

## Rabbi's Message March 2022

Dear Friends,

It was in the humble Ukrainian village of Okopy (at the time, part of Poland), sometime around the year 1698, when a poor Jewish woman named Sarah, along her husband, Eliezer, welcomed the birth of their only child, to whom they gave the name, "Israel," that the future of Jewish practice was changed forever. By the time Israel died in 1760, this child of poverty (who himself had become an orphan at just 5 years of age, had come to be known and admired far and wide by a new name, the *Baal Shem Tov* ("Owner of a good name/reputation"), or the *Besht* for short, for having introduced an entirely new way of celebrating Jewish life. His innovation, known as Hasidism, captured the hearts and minds of vast numbers of his fellow Jews in his day because it emphasized spiritual uplift over intellectual rigor at a time of enormous national distress. In the aftermath of the Khmelnitzki Massacres (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/chmielnicki-khmelnitzki-bogdan-x00b0>) and the religious crisis of Shabtai Zvi (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shabbetai-Tzevi>), the Jews of Eastern Europe were in desperate need of joy and optimistic purpose, which this newly formed approach of elation and awesome ecstasy provided. Utilizing the tools of Hasidism, downtrodden Jews began to believe with all their hearts that their actions actually matter, that they have true effect on God.

They also came to accept that a sincere heart far out-values years of intellectual preparation, that *niggunim* (wordless songs) have the capacity to move God even more than traditional prayers and blessings, and that God yearns for individual personal relationships with each one of us more than we can possibly understand. In short, the *Baal Shem Tov's* Hasidic approach to Jewish life brought reassurance to a shaken people: "Whenever feeling dejected," he taught, "we must remember, 'For my sake was the entire world created.'"

Upon the *Baal Shem Tov's* death in 1760, his novel approach to Judaism continued to grow in its teachings and influence through the work of his students and descendants, perhaps none less likely – nor more important – than his great-grandson, Nachman, who in 1772 was born in the Polish town of *Mezhibizh* (in current day Ukraine). Nachman was an **unlikely** long-term influence on account of the fact that without having appointed a line of succession before dying himself, Reb Nachman left a movement that in its more-than-two-century history has never had another rebbe other than him. Still, though, after moving to the town of Breslav in 1802, he became one of the most **important** successors to the *Baal Shem Tov* beginning in 1802, when moved to the town of Breslav and began amassing a great following. From then on, he would forever be known as Reb Nachman of Breslav, the founder of Breslav Hasidism.

Like his great grandfather, the *Baal Shem Tov*, Reb Nachman of Breslav emphasized the value of ecstatic worship, but unlike his famous great grandfather, Nachman emphasized even further the value of rapturous joy, even going so far as to teach that it is one of the greatest commandments that we are to be happy at all times. Of course, this does not mean that we can never be sad, but what it does mean is that whenever we have reason to be less than happy, we must never stop seeing the light through the trees with an optimistic heart.

Unlike Chabad Hasidism (founded in the town of Belarusian town of Liozno – at the time, part of the Russian Empire – by Shneuer Zalman of Liadi, the brightest disciple of the *Baal Shem Tov's* brightest disciple), which sought to transform simpletons into scholars Breslav Hasidism actually strove for the opposite: to transform scholars into simpletons. Reb Nachman advocated achieving this goal through the meditative practice of *Hitbodedut*, or self-seclusion, in which individuals are to seek a place of solitude where they can converse one-on-one with God. Ironically, the more learned a person is, according to Breslaver thought, the more difficulty they will have in figuring out to commune with God, because our intellect can get in the way. For that reason, Reb Nachman suggested simplifying our thoughts in *Hitbodedut*, even to the point where we focus on just a single word. The key is learning how to do it with as much passion and dedication as possible, and to approach the encounter with God as if we were meeting up with a dear friend.

I have been thinking a great deal of Reb Nachman these past few days, as his homeland of Ukraine (which, by the way, is where my father's side of the family had lived before emigrating the United States) has been savagely attacked by Vladimir Putin's military forces. Like Nachman understood, it is the case sometimes when we try to speak with God that we fail to find the words. So too – and even more – when we try to make sense of evil. This week is one of those times. I've been trying to follow Reb Nachman's guidance. I've been trying to carve out periods of solitude during which I can reach out to God, undisturbed by all that is going on around me. Unfortunately, I've not yet had the success I'd like. I am nowhere closer than I was yesterday to the clarity I crave as to *why* the massacres in Ukraine are happening. Intellectually, I understand the mechanics of it, but *why* it is happening remains beyond me. And perhaps it always will.

In the meantime, though, I remain grateful to Reb Nachman for leaving us two different works of his heart that continue to provide hope and guidance, which can be found on the next page. The first is his prayer for peace. The second is one of Reb Nachman's most famous teachings (from his masterpiece, *Likutei Moran*), which was put to music by Baruch Chait and recorded by countless artists. This is Israeli singer, Ofra Haza's rendition :

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=438\\_djb52QU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=438_djb52QU)

Wishing you all strength and peace,

Rabbi Dubin