

INTRODUCTION



Ours is, in many ways, the lowliest and most degenerate of times. Yet, by the same token, it is the most fortunate and propitious moment in all of history. This bold assertion is predicated on Kabbalah-based Chassidic philosophy, known as “Chassidus,” which is the primary theme of this creative literary work.

Shrouded in mystery throughout the millennia, Kabbalah has, at last, reached a state of broad elucidation, even fruition, in the form of Chassidic philosophy. Our generation is the beneficiary and remarkably the focus, to a large degree, of this potent wisdom.

Chassidus is an intellectual discipline that puts into perspective the mystery of the entire cosmos—its origins and existential purpose, as well as its relationship with its Creator, in a logical and compelling order. Adding to all this is the human psychological, emotional, and spiritual enigma. What *Chabad Really Believes* is a book on Chabad Chassidic philosophy, and its modern day application.

Penned as a dialogue between two friends, during a plane trip on a Jewish Federation Mission, the narrative is drawn to the climactic nature of our present era. This occurs as Danni, the more religious of the two, shares Chassidic insights with his disenfranchised friend, Jay.

When Danni speaks out in Treblinka, it causes an inner shift in Jay. This leads him to a spiritual awakening, yet, at the same time he grows increasingly perturbed over his seemingly insurmountable religious predicament.

Danni eases his friend’s distress by sharing the unique nature and potential of our current age, and how it relates to him personally. He assures Jay that, deficient as we may seem today, the measuring stick is thoroughly altered. No longer do we live by the incriminations of yesteryear—no longer do we bear the same stigmas.

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This book defines the current condition of Jewry in context of the broader historical perspective. The latter is based on the premise that history is not merely a hodgepodge of random events, but, rather, a deliberate sequence with a beginning, middle and end.

The product of almost 6 thousand years of tumultuous history and 2 thousand years of continuous exile, ours is the final generation of exile, dubbed the “Heel of Moshiach.”³ Ours is the generation destined to usher the Messianic era, blemishes and faults notwithstanding.

Given the Kabbalistic axiom that the end is wedged in the beginning and vice versa, it follows that all of history serves as a systematic buildup and preparation for our age—the moments of the finishing act that brings definition to all history, indeed, to creation itself.

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FATEFUL REUNION

It is 7:00 a.m. I take out my Tallis-prayer shawl, the size of a small blanket—and drape it over my shoulders before wrapping it around my torso. I then reach for my Tefillin-Phylacteries—two small black boxes with black leather straps that Jewish men are enjoined to place on their left or weaker arm and on the front part of their heads, at the hairline, during weekday morning prayers.

Sitting directly across me is my friend Jay Epstein, who is noticeably uncomfortable. In fact, Jay seems utterly ashamed to be associated with me.

To be honest, I am not really sure I could blame him. After all, we are in one of the busiest airports in the world, during a layover on a Jewish Federation Mission to Europe and Israel.

By design, Federation Missions foster Jewish identity and community mindedness through firsthand impact of ineffaceable Jewish history and events. They serve as an opportunity for participants to deepen their collective connection to Jewish life and community.

Our particular mission is on its way to Poland to learn about the Jews of Eastern Europe and their lives before and during the Holocaust. Our group, including several Holocaust survivors, plans to visit sites from Warsaw to Krakow—including concentration camps at Treblinka-Birkenau and Majdanek—to learn about a lost Jewish world.

The mission is scheduled to continue on to Israel, affording participants a behind-the-scenes look at Israeli life. Some of the planned highlights include a solemn ceremony commemorating Israel's fallen soldiers, an affirmation ceremony atop Masada, and events at the Israel Museum and Beit She'an Archaeological Park. The itinerary also includes a spiritual Shabbos-Sabbath in Jerusalem.

I don the Tefillin and complete my prayers just in time to board the next flight. When onboard, Jay finally gets his chance to psychoanalyze me over my “eccentric” behavior, a routine we have been through before.

Jay and I go back many years. We met in college 19 years ago and remained friends. Somehow, we both found our way into the lay leadership of our respective Jewish Federations. In our early days,

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Jay was the religious one. His family was traditional in their religious identification, while mine was not religious at all. For the first 39 years of my life, I knew next to nothing about my Jewishness.

“What’s the deal with all that religious stuff?” Jay ribs me, as we settle into our seats. “When we met, you were a nice, all-American, open-minded young man. When and how did all this come about?”

“Oh Jay,” I retort only half kiddingly, “is my religious observance upsetting you so badly? Why are you having such difficulty accepting my newfound growth? Are you the same open-minded guy you were when we first met?”

“C’mon Danni,” Jay says somewhat defensively, “It’s not like that, you know me better. I mean, a lot of my good friends are religious people.”

“Man, I can’t believe you would step headlong into that one, Jay.”

“Oh stop it Danni!” he cries, “I’m just curious about what has caused the change in you, that’s all. What’s the big deal?”

“Okay bud,” I tell my friend. “Let me see if I can help enlighten you somewhat. But, I’ll need a little bit of time to gather my thoughts. I’ve never shared this before, you know.” After some quiet contemplation, I begin my narrative.

