Israel ben Eliezar: The Ba’al Shem Tov (BeSHT)

The Court Sweeper

Once, just before New Year’s, the Baal Shem came to a certain town and asked the people who read the prayers there in the Days of Awe. They replied that this was done by the rav of the town. “And what is his manner of praying?” asked the Baal Shem.

“On the Day of Atonement,” they said, “he recites all the confessions of sin in the most cheerful tones.”

The Baal Shem sent for the rav and asked him the cause of this strange procedure. The rav answered: “The least among the servants of the king, he, whose task it is to sweep the forecourt free of dirt, sings a merry song as he works, for he does what he is doing to gladden the king.”

Said the Baal Shem: “May my lot be with yours.”

The Crowded House of Prayer

Once the Baal Shem stopped on the threshold of a House of Prayer and refused to go in. “I cannot go in,” he said. “It is crowded with teachings and prayers from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling. How could there be room for me?” And when he saw that those around him were staring at him and did not know what he meant, he added: “The words from the lips of those whose teaching and praying does not come from the hearts lifted to heaven, cannot rise, but fill the house from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling.”

One Small Hand

Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav has handed down to us these words of his great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov: “Alas! the world is full of enormous lights and mysteries, and man shuts them from himself with one small hand!”
Boruch of Medzhybizh (derived from Wikipedia)

At the time of the Baal Shem Tov’s death, two of his closest disciples, Rabbi Pinchas of Korets and Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonoye, reported to the Hasidim that the Besht had designated Reb Boruch as his successor, and instructed Reb Pinchas to take responsibility to carry out those wishes. Reb Boruch was only seven at the time of his grandfather’s death, and was raised in Reb Pinchas’ home, where the Besht’s other close disciples visited regularly to assist with his preparation to assume his grandfather’s mantle.

Rabbi Boruch was appointed rebe around 1782. He conducted his court in Tulchyn from 1788 until 1800, after which he moved to Mezhbizh. There he built a spacious, luxurious residence where he had a coach and horses.

Reb Boruch was known for his melancholy, fiery temper, and uncompromising strong will. His guiding principle of malkhut was the subject of great debate amongst the Chasidic leadership of his generation. He was the first chasidic leader to accumulate great wealth from his devotees through the practice of petek and pidyonot. In other words, he obtained donations and gifts for personal requests or prayers.

Elie Wiesel described his personality as follows:

“A proud man, prone to fits of anger and depression, this grandson of the Baal Shem’s claimed to be different from the other Hasidic Masters of his generation, and he was. He believed that everything was due him, for he saw himself as heir, not to his father, who went almost unnoticed, but to his grandfather. The fact is that to him every Rebbe was a potential rival and usurper. He declared himself superior to all of them.

“This open arrogance could not fail to cause him trouble and provoke hostilities. The grandson of the Great Maggid said: “Rebbe Barukh tried to ascend to heaven by stepping on the heads of other tzaddikim.”

“He was forever dissatisfied, distrustful, suspicious; his grudges were universal in scope. Yet people forgave him his excessive language, his abrupt changes of mood. His visitors were blessed, even as he insulted them, even as he cursed them.”
Blessed Be He Who Spoke

They asked Rabbi Barukh: “Why do we say: ‘Blessed He who spoke and the world existed’ and not, ‘Blessed He who created the world’?”

He replied: “We praise God because He created our world with the word, and not with the thought, like other worlds. God judges the tzaddikim for an evil thought they nurse within them. But how could the rank and file of the people persist if He were to judge them in this way, and not—as He does—only for an evil thought they have expressed and made effective through words.”

Hide-and-Seek

Rabbi Barukh’s grandson Yehiel was once playing hide-and-seek with another boy. He hid himself well and waited for his playmate to find him. When he had waited for a long time, he came out of his hiding-place, but the other was nowhere to be seen. Now Yehiel realized that he had not looked for him from the very beginning. This made him cry, and crying he ran to his grandfather. Tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh’s eyes and he said: “God says the same thing: ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me.’ ”

The Twofold World

Rabbi Barukh once said: “What a good and bright world this is if we do not lose our hearts to it, but what a dark world, if we do!”

The Great Work

Rabbi Barukh said: “Elijah’s great work was not that he performed miracles, but that, when fire fell from Heaven, the people did not speak of miracles, but all cried: ‘The Lord is God.’ ”
With Yourself

This is how Rabbi Barukh expounded the words in the Sayings of the Fathers, “and be not wicked by facing yourself only” (that is, do not think that you cannot be redeemed):

“Every man has the vocation of making perfect something in this world. The world has need of every single human being. Put there are those who always sit in their rooms behind closed doors and study, and never leave the house to talk with others. For this they are called wicked. If they talked to others, they would bring to perfection something they are destined to make perfect. That is what the words mean: ‘Be not wicked by facing yourself only.’ Since you face yourself only, and do not go among people, do not become wicked through solitude.”

