

The Light of the Baal Shem Tov: From Revelation to Concealment and Back Again

With Hashem's help, we continue our journey through the teachings of the holy Baal Shem Tov, drawing from his wellsprings of healing to nourish ourselves spiritually and psychologically. Through this healing we become healthier, stronger, and more deeply connected to our true selves. Yet the purpose of this inner work is not merely personal transformation. Its ultimate goal is to enable us to return to the world carrying greater light, revealing Hashem's presence to others.

There is a tendency to view healing as an entirely inward process. A person turns inward in order to clarify themselves, refine their character, heal their wounds, and cultivate the greatest spiritual light possible within themselves. Torah becomes medicine, spirituality becomes healing, and self-rectification becomes the focus of one's avodah. While this inward movement is indispensable, it represents only the first half of the journey.

The purpose of healing is not simply to become whole oneself. The purpose of healing is to become capable of healing others. The entire mission of the Baal Shem Tov HaKadosh, indeed the entire mission of Chassidus, is to illuminate the hearts, minds, and souls of other Jews. The light cultivated within oneself is meant to overflow outward until it reaches every soul one encounters.

The Rebbe Rashab famously described a chassid as a **lamplighter**. A lamplighter does not walk through the streets preoccupied with the brightness of his own lamp. Rather, he is keenly aware that every Jew he meets possesses a lamp waiting to be lit. As Shlomo HaMelech teaches, "**Ner Hashem nishmas adam**", the soul of every human being is Hashem's candle. Every neshamah is a unique point through which Divine light enters the world.

Yet exile, concealment, suffering, exhaustion, and the distractions of worldly existence often obscure that flame. The soul itself is never extinguished. A Jewish soul can never truly lose its light. At most, the flame retreats into its

source, hidden from conscious awareness. Tragically, many people move through life without realizing that such a flame even exists within them. They experience heaviness, sadness, laziness, confusion, or despair because they have forgotten the deepest truth of who they are.

The task of a chassid is to rekindle those hidden flames. One carries the light discovered within one's own soul outward, touching the wick of another Jew until that hidden fire begins to burn once again. The purpose of healing is therefore never limited to self-improvement. Personal rectification is only meaningful insofar as it enables one to reveal the glory of HaKadosh Baruch Hu within the hearts of others and awaken them to the greatness already present within their own souls.

This has always been the defining characteristic of the Baal Shem Tov. Like the hidden tzaddikim before him, he certainly engaged in profound inner avodah. Much of his spiritual labor was concealed from public view. Yet unlike those who remained entirely hidden, the Baal Shem Tov broke through those boundaries. His mission became **hafatzas ha'maayanos chutzah**, allowing the wellsprings of Torah and inner healing to flow outward until they reached every Jew.

This same aspiration appears in the famous vision in which the Baal Shem Tov ascended to the heavenly chambers of Mashiach. Although he stood before the highest revelations imaginable, his concern was not his own spiritual illumination. He asked only one question: "**Eimasai ka'asi Mar?**", "When will the Master come?" More precisely, when will this light descend into the world? When will this light reach ordinary people? When will the inner wellsprings flow outward into everyday life?

This reflects the deeper movement expressed in the verse "**Karvah el nafshi ge'alah.**" A person first brings redemption to his own soul so that he may become an instrument for bringing redemption to others.

This is precisely the foundation laid by the Baal HaTanya in the thirty-second chapter of Tanya. Before entering prayer, following the institution of the Arizal, a person accepts upon himself the mitzvah of "**Ve'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha.**" One enters tefillah recognizing that another person's spiritual life

is as significant as one's own. My healing exists so that I may contribute to your healing. My inner light exists so that it may illuminate your darkness.

Such is the defining quality of the tzaddikim. They are never satisfied merely with perfecting themselves. Their deepest yearning is to restore life, hope, and Divine awareness to others.

Yet the light of the Baal Shem Tov is not characterized primarily by outward excitement or visible displays of spirituality. As his teachings spread and Chassidus developed, one of the central challenges became the danger inherent in external revelation. Whenever profound spiritual vitality is openly revealed, there is always the risk that attention shifts from the inner light to its external expression.