“It all began when it dawned on me that almost half my time in this

world is already behind me and that I have little to show for it. Truth be told, I hadn't the slightest clue as to what on earth I was doing here.

"I've experienced enough of life to know that most of its so-called pleasures and rewards are not what they are made out to be. It became increasingly apparent how easily life may be consumed by senseless aspirations and addictions that divert our attention from any kind of substantive purpose and accomplishment.

"Sure, like most people, I spent the majority of my time in output mode, running about like the proverbial 'chicken without a head,' with little opportunity to think about anything outside the many demands of the moment, let alone the luxury of exploring deeper existential purpose.

"But then, there were occasional moments of solitude, when, instead of pulling out my smart phone to check my emails for the 30th time that day or that morning, or instead of choosing to interact through one of the ever-growing social media platforms, I actually stopped and listened to myself. It was during such occasions that these subtle feelings of hollowness and lack of meaningful fulfillment crept up.

"The quip, 'Why did I ever bother to show up for my existence in the first place,' did not appear all that humorous. After all, the gnawing void, whose urgency seemed to keep pace with my biological clock, was ever demanding.

"Of course, like so many others, I easily could have blocked out these feelings in a million different ways. I actually played that game for some time but, in truth, I knew deep down that ignoring these feelings was tantamount to fooling myself. Worse even, I felt all along like I was somehow 'cheating' myself and it's only a fool who would willingly cheat himself.

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“Having explored a range of different social and spiritual paths in life, I reached a point where I had a strong desire to connect with my own soul and family roots. It mattered a lot to me from where I came; the lives and sacrifices of generations whose name and DNA I shared.

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THE WORLD HE PLACED IN THEIR HEARTS

“Well, congratulations to you Jay,” I exclaim, “you actually hit upon one of the first principles of Chassidic philosophy—the correlation between the cosmic celestial order and the human psychological anatomy. This phenomenon is based on the opening portion of the *Torah*, Genesis, where it states that a human was created in the image of G-d. Did you ever wonder what that means? In what way are we created in G-d’s image? Are we miniature G-ds with G-dly powers? Obviously, not.”

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“Speak for yourself, Danni,” interjects Jay, never having lost his raw sense of humor. “Okay, sorry for interrupting, back to your point please,” he prompts.

“The meaning of the statement,” I continue, “is that the microcosmic order of human behavior mirrors, as it were, the Divine system of creation and vice versa. Chabad philosophy, in particular,

stresses the analogy between the way human action derives from thought and emotion, and the way in which the universe is spawned into existence. When one studies the human behavioral progression, one gains unprecedented insight into the descending order of the Divine creative energy.

“There is a sequence by which a fleeting idea is nurtured into a fully-fledged thought invested with emotion and, eventually, turns into decision and action. Others only see the final stage of the process, the behavior. But, its essential meaning lies way back, in the first flash of thought that set the process in motion.

“The same is true on a cosmic scale. The world that we see with our

eyes is only the last stage in the chain of descent-Hishtalshelus. Like human action, the macrocosmic 'World of Action'-'Olam Ha'asayah'—tends to mask the preceding worlds, from where it stems and to which it owes its very origins. The latter includes a series of contractions and concealments, known as Tzimtzum, something we'll get to in due time.

"But, if we were to travel backwards and inwards, we would reach the originating reality—the four metaphysical worlds described in Kabbalah: Assiyah-Action, Yetzirah-Formation, Beriah-Creation, and Atzilus-Emanation. Perhaps we would even reach back beyond the first thought to the personality that conceived it—Ein Sof—which is, of course, infinitely wider than any specific intention into which it is directed.

"This macrocosmic reflection of the Divine order of creation is the meaning of King Solomon's cryptic words in Ecclesiastes: 'The world He placed in their [mans'] hearts...' ²⁰

"By contrast, analyzing the Divine process of creation, as depicted in Jewish mysticism and interpreted through Chassidic philosophy, one acquires deeper insight and understanding of his or her own essential being and modus operandi."

Our intense conversation is brought to a halt as a flight attendant interrupts with beverage service. Both of us were lost in the discussion, forgetting for a moment where we were. "That's actually profound stuff, Danni," says Jay. "I mean I didn't understand everything you said, but the little that I did, makes a lot of sense.

Chassidic
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THE SOUL FACTOR

“The greatest advantage of the Chassidic system over other psychological disciplines is that it perceives and depicts a human’s psychological existence in the context of his or her soul. Whereas scientific systems begin their analysis with the brain, Chassidus’ insight into human identity begins with the human’s unique soul. In fact, Chassidus identifies no less than five different levels within a person’s Divine soul.

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“The difference as to whether we commence our assessment of a human’s identity with the brain or with the soul is huge. It hardly can be overstated. It may be compared to the examination of a person’s internal organs by prodding and probing in the dark with one’s hands, versus the benefit of a CAT scan or MRI.

“To perceive a person’s essence as beginning with the brain is to perceive only half the person and the smaller half at that. For, if an individual comprises body and soul, the soul is certainly the more significant part. Hence, to construct a model of the human entity without the soul is stabbing in the dark.

