



# Learning Chassidus Today



למא

5:23

וּמָחָה אֶל מֵי הַמָּרִים

*The kohen shall dissolve [the writing] in the bitter waters*

G-d says: "Let my name be erased in the water, if only to bring peace between man and wife."

*Sifri*

"... and he skips over me with love" (Song of Songs 2:4) Great is G-d's love for Israel; He lovingly tolerates the schoolchildren, who trample over the pages of the holy writings..."

*Midrash*

## Supernal priorities

A chassid once wrote to the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson:

*At the synagogue in which I pray, there are individuals who are completely out of line with the spirit of chassidism. I have therefore stopped my practice of reviewing discourses of Chassidic teaching there. For such people, must I squander the sacred teachings of chassidism to no purpose...?!*

The Rebbe replied in a letter dated 2 Iyar 5695 [May 5, 1935]:

Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz was among the most famous students of Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov and a close friend of his successor, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch. Rabbi Pinchas felt that the teachings of Chassidism should be safeguarded and only shared with selected people. He particularly disliked the practice of the people who transcribed Rabbi DovBer's teachings and allowed copies to be made.

Once while Rabbi Pinchas was in Mezeritch, he found one such transcription lying in a mound of garbage. The sight of this caused him great pain. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi was also in Mezeritch at the time. He knew about Rabbi Pinchas's intolerance to the widespread teaching of Chassidus. Wishing to calm him, he began to tell him the following metaphor:

"Once upon a time there was a mighty king who had an only son. Wishing his son to grow in wisdom and might, he sent him off to explore faraway lands and far-flung islands. There the prince was to learn the nature of foreign plants and animals and brave dangerous terrain to capture exotic beasts and birds.



One day, the news reached the king that his son, who was then on a faraway island, had fallen gravely ill, and that the doctors were unable to find a cure for his illness. The king commanded that a call be issued throughout the kingdom: 'Any man who has knowledge of medicine or who can propose a cure for the illness of the prince shall come to the royal palace.'

All the great doctors and all the famed scholars were silenced; for they did not know the remedy or the cure for the illness of the prince.

One day, a man arrived and told the king that he knew of a proven remedy for the illness of the prince. However, this remedy was to be found only in an extremely rare and precious stone. If they could find this gem, grind it to the finest of powders, mix it with a superb wine, and give it to the prince to drink, he would be cured.

The king commanded all the great gemologists of the land to assemble and make a thorough search of the royal treasure stores for the gem that the man had described. After inspecting all the king's gems, the experts finally discovered a stone that matched the man's description. However, the gem they found was the centerpiece of the royal crown of the king!

At first, they were overjoyed to discover the gem, but as soon as they realized that by removing the stone from the crown – the very crown which was used at the coronation of their king – all its glory would fade, they were extremely distressed. Nonetheless, they were forced to inform the king that the gem had been found.

The king was overjoyed. He commanded that the gem be extracted, ground to a fine powder, and the potion be quickly prepared for his son.

At that moment, terrible news reached the royal palace; the prince's condition had so deteriorated that his lips were sealed. The prince was so ill that he could take nothing, not even liquids, into his mouth. The experts and scholars who were gathered at the palace were certain that, under the circumstances, the king would surely direct them not to grind the stone so that the splendor of the royal crown could be preserved.

How astounded they were to hear the king instructing them to hurry and crush the gem and to prepare the potion as swiftly as possible, to pour into the mouth of the prince. 'Grind, pour,

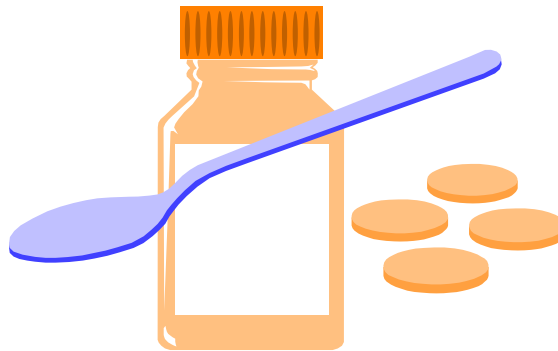


squander the entire gemstone,' said the king. 'Who knows, perhaps a single drop will enter the mouth of my son and he will be healed.'