The Fiftieth Gate

Without informing his teacher, a disciple of Rabbi Barukh’s had inquired into the nature of God, and in his thinking had penetrated further and further until he was tangled in doubts, and what had been certain up to this time, became uncertain. When Rabbi Barukh noticed that the young man no longer came to him as usual, he went to the city where he lived, entered his room unexpectedly, and said to him: “I know what is hidden in your heart. You have passed through the fifty gates of reason. You begin with a question and think, and think up an answer—and the first gate opens, and to a new question! And again you plumb it, find the solution, fling open the second gate—and look into a new question. On and on like this, deeper and deeper, until you have forced open the fiftieth gate. There you stare at a question whose answer no man has ever found, for if there were one who knew it, there would no longer be freedom of choice. But if you dare to probe still further, you plunge into the abyss.”

“So I should go back all the way, to the very beginning?” cried the disciple.

“If you turn, you will not be going back,” said Rabbi Barukh. “You will be standing beyond the last gate: you will stand in faith.”
Rabbi Dov Baer ben Avraham of Mezeritch
(Derived from Wikipedia and MyJewishLearning)

Also known as the Maggid of Mezritch, Dov Baer was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and was chosen as his successor to lead the early movement. He is regarded as the first systematic exponent of the mystical philosophy underlying the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov, and through his teaching and leadership, the main architect of the movement.

Although Dov Baer was a competent Talmudist, he was never a town Rabbi, occupying only the secondary Rabbinic position of maggid (preacher) in the towns of Rovno and Mezhirech and is hence known by the Hasidim either as the Mezhirecher Maggid or as Reb Baer.

Dov Baer only came to know the Baal Shem Tov during the last two years of the Besht’s life and while he quotes, very occasionally, sayings of the Baal Shem Tov, he never refers to him as “my teacher.” Dov Baer is therefore more correctly to be seen as an original thinker with his own emphasis on what it is that Hasidism teaches.

After his death, avoiding the unified leadership of the first two generations, this third generation of leadership took their different interpretations and disseminated across appointed regions of Eastern Europe. Under the inspiration of their teacher, this rapidly spread Hasidism beyond Ukraine, to Poland, Galicia and Russia.

The Succession

Before the Baal Shem died, his disciples asked him who was to be their master in his stead. He said: “Whoever can teach you how pride can be broken, shall be my successor.”

After the Baal Shem’s death, they first put the question to Rabbi Baer. “How can pride be broken?”

He replied: “Pride belongs to God—as it is written: ‘The Lord reigneth; He is clothed in pride.’ That is why no counsel can be given on how to break pride. We must struggle with it all the days of our life.” Then the disciples knew that it was he who was the Baal Shem’s successor.
Palm and Cedar

“The righteous (tzaddik) shall flourish like the palm-tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.” (Ps 92:12) Concerning this verse, the maggid of Mezritch said: “There are two kinds of tzaddikim. Some spend their time on humankind. They teach them and take trouble about them. Others concern themselves only with the teachings themselves. The first bear nourishing fruit, like the date-palm; the second are like the cedar: lofty and unfruitful.”

In Exile

The maggid of Mezritch said: “Now, in exile, the holy spirit comes upon us more easily than at the time the Temple was still standing.

“A king was driven from his realm and forced to become a wayfarer. When, in the course of his wanderings, he came to the house of poor people, where he was given modest food and shelter, but received as a king, his heart grew light and he chatted with his host as intimately as he had done at court with those who were closest to him.

“Now, that He is in exile, God does the same.”

To Say Torah and to Be Torah

Rabbi Leib, son of Sarah, the hidden tzaddik who wandered over the earth, following the course of rivers, in order to redeem the souls of the living and the dead, said this: “I did not go to the maggid in order to hear Torah from him, but to see how he unlaces his felt shoes and laces them up again.”

The Ten Principles

Said the maggid to Rabbi Zusya, his disciple: “I cannot teach you the ten principles of service. But a little child and a thief can show you what they are:
“From the child you can learn three things:
He is merry for no particular reason;
Never for a moment is he idle;
When he needs something, he demands it vigorously.

The thief can instruct you in seven things:
He does his service by night;
If he does not finish what he has set out to do, in one night,
he devotes the next night to it;
He and those who work with him, love one another;
He risks his life for slight gains;
What he takes has so little value for him that he gives it for a very small coin;
He endures blows and hardship, and it matters nothing to him;
He lives for his trade and would not exchange it for any other.”

At the Pond

After the maggid’s death, his disciples came together and talked about the things he had done. When it was Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s turn, he asked them: “Do you know why our master went to the pond every day at dawn and stayed there for a little while before coming home again?” They did not know why. Rabbi Zalman continued: “He was learning the song with which the frogs praise God. It takes a very long time to learn that song.”