“Most important, however, are the contrasting places to which these divergent approaches lead. The secular psychological system, inevitably, leads to selfishness. For, the more we follow the trail of that system back, the closer we get to our physical core. Logic dictates that the more attuned we are with our physical core, the more corporeal we become.

“In other words, if our own intellect and feelings represent the highest essence of our existence —cogito ergo sum—then, it only makes sense to do everything to enhance and vindicate that essence. So, we end up serving ourselves, which is the definition of selfishness.

“This path has but one eventual outcome: Emptiness and disillusionment. As our lives begin to appear feeble and fleeting, we find ourselves struggling for deeper definition and purpose: What is life’s true meaning and where does the individual—a tiny speck in time and space—fit into the scheme of things?

“In order to withstand the dread that our lives will soon be covered by eons of time, blotting out the fact that we ever existed at all, we frantically seek lasting impact and definition. But, in lack of essential purpose, where do we turn? Our desperate search for self-definition and realization is often satisfied by trivial attention-seeking and vain popularity.

“Thanks to the esoteric dimension of *Torah*, as articulated through Chassidus, we have the ability to know our essential human self in the context of our soul. Cognizance of our Divine soul, which is a sliver of the Sublime existence, leaves us humbled. For ‘Who am I and what am I, in face of the all-powerful and all-pervading core on whom I depend for every breath?’ The obvious conclusion of this outlook is a state of selflessness and awe.

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“This state inevitably leads to true self-contentment. It spawns new channels for joy and serenity. Joy that stems from being part of something infinitely greater than one’s feeble self; from being part of the ultimate and eternal truth.

“Only through an overriding, all-encompassing relationship with a Higher Eternal Existence, can a person achieve the blessing of inner satisfaction and fulfillment in this world, and secure the highest memorialization for the afterworld. In the words of R’ Schneur Zalman:²¹ ‘When one’s life centers on one’s relationship with the Almighty, the person will soar far above all obstacles.’ Meaning that if a person works

²¹ *Tanya*, Chapter 33.

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at achieving mindfulness of the Divine presence, he or she will gain deep contentment.”

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IDENTITY THEFT

Wednesday morning, our group gathers at Ben Gurion Airport to check in for our return flight to the United States. Again, Jay and I get seats near each other. As we board the plane, Jay turns to me with a slight grin and says, "Looking forward to another interesting twelve hours. You plan on relating more of your study sessions with the Rabbi, I hope."

"Do I have a choice in the matter," I ask.

"No," responds Jay, "As long as you understand that."

"I'm only kidding, Jay," I assure him, "I enjoy sharing these ideas with you, as much as you appreciate hearing them; besides, this stuff is meant to share."

After takeoff, we begin to engage in some small talk, mostly reflecting on the stimulating events of the past 10 days. We both agree that it was a highly moving and life-changing experience that could benefit most people, especially unaffiliated and non-active Jews.

"You know, Danni," Jay remarks to my chagrin, "The most moving and memorable moment of the entire adventure for me, believe it or not, was your impromptu speech at the memorial event in Treblinka. I haven't stopped thinking about your words, 'We're all here because we care about Jews and about Judaism... yet, what are you doing about it? What exactly are we trying to preserve? What do you perceive the future of Judaism to be; a country, a race? Is there any hope for Jewish continuity without its religious dimension...?' Those are powerful questions that, in the past, I haven't given much thought and, for which I have no answers.

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"I used to think that Israel, the Jewish State and homeland, is the complete answer, but I've come to realize that the emphasis on Israel puts the cart before the horse. Israel is not the reason for the Jewish people to exist. Rather, the Land of Israel is important because of the existence of the Jewish people. True, the Jewish people can only

flourish to the maximum extent in the Land of Israel and fulfill their national destiny, but the Jewish people survived in exile for 2 millennia without a land. However, no Jewish community ever survived, for any period of time, without *Torah*.

"Trips to Israel can be a powerful emotional experience, but the power of that experience, usually, is directly proportional to the degree

to which being a Jew is a primary aspect of self-definition, which is less true of most young American Jews. Likely, they view a common culture, particular sense of humor, or taste for certain ethnic foods—qualities shared with many non-Jews—as central to their Jewish identity. Their Jewish identity is shallow, because it does not center on religious beliefs or practices.

"Birthright was started in 1994, with the goal of bringing young Jews to the homeland to find or develop roots within the state of Israel. Jewish young adults between 18 and 27 get the opportunity to go to Israel for 10 days completely free, just because they are Jewish. It since has become a prerequisite for any young Jew who wants to keep their parents happy, knowing their child is getting in touch with their heritage. They make sure their passport is in good standing and their bags are packed.

"The kids actually end up having a great time. They soon realize the trip is mostly partying in Israel and getting to meet other young Jews, whose parents were also convinced this is a 'spiritual trip.'

"In the end, if being Jewish is a slight matter, it does not really matter whether the Jewish people continue to exist. If the continued existence

of the Jewish people is insignificant, of what importance is a state, primarily of Jewish citizens? Israel works most powerfully on those who, at minimum, have been entranced by the Jewish story; wondering how this people, of all the peoples of the world, preserved its national identity, removed from their land for over 2 thousand years. How did we survive? What did we find so important to preserve that we were willing to sacrifice so much to maintain our identity as Jews? Our forebears were willing to die for Judaism; yet, we're hardly willing to live for it.