This danger traces all the way back to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. The desire for a spirituality that is immediately felt created dependence upon experience itself. A person begins to think that when spirituality feels vivid and exciting, Hashem is present, and when those feelings disappear, so has Hashem. Such dependence upon external experience becomes one of the deepest obstacles to authentic avodas Hashem.

For this reason, every great revelation carries with it the danger of superficiality. Part of the early opposition to Chassidus reflected concern over precisely this issue. The revelation of joy, emotion, physical expression, and **avodah b'gashmiyus** seemed to expose spiritual light in ways that required extraordinary caution.

This tension appears in the well-known encounter between David HaMelech and Michal bas Shaul. As David danced before the Aron with complete abandon, Michal criticized him for revealing himself so openly, comparing his behavior to that of empty and frivolous people. Her concern reflected the perspective of restraint and measured concealment.

David responded that she had not yet seen the true depth of his rejoicing. Whatever appeared externally was only a tiny spark compared to the immeasurable light hidden within. The outward dance was insignificant beside the inward fire.

So too with the Baal Shem Tov. His movement contained tremendous enthusiasm and vitality, but beneath it rested extraordinary privacy, modesty, humility, and inwardness. This was not weakness. It was not timidity. It was profound inner strength.

The Baal Shem Tov never needed recognition. The world needed to know who he was, but he himself did not. Whether revealed or concealed, his inner reality remained unchanged.

This is the hallmark of every true tzaddik. As Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai expressed it, "**Woe to me if I reveal; woe to me if I do not reveal.**" Both concealment and revelation carry immense responsibility.

The humility of the Baal Shem Tov was therefore a **katnus d'kedushah**, a holy smallness. It was not the smallness of insecurity or self-negation born of weakness. Rather, it was the humility that emerges from recognizing where true strength resides. One who knows that all greatness comes from Hashem no longer needs external affirmation. Such humility allows one to become completely receptive to Elokus itself.

It is a **bittul machmas chizuk**—a self-nullification born not of frailty but of immense spiritual strength. The deeper one's awareness of the Divine reality beneath all existence, the less one depends upon external displays of greatness.

Ordinarily we search for revealed holiness. We expect redemption to appear through visible miracles, glorious institutions, flourishing Torah, vibrant tefillah, and the splendor of the Beis HaMikdash. We naturally associate redemption with revealed light.

Yet the three weeks teaches something altogether different.

It teaches that the deepest work of redemption often takes place precisely where nothing appears to be happening. The greatest spiritual developments unfold beneath the surface, invisible even to the one experiencing them. What seems to be emptiness may actually conceal the most profound movement of Divine life. This hiddenness, this inward retreat, lies at the very heart of the Baal Shem Tov's vision.

From the Churban to the Hidden Light

The same principle that defines the Baal Shem Tov's path allows us to understand the deeper meaning of the Churban. The destruction of the Beis HaMikdash was not, Heaven forbid, Hashem abandoning the world. Rather, it marked a profound shift in the manner of His revelation. Rebbe Nachman explains in *Torah Reish Yud-Tes* that the Beis HaMikdash represents Hashem's *tzimtzum*—His decision to reveal Himself within a particular place, allowing His Presence to become openly accessible through the avodah of Yerushalayim. It was the place where holiness could be seen and felt, where Divine service unfolded in the open, and where revelation itself appeared tangible. Naturally, this becomes our expectation of redemption. We assume that if Hashem is present, His Presence should be visible. We look for external signs, dramatic experiences, and open displays of holiness. Yet the Churban teaches precisely the opposite.

When the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, the Divine Presence did not depart from the world. Rather, it withdrew into the hidden depths of creation. The light retreated inward, clothing itself beneath concealment in order to prepare for an even greater revelation. What appears to be destruction is, in truth, the gathering inward of immense spiritual power. The light folds back into itself, intensifying beneath the surface until the proper moment arrives for it to emerge with greater strength than before. The Churban therefore is not simply an ending; it is the hidden beginning of a deeper revelation. It teaches us that the absence of visible light is not proof that the light has disappeared. Often it is precisely when the light is least apparent that it is doing its deepest work.