The king's ministers were amazed at the king's decision and pleaded with him. 'As long as the prince was able to take the cure, it was worthwhile to destroy the gem. Now, when his condition is so hopeless that his ability to swallow even a single drop is questionable, why ruin the glorious crown of the king, the crown by which he assumed his throne?'

The king replied to his ministers: 'If, G-d forbid, my son will not live, who needs the crown? And should he recover, the ruined crown will be my greatest glory. It will attest to the loyalty of my only son, who risked his life to fulfill my will to grow in wisdom and bravery...''

(From Once Upon a Chassid by Y. Tauber)



### Review:

- 1) What is the פשט (simple meaning) of the פסוק quoted in the introduction to this story. (Refer to source of the פסוק for clarification – חומש במדבר –)
- 2) What is the message according to the introduction?
- 3) “*He lovingly tolerates school children who trample over the pages of the holy writings*”. Give an example of how this applies today.
- 4) How do you think this applies to the problem of the Chassidim, both the chassid who did not want to teach and Reb Pinchas of Koritz?
- 5) How does this story answer their questions?
- 6) How does this story address the general question about how we can study Chassidus today?



Complete the table below by filling in the missing parts of the נמשל .

**"MAIN CHARACTERS"**

מְשָׁל	נְמָשָׁל
King	1)
Prince	2)
King's crown	3)
gem/centrepiece of crown	4)

**"PLOT"**

מְשָׁל	נְמָשָׁל
The prince is sent to a far off land	5)
The prince becomes gravely ill.	6)
The king commands that the gem be ground, poured into the prince's mouth even at the risk of being squandered.	7)
Some of the king's ministers protest.	8)
If the prince dies, of what use is the crown?	9)
Some medication enters the prince's mouth and he begins to recover.	10)



## “The Sickness of the Jewish People”

“The hidden aspect of Torah (including Chassidus) also developed over time and as needed”



*What was going on at the time of the Baal Shem Tov that made it necessary to begin spreading Chassidus?*

*What kind of ‘illness’ did the Jewish people have?*

*What was it about Chassidus that would help cure the Jewish people?*

The Jewish people were suffering in three areas; economically, spiritually and socially.

The year of 1648 may well serve as a starting point. In that year, exactly five hundred years before the birth of the Baal Shem Tov, the Cossacks, under the leadership of Hetman Bogdan Chmielnicki began their trail of destruction through Poland attacking Poles and Jews and leaving a horrible train of death behind them. These massacres and killings went on for several years before they were finally stopped. Yet the surviving Jews were given no rest. They were soon overwhelmed by the invasions of Russia and Sweden into Poland. Many areas, which had escaped the Chmielnicki holocaust, found themselves in the path of invading armies. As if this were not enough, there were then periods of outbreaks and pogroms against the Jews of Poland caused by religious intolerance, which lasted to the end of the seventeenth century. Poland was not the only place where Jews had suffered. The Thirty Years’ War (1618-48) had destroyed many communities in Central Europe, religious persecution was common in Austria and the position of Jews in other countries was extremely unstable.



*How would all of the above have caused an economic problem?*

It was under these circumstances that Shabbatai Tzvi (1626 – 1676), the self proclaimed Messiah found himself a following. He declared the Chmielnicki massacres as the 'birth pangs of Moshiach' and proclaimed himself as Moshiach. He gained many followers and excitement ran high among Jews in various parts of the world. In the beginning, even some important rabbis were impressed with Shabbatai Tzvi. However, before long, when Shabbatai Tzvi began doing things that were against Jewish law, the rabbis realized that Shabbatai Tzvi and his movement were a grave danger to the Jewish people and they began to oppose him. But many Jews were prepared to follow him blindly. The Messianic expectations had taken such firm hold on the imagination of many Jews that not even the downfall of Shabbatai Tzvi and his conversion to Islam could get rid of his followers. Despite an all-out effort on the part of leading rabbis to stop the movement, it continued, especially in Poland where it erupted again, fifty years later, in the form of another false Moshiach, Jacob Frank. Eventually, he and most of his sect converted to Christianity.

Although these false-Moshiach movements died, their after-effects lingered on in the suspicion and mistrust that they had aroused among the rabbis. Because these false Moshiach’s had learnt Kabbalah, known as mysticism or the secrets of the Torah, the rabbis felt that learning Kabbalah when one is not spiritually ready to do so was the source of the trouble. As was to be expected, Kabbalah and its study, which had previously been quite popular among many rabbis and in leading Talmudic academies



in Poland and elsewhere, now became forbidden. The general masses were also spiritually dazed wondering when the true Moshiach would finally come and end their misery.



***Explain the spiritual problem the Jews now had.***

Another direct result of the physical poverty of the Jewish communities was the general deterioration of the cultural level of the masses which accentuated (highlighted) a social problem that had been around for a long time.

Traditionally in Jewish life, being knowledgeable was more important than being rich. Poverty was not considered as bad as ignorance. As far back as the times of the Talmud there was a marked social distinction between the *talmid-chacham* (scholar) and the *am-ha-aretz* (ignoramus). However, with the destruction of the Second Bais Hamikdash, the study of Torah and religious observance was the only assurance of unity and survival of the Jewish people. The rabbis realized that the Jewish people, without their own land and political independence, could not survive among the nations of the world except by preserving their cultural heritage (keeping Torah and Mivot) They therefore looked for all different ways of spreading the study of Torah and of discouraging ignorance. They did this through showing contempt to and shunning of the ignorant. This attitude actually worked for many centuries and the general standards of Jewish education were kept very high. No one wanted to be shunned and education was therefore the top priority. While there were always poor Jews, poverty did not necessarily mean ignorance. When Jewish community life was well organized the community would make every effort to help support the poor student.

However, things changed a lot during the period under discussion. Many communities were destroyed and those that survived were too poor to provide free education for the masses. Many children were also forced to find work to help their widowed mothers look after the family. The majority of Jewish children and youth now remained uneducated, through no fault of their own. The division between the unlearned masses and the learned minority widened considerably. The unlearned Jew began to wonder about whether he could still be considered a good Jew if he could not learn. He was made to feel terrible about his ignorance but was not given any guidance as to how to solve this problem.



***Explain the social problem the Jews now had.***

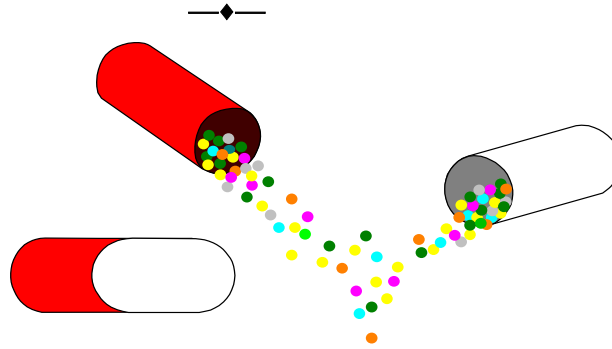
Thus from every point of view, economic, spiritual, cultural and social, Jewish life in the Polish provinces had reached a low in the aftermath of the tragic second half of the seventeenth century. Gloom had descended upon the Jewish population, and the people yearned for spiritual guidance and uplifting.

(Adapted from: Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi.by Rabbi Nissan Mindel.)



**Review:**

- 1) Briefly describe the economic, spiritual and social problem facing the Jews. (one or two sentences per problem)
- 2) Explain how the economic problems led to the spiritual and social ones.
- 3) Design a symbol to represent each one of the problems facing the Jews.



## Chassidus as a Cure

The Baal Shem Tov, also known as the Besht, first began his activities underground. As a young man of eighteen he was a member of a group of “secret serviceman” (*tzadikim nistarim*- hidden tzadikim) whose mission was to wander through the towns and villages to cheer up the Jewish people and help lift their religious and moral standards. The Besht became very aware of the conditions of Jewish life and with the need for more widespread education of the young. He himself became an assistant teacher for a period of time, dedicating himself to the education of the very young children. After the death of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem, the Besht became the leader of the *Nistarim* who spread his teachings among the masses. When, at the age of thirty-six, the Besht revealed himself as the leader of the new Chassidic movement he already had a number of followers in various communities in Poland. The Besht always remained a popular teacher who made use of parables and metaphors to teach profound concepts in simple terms.

Some of his main teachings included:

- 1) Everyone had a duty to serve Hashem in every aspect of daily life. Serving Hashem was not only through the study of Talmud. He emphasized prayer and observing Jewish law above study that took place as a purely intellectual exercise.
- 2) Divine Providence extends not only to every individual, but to every particular thing in the world, even inanimate objects. “A leaf torn from a tree and swept by the wind from place to place reflects the Divine Will and Providence”. This follows directly from his teaching of “*Continuous Creation*” in which he explains that there is no other reality other than Hashem. The true reality of all things is the ‘word’ of Hashem which created all things and which continually keeps them in existence. Without this energy which is the ‘soul’ of every particle in the world, all things would change back to their previous state of non-existence. This would then mean that Hashem is with everyone at all times.
- 3) The highest service to Hashem comes from the attachment we can make with our hearts rather than with our mind. Since we can never fully understand Hashem with our minds, because He is infinite and we are finite, we can become closest to Him by listening to Him. The Besht therefore emphasized the importance of the intention of the heart, the *kavanah* in performing Mitzvos. Here, he taught, it is





not even necessary to know the meaning of the prayers and Tehillim or the significance of the Mitzvos: The sincere saying of the holy words and the simple performance of the Mitzvos are enough to establish contact with Hashem. This was extremely encouraging even to the most illiterate and ignorant Jew as the Besht taught that no one is excluded from being able to serve Hashem.

- 4) The Besht pointed out that the name *am-aretz* which had become an insult was not originally intended to be used that way. On the contrary, the description is used for the Jewish people in a positive way. The Besht explained the metaphor: We step on the Earth yet it contains the greatest treasures (diamond, precious gems, important minerals, oil etc.); so does every Jew, even the humblest of the humble, contain great spiritual treasures which only have to be brought to the surface. Foremost among these treasures the Besht placed the virtues found in the common people: faith, sincerity, humility, love and kindness. He urged the development of these traits by word and deed. "A soul may descend into this world for seventy or eighty years just to do a favor for another Jew, materially or spiritually."
- 5) Above all the Besht tried to instill the quality of joy in serving Hashem. He made this mitzvah a cornerstone of his philosophy. He stressed that if we would be aware that Hashem is everywhere at all times; that He is the essence of goodness and extends His kindness to every individual; that we have the opportunity to serve Him in so many ways in everyday life, this would be enough to ensure that we would always be in a happy frame of mind.

(Adapted from: Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi by Rabbi Nissan Mindel.)



### **Review:**

- 1-5) Carefully read the five main teachings of the Besht listed above. For each one, connect how that particular teaching would be the 'medicine' for one or more of the problems we learned about previously.
- 6) Design a symbol for each one of the Besht's teachings that would represent the main idea of that particular teaching
- 7) On A3 paper, match the symbols you have designed for the problems facing the Jews with the symbols for the appropriate cure.



## Our Duty to Learn and Spread Chassidus

The Baal Shem Tov writes in a letter that on Rosh HaShanah of the year 5507 (1746) his soul ascended to the heavenly realms, where he was granted the privilege of entering the palace of Moshiach.

He writes as follows:

I asked the King Moshiach, “Master, when are you coming?”

And he replied: “When your wellsprings will be disseminated (spread) outward.” לכשיפוצו מעיינותיך הוצה

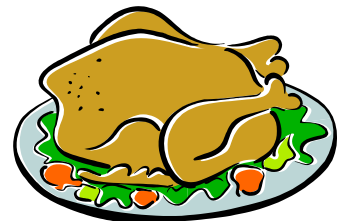
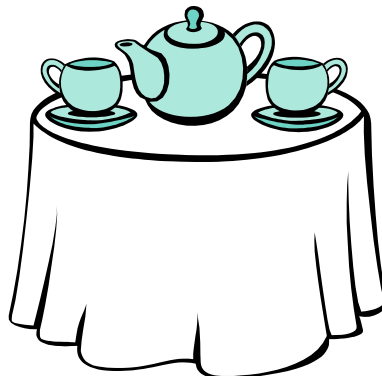


Thus we see that teaching, learning and spreading Chassidus is necessary and an important requirement to speed the *Geulah* (redemption).

In the writings of the AriZal there is a well known teaching, which is also cited in the Halacha, that on the afternoon of Erev Shabbos one should taste something of the delicacies that have been prepared for Shabbos. This practice helps us practically apply the phrase in the Mussaf prayer of Shabbos, טועמיה זכו “those who savor it will merit eternal life”.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 97) tells us that each day of creation stands for one thousand years. The Gemara shows how events that occurred in every millennium correspond to that day of creation. The seventh day, Shabbos, represents the days of Moshiach. According to this calculation, it is now late on Friday afternoon and thus, we should already be tasting the ‘food of the redemption’.

The days of Moshiach will be characterized by the fact that we will all recognize Hashem in everything. The Rambam quotes: כי מלאה הארץ דעה את ה' במים לים מכסים The Earth will be filled with the knowledge of ה' as the water covers the sea. This means we will have a clear understanding of Hashem that is not possible now. Hashem will also once again appear to us as He did at Mt. Sinai and explain the secrets of the Torah and its hidden mysteries. This means that everyone needs to work toward gaining an intellectual grasp of G-dliness and an understanding of the inner dimensions of Torah that will be revealed completely in time to come. We gain this from learning Chassidus.





## ON GIANT'S SHOULDERS:

*Composed by Yossi Green*

*Lyrics by Yocheved Reich*

When I was young,  
I heard a tale,  
of a giant standing tall,  
and his son, oh, so small

They shared a dream,  
to see the king,  
they hungered for the day,  
and hurried on their way.

As they neared,  
the two despaired,  
a wall rose to the skies,  
above the giant's eyes.

"Wait my son," said he,  
"climb upon me,  
and after you arise,  
you will be my eyes."

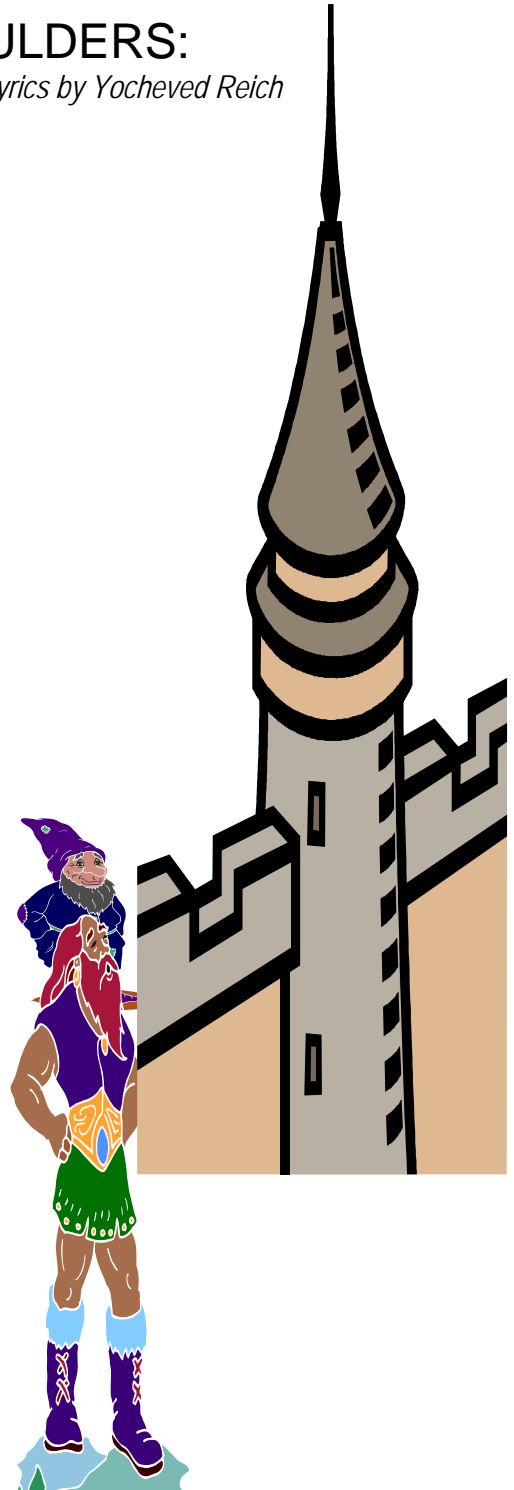
### CHORUS:

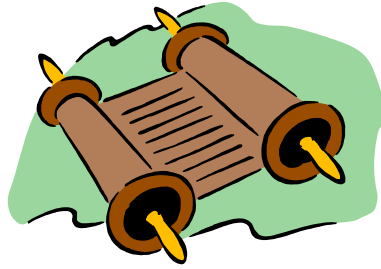
**And we will do it brothers,  
after us there'll be no others,  
you and I will do,  
what giants wanted to.  
so stand and take the credit,  
we will be the ones to end it,  
though we're small  
we're standing tall like soldiers  
riding high because we're on our  
father's shoulders.**

Holy and Pure,  
our fathers were,  
giants, righteous men,  
we are small compared to them.  
But our deeds upon their deeds,  
together they will bring  
Moshiach our King

### BRIDGE

It's up to us to hammer home that final blow,  
our fathers started long ago  
compelling us to follow.





## Spiritual Midgets on Spiritual Giant's Shoulders

Reb Yosef Karo, the author of the sefer, *Beis Yosef*, and the compiler of the *Shulchan Aruch* lived in *Tzfas* and was a contemporary of the *Arizal*. Reb Yosef Karo was a great *Tzaddik* and *Gaon* who was aware of his unique spiritual level. He, in fact, had the merit to have an angel from *Hashem* come and teach him *Torah*.

On one occasion, the *Beis Yosef* spent an extended period of time toiling over a particularly difficult passage in *Torah*. After days of hard work, he finally succeeded in comprehending the idea satisfactorily.

Shortly thereafter he had the opportunity to walk into a small *shul* where he encountered a group of Jews (none of whom were anywhere near his level) who were studying the very same passage of *Torah* that he had recently struggled with. He listened to see how they would deal with the questions that he had on that passage. He was amazed to discover that the one teaching the class interpreted the thoughts of the *Chazal* as he, the great *Beis Yosef* had concluded after days of hard work and effort.

This broke the *Beis Yosef* greatly. He knew that he was on a higher level than this common person! He therefore concluded that *Hashem* had punished him for some sin he had committed. Therefore he had to work very hard to understand something that this person had understood so easily. He went to his Rebbe the *Arizal*, and told him what had happened. He asked the *Arizal* to tell him what he had done to cause him to be so severely punished.

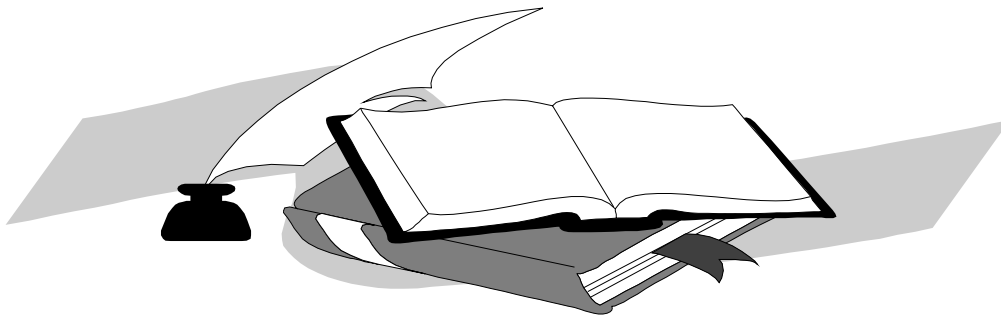
The *Arizal* explained that he had done nothing wrong, and it was not a punishment. He explained to the *Beis Yosef* that the *Torah* that we study and understand intellectually is in fact G-dly. The meaning of the word "G-dly" is that it is really beyond comprehension. However, there is a special gift placed in this G-dly *Torah* that allows it to be "brought down" to a level where it is comprehensible to the intellect. When *Hashem* gave *Moshe Rabbeinu* the *Torah*, He gave him the *Torah* in its entirety, the Written *Torah*, the Oral *Torah* and all the levels of interpretation. What *Hashem* transmitted to *Moshe* was the *Torah* on the G-dly level, on the level of light, and it became the responsibility of Jews to draw the *Torah* down from that G-dly level to the level of intellect, in general, and human intellect, in particular.



Throughout the history of the Jewish people, thousands of giants of Torah: *Neviim, Tananim, Amoraim, Rishonim, and Achronim* have devoted their lives to the understanding of Torah, often spending days and weeks interpreting a single passage or word. The reason such great effort was required to make these interpretations was because this was actually the drawing down and the transforming of a G-dly supra-logical idea to a level which can be understood by intellect. Once this process has been completed the Torah has, so to speak, been brought into this world and is from that moment onward available to everyone.

The Arizal explained to the Beis Yosef, that this particular passage that he had spent so long interpreting had until then, remained in its G-dly state! No one had, as yet, worked with this particular thought, to draw it down from the supra-logical G-dly level to the level of intellect and human understanding. The Beis Yosef had been the first to delve into this thought and bring it from the G-dly to the intellectual level. The *Beis Yosef* therefore needed *mesiras nefesh*, actual self-sacrifice, devoting days of his precious time to accomplish this feat. Once he had accomplished bringing it into the intellect, any person could learn and understand it with relatively little effort.

\* \* \*



### **Review:**

- 1) What additional insight is given to us about the role of "Giants" before us?
- 2) Relate this story to the study of Chassidus.
- 3) What is the "Big Idea" in this story?
- 4) Write an "everyday" example where this same "Big Idea" is in use.



## The Revelation of Chassidus in Recent Generations

*Read the following excerpt from a sicha of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and complete the exercise that follows it.*

There are two explanations as to why *pnimiyus haTorah*, the mystical dimension of the Torah, was revealed precisely in these last generations as the footsteps of Moshiach are approaching.

- a) Since the darkness of exile is thickening, an ever more brilliant light is required to pierce it. For this reason, the “soul of the Torah” was revealed, for this is what awakens and uncovers the “hidden point of the soul,” those parts of the soul that are most deeply concealed.
- b) Since we are now at the very end of the exile, we have been given a foretaste of the Torah’s secrets which will be fully revealed only in time to come. This foretaste serves as a preparation for the Days of Moshiach, the main point of which is knowledge of G-d. As the Rambam writes, “the occupation of the entire world will be solely to know G-d..., and the Jews... will attain an understanding of their Creator...”

The first of these reasons emphasizes the lowly state of the latter generations, while the second highlights their privilege- the fact that they have been found worthy of being granted a glimmer of the future revelation. Nevertheless, though they are opposites, these two reasons are interdependent. For this is the power of the inner dimensions of Torah which is the Torah teachings of Moshiach. It has the ability to light up even the redoubled darkness of the days that anticipate the footsteps of Moshiach.

*Likkutei Sichos*, vol. XV, p. 282 as printed in English in [From Exile to Redemption](#) p72.



### **Review:**

- 1) Restate, in your own words, the two explanations for the revelation of Chassidus today.
- 2) Categorize all of the stories and examples we have learned in this unit into two groups that will correspond to the two explanations given above.