"I mean, here I am a proud Jew, who is even active in the Jewish community, yet, I haven't a clue what Judaism really means to my very self, let alone anyone else. It is one thing, albeit unfortunate, to be assimilated, to have lost your Jewish identity and connection. But it's quite another thing to be a proud, active Jew and not know the true nature of what you're a part of. It's kind of like the proverbial messenger who forgot the message.

"I cannot help but ask myself, whether I'm truly fit to be in a leadership position. I have to admit that I'm one of those who resonate with a Judaism that is devoid of its religious dimension. So, as you well point out, I'm left to grapple with what I am ultimately left with? What is the value and meaning of a Judaism that is bereft of its vital religious essence? Sadly, I don't have an answer to the question.

"Ironically, I'm not, in the least bit, an anomaly. I am actually part of the norm when it comes to Jewish lay leadership these days. It's like, that's the way it's meant to be; no one questions or tries to change it. To be honest, it's crazy how normal it actually is. What future can Judaism hold, if its very leadership contains but a foggy notion of what it is they're trying to preserve?"

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I listen to Jay, not knowing whether to feel bad or good for him. Obviously, he is having an epiphany and is unnerved. But, in reality, his eyes are being opened to the unwavering truth and despite the pain, it is no doubt a healthy thing. I can only tell him that I relate to the way he is feeling, because I've been there myself.

"Sorry, Danni, I didn't mean to get off like that, but I feel like I've been misled and I am misleading others. I don't even know the Hebrew Aleph-Bet, how am I a leader? How can I be charged with the task of preserving the Jewish future or, as the prevailing buzzword goes, 'Jewish Continuity;' when I don't know the first thing about our Jewish religion and heritage? Isn't that like the proverbial adage, 'The blind leading the blind?'"

"Well congratulations on your epiphany, Jay. Now what do you plan to do about it?"

"Do about it? About what? I'm merely making an observation, albeit an uncomfortable one," asserts Jay. "What do you expect me to do, change reality?"

"No," I say, "Only to change yourself!"

"I need time to sort things out," Danni, "I can't think about what I should do or not do at this very moment."

"Fair enough, Jay, I understand where you're coming from, I'll respect your wishes and drop the subject for now. I'm always available for you, if and when you decide to talk about it."

"Thank you, Danni, that's very kind of you. You're a good friend and a true blessing in my life," Jay offers. "I hope you really understand that I'm not trying to push you away or anything; it's just that I need time. I need some more time."

In truth, I did understand where Jay was coming from; yet, I was still somewhat perplexed. Something didn't feel quite right about the situation. Jay seemed a little overly emotional or stressed about his circumstance. Yes, he may have realized that his life's paradigm was

shattered in some way, but it's not like he couldn't fix it. Many people realize half way through life that they're cruising down the wrong highway, only to make a U-turn and pick up on the right road.

Among the many great figures in Jewish history, R' Akiva's influence and stature is a source of inspiration throughout the ages. The *Talmud* compares him to Moses,⁶⁶ the ultimate compliment within Judaism. His story is one of the most inspirational Jewish stories:

The *Midrash* relates that during the first four decades of his life, Rabbi Akiva was a completely unlettered and ignorant Jew. Moreover, later in life, he freely admitted that when he was ignorant, he possessed a deep and abiding hatred toward the *Torah* scholars of his time.

While shepherding his flock in the hills of Judah, one day R' Akiva became thirsty and went to a brook to take a drink. As he was drawing water, something caught his eye. He saw drops of water falling on a huge stone; directly where the drops were falling was a deep hole in the stone. The shepherd was fascinated. He gazed at the drops and at the stone. "What mighty power there is in a drop of water," mused the shepherd.

"What are you gazing at," he heard someone ask. It was Rachel, his wife and master's daughter. "Look what the little drops of water did to the rock," R' Akiva exclaimed. "Do you think there is hope for me? Suppose I began to study *Torah*, could my heart be penetrated? I'm already 40 years old! Is it not too late to start?"

"It is never too late, Akiva," she assured him.

Upon gazing at the drops of water for a long while, the shepherd's mind was made up. Then and there, Akiva ben Joseph decided to go off and learn *Torah*. If dripping water could bore a hole into solid rock, then, even he—a 40 year old man—could learn *Torah* through diligent effort.⁶⁷

I'm not sure if Jay was familiar with the story of Rabbi Akiva, but in our

⁶⁶ Menachos 29a.

⁶⁷ Avot d'Rav Natan 6:2.

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF SIN

“The idea that our sins are within the realm of the Almighty’s master plan was affirmed in the most unequivocal manner by the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. His words can be perceived as revolutionary, perhaps even prophetic.

“In a talk delivered in 1992, on the Shabbos of Ki Sisa—the portion containing the sin of the Golden Calf—the Rebbe portrayed sin as part of the Almighty’s master plan.

“The Rebbe advances this idea in pondering the connection of the three main events in the Parsha, which are, seemingly, paradoxical. First, the children of Israel are awarded the original Tablets.

