

The 19th of Kislev – Light and Life

By Rabbi Dovid Markel

In the year 5662 the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer, was unable to be in Lubavitch for the 19th of Kislev, due to communal matters pertaining to the security of the Jewish people that forced him to be in Petersburg.

Aware that the Chassidim would certainly be crestfallen that he would not be there for this most auspicious day, the Rebbe authored a letter that was to be read by his son during the customary meal.

In this awesome letter, the Rebbe describes the day in such a remarkable manner that the letter made waves throughout Russian Jewry. Indeed, various Jewish leaders commented on its contents and chassidim re-celebrated the 19th of Kislev when they received the letter weeks after the actual date it was read in Lubavitch.

Amongst the statements that made the letter famous was his coining the term “Rosh Hashana of Chassidus” concerning the celebration of the 19th of Kislev. In truth, with these words, he somewhat transformed the holiday from one commemorating the 1st Rebbe's release from prison, to the focal point of all Chassidic way of life.

The 19th of Kislev...the festival on which “He redeemed our soul in peace,” and our soul's illumination and vitality were given to us, this day is Rosh Hashana for Chassidus bequeathed to us by our sacred forebears, identical with the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov.

“This day is the beginning of Your works,” the fulfillment of the true intention behind the creation of man on earth, which is to call forth revelation of the light of our holy Torah.

On this day, the light is called forth, in a general way, for the entire year. It is our duty, on this day to awaken our hearts with an innermost, elemental desire and will, in the very core of our heart, that G-d illuminate our souls with the light of His Inner Torah.

He goes on to conclude that this day elicits the imperative within each and every one of us to transform ourselves and banish from within ourselves all negative character traits and instead be devoted to Torah and service of G-d.

In the pithy statement “and our soul's illumination and vitality were given to us,” Rabbi Shalom Dovber expresses that Chassidus is comprised of two elements, light and life. Both of them are present in the teachings of Chabad Chassidus that are celebrated on this day.

It is clear then, that to appreciate this day internally, it is important to appreciate the meaning of this statement.¹

The importance of light

The Talmud (Nedarim 64b) expresses the importance of light by expressing that someone without it is not considered alive:

It was taught: Four are accounted as dead: A poor man, a leper, a blind person, and one who is childless... The blind, as it is written (Eicha 3:6): “He has set me in dark places, as those that are dead of old.”

In darkness an individual cannot appreciate what is right in front of their eyes and does not have real pleasure in life. Indeed, this is the meaning of the verse (Bereishit 3:6) “And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes. Only with one’s eyes can there be true lust.

However, “a constant pleasure is not pleasurable.”² for a person to truly appreciate the light of Chassidus they must step back and imagine a world without it.

Indeed it is concerning this perceived lack of appreciation of Chassidus that Reb Nochum Sossonkin shared the following anecdote that he heard from the holy chossid, Reb Dovid Tzvi Chein (*Radatz*):³

“Once, I was in a certain synagogue with the *Radatz* preparing for prayers. The *Radatz* was standing with his *talis* draped over his shoulders and was in a talkative mood. He suddenly said to me that he ‘is dissatisfied with Lubavitch.”

When he saw my shock, he went on to explain:

“When I was young, my father, Reb Peretz, did not allow me to learn any Chassidus. My entire world was studying with the interpretation of Rashi and Ramban. When I afterwards began to study Chassidus it had a deep effect on me. Yaakov and Lavan were totally different individuals than expressed in the simple verses. However, because in Lubavitch the commence studying while they are still young, they lose that appreciation.”

Reb Nachum goes on to explain, that though he agrees that when one studies Chassidus when they are young, they are lacking an appreciation for what it truly is, it was nevertheless necessary for the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom Dovber to institute the study of Chassidus from a young age.

For, being that in that era, the winds of the enlightenment blew strong in Russia, if one were to wait until the child was older to begin studying Chassidus—it may be too late!

¹ See Likutei Sichos, Vol. 2 Pg. 463 for an explanation that light is general while vitality is particular. Light is present in the general Chassidic movement, however, vitality is specific to Chabad Chassidus.

² Kesser Shem Tov, Sec 121. See Nidda 31b concerning the reason for the seven days of the Nidda as well as The Guide to the Perplexed 3:24

³ Zichronotai, Pg. 300-302

Though we must indeed study Chassidus—as our fear of Heaven is dependent on it—it is crucial that we step back and realize the awesome present that we have.

This can be illustrated in the following allegory that is brought in Chassidus:⁴

Once, a king dispatched his son to a remote part of his kingdom where the inhabitants dwelled in large underground caverns for many generations until they had forgotten about the surface world altogether. Living in darkness had become natural to them, so much so, that they could not imagine such a thing as light, and they were quite comfortable, happy and content with the darkness. They had no knowledge whatsoever of the sun or the wonderful fruits and produce of the surface world. The prince tried to explain all that they lacked...the warmth and brightness of the sun, the fruits of the earth and the beauty of the world and everything therein... but they only laughed and jeered at him. The longer the prince stayed with them the more saddened and anguished he became over the lack of light, which astonished them greatly. They simply could not understand his distress. Finally, as he was crying, he took his fiddle and started playing a joyous melody. This totally confused them, but he explained, “I am looking forward to when my father the king will save me and take me out of this deep pit.