One of the most beautiful stories about the Baal Shem Tov illustrates this idea. The Rebbe Rayatz records in *Reshimas Devarim* that the Toldos Yaakov Yosef related how Rav Nachman Horodenker attended the funeral of the Baal Shem Tov expecting to witness extraordinary heavenly revelations. Surely the passing of such a tzaddik would be accompanied by pillars of fire and unmistakable displays of holiness. Yet as he walked through the levayah, he experienced absolutely nothing. There were no visions, no supernatural signs, and no overwhelming spiritual experience. Only after returning home from the cemetery did the heavens suddenly open before him, allowing him

to behold the very revelations he had expected to witness earlier. When he later described what had happened to Rav Zev Wolf, another disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, Rav Zev Wolf simply replied, "Certainly this is exactly how it had to be."

This story expresses one of the deepest foundations of the Baal Shem Tov's teaching. We naturally expect the greatest light to appear at the moment of greatest revelation. We imagine that the passing of the Baal Shem Tov should have illuminated the world with visible holiness. Instead, there was only silence. The light first withdrew from sight before revealing itself again. This is the rhythm of the Baal Shem Tov's path: revelation, concealment, and then a deeper revelation. A person experiences inspiration, feels Hashem's closeness, and senses illumination in avodas Hashem. Then the inspiration fades. The experience disappears, and it seems as though everything has returned to emptiness. Yet that apparent emptiness is not a loss of light but its return to its hidden source. The light gathers strength beneath the surface so that it can eventually emerge with even greater intensity than before.

This same pattern defines the entire process of redemption. The Beis HaMikdash is built, then destroyed, and ultimately rebuilt. Presence gives way to concealment, only to return in a fuller and more enduring form. The light of Mashiach follows this very pattern. It does not first appear through overwhelming external displays but emerges quietly through concealment, through *hessech hadaas*, when one no longer knows how redemption will arrive. We often search for loud signs and visible miracles, yet the Baal Shem Tov teaches that redemption usually grows in hidden places. It develops within humility, simplicity, and genuine *shiflus*, where the self willingly contracts into apparent nothingness. This "nothingness" is not emptiness but the concentrated point from which every future revelation will emerge, just as a seed buried beneath the earth appears lifeless while secretly containing all of its future growth.

The talmidim of the Baal Shem Tov, particularly Rav Pinchas of Koritz, describe this process with the expression *poshet tzurah v'loveish tzurah*—removing one form in order to assume another. Every revelation possesses a form through which it appears in the world. The Beis HaMikdash was one such form. Yerushalayim in its glory was another. When those forms

disappear, it appears that everything has been lost. Yet what seems to be destruction is only the preparation for a new garment of revelation. The previous form falls away so that a deeper and more complete form can emerge. This is the way Hashem reveals Himself throughout creation: presence, concealment, and an even greater presence. Tisha B'Av is therefore not simply the story of destruction. It is the hidden beginning of redemption, the moment in which the old form falls away so that the new one can begin to emerge from within the depths of concealment.

The process of **פושט צורה ולובש צורה** is not merely a description of Jewish history. It is the very rhythm of the spiritual life of every individual. Every person experiences moments of clarity in which the heart feels alive, the mind is illuminated, and one's relationship with Hashem seems natural and effortless. Those moments become the "form" through which a person experiences spirituality. Yet inevitably there comes a time when that form falls away. The inspiration fades, the excitement disappears, and the person feels as though everything that once seemed so real has been lost. It is precisely at this moment that one is tempted to believe they have regressed. The Baal Shem Tov teaches that the opposite is true. What appears to be the disappearance of holiness is often its movement into a deeper place. The light has not been extinguished; it has retreated into its source so that it can emerge again in a richer and more enduring way.