Then they commit the sin of the Golden Calf, leading to the loss of the Tablets. Finally, a second set of Tablets is granted. How are these three, ostensibly opposite events, connected to each other?

Sin is part of
the Divine
master plan
of creation.

“Our Parsha, says the Rebbe, alludes to three essential elements inherent in creation: The conceptual ‘idea’ state, followed by the state of implementation, proceeded by the fruition of the original intent—the end state. Every facet of creation comprises these three essential elements.

“For example, let us use the process of building a house. First, there is the desire and conception, followed by the actual construction and finished product. Finally, the house becomes occupied and used, which brings about the fulfillment of the original intent.

“These three elements constitute the very components of our Parsha, which answers the Rebbe’s question regarding their connection:

- 1) *Torah*/Conception: The first tablets, represent *Torah*, for, according to our sages, the entire *Torah* is encrypted within the ten commandments of the tablets. *Torah*, in turn, we're taught, preceded creation and often is referred to as its blueprint and purpose.
- 2) Sin/Teshuvah: The shattering of the tablets, due to the sin of the golden calf, which resulted in Teshuvah. This component personifies life during the 6 thousand years of world existence.
- 3) Moshiach/Fruition: The second set of Tablets, signifying the Messianic era—the ultimate redemption—rooted in the origins and purpose of creation. This stage represents the bounty harvested as a result of the descent-sin and repentance.

“We see here, Jay, how the Rebbe weaves transgression into the very purpose of creation, as an inevitable means of transforming the secular into holy and sin into virtue, via the power of Teshuvah.

“The highest levels of spirituality and world transformation are reached when sin itself is reversed, in the words of the Rebbe, ‘for sin, too, is needed, because that’s the order in which G-d created the world. To quote the words of Rashi: “This was decreed by the King.”

“In this particular talk that, incidentally, was one of the last before the stroke that took away his ability to speak;⁹³ the Rebbe describes this delicate idea in unusually blunt terms. In all of Chassidus, such words are hardly ever spoken. The role of sin, and where it fits in, is commonly addressed in abstract philosophical terms. Yet, in this particular Sichah—talk—the Rebbe chose to spell it out in the most literal and blatant terms.

“The latter is extraordinary. Perhaps, it is because the Rebbe, acting in the capacity of a prophet, was indicating that this particular way of service, e.g. transforming sin into virtue through Teshuvah, is especially

⁹³ On March 2, 1992, the Rebbe suffered a disabling stroke and was unable to speak in public ever since. A second stroke, on the very same date in the Hebrew calendar (Adar 27—March 10) two years later, left him in critical condition. His soul ascended on high on the 3rd of Tammuz 5754 (June 12, 1994).

relevant to our generation; the last vestige of exile, commonly called the ‘Heel of Moshiach.’”

“‘Heel of Moshiach?’ What’s the meaning of that, Danni,” muses Jay.

“The end of the exile, Jay. The era heralding the coming of Moshiach,” I explain, “is called by our sages ‘Ikvesa D’moshichah’—the ‘Heel of Moshiach.’⁹⁴ This is because of its spiritual lowliness due to the ‘descent of the generations.’

“Yet, it is also the generation that is specifically connected with Teshuva, as Maimonides states: ‘The *Torah* already promised that the people of Israel will return to G-d at the end of their exile and will be immediately redeemed.’⁹⁵ Ours is indeed the generation of Teshuvah.

“The prophet Amos’ words elegantly describe the proclivity for Teshuvah in the era before the redemption: ‘Behold, days are coming, says G-d the Lord, when I will send a famine in the land. Not a famine for bread and not a thirst for water, but to hear the words of G-d.’⁹⁶ Indeed the Lubavitcher Rebbe proclaimed our generation to be the Messianic era (the era that will usher in the Messiah).⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Rashi, Talmud Sotah 49b. Literally: the heel of Moshiach, an expression borrowed from Psalms 89:52. The simile refers to the final period of Exile (Rashi), when Moshiach will not yet have come; but signs of his imminent arrival will be discerned, as though his approaching footsteps were already audible. Alternatively, a heel, the lowest extremity of the human body, may be used as a synonym for end (see Rambam Deuteronomy 7:12), so that the wording used simply denotes the end of [the period that will usher in] Moshiach (see Rashi to Sanhedrin 97a and to Psalms *ibid.*).

According to Radak on Psalms (*ibid.*), the wording used may mean while Moshiach delays. See also Talmud Avodah Zarah 9a and Rabbenu Ephraim al HaTorah, Deuteronomy 7:12.

“The final period in Jewish and world history is referred to in Jewish sources as the era of Acharis Ha-yamim—the End of Days. The period at the end of the Exile, before the Messianic era, is called Ikvesa D’moshichah—on the heel of Moshiach, or Chevlei Moshiach—the birth pangs of Moshiach’s coming. The concept of Acharis Ha-yamim includes the eve of the Redemption, as well as the Redemption, itself; whereas the Term ‘On the heels of Moshiach’ or ‘Birth pangs of Moshiach,’ denotes only the final days of subjugation—Ikveta D’Meshicha—R. Elchanan Wasserman.

