the pit.”

If we were to discuss the difference between the way the parents and the children viewed the pit, there would be two aspects. First, the parents were aware of the world that existed outside of the pit. Secondly, they knew that the window had absolutely no real significance. The children, on the other hand, knew of nothing but the pit. To them, the window had an entirely different identity; it was a provider with a life of its own. There was nothing in their frame of reference beyond the window.

This is the difference between a *tzaddik* and an ordinary person. When an ordinary person looks at nature, he sees the window. The window (clouds) gives rain. The window (earth) gives forth crops. The window (trees) gives fruit. The window (sun) gives light. They have to struggle to believe and accept that there is a higher force which is G-d.

The *tzaddik* is like the parents. Just as the parents were aware of the entire world outside the pit, the *tzaddik* clearly sees the existence of G-d in the world. Just as the parents saw the insignificance of the window, the role of nature takes on an entirely different significance to the *tzaddik*.

When a *tzaddik* performs a miracle and reveals G-d's presence in the world, ordinary people have an opportunity to see life outside of the pit. A person will see physicality and materialism as merely a means to an end: the end being an enhanced communication and relationship with G-d, and that the true identity of creation — of nature and everything that happens within nature — is really G-d.

As a result, everything in a person's life — his personal, business, social, and political life — is elevated to a much

They will be aware that when studying Torah, they are drawing G-dliness into their mind and heart.

The same is true with the observance of *mitzvos*. A person can perform *mitzvos* and be conscious of the physical, emotional, and social benefits in observing them. But when that person has an awareness of the G-dly dimension of *mitzvos*, their performance has a whole new meaning. A person realizes that he is drawing G-dliness into his mind and heart (and the world as well), elevating and refining him to a higher spiritual level. Another aspect of revealing G-d's presence in the world is that it heightens one's sensitivity to the G-dliness in everything: in the street, in nature, in life itself.

An analogy is given⁹ of a king who once threw a young couple into a deep pit in the ground where they were condemned to remain for life. Were it not for candles, the pit would be completely dark, with no connection to the outside.

Once a day, however, a little window opened up at the top of the pit and a basket of food was lowered down to the couple. Anything that had to be removed from the pit was put into the basket to be taken out. For years and years they saw no people — only a rope that brought them a basket of food.

The couple eventually had children, and these children grew up in the pit. As the children grew, there was a difference of opinion between the parents and the children as to where the food came from. The children said, "That's obvious. It's coming from the window."

The parents laughed pitifully. They said, "There is a whole world out there. A world of people and buildings and sunlight. This is only a little dark pit. The window is only something

manna falling from heaven, the splitting of the sea, and many others.

Moses' successor, Joshua, was also known for his performance of great miracles, the most famous being both the crumbling of the walls of the city of Jericho and his stopping the sun to facilitate the conquest of that city.

Throughout the accounts of the Prophets and the later Scriptural writings, we find incredible stories of the miracles performed through prophets and other *tzaddikim*. Needless to say, the performance of miracles by *tzaddikim* clearly preceded the Baal Shem Tov.

Even though G-d has always performed miracles through *tzaddikim*, it was never a major focus of Jewish life before the advent of the chassidic movement. So what was it that the Baal Shem Tov and his successors needed to communicate to the Jewish people by performing these tremendous miracles? Surely these *tzaddikim* weren't acting on their own initiative. What was it about the later generations that necessitated this open and frequent display of miracles?

Baal Shem Tov Stories: Truth or Fantasy?

Someone once asked the famed chassidic Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, to comment on the authenticity of the Baal Shem Tov's miracle stories. He answered cryptically that a person who believes every story told about the Baal Shem Tov's miracles is a fool. But a person who doesn't believe them is an *apikores*, a disbeliever.¹

What does that mean? If a person believes everything he hears, that can be a sign of foolishness. Even if the story

9. From *Derech Chaim*, a book of chassidic teachings by the Mitteler Rebbe (Kehot, 2002), p. 88.

1. I.e., for a true believer would know that nothing is beyond the potential of a *tzaddik*.

actually happened, details could have been added or omitted when the story passed from one person to another and one generation to the next. In such a case, the story can evolve into something entirely different from what actually occurred. Unless one hears a story from a reliable source, he can't be certain that what he heard is exactly what happened.

On the other hand, if a person doesn't believe that the story *could* have happened, he is lacking in the belief that G-d is above nature and that He can perform miracles through *tzaddikim*, who are also above nature. Such a person is an *apikores*.

Someone once asked Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the Previous Rebbe, whether all the stories about the Baal Shem Tov actually occurred. He answered, "I can't testify as to whether or not they actually happened, but whether they *could* have? Much greater things involving the Baal Shem Tov could certainly have occurred."

From the above, we see that one's belief in G-d and the fact that miracles can be performed through *tzaddikim* are fundamentally connected. Since G-d Himself *created* the natural order, He is not bound or restricted by it, and can therefore perform miracles. And since *tzaddikim* are completely unified with G-d on an essential level, they, too, are not restricted by the laws of nature and can also perform miracles.

Nevertheless, the question still remains: Why did the Baal Shem Tov and the other chassidic Rebbes focus so *heavily* on the performance of miracles? What was the specific purpose of a miracle in their generations and what did it contribute to the amelioration of Jewish life?

that the reason she hadn't written sooner was that she recently gave birth to a little boy. She was writing to congratulate him and let him know that everything was fine.

"Seeing this vision calmed him tremendously. He realized that all this had taken place through the spiritual powers of this great Rabbi and he had had the privilege of witnessing it. Sure enough, a short time later, he received a letter from his wife that was identical to the one he had seen in the mirror."

Concluded the man, "I, in fact, am that child who was born. The general in the story was my father. When I was told that by looking at the fire you were able to extinguish it, I was sure you were the Baal Shem Tov."

In these three stories, a miracle performed by a *tzaddik* was able to break through the façade of nature and reveal the truth about G-d's dominion over the world.

The Purpose of Awareness

What if a person firmly believes in G-d — and believes with no doubt that G-d is above nature and runs the world? Why would this person need to experience or hear about a miracle?

The question itself misses the underlying point. The purpose of miracles is not to convince someone that G-d exists, nor is it to prove that G-d is above nature. For someone who believes strongly in the existence of G-d, miracles can make his belief more tangible and heighten his or her awareness and consciousness of G-d.

When someone's awareness of G-d is intensified, everything he or she does will have an added G-dly dimension to it. When people are studying Torah, for example, they will not only be aware of its academic benefits, its brilliant wisdom, they will also be conscious of the fact that it is *G-dly* wisdom.

running to the Alter Rebbe for a blessing and a solution to the situation. The Alter Rebbe asked to be brought to the scene of the fire. He stood leaning on his stick, looking intensely into the fire. The longer he stared, the smaller the fire became until it was completely extinguished.

Everyone in town was talking about this incredible miracle. One of the head authorities of that town, a non-Jew, asked to meet the Alter Rebbe, and when it was arranged, he asked the Alter Rebbe if he was the Baal Shem Tov.

The Alter Rebbe replied, “No, I am a grandson of the Baal Shem Tov.”⁸

The man continued, “I’ll tell you why I am asking. There was once a general who went to war, leaving his wife and children behind. As he traveled, he hoped to receive some word from his wife at home. A long time passed and he didn’t receive any communication from her, so he began to worry.

“The war took him to an area near the city of Mezhibuzh where the Baal Shem Tov lived. People told him to try to see the great Jewish rabbi there who had holy vision and was famous for giving blessings. So he made the effort to visit the Baal Shem Tov.

“Even though he never actually got to speak to the Baal Shem Tov, he did make it to his waiting room. While sitting there, he looked into a mirror on the wall and, to his astonishment, instead of seeing his own reflection, he saw an image of his hometown. He looked closer and saw his house. He looked through the window of his house and saw his wife sitting at their table writing a letter. When he looked even closer, he saw that she was writing a letter to him, explaining

8. The Alter Rebbe considered himself a spiritual grandchild of the Baal Shem Tov because he was the student of the Baal Shem Tov’s student, the Maggid of Mezritch. (*HaYom Yom*, entry for 27 Iyar.)

The Purpose of Miracles: A Preface

To answer these questions, one needs to understand the purpose of miracles in general. The *Midrash* says² that when G-d created the world, He considered creating it with the Attribute of Judgment (*Midas HaDin*) alone but recognized that the world would not be able to withstand such unyielding severity. Punishment would be meted out for even the smallest transgression and there would be no possibility for reprieve or rectification.

G-d also entertained the notion of creating the world with the Attribute of Kindness or Compassion (*Midas HaChessed-Rachamim*) alone but saw that that world would also not endure. Living without consequence for one’s actions would create a society of chaos and depravity and that, too, would implode.

To avoid both these extremes, G-d blended the Attribute of Kindness with the Attribute of Judgment and thus created our world.

A deeper insight into this *Midrash*, according to chassidic teachings,³ is that Judgment and Kindness are the two primary modes through which G-d interacts with the world:

The Attribute of Judgment, known as *Gevurah*, conceals G-dliness in the world. As G-d’s nature is to bestow revealed goodness, withholding it usually results from His judgment. Whenever something negative happens to a person, the concealment of G-dliness is in play.

The Attribute of Kindness — *Chessed* — reveals G-dliness in the world and is the quality that brings about the desirable circumstances in a person’s life.

2. *Bereishis Rabbah* 12:15. See also *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 1:1.

3. *Tanya, Shaar HaYichud VebaEmunah* (Kehot), ch. 5.

When G-d created the world, He created it out of a desire to have a “dwelling place” in this coarse, materialistic world; the lowest of all worlds. As G-d is a spiritual being, the physical world must be infused with G-dly light in order for Him to feel “at home” in it. Therefore, a world whose existence is predicated on being both physical and spiritual would have to maintain a constant and perfect balance between *Chessed* and *Gevurah* — a world where G-dliness would be neither excessively revealed or concealed.

Initially, one might think that a world created with *Chessed* would be the most euphoric and idyllic world imaginable. Yet were the universe to be created through the complete revelation of G-d’s presence, the world and all its inhabitants would be unable to remain in a materialistic state. Without the concealment of G-dliness, the world could only exist as a completely spiritual entity.

However, while the concealment of G-dliness may make the creation of physical entities possible, it also makes establishing a connection to G-d *impossible*. If G-d’s presence were totally concealed from us, we would lack an awareness of G-d and hence have no relationship with Him.

To create a world in which He is both concealed and revealed, G-d concealed enough of Himself to allow for our “independent” existence and free choice, and revealed enough of Himself to allow us to relate to Him.

One of the ways this revelation is shown to us is through miracles.

Nature Conceals — A Miracle Reveals

Through our physical eyes, the world seems to follow a natural order: the sun rises and the sun sets; seeds are planted

then ordered the rowing stopped so the Alter Rebbe could fulfill the *mitzvah* of making a blessing over the new moon.⁶ It was clear that this whole occurrence was above and beyond nature.⁷

By all the laws of nature, the horses in the first story should have responded to their driver and pulled the wagon. By all the laws of nature, the boat in the second story should have moved when rowed. The fact that both scenarios went against nature made it eminently clear that there is a force above and beyond nature that is running this world.

Through incidents like this, G-d is revealed in the world. What is the effect of this? Simply, the inspiration that comes from witnessing a miracle brings people to a level of spiritual awareness they could not otherwise achieve.

Once, there was a chassid who visited the very spot on the side of the road where the Alter Rebbe spent that Shabbos. Had he sat and studied a lengthy discourse in chassidic philosophy, it is doubtful that he would have achieved the same level of awe and awareness of G-d that he reached by visiting the site of this miracle.

Another miraculous story involving the Alter Rebbe revolves around a fire that broke out in a certain city he was visiting. The fire was huge and there was no hope in putting it out. In those days, if a house was on fire, it was a much greater danger than would be today because the materials used to construct those houses made the spread of fire much easier.

The townspeople and the town’s firemen began to panic, fearing that the whole town might burn down. Someone came

6. Since G-d desires that *mitzvos* be performed within nature (so nature itself is involved in the *mitzvah*), the Alter Rebbe preferred that the boat be stopped through natural means so he could perform the *mitzvah* of *kiddush levanah* without resorting to a miracle.

7. *Likkutei Dibburim, loc. cit.*, vol. 5, pp. 140-141.

keep them from traveling. He asked the Alter Rebbe to “at least let the horses move to the next village.” The Alter Rebbe refused. The general said, “Then at least let them move to the side of the road near the tree.” To this the Alter Rebbe acquiesced. The horses moved to the side of the road near the tree where they remained until the end of Shabbos the next day.

(In later years, chassidim who lived near the city of Nevel knew exactly where the tree was and exactly where the Alter Rebbe spent that Shabbos.)⁵

There was a similar incident that occurred later on in the account of the Alter Rebbe’s arrest. Eventually incarcerated in the Peter-Paul Fortress in Petersburg, he, an officer, and some assistants had to cross a river by boat from the prison to the place of his interrogation.

This night happened to be one of the nights on which a Jew makes the monthly *kiddush levanah* — the blessing over the new moon — and the Alter Rebbe wished to do so. But in order to bless the moon, a person is supposed to remain in one place, so he asked the officer to stop the boat in order for him to make the blessings.

Like the other general and officers in the first story, the officer was certainly not going to respect his request. But the boat suddenly stopped and he could not figure out why it stopped or how to make it move.

Finally the Alter Rebbe asked, “Now will you stop the boat for me?” The officer realized he was not dealing with an ordinary person and promised to do so. When the rowing continued and the boat once again began to move, the officer

5. *Likkutei Dibburim, an Anthology of Talks by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch*, in English translation, vol. 1, p. 89 (Sichos In English, Brooklyn, NY, 1988).

and crops grow — all giving the impression that “nature” is running and operating the world.

Nature is the true concealment: You see the world but you don’t see G-d.

How can so many people deny the existence of G-d? Because the veil of nature conceals and distorts the truth. A person can look at the world and conclude that nature is an independent agent functioning without need of Divine input.

But when a miracle takes place, the “lie” is exposed. Incredible miracles such as the Jewish people effortlessly walking away from the evil clutches of Egyptian slavery, the Red Sea splitting for them and standing like a wall, the Egyptians drowning as they followed after them on dry land and the Sea immediately reverting to its original state reveal G-dliness in the world. Those who were there “saw” with their own eyes that G-d, and not nature, operates this world.

All miracles produce a similar effect. While nature’s function is to conceal G-dliness, the purpose of a miracle is to reveal it.

A miracle pierces the veil and gives us a glimpse of G-d.

The Body and Soul of Judaism

This will help us understand what the Baal Shem Tov and the other chassidic Rebbes after him communicated to us through the performance of miracles.

In Judaism, there is a body and a soul. The body consists of the technical, physical details — the do’s and don’ts — of Jewish life: lighting candles before Shabbos and the holidays, eating matzah on Passover, putting a *mezuzah* on the doorpost, donning *tefillin* every morning, refraining from eating non-kosher food.

The soul of Judaism is the G-dliness behind it all. Experiencing or sensing G-dliness gives us an increased awareness of, and love for, G-d. When the soul of Judaism is revealed, our feelings and emotional connection to G-d, our awe, deep belief, and trust in Him are enhanced. Through performing miracles, the Baal Shem Tov increased the revelation of G-dliness so that these aspects within ourselves would be strengthened and reinforced.

One doesn't need a tangible or obvious connection to a *tzaddik* to follow the body of Judaism. A person can see for himself what is written in the *Code of Jewish Law*, learn what one should and should not do, and follow the rules on his own.

But it is mainly one's connection to a *tzaddik* that helps a person develop the soul, or *neshamah*, of Judaism. Through this connection, a person's love, awe and belief in G-d is stimulated, and through the miracles that he performs, a *tzaddik* helps reveal G-d's presence in Judaism and in the world.

This, therefore, is the purpose of miracles. The miracles performed by the Baal Shem Tov and the *tzaddikim* that followed have been a powerful tool to reveal G-d's unequivocal presence in the world.

In truth, just as a miracle comes from the hand of G-d, so too does nature operate through the hand of G-d. But because nature hides G-d's presence, G-d's role in world events is not clearly seen.

The ultimate goal of Creation is that nature should become transparent and that G-dliness become apparent. This is achieved through miracles. They shatter the false veneer of nature and reveal how G-d is the One directing every aspect of the world.

Three Miracle Stories of the Alter Rebbe

The story is told of the arrest of the Alter Rebbe by the Russian government.⁴ Accused of high treason, he was taken to prison in the dreaded black coach, the vehicle reserved for the government's most dangerous enemies.

The trip from his home in Liozna to the prison in Petersburg took a few days, and the ominous journey began on Friday. The Russian government was hardly interested in one's observance of Jewish practice, so the officers accompanying the Alter Rebbe were certainly not concerned that the trip would continue into Shabbos.

Nevertheless, Jewish law mandates that one not travel on Friday after noontime, since obstacles and delays along the way could result in a person's desecration of Shabbos. So the Alter Rebbe asked the driver to stop the wagon early Friday and wait on the side of the road until Shabbos was over.

The general in charge found the request outrageous. An officer of the Czar should take orders from a prisoner?! He rejected the Alter Rebbe's request, of course, and ordered the driver to continue on as before.

Suddenly, one of the axles on the wagon broke for no apparent reason. Unruffled, the officer had the axle fixed and immediately ordered the driver to continue. As they were about to set out again, one of the horses suddenly collapsed and died, and the officer quickly sent someone to the nearby village to bring a new horse. After hooking up the new horse to the wagon, strangely, and for absolutely no apparent reason, both of the horses wouldn't budge.

At this point, the general finally understood that all these events were the result of miracles performed by the Rabbi to

4. *The Arrest and Liberation of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi*, op. cit.