While the story has many meanings, the most obvious intent of the father sending his son to the pit from the onset, was surely so that he can gain an appreciation for light.

This is akin to a child, who *because* he lives in the lap of luxury, does not at all appreciate what he has. Only when he encounters poverty does he even know what riches are.

Often, those that came to Chassidus later in their lives appreciate Chassidus more than those that have studied it all their lives. They understand how dark the world would be without it and intensely value the contribution of Chassidus.

For truly, it is difficult to imagine a G-d fearing world today, without Chassidus. Indeed, Chassidism has saturated the world to the extent that its world view has permeated literally every crevice of the Jewish world.

We too must step back and appreciate our awesome gift of true light so that we can truthfully say: “Fortunate are we! How good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage!”

The vitality of our soul

The statement “the vitality of our soul,” is expressive that the Chassidism is literally life. From the greatest of chassidim, to the lowest, Chassidism gives each of them vitality and energy.

This is reminiscent of the following story:

Once, three great Chassidim, in the midst of a Chassidic gathering expressed where they would be, were it not for chassidism:

⁴ Derech Chaim, Pg. 88

Reb Isaac, the Rav of Homel expressed: “Were it not for Chassidus, I would be a world renowned *gaon* (sage).”

Reb Hillel, the Rav of Paritch said: “Were it not for Chassidus, I would be a famous kabbalist.”

Present at the gathering was the chassid Reb Shmuel Munkes. Known for his antics and humor, he said: “Were it not for Chassidus I would be a thief. I’d steal all the alcohol from the *misnagdim* and give it to the chassidim.”

Reb Shmuel was expressing the ultimate secret of Chabad Chassidus. It has the ability to enliven not only the greatest sage or kabbalist, but the ability to transform the potential drunk as well.

This is acutely felt in the world today: the same ideas in Tanya and Chassidus of the specialness of the Jewish soul, Torah study and mitzvos are what transform the lives of those not exposed to Judaism and convince them to lead a Torah lifestyle, but it is these same ideas that are revolutionary to the non-chassidic Torah scholar as well.

It is the same essential ideas that gives vitality and transform the lives of both. It is this awesome element that is specifically in Chabad Chassidus.

Kabbala and other branches of Chassidism speak the language of the G-dly soul. An individual who is already inspired and in tune to spirituality can find great resource in it, but the appreciation, beauty and vitality is often missed by the uninspired.

It is specifically Chabad Chassidus that can bridge the chasm between soul and mind. It is in Chabad Chassidus where the *entirety* of the individual—not merely the *heavenly* aspect of the person is inspired, but the *mundane* aspect as well can appreciate and have a vitality in G-dliness.

In the famous letter from the Ba-al Shem Tov to his brother in-law, concerning his visit to the Garden of Eden on Rosh HaShana of the year 5507, he writes:⁵

“I asked Moshiach: ‘When will the master come?’ He answered: ‘With this you shall know: When your teachings will be famous and will be revealed in the world and your wellsprings will be spread outwards.’”

The 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom DovBer explains, that this is primarily expressed in Chabad Chassidism.⁶ Only Chassidism that is expressed in human intellect can transform the coarsest of individuals, so that they too will be permeated with the life and vitality of Chassidism.

In a letter of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, he expressed this special quality of Chabad Chassidus:⁷

⁵ *Kesser Shem Tov*, Pg. 4

⁶ *Torah't Shalom*, 19 Kislev 5668, Pg. 112ff

⁷ *Igros Kodesh*, Previous Rebbe, Vol. 2, Pg. 375-376

In the city of Terkesh, there was a young man who began studying Chabad Chassidus. The studies had a deep effect on him and he began praying at length and acting in the Chabad traditions.

This young man's friends were chassidim of various Polish Rebbe's and they once denigrated him, saying: "While your Rebbe is surely great, if you want to experience a miracle you can only find it by our rebbe's."

While this individual was troubled by the comment, he did not express it to anyone.

One day, his Chassidic mentor, Reb Yehuda Leib, received a letter from the Alter Rebbe with the enigmatic message: "You should bring him close to Chassidus and appease his pain. This should be for him a sign and for others a miracle."

Not understanding, the mentor told the message to his student. When the student recounted the episode that had transpired to his teacher. His teacher remarked: Fool, is there a greater miracle than transforming a block of wood into a human being?!"

Indeed, this is the greatest miracle of Chassidus. It has the ability to literally resurrect the dead and bring life and light to places that are devoid of it!

May we indeed appreciate the tremendous gift that we have that "Fortunate are we! How good is our portion that we are Chassidim, how pleasant is our lot that we are Chabad Chassidim!"