⁹⁵ Yad Hachzaka Hilchos Teshuva 7:5. And as stated in Deuteronomy 30:10: “And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have put before you and you shall return unto G-d your Lord and shall obey His voice according to all that command you this day. And G-d your Lord will return your captivity and will have mercy upon you.”

⁹⁶ Amos 8:11.

⁹⁷ It is noteworthy that other recent Jewish leaders, including the Chafetz Chaim, have declared that we are living in the period of Ikvesa D’Moshicha. See Chafetz Chaim, Shem Olam, part II, chapter 2; Tzipita L’yeshuah, Letters of the Chazon Ish, part I, letters 96 and 111; R. Elchanan Wasserman, Ikveta

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“Be that as it may, the Rebbe goes much farther than to merely acknowledge the human’s misdeeds as having a place in the greater Divine master plan. He actually presents it as an inevitable part of mankind’s journey towards self-perfection and world refinement, the very intent of creation.”

“Wow, that’s heavy stuff, Danni,” Jay declares. “I’m not going to say I fully understand the concept because it is definitely somewhat complex. Nevertheless, in some higher form of consciousness, it seems right to me. For, if G-d sought perfection, He already has the angels; for that He didn’t need a lowly and physical universe.”

IKVESA D'MOSHICAH— HEEL OF MOSHIACH

"So, Jay, can we talk about you now, or do you want to continue changing the topic? Teshuva is the way to go, my friend. Forget the anger; forget the blame; forget the feeling bad for yourself. Focus your energy on self-growth and improvement. Do as Chassidus teaches; turn your past into merits."

"You know, Danni, now you're really beginning to annoy me," says Jay, visibly irritated. "I'm not sure whether you're pretending or just plain clueless, but, for the life of me, I can't understand why you insist on ignoring the elephant in the room."

"The room? The room we're in right now," I say in an attempt to lighten the mood, "is 30 thousand feet in the air, I sure hope there's no elephant in it." I manage to eke a faint grin out of Jay, but my humor fails to do the trick, Jay is still quite upset. "Okay, Jay, tell me about the elephant in the room," I say.

"You mean to tell me, Danni," Jay exclaims, "that you really don't understand the obvious predicament in which I find myself as a result of my marital status? It's easy for you to sit there and preach these hifalutin ideas about Teshuva and turning my past into merits, but I've got to deal with reality, such as a wife and kids."

"So what are you suggesting, Danni? That I do Teshuva, while I remain in the relationship, or do you recommend that I get rid of my family? What do the great Rabbis of Chabad have to say about this situation? Would they favor Teshuva over broken families?"

"I'm sorry, Jay, I really should have been more sensitive to your situation," I concede. "Your predicament is more complex than I seemed

to acknowledge, but it was not intentional. I just was not looking that far down the road, but rather at the more immediate picture.”

“But is there a long term answer for this type of circumstance, Danni?”

“This is an extremely delicate issue, Jay, and I’m afraid there is not a one size fits all answer to this question. Each situation must be considered individually. But Jay, please don’t shoot the messenger. Chabad, nor any of the other Orthodox strands, is not the enemy. The *Torah’s* laws about intermarriage are over 3 thousand years old. So are the laws regarding conversion; Chabad did not invent them or change them.

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“Your predicament , Jay, is a tragic result of an unfortunate state of affairs within the Jewish community, but, of all parties, Orthodoxy is the least to blame.”

“Then what does one do, Danni,” asks Jay. “You know how little control I have over the situation at this point. I can’t make the kids be any more Jewish. I certainly can’t make Arlene. To be honest, I don’t even feel like I have the right to request it from her. So, what am I supposed to do, Danni?”

“You really want to know, Jay,” I ask.”

“No, I don’t really want to know, Danni,” he sarcastically remarks. “I’m just trying to make conversation, because we’ve hardly talked to each other during this trip... Of course, I want to know.”

“Well then, I’ll tell you Jay,” I assert. “Leaving aside for now the possibility of an Halachic conversion that, of course, should be part of any plan, the answer is that you should do whatever you can to align your life with G-d and *Torah*. The rest leave up to G-d. Remember the Hashgacha Pratis concept, G-d has a master plan and nothing is outside its purview,

even your situation. So don't try to run the world, because you'll put G-d out of a job, and who knows where that could lead."

"Oh I see, so now you want me to turn into a hypocrite," Jay protests. "I should have two lives, Jay the sinner and Jay the saint. Are you really serious, Danni? Can one really serve G-d and transgress at the same time? What about Teshuva?"

"You raise a good point" I tell Jay, "In a different era, you might have been 100 percent right; but our generation is unlike any other, especially regarding the issue of hypocrisy. You see, Jay, each generation in history has its unique mission and set of challenges that call for a corresponding response. In that regard, Judaism is not a static religion, but rather a living breathing organism. Incidentally, this may explain Judaism's mysterious ability to survive against overwhelming odds.

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the same time?