This is the deeper meaning of the expression **פושט צורה ולובש צורה**, cited by Rav Pinchas of Koritz from the earlier mekubalim. Every revelation assumes a particular form, because every truth must clothe itself in some vessel in order to become visible within this world. Yet no single form is capable of containing the infinity of Divine light. Eventually the vessel has fulfilled its purpose and must fall away. The first revelation gives way to concealment, not because it has failed, but because it has succeeded. It has carried the individual as far as that particular garment can carry him. The only way to ascend further is for the garment to be removed so that a new and more expansive vessel can eventually emerge. What appears to be collapse is therefore nothing more than preparation for a greater revelation.

This pattern can be seen throughout all of existence. The Beis HaMikdash stood in its glory, revealing the Divine Presence openly before the eyes of Klal

Yisrael. Then came the Churban. To the eye it appeared that everything had been destroyed and that the center of Jewish life had disappeared. Yet the Churban was never simply destruction. It was the removal of one form of revelation in order to prepare the world for another. The light withdrew from public visibility and entered the hidden interior of existence, where it continues to sustain the world in silence. The Beis HaMikdash that once stood visibly in Yerushalayim now lives within the concealed depths of creation, waiting for the moment when it will reveal itself again in an even more complete fashion. The apparent absence of the Shechinah is therefore itself one of the deepest expressions of the Shechinah.

This is why the tzaddikim explain that the light of Mashiach unfolds according to this same pattern. We naturally expect redemption to arrive through unmistakable signs, dramatic miracles, and overwhelming spiritual experiences. We imagine that when Mashiach comes everything will suddenly become obvious. Yet the Baal Shem Tov teaches that the first movement of redemption is almost always hidden. It begins beneath the surface, within places that appear ordinary or even empty. It develops through **hessech hadaas**, when a person has stopped looking for spectacular revelations and has instead become willing to discover Hashem within concealment itself. Redemption does not begin with noise. It begins in stillness. It begins in humility. It begins in the quiet place where the soul has learned to trust that even when it sees nothing, Hashem continues to reveal Himself beneath the surface.

. Like a seed buried beneath the earth, it appears lifeless only because all of its future growth has been compressed into a single hidden point. The seed must first disintegrate before it can sprout. If one were to judge only by appearances, one would conclude that the seed has been destroyed. In reality, its apparent destruction is the very beginning of its transformation. The same is true of spiritual life. The moments that feel most barren often conceal the deepest work of renewal. The light gathers itself into a point so concentrated that it can no longer be recognized as light at all, yet from that very point a richer and more enduring revelation will eventually emerge.

This understanding transforms the way a person experiences periods of concealment. Instead of interpreting spiritual dryness as failure, one begins to

recognize it as part of the Divine rhythm. Inspiration and concealment are not opposites. They belong to the same movement. Revelation gives birth to concealment, and concealment gives birth to a deeper revelation. The person who understands this no longer panics when the familiar forms disappear. He realizes that Hashem has not left him. Rather, Hashem has drawn him into a deeper chamber where the next stage of growth is quietly taking shape. The loss of one form is itself the preparation for the birth of another, and the very place that appears empty is often the place where redemption is already beginning to grow.

The She'aris Yisrael of Viletnik explains this idea through a remarkable teaching of Chazal. The Yerushalmi teaches that at the very moment the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, Mashiach was born. At first glance, this statement appears paradoxical. How can the birth of redemption coincide with the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history? If redemption signifies the rebuilding of what was lost, why would it begin precisely when everything seems to have collapsed? Yet this is exactly the secret that the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples sought to reveal. The concealment itself is the birthplace of redemption. The very force that appears to destroy is simultaneously nurturing the future revelation that will emerge from within it. The Churban is therefore not merely followed by redemption; it already contains redemption hidden within its depths.

