

# 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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ב"ס"ד

# A Tzaddik and His Students: THE REBBE-CHASSID RELATIONSHIP

By: Rabbi Shloma Majeski

(Chapter 7)



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## A Tzaddik and His Students: The Rebbe-Chassid Relationship

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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  
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So the choice a person makes is surely his, but how that  
person's efforts will bear fruit is up to the blessing bestowed on  
him. When a person receives a blessing from a Rebbe,  
G-dliness is revealed in those areas in which he is to be blessed.  
And the more G-dliness that is imparted to a person, the more  
every area of life — physical *and* spiritual — is met with greater  
success.



### לזכות

החייל ב"צבאות השם" מתתיהו ארי' לייב שי לייט  
לרגל יום הולדתו השלישי ולתספורתו,  
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### נדפס ע"י נכדם ובנם

הרה"ת ר' אהרן וואלף וזוגתו מרת פולינה  
ומשפחתם שיחיו ציקמאן

from carrying it out. Asking for G-d's blessing extends to those circumstances beyond one's control that may prevent a person from accomplishing his goals.

### *The Marriage of Hard Work and Blessing*

Even though we must constantly keep in mind that *everything* is up to G-d, our job is to do what we need to do, and work on what we need to work on in all areas of life. Then, having asked G-d to help us make the right choice, it is our job to labor in that choice to bring it to fruition. Like a vessel that holds the blessing of rain, our vessel of hard work holds G-d's blessing for success.

Imagine a person who decides to open a store, rents the space, and then sits on a folding chair waiting for the merchandise and customers to miraculously arrive. Purchasing the merchandise, publicizing the wares, and providing customer service has to be performed by the person, but the success in the business is all from G-d.

Likewise, a person has to plow and sow to produce crops, but if it doesn't rain, nothing will happen. Regardless of the circumstances — the fanciest equipment, the biggest farm, and the purchasing power of the clientele — the rain (G-d's blessing) is what makes the crops grow. Of course, the opposite is also true: a field can be blessed with rain, but without a person's actual work, nothing but weeds will grow.

Asking for a *tzaddik's* blessing does not take away one's work, nor does it suggest that the *tzaddik* do his work for him. It is simply a person's request that he or she will have the ability to do whatever work is necessary, and that the hard work invested will be successful, both in physical and spiritual matters.

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## IN LOVING MEMORY OF

Horav **Schneur Zalman Halevi** ע"ה  
 ben Horav **Yitzchok Elchonon Halevi** ה"י  
**Shagalov**

Passed away on 21 Tamuz, 5766

Reb **Dovid Asniel** ben Reb **Eliyahu** ע"ה  
**Ekman**

Passed away on 5 Sivan - Erev Shavuot, 5765

Mrs. **Devora Rivka** bas Reb **Yosef Eliezer** ע"ה  
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Passed away on the second day  
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Reb **Yitzchok Moshe** (Ian)  
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**Ekman (Santiago, Chile)**

Passed away on the 24th day of Shevat, 5769

ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

## AND IN HONOR OF

Mrs. **Esther Shaindel** bas **Fraidel Chedva** שתיח'ל  
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matters when, in the text of the blessing directly before the *Shema* prayer, we are told to ask G-d to “have mercy on us and grant our heart the understanding to comprehend, discern, perceive, learn and teach, observe, practice and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah with love.” Furthermore, we ask G-d to “Enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, cause our hearts to cleave to Your commandments and unite our hearts to love and fear Your Name.”<sup>37</sup>

Even though we know that spiritual growth depends on the choices a person makes, nevertheless it needs G-d’s blessing to be successful.

As for where we see that blessings for spiritual success can be conveyed through a *tzaddik*, the previously mentioned incident with the spies illustrates that both Joshua and Caleb were blessed by *tzaddikim* to remain spiritually strong in their mission.

Therefore, not only can a person be blessed for success in spiritual matters, he can receive those blessings from a *tzaddik*. A *tzaddik’s* blessings and prayers for people extend not only to physical concerns but to areas related to free choice as well.

In actuality, there is *nothing* a person can do or succeed in without the assistance of G-d. It may be a person’s free choice that has him decide to study Torah, perform *mitzvos*, or do good deeds, but will he actually be able to carry it out? This is where he needs G-d’s blessing: that there shouldn’t be any difficulties on the way, and if there are, he will have the power to overcome them, as well as his own evil inclination, which can often stand in his way.

A person may also make a G-dly choice, like attending a Torah class or helping a friend in need, but certain obstacles such as weather, sickness, or a subway strike may prevent him

37. *Siddur Tehillat HaShem*, p. 45.

Therefore, *tzaddikim* would often hand out coins, dollar bills, or a holy book (*sefer*), as a way of transmitting blessing.

For many years, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would stand for hours on Sundays and many other occasions and distribute dollar bills to thousands of people. Entire books have been written on the outcome of some of the blessings received through these dollar bills from the Rebbe, whether it be the healing of serious illnesses, women giving birth after having been unable to have children for over a decade, financial turnarounds against impossible odds or other miraculous results.<sup>35</sup>

### *Receiving Blessings for Our Spiritual Needs*

Some people may think that a blessing only applies to something physical, but can a person receive a blessing for something spiritual? If the entire purpose of the world's creation is based on G-d giving a person complete free will to make his own spiritual choices, wouldn't a blessing for spiritual strength take away that choice? If a person must choose on his own to do good deeds, live morally, learn Torah and grow spiritually, can a person receive a blessing for that?

In addition, there is a well-known axiom in the *Talmud* which states, "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven,"<sup>36</sup> meaning that while all of our physical circumstances are orchestrated by G-d, our spiritual growth and development is left to our choice.

Nevertheless, we see a powerful proof for a person asking for — and therefore receiving — direct blessings for spiritual

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **THE BLESSINGS AND PRAYERS OF A REBBE**

The previous three chapters discussed a Rebbe's ability to perform miracles, convey information through prophecy or *ruach hakodesh*, and give G-dly advice and instruction.

Another essential function of a Rebbe is to bestow blessings (*berachos*) and pray for others: individuals, the collective Jewish nation, and the world at large. This is one of the reasons why Jews from all walks of life go to great lengths to receive blessings from a Rebbe and to ask the Rebbe to pray for them.

Is there a Torah source for this practice? And since every Jew has the power to bless and pray for others, what makes a Rebbe's blessings and prayers superior to those of an ordinary Jew?

Many think this concept originated with the chassidic movement and has therefore added something to the Torah. Others claim that asking a Rebbe to bless or pray for someone is "not Jewish" as it seems to make the Rebbe an intermediary between G-d and the Jewish people. "If G-d is the source of all blessing," they ask, "why would I turn to a human being for my needs? Doesn't that undermine one's direct relationship with G-d and isn't that contrary to the basic principles of Judaism?"

This chapter will address these questions, expound on the nature of a Rebbe's *berachos* and prayers, and

35. One of the objectives of "Sunday Dollars" was to encourage people to give these dollars to charity (*tzedakah*), thereby bringing more G-dly light into the world through this *mitzvah*. Unwilling to part with the Rebbe's dollars, most people kept them and donated a dollar (or more) of their own to *tzedakah*.

36. *Berachos* 33b.

explain what makes them distinct from those of an ordinary Jew.

### *Torah Sources for Receiving Blessings From a Tzaddik*

There are numerous sources in the Torah itself where we see the concept of receiving blessings from a *tzaddik*. In the *Book of Genesis*,<sup>1</sup> when Isaac is about to bless his son Esav, his wife Rebecca goes to great lengths to insure that their worthier son, Jacob, receive the *berachos* instead. The risk she takes to accomplish this gives us some insight into the importance and desirability of a *tzaddik's* blessing.

Later in *Genesis*, before his passing, Jacob gives special blessings to each one of his twelve children, the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes. Here, the Torah elaborates at length on the details of each blessing.

Appearing in the last section of the Torah, “*V’Zos HaBerachah*” (“And This Is the Blessing”),<sup>2</sup> are the blessings that Moses gives to the Twelve Tribes before his passing. Not only do they comprise the majority of this Torah section, but the transmission of Moses’ final blessings becomes the title of the entire section.

The first recorded source of a *tzaddik's* power to bless others is found in the Torah commentary of *Rashi* in *Genesis* (12:2), in the section entitled *Lech Lecha*. In this verse, G-d is speaking to the Patriarch Abraham and ends the sentence with the words, “*veheyey berachah*” — “and you will be a blessing.” *Rashi* explains this to mean, “The blessings are now in your hands. Up until now the blessings were in My hand: I blessed

*Rashi* explains that from this we derive that “when a person enjoys participating at a meal at which scholars are seated, it is as if he is enjoying the splendor of the Divine presence.”

How does this relate to food? If a person is eating food that is part of the *tzaddik's* meal, it is as if he is benefiting from G-d’s presence, because G-d’s presence, the *Shechinah*, is contained within the *tzaddik*, as explained in Chapter Two. Therefore the *Shechinah* within the *tzaddik* extends to everything he is connected to and involved with. The food he is eating becomes imbued with G-dliness, and if someone else eats that food, he actually absorbs the blessing within himself. In that way, food becomes a source of blessing.

Since G-d is the source of life, therefore, whatever is connected to Him is imbued with greater G-dly energy, as it says in *Deuteronomy* 4:4: “But you who did cleave to the L-rd your G-d are alive; every one of you this day.” Therefore anything connected with G-d and anything that has G-dliness imbued in it in a revealed way has more life and more blessing. This is why some chassidim have the custom of eating *shirayim*: the food left over from the meal of their Rebbe. Their only purpose in eating this food is to receive the Rebbe’s blessing transmitted through the food.

### *...through an object*

Sometimes a Rebbe’s blessing is transmitted to the chassid through the giving of an object, as we find in the *Talmud*: “He who took a coin from Iyov was blessed.”<sup>34</sup> Iyov was a *tzaddik*, and receiving a coin from him was one way of receiving his blessing.

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1. 27:4.

2. *Deuteronomy* 33:1-29.

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34. *Bava Basra* 15b.

all the women who had not yet had children or had miscarried, and they too would be blessed.

The following day, the whole town was talking about the incredible miracle that had taken place. Every single one of the sick people in the *shul* had become well! The doctor of the town said that while some people called this a miracle, (for some) it was literally resurrection of the dead.

And all this from a *tzaddik's* blessing transmitted through wine.

Other drinks can also be a vehicle for blessing. Once, at a chassidic gathering led by the Rebbe Rashab, the fifth Rebbe of Chabad, the Rebbe wanted to give one of the chassidim some vodka with which to say *l'chaim*. The chassid picked up the bottle that was in front of him and indicated to the Rebbe, "I already have (my own *l'chaim*)."

The Rebbe said to him, "What you have is not what I am giving you!" If the Rebbe was merely distributing vodka, then the vodka from the chassid's bottle and the vodka from the Rebbe would be the same. If the Rebbe is imbuing a spiritual blessing in the vodka, then only the vodka from the Rebbe has that blessing.

The Rebbe Rashab continued, "How painful it is when you desire to give someone something spiritual and they push it away by showing you their materialism... (totally oblivious to what the Rebbe is giving)." No matter what was in that chassid's cup, it did not have the Rebbe's blessing in it, and the Rebbe wanted to give him a special *berachah*.<sup>33</sup>

We find a similar thing with food. It says in the *Book of Exodus* (18:12) that "Yisro (Moses' father-in-law), Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel sat down and ate before G-d."

Adam and Noah, and now I am transmitting this ability to you. You may now bless whomever you desire."

In another section in *Genesis* entitled *Chayei Sarah* (25:5), the verse states, "And Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac," on which *Rashi* comments: "G-d said to Abraham, 'and you will be a blessing' — the blessings are given into your possession to bless whomever you desire. And Abraham transmitted this power to bless to Isaac."

Examples of blessings from *tzaddikim* appear in the *Book of Prophets* as well. In *Kings II*, ch. 4, the story is told of the prophet Elisha who used to visit the home of a certain family, and on one occasion asked the woman of the house what *berachah* she needed.

She requested a blessing for children, and even though the commentaries<sup>3</sup> say there was a Heavenly decree that she not have children, Elisha blessed her and she did, in fact, give birth. Not only was the *tzaddik's* blessing fulfilled, it actually overturned a Heavenly ruling.

(A famous phrase explains this to a greater degree:<sup>4</sup> "A *tzaddik* decrees" — that this person should have a child, or that person should become well, have a livelihood, etc. — "and G-d fulfills." We see on certain occasions as well that G-d may decree what appear to be negative circumstances, and a *tzaddik* can nullify that decree.)

These are some of the major sources from the Torah and its commentaries which show clearly that G-d has bestowed the ability to bless upon his *tzaddikim* — first to Abraham and then upon the *tzaddikim* of every generation that followed.

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3. Referring to the Torah commentators *Ralbag* (1288-1344), Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, of France; and *Malbim* (1809-1879), Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel (Weiser), born in Volhynia (Ukraine).

4. *Zohar II*, p. 15a. See *Moed Katan* 16b where the opposite wording appears: that G-d decrees and a *tzaddik* has the power to nullify His decree.

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33. From a *sichah* (talk) of the Rebbe Rashab, written in *Toras Shalom*, p. 177.

From this it is clear that the concept of receiving a *berachah* from a *tzaddik*, a human being of flesh and blood, is not a new concept but one found in the very fundamentals of Torah itself.

Similar to this is the concept of receiving a blessing from a *kohen*.<sup>5</sup> As is written in the Torah (*Numbers* 6:22-27), it is a *mitzvah* for the *kohanim* to bless the Jewish people.

On a daily basis, the *kohanim* in the *Beis HaMikdash* would perform the service of *Birkas Kohanim* — “the Blessing of the Priests” to the people. Even today, when there is no *Beis HaMikdash*, *kohanim* in every synagogue around the world still bless all the Jewish people in their community during the services on the Jewish holidays. In Israel, *Birkas Kohanim* is performed every Shabbos during the morning service, and in some places there, every day.

Although the *kohanim* are human beings of flesh and blood, they have been granted the ability to draw down blessings from G-d in a more direct manner than can we, and we make the greatest effort to be present in synagogue to receive the blessings from them.

It is even customary at happy occasions such as a wedding or a *bris* for a *kohen* to be called upon to give a blessing to the bride and groom or to the baby.

### *Asking Tzaddikim to Pray for Us*

What is true about receiving blessings from a *tzaddik* also applies to being prayed for by a *tzaddik*. It goes without saying that every person prays to G-d directly — especially since we find that one of the 248 positive commandments in the Torah

There was an older chassid named Reb Moshe whose illness was so dire that the doctor believed he only had a few more hours to live. As Reb Moshe lay in bed, several chassidim came to the house to carry him to the Alter Rebbe’s *hakafo*. Reb Moshe’s uncle, a great Torah scholar who had not yet been convinced of the miraculous powers of the Alter Rebbe, began shouting and screaming, “How can you do this?! The man has a high fever! The doctor thinks he has just a few hours to live. You are going to take him out in this freezing rain and sleet? It’s literally murder!”

Reb Moshe lay motionless, his skin a sickly blue. His children, however, chassidim of the Alter Rebbe, had such staunch trust in their Rebbe that if the Rebbe requested that all those who were sick be brought to *shul* for *hakafo*, there was nothing to be concerned about. That would be how their father, and many other ailing chassidim, would be healed.

When they finally arrived, the *shul* was packed with sick people. Many were so ill, they couldn’t stand and had to lie down. Many were groaning in pain and others couldn’t stop coughing. Yet they were all there for the same reason. They knew they were following the directives of their Rebbe, and by doing what he said, they would receive his blessing.

The Alter Rebbe first made *kiddush* on wine. He then chose three people with whom to form a *Beis Din*, a Jewish court. One of them was a *Kohen*, the second a *Levi*, and the third a *Yisrael*.<sup>32</sup> He appointed them as his “emissaries of healing” to distribute to all the sick people in the *shul* the wine that was left in the cup after he made a blessing on it. He also told them to go to the women’s gallery and distribute wine to

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5. Men from the tribe of Levi, specifically descendants of Aaron, who were chosen to perform the services in the *Beis HaMikdash*.

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32. The three designations of the Jewish people. A *Kohen* and a *Levi* are both descendants of the tribe of Levi, and the designation of *Yisrael* refers to all other Jews.



Meal,” when one says the blessing over a cup of wine known as “*kos shel berachah*” (the cup of blessing).<sup>29</sup> In our day and age, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would say the Grace After a Meal over a cup of wine at the end of every *yom tov* (holiday), and then stand for hours distributing wine from his cup to every one of the thousands of people present.

Once the wine has been blessed, those who drink from it receive a blessing because the *tzaddik’s* blessing has been imbued into the wine. There are also many situations when a *tzaddik*, a Rebbe, transmits his blessing by pouring wine (even without having made a blessing over it) and giving *l’chaim* to the chassid.

There is a well-known story<sup>30</sup> about the miraculous blessing in the *kos shel berachah* of the Alter Rebbe. It is customary that chassidim spend the month of Tishrei with their Rebbe, and in 1786, chassidim streamed into Liozna<sup>31</sup> from towns all over Russia and the Ukraine to spend Tishrei with the Alter Rebbe. That month was extremely cold — cold enough that by Sukkos time it was snowing so heavily that snow had to be cleared from the roofs of all the sukkahs before the meals could begin.

That year, many of the chassidim who came to spend the holidays with the Alter Rebbe became very ill from the cold and some even suffered from frostbite. Reb Pinchas Reizes came to the Alter Rebbe and asked for a blessing that these chassidim be healed. Instead, the Alter Rebbe said that all the chassidim who were sick should be taken to the *shul* to participate in the dancing (*hakafos*) on Simchas Torah.

29. In most cases, *kos shel berachah* is given out after the “Grace After a Meal” or the *Havdalah* service, which marks the end of Shabbos or *Yom Tov*.

30. *Likkutei Dibburim*, in English translation, vol. 2, p. 161ff. (Sichos In English, Brooklyn, NY, 1988).

31. A town in White Russia where the Alter Rebbe lived from 1767-1801.

obligates a Jew to pray to G-d.<sup>6</sup> Asking a *tzaddik* to pray for someone is not a substitution for that person’s individual prayers but an addition to them.

The potency of a *tzaddik’s* prayers over that of an ordinary person has its source in the *Talmud* (*Bava Basra* 116a) where it states: “If someone in your family is not well, you should go to the *tzaddik*<sup>7</sup> of your city and ask him to pray for you.”<sup>8</sup> These exact words are brought down as a *halachah* (law) in the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Code of Jewish Law*) — that a person should go to a *tzaddik* to *daven* (pray) for him.<sup>9</sup> From these sources we see that the reason we ask a *tzaddik* to pray for us in times of need is not just that the *tzaddik’s* prayers are more powerful than ours, it’s that the Torah instructs us to do so.

In the *Book of Numbers* (11:2), a fire breaks out among the congregation in the desert and the people cry out to Moses to save them. *Rashi* asks, “Why did they cry to Moses?” and explains with an analogy of a king who becomes angry with his son. The son goes to someone whom his father loves very much and says, “Could you please ask my father to have mercy on me?”<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere in *Numbers* (21:32), *Rashi* explains that the Jewish people felt confident that G-d would help them in battle because of Moses’ prayers that they succeed.

6. See ch. 1, fn. 25.

7. Even though the *Talmud* uses the terminology “*chocham*” (a wise person), it is referring, in this context, to a *tzaddik*.

8. This is developed further in a commentary: “When a king’s fury is aroused, he sends messengers of death to mete out punishment, but a wise man can calm the king and wipe away his fury. Similarly, when the fury of the King of the Universe is aroused, He sends forth the Angel of Death and the victim falls seriously ill. However, a Sage can utilize the favor he finds with G-d to pray for the person’s recovery.”

The commentator *Rashbam* takes this a step further, saying: “According to this, one should turn to a Sage for assistance with prayer at any time of need, not only in a case of illness” (*Schottenstein Shas on Bava Basra* 116b, fn. 32).

9. *Yoreh Deah* 335:10.

Why the prayers of Moses? Weren't their own prayers good enough? And if a *tzaddik* prays for someone, does that exempt that person from saying his or her own prayers every day?

As stated above, a person must certainly pray to G-d. Asking a *tzaddik* to pray for someone is not a substitution for that person's individual prayers. But a *tzaddik* can *strengthen* the power of that person's prayers by interceding on his behalf. The reason for this is simple. Because a *tzaddik* is so precious and close to G-d, and because his entire life is involved in fulfilling G-d's purpose for creating the world, he can receive G-d's blessing and G-d's answer much more quickly than would an ordinary person.

When an ordinary person prays for his own needs, the Heavenly Court makes an investigation into his worthiness. It evaluates the sincerity of his prayers, how he studies Torah, how kind he is to others. Those factors will often determine to what extent his prayers will be answered. But a *tzaddik* lives a spiritual life and a perfect life. Therefore when he prays for an individual, his closeness to G-d will help speed the fulfillment of those requests.

In the Torah section entitled "*Yisro*," we are told of the thousands of Jews in the desert who were standing on line waiting to talk to Moses about various material and spiritual matters. Why were they waiting? The *Ramban*, one of the Torah's major commentators, explains that one of the reasons was to ask Moses to pray for their sick.

There are many stories in the *Talmud* of people going to a *tzaddik* and asking him to pray for them. In one such story,<sup>10</sup> the people of a certain community were fasting and praying that the drought in their land should end, but when they saw that the rain was not forthcoming, they went to the great

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10. See *Megillas Taanis* and *Taanis* 23a.

After living twelve consecutive years in a wholly spiritual environment, their emergence from the cave was quite a harsh adjustment for them. Instead of rejoicing in their freedom, they were horrified that people could be so involved in materialism. As they surveyed the people plowing fields in the land below the cave, whatever met their gaze was destroyed. A Heavenly Voice ordered them to return to the cave where they remained for another year.

When they emerged the second time, Rabbi Elazar had still not learned to appreciate the importance of engaging in physical work and destroyed everything on which his eyes rested. When his father saw what his son had done, his gaze restored and healed everything that Reb Elazar had destroyed.<sup>26</sup>

These examples illustrate that a look, or even a glance, from a *tzaddik* has tremendous spiritual power. That is why a chassid makes an effort to be seen by the Rebbe and to have those he cares about seen by the Rebbe as well, knowing that both spiritual and physical blessings are transmitted through the Rebbe's look.

### ... *through food*

Blessings can also come through food or drink, and wine has always been a vehicle through which a *tzaddik* conveys blessings. This too has its origin in the Torah,<sup>27</sup> and *Shulchan Aruch*<sup>28</sup> designates the actual instances in which wine can receive blessing. One of those times is in the "Grace After a

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26. Because Reb Shimon and his son Reb Elazar were so immersed in spirituality, they couldn't relate to involvement in anything physical. They needed a year to make the transition from the spiritual to the physical plane and appreciate that serving G-d needs to be done using physical objects in a physical world. Although initially, Reb Shimon had to heal the effects of Reb Elazar's destructive gaze, Reb Elazar ultimately realized this as well.

27. *Rashi* on *Bereishis* 18:9 in the section entitled "*Vayeira*."

28. In the volume entitled *Orach Chayim*, sec. 183.

informed that Joshua was filled with “the spirit of wisdom” because Moses had laid his hands upon him.<sup>23</sup>

*Kobanim*, too, convey blessing through their hands.<sup>24</sup> While they are saying the Priestly Blessing, the *kobanim* stretch out their arms and arrange their fingers in a particular configuration so that the spirit of blessing will be conveyed through their fingers.

### ...through a look

We also find that the blessing of a *tzaddik* can be conveyed through a look. One of the sources for this is in the Torah itself. In the *Book of Deuteronomy* (32:49), the portion entitled “*Vayeilech*,” G-d tells Moses that he will not have the privilege of going into the Land of Israel. He should, however, go to the top of a mountain and gaze at the entire land.

On the surface, it seems that viewing the land is a small concession for not being allowed to enter. But *Seforno*, one of the major Torah commentators, explains that Moses’ gaze had a significance well beyond the obvious. Through his gaze, Moses was actually able to transmit blessing to the entire Land of Israel. From this we learn that the gaze of a *tzaddik* alone can convey blessing.

A similar story is found in the *Talmud*.<sup>25</sup> Two of the greatest Torah scholars of their time, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his son Rabbi Elazar, hid in a cave for twelve years to escape a death decree from the Roman Emperor. In the cave, Rabbi Shimon and his son spent every possible moment studying Torah and plumbing the depths of mystical texts.

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23. *Deuteronomy* 34:9.

24. See earlier in the chapter.

25. *Shabbos* 33b.

*tzaddik* Choni HaMagel and asked him to pray for them. Choni HaMagel went outside and made a circle<sup>11</sup> in the dirt and prayed, “G-d, I will not leave this circle until You bring rain to Your children!” Almost immediately, the rain began.

The great *tzaddik* Reb Chanina Ben Dosa is also the subject of many stories in the *Talmud*. Even *tzaddikim* whose prayers were not answered went to this *tzaddik* to ask him to pray for them, and they were helped. By evaluating the fluidity of his prayer, he would be able to tell them in advance whether or not his prayer for them was accepted. If it went smoothly, he would know it had.<sup>12</sup>

In the previously mentioned story about the Prophet Elisha, the woman’s child, now a young boy, fell ill while out in a field and passed away after being carried home to his mother. The mother laid the child on a bed in the house and ran to find Elisha, insisting that he bring the child back to life. He came to the house and, through his prayers, was able to bring the child from death back to life.

### *Asking for a Tzaddik’s Assistance At His or Her Gravesite*

Going to the graves of *tzaddikim* and beseeching them to pray for us also has its source in the Torah. The Torah tells us that the *tzedeke*<sup>13</sup> Rachel, our Matriarch, was not buried together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca and Leah in Hevron, but was buried alone, by the side of the road, in Beis Lechem. In the *Book of Genesis*, the section entitled “*Vayechi*” (48:7), *Rashi* explains that the reason for this is that

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11. His name, Choni HaMagel, derives from the Hebrew word “*hamagel*,” meaning “the one who drew the circle.”

12. *Berachos* 34b.

13. The feminine form of the word *tzaddik*.

when the “Jewish people would later be expelled from Jerusalem and sent into exile, Rachel would plead for mercy for her children as they passed by her grave.”<sup>14</sup> Today, thousands of people visit Rachel’s Tomb annually, entreating her to pray on their behalf that their deepest requests be answered and that G-d should take us out of exile (*galus*).

In the *Book of Numbers*, the section entitled “*Shelach*,” (13:1ff.), the Torah relates the story of the “Twelve Spies” whom Moses sent to spy out the Land of Israel before officially entering as a nation. Although ten of the spies committed a grievous sin by publicly doubting G-d’s ability to conquer the nations there, the other two, Caleb and Joshua, remained steadfast in their trust in G-d. *Rashi* describes how Caleb traveled to the Cave of Machpelah in Hevron where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are buried and prostrated himself on the Patriarchs’ graves, asking that he should not be persuaded by his mutinous companions to join in their slanderous report.<sup>15</sup> (*Rashi* also describes that Moses had already prayed on Joshua’s behalf that he, too, should not become one of the rebellious spies.)

Similarly,<sup>16</sup> during the destruction of the First Temple and the beginning of the Babylonian exile, the Prophet Jeremiah ran to Hevron to the graves of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,

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14. As *Rashi* comments: “(Jacob says to his son Joseph): I know that you have [a complaint] in your heart against me. However, know that I buried her there because of [G-d’s] Word, that she might be of aid to her children when Nebuzaradan exiles them and they pass by there; [then] Rochel will come out upon her grave, crying and beseeching mercy for them ... And the Holy One Blessed Be He will answer her, saying, “‘There is a reward for your work,’ ‘And your children will return to their own border (*Jeremiah* 3:15-17).”

15. See also *Sotah* 34b, which states: “[Caleb] said, ‘My fathers, please request G-d’s mercy for me that I shouldn’t fall into the plot of the spies.’”

As will be seen, one of the reasons to go to the gravesite of a *tzaddik* is that you pray in the merit of the holy ground upon which you are standing. The other reason, cited here, is that a person actually asks the *tzaddikim* buried there to pray to G-d on his or her behalf.

16. *Midrash* on *Lamentations* 41.

even if my sickness will purify me,] I would rather not have this suffering.” “In that case,” the *tzaddik* replied, “give me your hand.” He took his hand and the colleague stood up, the disease gone.

The blessing and healing from the *tzaddik* didn’t come only through words but from the touch of his hand, which was the tool and vehicle through which the blessing was transmitted. In many chassidic circles, when chassidim come to the Rebbe, they shake the Rebbe’s hand — one of the ways the Rebbe can bless his chassidim.

In the *Book of Genesis*, the section entitled “*Vayechi*” (48:8-20), Jacob wants to bless his grandsons Ephraim and Menashe before he passes away. In transmitting the blessings, instead of putting his right hand on the head of the boy sitting to his right, and his left hand on the head of the boy sitting to his left, Jacob crosses his arms so that his right hand rests on the head of the boy to his left and left hand on the boy to his right. The spiritual import of this arrangement is so significant, that Joseph, the boys’ father, worries that the individual blessings may be transmitted to the wrong child. Regardless, the Torah is telling us that putting one’s hands on a child’s head is a major conduit for the transmission of a blessing.

(Many people bless their children every Friday night while placing both their hands on the child’s head. Certainly this is traditionally done *erev* Yom Kippur.)

Another example of conveying spiritual power and blessing through the hands occurs towards the end of Moses’ leadership when G-d commands him to “lay his hand upon Joshua,”<sup>22</sup> in order to transmit the power of leadership to him. The Torah repeats this at the end of the Torah when we are again

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22. *Numbers* 27:18.

called for (e.g., to subdue enemies), his words will evoke blessings from G-d's attribute of *Gevurah*.

Finally, like a doctor who can stitch a wound, remove a blockage, or prescribe the right medication, the *tzaddik* not only knows how to ask G-d for healing, but is like a spiritual surgeon who can actually fix the spiritual mechanism above and correct that which needs repair.

For the average person, for the most part, all this is an impossibility. But a *tzaddik*, who sees the spiritual dimension of everything, can reach the root of the problem or need and cleanse or heal from there. This is what he accomplishes with his prayers and blessings.

### *Transmitting Blessings...*

Regarding the transmission of blessings by a *tzaddik*, there are many ways this can be achieved. The most obvious is that a *tzaddik* gives a verbal blessing, saying to the person, "I bless you that this and this should take place...."

### *...through action*

There is another possibility: that the *tzaddik* gives the blessing through a certain action, and this becomes the channel through which the blessing is transmitted. One example from the *Talmud* describes a case where a *tzaddik* transmitted his blessing to an individual through a handshake.

In the beginning of *Tractate Berachos* (5b), there is a story about a *tzaddik* who paid a visit to a sick colleague. Seeing that he was in tremendous pain, the *tzaddik* asked him, "Is your affliction dear to you?"<sup>21</sup> The colleague said, "Even so, [i.e.,

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21. Since the Torah teaches that suffering is a process of refinement, he was asking him if he welcomed this method of purification.

pleading that they intercede on the Jews' behalf and beg G-d to have mercy on them.

Asking for Heavenly assistance at the grave of a *tzaddik* is a clearly stated law in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (the *Code of Jewish Law*). In the section entitled "The Month of Elul," it states:<sup>17</sup> "It is customary to go to the cemetery after the morning service on the day preceding Rosh HaShanah and pray at the graves of *tzaddikim* (that G-d should give them a good and sweet year). We give charity to the poor and recite many supplications to arouse the holy *tzaddikim* who are buried there to intercede on our behalf on the Day of Judgment. Furthermore, since *tzaddikim* are buried there, the place is holy and pure, and prayers recited there are received more favorably because they were recited on holy ground."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the *Zohar*,<sup>19</sup> considered to be the fundamental text on the *Kabbalah*, states: "The world exists only because of the *tzaddikim* who have passed away ... they pray to G-d and G-d has mercy on the world because of them."

It stands to reason that if it is appropriate for a *tzaddik* to intercede on one's behalf when he is no longer in this world, then surely when a *tzaddik* is alive and in a physical body, it is appropriate for him to do this as well.

### *What a Tzaddik Accomplishes With His Blessings and Prayers*

When a *tzaddik* gives a blessing or prays for someone, what is accomplished spiritually that enables his blessings and prayers to have such a powerful effect?

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17. See para. 13 in the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* for the full text.

18. *Ibid.*, Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried, English translation by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger (Moznaim Publishing Corp., NY, 1991), p. 527.

19. *Tanya, Iggeres HaKodesh*, the end of ch. 27. See *Zohar* II, p. 16b; III, p. 71a.

The G-dliness of the *tzaddik* gives him a deeper spiritual perception and understanding of an individual, the world, and the heavenly plane. When he sees a need — that a person is not well, has no children, money, or any other problem, G-d forbid — the *tzaddik* is able to perceive the *source* of the problem on a spiritual level: he can see the person's spiritual deficiency causing this physical lack, or is privy to the decree in heaven that brought it about.

When a *tzaddik* prays for someone, he is not just requesting that the symptoms of a person's problems either disappear or change in the physical realm. Rather, he is reaching into the spiritual realms in search of the inner core of the problem and praying for healing at that level. Once the core of the issue is corrected in the spiritual realm, the symptoms will naturally fall away in the physical realm.

When the average person *davens*, his or her *words* may reach the spiritual worlds, but he himself cannot see into the spiritual realms at all. In general, all he can basically perceive is the physical end product of whatever is transpiring above. But because a *tzaddik* has a clear window into the spiritual world, he is able to direct his prayers to the proper channel in a much more precise and powerful way.

As an example, if a person has a broken machine, he tries to figure out why it is not working. He pushes this or that button, turns the machine on and off, checks the wires, etc., and if he still can't get it to work, he brings it to a technician. The technician opens up the machine and looks inside for the source of the problem. The layman can only deal with whatever is on the surface. His knowledge extends only to the knobs, buttons and wires that are on the outside of the machine. The technician looks at the inner workings of the machine, gets to the root of the problem, and fixes it on a more fundamental level.

The same is true in our case. When we pray to G-d to alleviate the difficulties we are having — whether in the areas of health, livelihood, or children, or any other problem we might have — we ask for relief only on a surface level because that's the only level to which we can relate. Even on a practical level, a person can only try to ameliorate his condition by doing something tangible like going to a doctor or getting a better job. He can also make an effort to improve his spiritual conduct, like giving charity, for example. But aside from all the things a person can do on this level (including praying that these methods will help and improving his conduct in general), there is very little else a person can do in the spiritual realm that *directly* affects the source of his situation.

A *tzaddik*, on the other hand, can go to the spiritual source of a problem and correct it from there through prayer or blessing. Interestingly, when a blessing is pronounced, it is not just the *tzaddik* expressing his wish that the blessing be fulfilled, it actually draws down the flow of energy from G-d to bring about a change in the situation. According to *Kabbalah* and chassidic teachings,<sup>20</sup> the definition of the word “*baruch*” (blessed) really means “drawing down,” because in pronouncing the blessing, one draws down G-d's energy. In so doing, the *tzaddik* is then able to direct G-d's blessing to the removal of blockages or the correction of untoward circumstances.

Through his prayers, a *tzaddik* can also direct the flow of G-d's energy to that attribute of G-d that can best heal or bring success to a situation. For example, if *chessed* (revealed kindness) is called for (e.g., for income or children), the *tzaddik's* actual words of *davening* will evoke blessings from G-d's attribute of *Chessed*. If *gevurah* (severity, withholding) is

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20. *Torah Or*, an anthology of chassidic discourses by the Alter Rebbe, in the section *Miketz*, p. 37c.