"Be that as it may, much as the Baal Shem Tov acted in response to the crisis of his time, the Supra Leaders of each generation are charged with the responsibility to identify and contend with the unique threats facing world Jewry in their time. This is why Judaism places such great prominence on leadership in conjunction with the law. The Tzadik is called 'the eyes of the community.'¹²⁵ He possesses the vision to not only see the immediate, but also the larger picture. In fact, there is 'an extension of Moses in every generation'¹²⁶

"The Moses of the day maintains the Divine spirit and authority to make necessary adjustments within *Torah* observance.¹²⁷ Such adjustments include the emphasis, or de-emphasis, of a given law or set of laws and practices. Even the temporary suspension of certain commandments is placed in his authority and judgment. In some cases, the generational

¹²⁵ Rashi, Taanis 24a.

¹²⁶ *Tikkunei Zohar*, Tikkun 69

¹²⁷ *Talmud* Sotah 47-48.

leader relies upon the power of prophecy to mark a shift in the national direction.”

“From what you describe, Danni,” interjects Jay, “the revelation of *Torah* is kind of an ongoing phenomenon, what might be referred to as ‘real time’ in today’s vernacular. It’s almost as if the *Torah* continues to adapt through its leadership, in accordance with the characteristics of each generation.”

“Indeed, that is the case, Jay,” I affirm. “From its earliest inception, Judaism placed the highest value on spiritual leadership, beginning with Moses of whom the *Torah* states, ‘And they believed in G-d and in Moses His servant,’¹²⁸ thus placing G-d and Moses in the same phrase.

“Leadership and supra leadership are a constant within Judaism, from the age of the prophets to the Judges and from the authors of the *Talmud* to the Chassidic masters. The function of leadership and, especially, supra-leadership is to reveal, adjust, and apply proper Jewish observance, in accordance with the time and circumstance.

“Our generation was fortunate to have its own such Moses, the late Rebbe of Lubavitch, R’ Menachem Mendel Schneerson, known simply as the ‘Rebbe.’ For our generation, he identified and confronted the momentous trials and conflagrations.

“World Jewry at the time of his ascendance to leadership, the immediate post holocaust era, was in a ravaged state. The events of the first half of the 20th century left a majority of Jews victims of ignorance, through no fault of their own. Jewry found itself vulnerable as the winds of change swept the world and world Jewry in particular.

“Our 3 thousand year heritage was showing signs of fatigue as a result of the long and bitter exile. The culture that nurtured the people for centuries came under siege on many fronts.

“The dynamic Rebbe of Lubavitch declared our age to be the long

¹²⁸ Exodus 14:31.

anticipated era of 'Ikvesa D'Moshichah'—a degenerate yet opportune time, known as 'Heel of Moshiach'—when Moshiach's approaching footsteps can practically be heard.¹²⁹

"The commentaries explain that when we observe the *Torah* and its Mitzvos during the time of Ikvesa D'moshichah, G-d will keep His promise and bring the redemption. This promise is implied in Deuteronomy by use of the word 'Eikev.' 'And it will be, "Eikev"-because you will heed these ordinances and keep them and perform them, that the Lord your G-d, will keep for you the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers...' The word Eikev, assert the commentaries,¹³⁰ also means 'heel,' as in 'Heel of Moshiach.'

... The lesson that one who completes a mitzvah is credited with it (Rashi, Deuteronomy 8:1), is particularly apt for our generation. For according to all the signs which were given by our Sages, we are presently in the last generation of exile, which will become the first generation of redemption. Thus, it is greatly encouraging to know that, despite the fact the *Torah* study and observance of Mitzvos in previous generations greatly surpassed that of our more humble efforts, nevertheless, one who completes a mitzvah is credited with it. Moshiach will come in the merit of our Mitzvos, which are performed in the last moments of exile.¹³¹

"Implied here is that there is something unique about our observance of *Torah* during the stage of the 'heel' that will precipitate the redemption. What is so unique about the time of the heel? The explanation lies in its unique character.

"When one wants to enter a very hot bathtub or cold swimming pool, which limb does he or she put in first? The answer is the foot. Despite and because of the foot's reduced sensitivity compared to the more refined limbs of the upper body, it responds more readily to our will.

"The very 'lowliness' of the foot is its strength, enabling it to withstand

¹²⁹ See footnote 94 & 97.

¹³⁰ Deuteronomy 7:12.

¹³¹ Based on *Likutei Sichos* vol. 19, pp. 104-5.

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harsh conditions and keep soldiering on. Similarly, although our generation may lack higher qualities and spiritual refinement associated with previous generations, like the heel, we are able to show a deeper commitment to the fulfillment of the Divine will. It is the action of the heel that brings fruition to the ultimate purpose of creation.

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THE 7TH GENERATION

“The process of bringing Divine presence into our benighted and physical world, and the lowest realms within the physical, essentially, is a gradual one. With every subsequent generation, the Shechinah descends a little further. As holiness penetrates increasingly lower levels of existence, our mission becomes more outward oriented. At some point, this process increases exponentially. That period is what we refer to as *Ikvesa D’moshicha*—the ‘Heel of Moshiach.’

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“You see, Jay, the earlier generations correspond to the ‘brain’ of the cosmic matrix, while the final generations correspond to its ‘heel’. The brain, or head, which is the seat of the intellect, is far more delicate than the foot.

“Maintaining the integrity and wellbeing of the brain—protecting its delicate complex mechanism, both neurologically and physiologically—requires greater care, than that of the relatively coarse foot. We see this patently reflected on a daily basis, in the fact that helmets are commonly worn on the head rather than on the foot.