This idea is illuminated by a teaching of the Maggid of Mezritch based upon the Gemara in Yevamos. The Gemara teaches that before a person departs on a long journey, he should spend time with his spouse, strengthening the bond before leaving home. The Maggid explains that this reflects the relationship between HaKadosh Baruch Hu and Klal Yisrael. Before sending His children into the long journey of exile, Hashem first drew them into the deepest possible bond with Himself. The destruction of the Beis HaMikdash was not the beginning of distance but the preparation for enduring the experience of distance. Precisely because the journey ahead would be so long and so dark, Hashem implanted within Klal Yisrael an even deeper point of attachment that would remain untouched by exile itself. What appears to be departure is, in reality, the strengthening of an inseparable relationship.

This perspective changes the way one understands exile altogether. We often imagine that exile represents the absence of Divine revelation, while redemption represents its return. The tzaddikim teach something far more profound. Exile itself is part of revelation. It is another stage in the unfolding relationship between Hashem and His people. The light does not disappear when concealment begins. Rather, it descends beneath the surface, becoming more essential precisely because it is no longer dependent upon outward manifestation. The journey away from the Beis HaMikdash is itself sustained by the hidden presence of the Shechinah. Every step through exile is accompanied by the concealed light that was implanted at the very beginning of the journey.

For this reason the She'aris Yisrael writes that **עצם כח החורבן הוא עצם כח המשיה בטמיר ונעלם**. The essential power contained within the Churban is itself the essential power of Mashiach concealed from sight. The very energy that appears to dismantle the previous revelation is simultaneously building the next one. The work of exile is therefore not to create redemption from nothing, but to uncover the redemption already hidden within the concealment itself. Through faithfully enduring the hiddenness, through clarifying the darkness and recognizing the process of **פושט צורה ולובש צורה**, a person gradually uncovers the infinite light that has been present all along. Redemption is not imported from somewhere else; it unfolds from within the very place that once appeared empty.

This is why Chazal teach that Mashiach is born on Tisha B'Av. Immediately after the previous garment has been removed, the new garment begins to take shape. As soon as one revelation withdraws, another has already begun to emerge beneath the surface. Although invisible to the eye, the process has already started. There is never a moment in which Hashem abandons creation. There is only the movement from one form of revelation to another. What appears to be an ending is always the hidden beginning of something greater.

Rav Pinchas of Koritz finds this same pattern within the words of Tehillim: **"ואתה זנחת ותמאס התעברת עם משיחך"**. On the surface, Dovid HaMelech laments that Hashem has rejected His people and His anointed one. Yet Rav Pinchas understands the verse differently. The very experience of rejection is

itself the place in which the light of Mashiach begins to emerge. When Hashem appears distant, His deepest closeness is often being prepared beneath the surface. The concealment itself is not separate from redemption but constitutes one of its essential stages. This is the recurring rhythm of Divine revelation: the funeral of the Baal Shem Tov, the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, the silence that follows inspiration. Each appears to mark an ending, yet each is already giving birth to a deeper revelation that can emerge only after the previous form has passed away.

Rav Pinchas therefore teaches that the greatness of the future revelation corresponds directly to the depth of the concealment that precedes it. Only human beings experience this painful contraction of consciousness, this descent into apparent smallness. An animal lives only within what is immediately present, but a human soul possesses the capacity to carry hidden potential through periods in which nothing seems visible. The longer and darker the exile, the greater the revelation that is quietly maturing within it. The intensity of concealment is itself testimony to the magnitude of the light waiting to emerge. What appears to be the deepest darkness is often the womb of the greatest illumination.

This understanding sheds new light on one of the most difficult aspects of Tisha B'Av. We sit upon the ground as mourners. We strip away the ordinary expressions of dignity and comfort. We recite Kinnos that describe devastation, loss, and abandonment. Yet beneath this mourning lies an extraordinary secret. Tisha B'Av is not simply a commemoration of what was destroyed; it is the hidden birthplace of what is yet to be revealed. The day itself contains within it the first stirrings of consolation. The descent to the ground is not the end of the journey but the point from which ascent becomes possible. It is precisely because the previous form has disappeared that the new form can begin to emerge. Every act of mourning already contains the seeds of future joy.

For this reason, the tzaddikim describe Tisha B'Av as a **moed**, a festival. On the surface this appears incomprehensible. How can the darkest day of the Jewish calendar bear the title ordinarily reserved for our greatest celebrations? The answer lies in recognizing that the essence of holiness is not measured by what is presently revealed but by what is presently taking shape. A seed lying

beneath the earth appears lifeless, yet no one would say that nothing is happening. Its apparent disintegration is the very process through which new life is formed. The destruction of the Beis HaMikdash functions in precisely this way. What appears to be loss is actually preparation. The disappearance of the former revelation creates the conditions necessary for a revelation that will ultimately surpass everything that came before it.

This imagery is reflected in the twenty-one days of **Bein HaMetzarim**. The tzaddikim compare these days to the development of an egg before it hatches. Throughout that period, almost nothing can be observed from the outside. Growth takes place quietly and invisibly until the proper moment arrives for new life to emerge. So too, the twenty-one days stretching from the Seventeenth of Tammuz until Tisha B'Av appear to be days of destruction and decline. Yet hidden within them is the gradual formation of redemption itself. What the eye interprets as deterioration is, in truth, the silent preparation for birth. The future is already being fashioned beneath the surface long before it becomes visible.

The Baal Shem Tov expressed this truth through a remarkable story. He instructed several of his students to travel to a small village near Mezhibuzh, where they would find one of the hidden tzaddikim of the generation. Expecting to discover an extraordinary scholar or mystic, they instead encountered a simple villager sitting alone beneath a tree. The man possessed almost no formal learning. He knew only the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Throughout the day he would slowly recite the alef-beis with profound devotion: *Alef. Beis. Gimmel. Daled*. When he finished, he would lift his eyes toward Heaven and say, "Ribbono Shel Olam, You created these letters. All prayers, praises, and words of Torah are composed from them. I do not know how to arrange them properly before You. Therefore I offer You the letters themselves. Please take them, combine them as only You can, and fashion from them the most beautiful prayers and songs." Then he would begin again, repeating the alef-beis with the same sincerity and love.

When the students returned and described what they had witnessed, the Baal Shem Tov explained that the simple faith of this villager possessed the power to shake the highest worlds. Sometimes the innocent devotion of a Jew who knows almost nothing reaches further than the scholarship and eloquence of

the greatest tzaddikim. This story captures the essence of Tisha B'Av. There are moments when all of our sophisticated understanding falls away. The Beis HaMikdash has been destroyed, Yerushalayim has become like a plowed field, and all that remains is the simplicity of standing before Hashem with empty hands. Yet it is precisely there that the deepest relationship is revealed. We return to the alef-beis. We return to the most fundamental building blocks of faith. We acknowledge that we cannot yet arrange the letters into the song of redemption, but we trust that Hashem can.

This is the deepest teaching of the Baal Shem Tov regarding the journey from revelation to concealment and back again. Spiritual life is never a straight line of uninterrupted ascent. Every revelation eventually withdraws into hiddenness so that it can emerge again in a more complete form. The Churban is therefore not the opposite of redemption but one of its essential stages. The apparent disappearance of the light is its return to the innermost point from which all future revelation is born. The task of the Jew is not merely to celebrate the moments of inspiration but to remain faithful during the periods of concealment, recognizing that beneath the silence Hashem is preparing something greater than what has already been seen.

When we learn to perceive the world in this way, every experience of concealment becomes an invitation to deeper trust. The funeral of the Baal Shem Tov, the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, the quiet disappearance of spiritual excitement, and the long exile of Klal Yisrael all reveal the same Divine pattern. Hashem removes one garment only to clothe Himself in another. The previous form passes away so that a richer and more expansive revelation can emerge. This is the eternal movement of **פושט צורה ולובש צורה**—the secret that lies at the heart of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings and at the heart of Jewish hope itself.

May we merit to recognize the hidden light already present within the darkness, to discover the redemption quietly unfolding beneath the surface of history and within our own lives, and to witness the complete revelation of the Shechinah with the rebuilding of the Beis HaMikdash, the coming of Mashiach Tzidkeinu, and the ultimate fulfillment of **תחיית המתים**, speedily in our days. Amen.