“As part of the cosmic ‘head,’ our forebears had the great responsibility of interpreting the *Torah* and establishing the law for all of time. This required a helmet, in the form of increased inward focus, and limited exposure to the ‘outside’ elements. Thus, they were unable to engage the lowly and coarse elements that are common in the generation preceding the advent of Moshiach.

“Even in the time of R’ Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century author of *Tanya* and founder of the Chabad movement, the Divine servant found himself withdrawn from the materialistic sphere.

“Expected to study vast amounts of *Torah* and pray with utmost fervor and concentration, while expressing the ultimate in character refinement, the seeker of holiness had little capacity for involvement with the secular and mundane elements of life. After all, that generation had the sacred task of laying the foundation and framework of Chassidic ideology.

“But now that we reached the final quarter of the 5th millennium since creation, well into the stage known as the ‘Heel of Moshiach’—indeed the very end of the heel—we possess the unique ability and mission to confront and transform the darkest vestiges of exile, our generation’s limited spiritual capacity notwithstanding.

“Chabad sees a critical parallel between the advent of the Chassidic movement and the period of the heel. In fact, Chassidus is seen as the armor, or intelligence, for this final foray. Our mission entails completing the process of drawing down the Shechinah to earth.

“We must draw down the Shechinah, not just to the lower levels, but to the very lowest level—the farthest and the darkest corners of the universe—thereby clearing the path for the ultimate redemption.

“Chabad culture maintains that, with the advancement of time and the proliferation of more potent forms of Chassidus and their more illustrious articulation, the implements are provided to complete the work of turning this world into a dwelling for the Divine presence. Through the progression of Chabad Rebbes and the translation of the deepest concepts of *Torah* into every spoken language, we are ready to penetrate the farthest and innermost layers of exile.

“The anticipation of the final redemption in this age of *Ikvesa D’moshicha* is not limited to the cognitive intellectual realm; it finds expression in the practical arena, as well. Through its army of Chassidim and

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Shluchim, Chabad sees its role as being the vanguard of this mission—‘the boots on the ground.’ Chabad’s goal is to use every method of outreach to bring *Torah* to every man, woman, and child alive today.

“Although this final endeavor began with the Baal Shem Tov and R’ Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the farthest corners remain reserved for the last generation to elevate. The sixth Chabad Rebbe, R’ Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, brought the movement to the West and took the process to a new level, by extending it to people and places that were, previously, unable to even relate to the process.

“Through his Yiddish translations of Chassidus and illustrious memoirs, R’ Yosef Yitzchak enabled the mind of the ordinary person to grasp and internalize the transcendent spirituality of basic Chassidism and Kabbalah.

“However, the greatest expansion came with the advent of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the ‘seventh generation’ of Chabad leadership. His teachings include Kabbalistic philosophy and theology, recorded for the most part in his *Likutei Sichos*.¹⁵⁰

“Chabad believes that the final step of bringing the Shechinah down to earth, so that the ‘lower world’ itself becomes a source of illumination, belongs to the Rebbe of the ‘seventh generation.’

TINOK SHENISHBA

“Once, I remember seeing a cartoon showing a father examining his young son’s report card that was filled with D’s and F’s. As the father scowled, the boy asked, ‘Dad, do you think the problem is heredity or environmental?’

“Perhaps the most revolutionary measure taken by the Chabad leader of our time—the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson—was to classify all non-*Torah* educated Jews in our times as Tinok Shenishba, literally ‘captured infant.’ This ideology was based on the approach of his father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe.

“Tinok Shenishba is a Talmudic term that refers to a Jewish individual who inadvertently sins as a result of being raised from infancy among gentiles and, therefore, has no understanding of Judaism.¹⁵⁹ Raised without an appreciation for the ideology and practice of Judaism, by Talmudic law, one is not held accountable for failing to live in accordance with *Torah*. In this case, Judaism absolves the person because he or she cannot be blamed for his or her lack of belief and observance.

“At the end of a long letter, in response to a certain individual, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak writes:

...The Sages tell us that even when one sins, he or she is still called a Jew. Even one, who discards Judaism and becomes—Heaven forbid—an apostate, remains a Jew. To stop being a Jew is impossible (Sanhedrin 44a). Whether he or she wants to or not, one who is born a Jew remains a Jew and sooner or later will feel the sentiment expressed at Sinai: ‘We will do and we will hear,’ (Exodus 24:7) because the Pintele Yid—the essence Jewish soul—always remains whole...¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Shabbos 68b; Shavuot 5a.

¹⁶⁰ Igros Kodesh of the Previous Rebbe, Vol. 2, p. 526.

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“The late Lubavitcher Rebbe crystalized this philosophy throughout his 50 years of leadership. Expounding on the theme of Tinok Shenishba at a Shabbos gathering of Parshas Vayechi,¹⁶¹ the Rebbe stressed that, in our generation in particular, we must always relate to our less observant brethren in the context of Tinok Shenishba. Furthermore, our relationship with such individuals should be one of inspiration and encouragement towards observance, if only one Mitzvah at a time: