

A Study of Rabbi Levi Yitzhok of Berdychiv:
Based on the Hasidic Legends and his Sermons and Comments
Contained in his Kedushat Levi Ha-shalem

by

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Thesis Digest

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Born near the middle of the eighteenth century, Rabbi Levi Yitzhok built for himself a life founded upon love. His love was not an empty, meaningless gesture, but a sincere emotion which stemmed from the very root of his being. His expressions of love and devotion for God, as was manifest in his prayers, often left him in such a state of ecstasy, that he was completely oblivious to his surroundings. His love for the people Israel was so intense that it earned him the title -- Defender of Israel. In his eyes, Israel could do no wrong. Rather than indict Israel for some wrong, God often appeared, in his eyes, to be the guilty party. When such was the case, he never failed to argue with God, as one argues with another human being. If he felt that Israel was being wronged, he told God so, in language which was quite frank and bold. To God, he would also plead on behalf of his people, and would even offer to make deals with God, if He would but answer their prayers and/or alleviate their suffering. In the eyes of his people, he appeared as a revered teacher, a saint, a gentle human being. But his life was not one of gentleness and ease, instead it was a life

of suffering and travail. Though he would go out of his way to be kind and gentle, he became a victim of pain and suffering because he was unable to conceal his emotions or compromise on his convictions. Once he became the rabbi of Berdychev, he was able to settle down, and no longer had to flee from city to city because of his beliefs. In Berdychev, he preached to a congregation which truly respected and revered him. By means of his sermons, he offered his congregants guides to leading a life of true devotion and service to God. For to him man's task was to serve God faithfully, and in return God would take care of His people. His life was truly a labor of love -- a love for his people, and a love of his God.

Table of Contents

	Page
Preface	i
Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three	31
Chapter Four	53
Bibliography	62

Preface

This study of Rabbi Levi Yitzhok of Berdychov is one which is prompted out of a sense of **familial love and pride**. According to family records, I am the eighth direct male descendant of Rabbi Levi Yitzhok. In this family line, there was a rabbi in each generation, with the exception of my father and his father. With God's help, I will shortly be restoring a family tradition.

As will be noted later on, Levi Yitzhok was also known as the Derbarmdicker. It is from this name that "Derby" is derived. According to family legend, the original name was split when the family decided to emigrate to this country. When split, three names were obtained: that of Derby, Baum or Barnes, and Dicker. Contact with the other two-thirds of the family has, to my knowledge, disappeared. Consequently, the authenticity of this legend cannot be verified. However, the full name of Derbarmdicker, **דערבארִימדיקער** has been preserved in two areas. In this country, the full name, ironically, has been preserved on family head-stones; in Israel, the Hebrew equivalent of Rahaman is the name by which our family is known.

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to my

family, for their moral support and their precious heritage; to Miss Esther Pranikoff, for her patience and her preparation of this manuscript; and special thanks to Dr. Eugene Mihaly, my teacher and advisor, for his help and guidance in the writing of this manuscript.

Chapter One

The Maggid of Mezeritch, Rabbi Dov Baer, who was one of the disciples of the Baal Shem, also had many disciples of his own. These disciples were different from one another -- different in their views as to the essence of Hasidism as they had received it from their teacher; different in the means that they employed to spread their message so that it would be adopted by the people. Some such as Shneur Zalman of Ladi, sought to teach the message of Hasidism as a religious philosophy, founded upon study and meditations; others based their message on religious ecstasy, enthusiasm, and the emotions -- their goal was to enflame the hearts of their followers. One of the latter disciples, and considered the greatest of them all was Rabbi Levi Yitzhok, the rabbi of Berdychev.¹

Levi Yitzhok was born into an atmosphere which was very congenial to his very nature. Though there was little wealth in the family, there existed a tradition for learning which is said to have existed for over twenty-six generations. His father, Meir, who himself was a rabbi, was descended from learned forbears, as was his mother, Sarah. She, too, enjoyed no small reputation for her piety and her

1. Solomon A. Horodezky, Ha-hasiduth V'ha-hasidim, (Jerusalem, Dvir, 1903), II, p. 73.

generosity. On both sides of the family there had been for generations a fine blending of Rabbinism and mysticism in which Levi Yitzhok was able to immerse himself during his earliest youth.²

The event of his birth in the year 1740 did not go unnoticed in Hasidic circles. It is told that at the hour of Levi Yitzhok's birth, the Baal Shem greatly rejoiced, and said to his disciples:

"At this moment a great soul has descended from the heavens, a soul which will, in the future, recommend good for Israel.

"When this soul began its descent, the Baal Shem said, that Samuel appeared before the Holy One Blessed Be He, and complained that when this soul would complete its descent, then my own effectiveness and powers will cease to exist, because this soul will help make the world free of evil.

"However, the Holy One Blessed Be He comforted the distraught angel by informing him that this soul was destined to be a Rabbi, whose task it would be to busy himself with the needs of his congregation."³

From his early boyhood, he was marked for that quiet and meditative nature that characterized all the subsequent years of his life. He was one of those men who had never

2. Ibid.

3. Kahana, p. 250.

had a childhood, but always retained something of his childhood with him. Because of his burning love of knowledge, and his passion for truth and righteousness, Levi Yitzhok became not only a conscientious student, but one who almost wore himself out at his books. Every action that he performed was one characterized by extreme tenseness, whether it was in his studies at home, or in his prayers at the synagogue.⁴

As might have been expected, Levi Yitzhok spent most of his time in study, first under the supervision of his father, then under other tutors. Under their guidance he became a student of the Talmud, together with all of its multitudinous commentaries. He did not neglect the meditative and contemplative life, for he read extensively works of an ethical-religious nature, which furnished him with a personal discipline. Thus he became familiar with the two branches of Jewish study, the intellectual and the moral, the mental and the spiritual. With the one he sharpened his mind, the other softened his heart; one taught him what to believe, the other how to live.⁵

He soon arrived at an age when marriage had to be considered. He had many things in his favor: learning, noble ancestry, and the prospect of a brilliant rabbinical future. It did not matter, to the many families that sought him for

4. Jacob S. Minkin, The Romance of Hassidism, (New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1955), p. 154-155.

5. Ibid.

their daughter's husband, that many years would still have to pass before the student ripened into the scholar, and the scholar into the rabbi. The successful winner of the prize was Israel Perez of Lubartov, a prosperous merchant. After Levi Yitzhok was duly and solemnly wedded to the daughter of Israel Perez, the young couple went to live with her parents. Marriage produced little change in the life of the young man; for he continued to study and to follow his own interests. The Perez family provided all of his material needs.⁶

Not far from Lubartov, in the town of Riczivol, there lived one of the most enthusiastic disciples of the Maggid of Mezeritch. Rabbi Samuel Hurewitz was noted both as a Talmudist and as a Kabbalist. His fame was due to his teachings, in which he applied the Hasidic method to his public discourses, interpreting the teachings of the Torah in its light. Intrigued by all that he had heard about him, Levi Yitzhok resolved to visit him.⁷

However, this did not fare well with his father-in-law, whose business had now begun to dwindle, and he was anxious about his daughter's future. It was not his plan that his son-in-law would be forever dependent upon him for support; his plan was that his son-in-law be installed some-

6. Horodezky, p. 74.

7. Ibid.

where as a rabbi, with his daughter sharing some of the honors. Because of this, he refused to let Levi Yitzhok go to Riczivol.⁸

Sensing that he could not dissuade his father-in-law in any other manner, Levi Yitzhok began a hunger strike, rejecting for several days every offer of food. The method, though quite harsh, proved to be effective; and before long Levi Yitzhok departed on his own with the blessings of his family.⁹

It was at the home of Rabbi Samuel, that Levi Yitzhok heard for the first time of the famed Preacher of Mezeritch, Dov Baer. He was so moved and fascinated by the many reports of Dov Baer's piety and saintliness, and by the splendor of his court, that he resolved to go and to study under him.¹⁰

Levi Yitzhok was overawed by the very presence of the Preacher of Mezeritch, and the tense religious atmosphere that prevailed in his court. He regarded him with a feeling of reverence and awe, which was little short of divine. According to legend, Levi Yitzhok once remarked, "Once on Rosh Hashonah, I saw on the face of the Maggid a radiance, which seemed to be part of a glowing ray of light stretching

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Minkin, p. 156-158.

heavenward; I was suddenly filled with fear, and fell backward, only to be caught by people nearby. When my teacher saw the expression of shock on my face, he turned his own toward the wall; when he again looked in my direction, I could see nothing unusual."¹¹ Much as he had learned before, he now regarded himself as ignorant, and studied everything from the beginning with Rabbi Dov Baer.¹²

But the dreamland in which he was living did not last long; the awakening was sudden and quite rude. The material circumstances of his family, which had been on a steady decline for a number of years, were now in a positive state of collapse. Not only had the business collapsed completely, but, in order to protect and to maintain the good name of the family, Levi Yitzhok's young wife had secured some type of employment in order to maintain the family and also to pay off some of the debts of her father's business. She had succeeded in keeping the matter hidden from her husband for over two years, before he first found out. This had a most sobering effect upon him, and he then began to seek out some rabbinical position.¹³

A vacancy in the pulpit of Riczivol, a position

11. Horodezky, p. 74.

12. Minkin, p. 156-158.

13. Horodezky, p. 75.

formerly held by his teacher, Samuel Hurewitz, gave Levi Yitzhok his opportunity and he accepted the call. However, the position soon proved itself more difficult than he had anticipated; for in worldly things he was as impractical and as inexperienced as a child. Lacking the former rabbi's tact and experience, he soon found himself in trouble with the members of the congregation. Likewise, his inability to hide or even to restrain his own feelings and convictions, soon brought down upon himself the displeasure of the community. After periods of open persecution, and unwilling to remain the cause of friction in the community, he left Riczivol.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Hasidism was spreading throughout the Russian pale; it had even made its entrance into the great industrial and trading center of Pinsk, which was also one of the best known Jewish centers in the Russian pale because of its fame as a center for Jewish learning. In one of the suburbs of Pinsk, there lived Rabbi Aaron, one of the early Hasidic leaders and also a disciple of the Maggid of Mezeritch. Though Rabbi Aaron was only a few years older than Rabbi Levi Yitzhok, the two men had a great deal in common, in particular, their intense religious emotions. It was said of Rabbi Aaron that whenever he recited the Song of Songs,¹⁵ there was a veritable commotion in heaven. It was

14. Guttman, p. 80.

15. Horodezky, p. 75.

due to his influence that Karlin became the center of a Hasidic propaganda that spread its influence over many neighboring communities; it was also due to his work that Hasidism made its inroads into this important Jewish center, Pinsk.¹⁶

When a minor rabbinical position in Pinsk became available, Levi Yitzhok was able to secure the appointment with the help of Rabbi Aaron of Karlin. This new position proved to be no bed of roses, for there was a great deal of opposition to his election because of his Hasidic leanings. It is told that on one occasion the leaders of the congregation came to visit with Rabbi Levi Yitzhok. Upon entering, they saw the Rabbi in a corner of the room so immersed in his prayer of thanks to God for an apple, which was on the table, that he was completely oblivious to their entrance.¹⁷ Such manifestations of divine ecstasy appeared to be quite radical to the inhabitants of Pinsk.

One year after his election (1772), there appeared Rabbi Elijah's first proclamation against Hasidism.¹⁸ The

16. Minkin, p. 158-160.

17. Horodezky, p. 76.

18. Rabbi Elijah (1720-1797) was the leader of the Lithuanian rabbis during the latter part of the eighteenth century. He held the title of Gaon, and lived in Vilna. Simon M. Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1916), p. 235-238.

Jewish communities of Russia and Poland were urged to give this document the greatest possible publicity and to spare no means in stamping out this sectarian heresy. With persecution and oppression being urged openly, the city soon became full of strife and excitement. In order to help heal the rift which was destroying the Jewish community of Pinsk, Levi Yitzhok left the city and moved to a neighboring
¹⁹
community.

But his situation did not improve, as the cause of his persecution in Pinsk followed him to his new home. The second ban against Hasidism only added more fuel to an already raging fire. So it was that this man of nobility and simplicity, a man possessing a deep passion and love for all men, an individual completely incapable of hatred, unaccustomed to bitterness, found himself being driven from place to place like an outcast. His espousal of Hasidism brought him nothing but suffering; he found himself beset with difficul-
²⁰
ties which he was not responsible in arousing.

New hope finally dawned when he received an invitation to accept the vacant spiritual leadership of Berdychev. Rabbi Levi Yitzhok and Berdychev were so well suited to each other, that they became almost identical. His honeymoon was not without friction, as there was a portion of the community

19. Horodezky, p. 76.

20. Minkin, p. 162-165.

that was hostile to Hasidism, and, therefore, resented his coming. However, he soon overcame his opponents not by force, but with kindness and tenderness. With the simplicity and the sincerity of his own living, with his heart overflowing with love for all groups and classes of Jews, with his infectious enthusiasm he was able to win the admiration and the love of the entire community.²¹

Having suffered much, the stormy career thus ended, and a new life began for Levi Yitzhok. Throughout all of his many difficulties, he continued to remain the optimist because of his deep faith in the capacity for goodness which he knew existed within all men.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhok served the community of Berdychev for twenty-four years. He passed away on the day after Sukkoth -- the twenty-fifth day of Tishri -- in the year 1809. Simple and modest as was his life, equally simple was his grave. Though a stone structure was placed over his grave, there is no inscription upon it. Nor is one necessary. For no Jew of Berdychev needs to be reminded that one of the holiest and gentlest of men lies buried there.²²

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 177.

Chapter Two

1.

Levi Yitzhok stood alone, unequalled by any of the Hasidic leaders of his time, for his deep and burning love for his people Israel. This was his unique distinction -- for no other person had ever made his love of Israel his life's work. Levi Yitzhok lived not for himself, but for his people. Whereas many rabbis were prone to flattering the rich and influential members of the community while treating the poor either with indifference or even contempt, not so Levi Yitzhok; he treated all with love and with tenderness.¹ His love for the Jews was no empty gesture; it was a pure, a holy, an exalted love which exceeded all bounds. It was a love so great, that it blinded him to the imperfections and the shortcomings of his people; in his eyes they could do no wrong.

The Rabbi of Berdychev once encountered a Jew on the Ninth of Ab, who was eating in public. The Rabbi stopped him and said, "You must have forgotten that today is the Ninth of Ab!"

"No, I have not forgotten," was the reply.

"Then perhaps you are unable to fast because you are ill?" continued the Rabbi.

"Oh, no! My health is in quite good condition,"

1. Horodezky, Leaders of Hasidism, p. 42-46.

answered the man.

The Rabbi lifted his eyes skyward and exclaimed, "Oh Lord, what a truthful people the Jews are! This man might have committed the sin of falsehood and justified his actions on the grounds of ill health; but he would rather acknowledge his transgressions than be guilty of a falsehood."²

On another occasion, while on a journey, Levi Yitzhok noticed that his Jewish coachman was reciting his morning prayer while greasing the wheels of the coach -- an act which is forbidden. Instead of reprimanding him, Levi Yitzhok was overwhelmed by a great inspiration which surged through him at this sight. He cried out to the Lord of the world that He might behold how much His people love and serve Him. For even while they are performing such menial tasks as greasing coach-wheels, they do not forget their God, neither will they be denied the joy of serving Him.³

Here there is an individual who possessed such a stubborn belief in the innocence and the perfection of the Jewish people, that even when the evidence was strong against them, his faith did not waiver.

Before Passover, the Rabbi summoned together all of the merchants of the city and asked whether much smuggling

2. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 283.

3. Horodezky, Leaders of Hasidism, p. 42-46.

was being practiced. When the answer was given in the affirmative, he exclaimed, "O Lord, behold what a good nation is Israel. The king has many officers, and they cannot halt smuggling. Thou hast none, and yet Thou couldst find no⁴ Hometz being smuggled into any Jewish home on Passover."

Once when he chanced to overhear a thief bragging to his accomplice about some previous escapades, Levi Yitzhok chose to view this as an example of a truly holy man who was confessing his sins to God, even though it was a long time until Sélichot.⁵

Not only could he not accept the fact that his people may have done wrong, he also refused to let others find fault with them. He once heard of an itinerant preacher who was accusing the Jews of violating some religious laws. He lifted up his eyes and prayed, "Lord of the universe, this Maggid is compelled to make bitter complaints against Thy children because he needs the few coins that are usually given to a wandering preacher. Give him, O Lord, his few coins in another way, and save him from the necessity of speaking evil of Israel."⁶

Though it might seem that Rabbi Levi Yitzhok was

4. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 310.

5. Hasidic Anthology, p. 518.

6. Hasidic Anthology, p. 229.

hopelessly naive when it came to recognizing the shortcomings of his people, we also find that he was very much aware of his people's deficiencies, particularly their preoccupation with material acquisitions.

He frequently noticed his people working madly and feverishly at their work. So completely absorbed in their task of chasing down a livelihood, that they lost all of their perspective on life. Blindly racing to acquire that pot of gold which lay at the other end of the rainbow, they were too busy to stop and to enjoy what they had; too busy to realize that perhaps they were running ahead of their goal, and all they need do is to stop and they would attain it.⁷ When he witnessed actions like this, he would calmly remind his people, that everything is in the hands of God, and man's only task is to fear God.⁸

To this man of feeling, the misfortune of his people deeply wounded his heart. His ambition was to bring before God and the world the sorrows of his people. Consequently, he appealed to God not for his own needs, but for the needs of his people whom he loved above everything, and for whom he most likely would have sacrificed his own life.

Whenever Rabbi Levi Yitzhok came to that passage in the Haggadah of Passover which deals with the four sons he

7. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 226.

8. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 226-227.

would say, "The one who knows not how to ask; that is myself. I do not know how to ask You, Lord of the world, and even if I did know, I could not bear to do it! How could I venture to ask You why everything happens as it does, why we are driven from one exile into another, why our foes are allowed to torment us so. But in the Haggadah, the father of him 'who knows not how to ask,' is told: "It is for you to disclose it to him." And the Haggadah refers to the Scriptures, in which it is written: "And thou shalt tell thy son." And Lord of the world, am I not your son? I do not beg you to reveal to me the secret of your ways -- I could not bear it! But show me one thing; show it to me clearly and more deeply; show me what this, which is happening at this very moment, means to me, what it demands of me, what You are telling me by way of it. It is not why I suffer, that I wish to know, but only whether I suffer for thy sake." and was willing to

10. Much as he believed in God, with all of His wisdom and justice, He could never justify Himself in the eyes of Levi Yitzhok. God always appeared to be guilty, and he did not hesitate to tell Him so in bold and frank language.

11. The Berdychever, breaking off his prayer, once turned to God saying, "Lord of the world, Thou art bound to forgive Israel for its sins. If Thou wilt do so, it is well. If

10. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 212.

9. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 212-213.

12. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 212.

not, I will inform the world that Thou art walking about in Tefillin that are unlawful and of no effect. For what said David, 'Who is like Thy people, Israel, a people set apart on earth?'¹⁰ But if Thou wilt not forgive the sins of Israel, their privilege is of no avail; the word which is carried in Thy Tefillin are therefore untrue and unlawful."¹¹

On another occasion, he said, "Lord of the world, Israel is Thy head-phyllacteries. When the phylacteries of a simple Jew fall to the ground, he picks them up carefully, cleans them, and kisses them. Lord, Thy phylacteries have fallen to the ground!"¹²

For the sake of his people, Levi Yitzhok would quarrel with God, with whom he conversed as if with another human being. Once in the middle of a prayer, he stopped and exclaimed, "Lord of all the world! There was a time when you went around with that Torah of yours and was willing to sell it at a bargain, like apples that have gone bad, yet no one would buy it from you. No one would even look at it! And then we took it. Because of this I want to propose a deal. We have many sins and misdeeds, and You an abundance of forgiveness and atonement. Let us exchange. But perhaps You will want to exchange like for like. To this my answer

10. II Samuel 7:23

11. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 228.

12. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 222.

is had we no sins, what would You do with Your forgiveness?
So You must balance the deal by giving us life, children,
and food besides."¹³

Whenever it was a question of securing something for his people, Levi Yitzhok would use all that was his to command, to help his people, even if it meant arguing with God. For in his eyes, this was possible because of the nature of the relationship that existed between Israel and God. It was a marital relationship in which Israel was the bride who came from a noble but very poor family; it was, therefore, the task of the groom, God, to provide the sustenance for their livelihood.¹⁴ Israel, as God's chosen bride, then became the center and the purpose of the universe.

Though Israel was His chosen people, God remained the Lord of the universe. At the mention of His name, the whole universe and its inhabitants began to tremble in the fear of His name. But though all recognized the presence of God, it was Israel to whom He would speak, to whom He would give commandments.¹⁵

13. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 209-210.

14. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 197.

15. Sefer Ha-hasiduth, p. 257-258.

2.

Since Israel could do no wrong, Levi Yitzhok would often conduct tests to show that in spite of all the suffering that has befallen the Jew, it was not because of his own transgressions. Throughout it all, the Jew remained faithful to his God and His commandments.

Who else but the Jew, when offered some brandy, would first look around for water so that he might first wash his hands and say the proper blessing. The non-Jew would definitely not do this, he would accept the drink and then go on about his business.¹⁶ In any of these tests in which a comparison was made between the Jew and the non-Jew, it was always at the expense of the non-Jew.

On Yom Kippur eve, Levi Yitzhok would say, "Lord of the universe, Thou hast commanded us to fast this day; but Thou hast also bidden us to eat and drink before the eve of the fast. Were such a command issued to the followers of any other faith, they would surely have over-eaten and become drunk, thereby failing to attend divine worship in the evening. But not so the Jews! They eat and drink on the eve of the Day of Atonement, as Thou hast commanded, yet, when the time arrives for prayer, behold, they are all here."¹⁷

16. Romance of Hasidism, p. 170-171.

17. Sefer Ha-hasiduth, p. 259.

Prayer is the prime means of communication between man and God. It is the means by which man can complain to Him of the sufferings that have befallen him; it is also the means by which man can praise God for His many kindnesses. All prayers and hymns are but a plea to have His glory and His majesty revealed throughout the world.¹⁸ Prayers must be recited wholeheartedly. One cannot truly pray when his mouth is uttering words, while his mind is somewhere else thinking about business.¹⁹

As long as his prayers are sincere, and they originate in the heart, it matters not whether one is learned and recites the prayers as they are found in the prayerbook, or whether he is uneducated and he recites the letters of the alphabet, and leaves to God the task of weaving these letters into songs which are acceptable.²⁰ For just as a mother can understand the babbling sounds of an infant, so too God can understand the often mumbled prayers of his children.²¹

18. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 216.

19. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 214.

20. Romance of Hasidism, p. 166.

21. Sefer Ha-hasiduth, p. 265.

3.

"When I wander -- You!
 Where I ponder -- You!
 Only You, You again, always You!
 You! You! You!
 When I am gladdened -- You!
 When I am saddened -- You!
 Sky is You! Earth is You!
 You Above! You Below!
 In every trend, at every end,
 Only You, You again, always You!
 You! You! You!²²

This was Levi Yitzhok's concept of God. He was a truly universal being who manifests Himself everywhere. Not only does He dwell within the total universe, but He is so great that He can also be encompassed within the covers of a small book.²³ God was the all-knowing One who had given us life in order to see what use we would make of it. Some would contend that since He knows of all of our needs, why did He not provide us with these wants, so that our time could be spent in the pursuit of the spiritual?²⁴ We cannot

22. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 212.

23. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 22.

24. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 152.

begin to comprehend His ways; our duty is to serve God out of a sense of abiding love. For they who serve Him with love, they trust that God will take care of their every needs; they who serve God because of fear, are constantly afraid of God Himself.²⁵

The relationship between Israel and God being what it was, afforded every individual the opportunity of making a deal with God, in order to obtain His pardon. Once on Rosh Hashonah, Levi Yitzhok addressed God as follows, "You wish me to repent of my sins, but I have committed only minor offenses. But Thou, O Lord, hast committed grievous sins: Thou hast taken away babies from their mothers, and mothers from their babies. Let us then make a deal. If Thou forgive²⁶st me, than I will forgive Thee."

Instances also arose in which there was a unilateral act of forgiveness -- where Israel forgave God for the suffering which He had bestowed upon her. "On one eve of the Day of Atonement, the rabbi of Berdychev waited for a while before going to the pulpit to read the prayers. In a corner he found a man crouched on the floor and weeping. When he questioned him, the man replied, 'Up to a short time ago I had all good things, and now I am wretched. I lived in a village

25. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 502.

26. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 57.

and no hungry man went from my door unfed. My wife used to bring home wayfarers she met on the road, and see to their needs. And then He comes along' -- here the man pointed toward the sky -- 'takes my wife and my house. There I was with six small children, without a wife, without a house! And I had a thick prayerbook, and all the hymns were in it in just the right order; you didn't have to hunt around, and that burned up along with everything else. Now you tell me, can I forgive Him?' The zaddik had them look for a prayerbook like the one the man described. When it was brought, the man began to turn the pages to see if everything was in the correct sequence. Finally the rabbi asked, 'Do you forgive Him now?' 'Yes,' said the man; then the rabbi continued with the prayers.²⁷"

We know not the reason for His actions, nor do we question them. We go on, in spite of all suffering, serving Him. Our reward for this service is life itself; and on Rosh Hashonah we pray that God does inscribe us in the book of life. When Rosh Hashonah falls on the Sabbath, then He is obligated to do so, for even He is forbidden to write on the Sabbath except for purpose of saving a life -- for the purpose of inscribing us in the book of life.²⁸

27. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 223-224.

28. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 399.

4.

Levi Yitzhok was often disturbed by the actions of his people. He pictured man as being a manifestation of God. His brain was likened to that of the Ark and the Two Tablets of the Covenant, while his body was likened to that of the Holy of Holies. Whenever man even thought impure and unholy thoughts, then he was placing an idol within the Holy of Holies; man, himself, was the messenger of God.²⁹

In spite of this divinity within him, man was often prone to create a warped sense of values for himself. Though he had no objection to giving charity, the practice of house to house begging was abhorrent to him. Therefore he considered establishing a public fund³⁰ with its own administration in order to free him from the necessity of having to come face to face with the poor.

Not only in the realm of charity, does a strange set of values operate but also within the province of justice itself. When a man commits a theft, in order to measure his guilt we consider the amount of the theft. However, when an individual contributes to charity, we consider the recipient and all those who will benefit by the gift. Why do we not consider just the amount of the contribution? Why, in

29. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 254.

30. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 469.

the first instance, do we not consider those who have been robbed and will suffer because of it? In answer to these questions, Levi Yitzhok would reply that since the benefactor is interested in preserving lives, then the people are considered. But the robber wants only the money and is not concerned with the people; therefore, the value is considered.³¹

In his dealings with his fellow-man, Levi Yitzhok would go out of his way to help them. He insisted on serving his guests himself, for he considered hospitality to be more meritorious when it was extended freely without the prospect of payment. Since a servant would be paid for his services,³² then the intrinsic goodness would be lost. Consequently he would always welcome every guest, even the most ignorant and untutored, into his home. Why shouldn't he have? God does it -- He extends a welcome to all of His children, whether they be educated or not, or they be righteous or not.

For to all man, their future lies hidden from them. It is a fact known only to God. When a child is born and is initiated into the family of Abraham, we do not know what the future will bring him. We can only trust in the God of

31. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 211-212.

32. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 182.

Goodness, that this child would receive His blessings and protection. For all things in life are doubtful. We can only rejoice in the present and hope for the tomorrow. It is all in the hands of God.³³

"At times the rabbi of Berdychev used to travel from town to town seeking support for some worthy cause; usually he met with only moderate success. He regretted the waste of time, and resolved not to undertake a similar enterprise in the future. On returning home on one occasion, he witnessed an officer beating a thief who had been caught red-handed. The Rabbi paid the thief's fine, and upon his release the Rabbi inquired if he had learned his lesson and would in the future abstain from thievery. The thief replied, 'So what if I were beaten! This time my luck was poor, but next time it will be better!' The Rabbi resolved that he must bear this in mind. For surely his success this time had been meager, but one must not abandon a good deed because of setbacks. Next time fortune might be better."³⁴

5.

He who finds himself in a state of hitlahavut -- ecstasy -- is in a state of holiness. It is the state of be-

33. Newman, Hasidic Anthology, p. 182.

34. Sefer Ha-hasiduth, p. 253.

ing where there is an end to constraint, where one is so detached that he is lifted above everything earthly. He is above nature, time, and thought.³⁵ Such was the state of Rabbi Levi Yitzhok when he was in prayer. He was literally transported out of the realm of the present, especially when he participated in the ceremonials of the various holidays. It is related that on Sukkoth, he was so enthralled by the sight of the lulav and esrog as it lay inside a chest, he thrust his hand through the glass lid, and did not notice that he had cut himself. The lights of Hanukkah were so entrancing, that he was impelled to put his hand into their flame, yet he felt no pain. When he had drawn the water for the baking of the unleavened bread, he was so enraptured at fulfilling this holy rite, that he fell into the well.³⁶

As the life of a Hassid is marked only by joy or sorrow, or laughter or tears, frequently he laughs when he is sad, and cries when he is happy. Consequently when his son died, Levi Yitzhok was seen dancing as he followed the bier. Many were astonished at his behavior. For Levi Yitzhok his sorrow at the loss of his son was mingled with the joy of returning to God a pure soul.³⁷

35, Martin Buber, Hasidism and Modern Man, p. 74-82.

36. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 204-205.

37. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 231.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhok was also known as the "Merciful" -- Derbarmdiger. By this name, which was not his father's, he was known to the authorities and listed in their books. And, according to legend, this was how it happened. When the czar issued a decree that everyone must add to his name a second name, the Jews were slow to obey. To enforce the new law was the task of the local sheriff. When he crossed Levi Yitzhok's threshold and mumbled his question by rote, the zaddik looked at him and -- ignoring the question -- continued to pray, "Endeavor to imitate the quality of God. As He is merciful, so you too shall be merciful." The sheriff pulled out his list and noted down; "first name, Levi Yitzhok, second name, Merciful." ³⁸ So it was that the defender of Israel also became known as the Merciful One.

6.

"Good morning, Lord -- Master of the Universe.
 I, Levi Yitzhok, son of Sarah of Berdychev,
 I come to You with a Din Torah from Your people Israel --
 What do you want of Your people Israel?
 What have You demanded of Your people Israel?
 For everywhere I look it says, Say unto the children
 of Israel
 And every other verse says, Speak unto the children
 of Israel --

38. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 221-222.

And over and over -- Command the children of Israel
 Father, sweet Father in heaven,

How many nations are there in the world?

Persians -- Babylonians -- Edomites.

The Russians what do they say?

That their Czar is the only ruler.

The Persians what do they say?

That their Kaiser is supreme --

And the English -- what do they say?

That George III is a sovereign.

And I, Levi Yitzhok, son of Sarah of Berdychew, say
 Yisgadai, v'yiskadash sh'may rabboh ...

Magnified and Sanctified is only Thy name.

And I, Levi Yitzhok, son of Sarah of Berdychew say
 From my stand I will not waver --

Let them put an end to idolatry

Let them call a halt to their blasphemies ...

Yisgadai, v'yiskadash, sh'may rabboh ...

Magnified and Sanctified is only Thy name. ³⁹

Here we have the famous Kaddish of Levi Yitzhok. The prayer which he uttered on the Day of Atonement affirming his faith in one God, the God of the whole universe -- but more specifically the God of Israel.

39. Sefer Ha-hasiduth, p. 258.

There is, however, one very interesting fact which is mentioned in this prayer. Is it not strange that Levi Yitzhok considers himself to be the son of Sarah, his mother, and not the son of Meir? This is certainly not the usual procedure.

In the sermon of Levi Yitzhok based on the Scriptural verse -- "And these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son ..."⁴⁰ he states that even though Ishmael was also born of Abraham, it is only Isaac who will be called by his father's name. In the family chain of the Patriarchs, a son is considered to be an offspring of his father only if the son himself is a righteous individual. The privilege of being called by one's father's name is not an automatic process,⁴¹ but it is an earned privilege.

Could it possibly be that this man who was considered by others to be a saint, to be the Defender of Israel, that he, himself, felt that he was not worthy enough to bear his father's name? He was aware that he was not perfect, and that there were many aspects of his life that needed to be corrected. He was in the habit of reviewing the events of each day upon returning, and resolving not to repeat the same mistakes on the morrow. If this was something which he had

40. Genesis 25:19

41. Kedushat Levi 41

already promised not to do, but had failed to keep his word, then he would remark, "Yesterday I did not speak the truth, but I do speak the truth today."⁴²

Truly these days to day flaws were not the ones which could make him feel unworthy. Perhaps he considered himself unworthy because Israel, his people and his life, were unworthy to receive the coming of the Messiah. He possessed an indomitable faith in the future of the Jewish people, in the end of their exile and their return to their homeland. The coming of the Messiah was for him an event which was just around the corner. When on the Ninth of Ab, the Messiah failed to arrive, Levi Yitzhok prostrated himself before the Ark and recited Lamentations in a voice which was choked with sobbing.⁴³

Perhaps this was the reason why he considered himself to be unworthy of being known as Levi Yitzhok, son of Meir.

42. Tales of the Hasidism I, p. 218.

43. Romance of Hasidism, p. 173-175.

Chapter Three

Why is homiletics the most important aspect of a rabbi's career? In the first place preaching is the show-window of a rabbi's life. By this means he is able to establish contact with a larger part of the congregation. The impressions which he creates through his sermons help him to teach out and to draw into a closer relationship with Judaism in general, and the temple in particular, those people who might otherwise have little or no contact with the rabbi, and/or little or no use for Judaism itself.¹

Secondly, our faith is a preaching faith. Judaism is more than a religion of contemplation, and more than a mere religion of common sense -- it is a faith that is a way of life.²

The sermon is vital for a third reason. It is the only means by which we can make our religious principles, as enunciated in the Bible, relevant and meaningful for life today. The sermon is the tool for transforming the commandments of universal importance and eternal truth into guides for living which are important here and true for today.³

Finally, the sermon is important because it has the

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1. Aspects of Jewish Homiletics Lectures, given by Rabbi Robert Kahn, November 11-14, 1957, p. 1-4.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.

power to move the human heart due to the fact that it can change human lives and affect the course of human history. Preaching can and does make itself felt upon those whose hearts are troubled and whose minds are disturbed. It can also change the direction of individual lives and the objectives of society. The spoken word is a powerful instrument.⁴

1.

If we were to but glance into the show-window of Rabbi Levi Yitzhok's life, we would be witnesses to one of the most touching love scenes in the history of mankind. None other has made the love of Israel his life-ideal so much as he. He loved his people deeply, lastingly.

If a comparison is to be made with another great lover of Israel, it would be with the prophet Jeremiah. Like him, Levi Yitzhok was a man of sorrow, bent and burdened with the tribulations of his people. Like Jeremiah, he could have cried out, "My heart moaneth within me; I cannot hold my place."⁵ But, unlike Jeremiah, the rabbi of Berdychew could never say, "Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord ... Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God ..."⁶ Even the

4. Ibid.

5. Jeremiah 4:19

6. Jeremiah 3:12-13

prophet of Judea often mixed his speeches with hortatory statements; but from Levi Yitzhok came only words of tenderness and love.

We are all familiar with the Biblical story of Korah. Korah and a group of respected members of the congregation appeared before Moses and Aaron, and challenged them as to why both brothers should occupy such exalted places of leadership, especially since God had considered all of the congregations to be holy.⁷ Rashi, in commenting on these verses, states that Korah had separated himself from the congregation in order to establish a rebellion, for Korah was envious that he was not being considered for one of the positions of leadership. Even the Rabbis of the Midrash refer to Korah as being the one who rebelled, the one who formented a quarrel, the one who contended against Moses.⁸ Because of this his punishment was both burning and being swallowed by the earth.⁹ But Levi Yitzhok could not be so harsh with Korah. Commenting on these same verses, he states that there are in this world some righteous people who do worship only for the sake of bringing enjoyment and satisfaction to God. To these people it makes no difference whether they or some-

7. Numbers 16:1-3

8. Midrash Rabbah, Numbers 18:1, 2

9. Midrash Rabbah, Numbers 18:19

one else are the direct cause of God's satisfaction. But there are also those people who desire a reward for their worship; therefore, in this instance, they, themselves, must be the creators of satisfaction for God. The latter was¹⁰ Korah.

If we look into the window of another sermon, we can again see not only how great was his love for his people, but the extent of God's love for Israel. For it is God's task to punish those whose relationship with Israel could possibly be dangerous or harmful to her. For just as a king periodically will test those principalities which owe him allegiance, whether or not they love and serve him truthfully, so, too, he will periodically check to find out whether or not they also love his sons. So it is with God. In the month of Tishri, the season of the Holydays of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kipper, God judges the world as to their love for Him and their fear of Him; in Nissan, at Passover, He checks to see if the world loves His children -- the children of Israel. Therefore did God smite Pharoah who harmed Israel in this month. And this is the meaning of the verse -- "this month shall be to you" -- for you it is the first of the months, that is, that the emanation which is sent forth from God,

10. Kedushat Levi I, p. 223.

on the month of Nissan, as well as the judgment, it is all because of Israel; and God exacts punishment from him who causes evil to Israel and He performs miracles for Israel.¹¹

When a man has charm appeal, then he surely has superior status. But in truth, who can exalt himself in the presence of God, in that he has superiority? Surely, to God all the inhabitants of the world are accounted as nought. And it is this that the verse -- "The Lord make His face shine upon Thee, and be gracious unto Thee"¹² -- indicates. God's mercy in giving Israel glory and beauty is intended to give Israel superiority, and, therefore, will Israel find favor in His eyes. In other words, God makes Israel beautiful and great so that they have favor in His eyes.¹³

Through yet another window, we are able to see a manifestation of God's love for Israel. During the course of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were led by God who appeared before them in a pillar of cloud during the day, and by night in a pillar of fire. Suddenly, however, at the

11. Kedushat Levi I, p. 107.

12. Numbers 6:25

13. Kedushat Levi I, p. 207.

time of the crossing of the Red Sea, "the angel of God, who went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud removed from before them, and stood behind them."¹⁴ Why was there this sudden about face? We are all cognizant of the fact that because of their holiness, the angels of God, naturally occupied a higher place than that of Israel. Nevertheless, when God showed His great love for His children, then Israel was placed on a plane higher than that of the heavenly host. So it was that at the splitting of the Red Sea -- God's demonstration of His great love for Israel -- that the angels who were leading the Israelites, out of deference to one occupying a higher plane in life, moved to the rear,¹⁵ while God made known His love.

2.

Since Judaism is a way of life, it is by means of the sermon that the Rabbi is able to give directions and offer guides for living. One of the guides given to man is the Ten Commandments. The fifth commandment as originally transmitted states, "honor thy father and thy mother."¹⁶ However, the later version reads, "honor thy father and thy

14. Exodus 14:19

15. Kedushat Levi I, p. 211.

16. Exodus 19:12

mother, as the Lord Thy God commanded thee."¹⁷ This difference in versions caused Levi Yitzhok to ask the question -- why was it necessary to add the phrase, "as the Lord Thy God commanded thee." Surely, all know that children are obligated to honor their parents. The purpose of the additional phrase is to inform us that if our parents tell us to violate one of God's commandments, then we need not listen to them. For it is written that we honor our father and our mother, as the Lord God commanded us; we honor and respect them only as long as we do not go against the teachings of God. We honor them only so long as it is in consonance with God's commandments to us.¹⁸

For man to live, he must accordingly adhere to the commandments of God. These commandments manifest themselves either as ordinances or statutes. "Mine ordinances shall ye do, and My statutes shall ye keep, to walk therein ... Ye shall therefore keep My statutes and Mine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them: I am the Lord."¹⁹ Is there any difference between an ordinance and a statute? The reply would be in the affirmative. For the statutes are those commandments which have no reason, and the ordinances

17. Deuteronomy 5:16

18. Kedushat Levi I, p. 249; Yebamoth 5b.

19. Leviticus 18:45

are those commandments which do have reasons behind them. In truth, Levi Yitzhok says when a man performs a commandment which has no reason, then he is purified thereby to understand those commandments which do have reasons. But, God forbid, if an individual does not perform those commandments which are statutes, then he does not possess the power of comprehension necessary to understand those commandments which do have reasons, in order that he might observe them. This then is the meaning -- when one performs those commandments which are statutes, which do not have reasons, then his power of comprehension is so purified that he can understand those commandments which have reasons, and thus be able to observe them, so that the one who performs them will understand that these commandments constitute the very essence of his living.²⁰

Every individual is obligated to serve God by observing commandments. It is only by means of devotion, as is manifested through deeds of kindness, and by means of holy thoughts, that man is able to aspire to reach up to God. By so doing, he not only contributes of himself, but contributes also to himself -- for his own betterment.²¹

20. Kedushat Levi I, p. 198.

21. Kedushat Levi I, p. 143.

While travelling down the road of life, there are some roads which it is permissible to follow, and there are others which it is not. "And if one sin through error, in doing any of the things which the Lord hath commanded not to be done, and be guilty ..." ²² For it is known that the more one serves God, the more one appears as nothing in his own eyes when compared to the greatness of God. But when a man performs a mitzvah, and believes that he is serving God, this mitzvah counts for nothing. And this is the meaning of the verse -- "If a soul sins" -- what is the sin? In that he performs one of the commandments of God which should make him nought, and he sins, that is, this mitzvah should make him feel as nought, yet he believes that he is properly serving God. ²³ This is his sin.

In his sermon based on the weekly scriptural portion -- Vayakhel, Levi Yitzhok points out that there are two distinct types of mitzwot -- the active mitzwot and the vocal mitzwot. The active mitzwot are those which are performed by the individual in the Temple through the various sacrifices. However, on the Sabbath, when all manner of

22. Leviticus 4:27

23. Kedushat Levi I, p. 177.

work is prohibited, the mitzwot that are required are those of the vocal variety. The vocal mitzwot are those dealing with the study of the Torah and with prayer. The latter mitzwot are more important than the former; for the latter comprise the essential elements of the Sabbath which are necessary for the proper functioning of the world.²⁴ Thus through study and prayer man received valuable assistance for his way through life.

But study and prayer and the observance of the commandments alone will not be sufficient. Added to these elements must be that of faith; a faith which exceeds all bounds -- a faith which embodies the belief that everything is the work of God's hands, and since He caused it to be, then it must be for the best. This was the message of Levi Yitzhok's sermon based on a portion of the Joseph story. "And Joseph's master took him, and put him in the prison, the place where the King's prisoners were housed; and he was there in the prison."²⁵ Why was it necessary for Scripture to state twice that "he was in prison"? It is stated twice to show that when the Holy One Blessed be He does send evil to a man, God forbid, then he need not

24. Kedushat Levi I, p. 170.

25. Genesis 39:20

perform any manner of physical work, except to trust in God; for surely God will change this evil to good. Even though man possesses the ability to prevent his being incarcerated in prison, he should do nothing, for with implicit faith and trust in God, then this will surely turn out for the best.²⁶

3.

By means of the sermon both the basic principles and the underlying thoughts that are present in the Bible can then become more relevant and meaningful to us in our task of living today.

For example, if we were to look at the opening verse of the Bible, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,"²⁷ what meaning has this for us? What do the words themselves tell us? They definitely do not ask a question; neither do they urge us to action, nor do they provoke us into a controversial argument. The words simply supply us with a bit of information.

In the sermon, this bit of information is transformed -- seemingly meaningless words suddenly can become

26. Kedushat Levi I, p. 63.

27. Genesis 1:1

most meaningful to us. We, in our own humble way, are so overawed by the majority and the greatness of all of the creation which surrounds us, that we choose to speak of the greatest ones as being the major creations of God. Thus, heaven and earth, as well as light and darkness, merely stand for all of the many creations of God. God, then, is not only the creator of all, but He is "all" itself; His presence and His influence manifests itself everywhere, in all of His creations. Though we say that God created light and formed darkness, we mean this in terms of a never-ending creative process. In every moment something new is being created, while something else is being formed by Him. Through all of this, we feel His presence around us. God then is "all" itself; therefore, when man realizes his own nothingness, and recognizes his own littleness, and that it is God which gives Him strength to be what he is, then he bears witness to God's continuing creation -- yotzer, in the present tense. However, if he looks at himself, and does not realize his own littleness, then he affirms his own being and thus denies the creativity of God in the present -- he makes of God yotzar, creator only in the past tense.

28

There are many times when we look about us and witness all the changes that are taking place, and we begin to wonder whether there is any plan that is being followed. Has a logical sequence been arranged, or do we have only organized chaos? For Levi Yitzhok there is a master plan at work, and first things must be done first in order to achieve success.

Commenting on the purely factual statement, "and Bezalel the son of Uri ... made all that the Lord commanded Moses,"²⁹ Levi Yitzhok points out that Moses received his instructions from God, and then transmitted them to Bezalel, who saw to it that they were carried out. A Logical sequence was followed; in the same manner when man first rises from his bed, he washes prior to beginning his prayers. So, too, it is not possible to believe with a sense of perfect faith that there is a creator of all the worlds, if one has not, prior to this, accepted upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. Following this, then, he is able to study the Torah, pray to God, and observe the commandments. Throughout the Torah and the mitzwot, man is then able to learn about the attributes of God. But the question was raised as to why Moses commanded that the vessels be con-

29. Exodus 38:21

structed first and then the tent of meeting, while Bezalel built the tent first and then the vessels. We first must recognize that the tent of meeting stands for the belief in God; the vessels represent the mitzwot and the commandments. For the child, his conception of God is that of the creator of everything; when one matures and reaches adulthood, and has had the benefit of the study of the Torahs and the mitzwot, then his conception of God is one that can be buttressed by faith. Moses was an individual who had rapidly matured and, in the process, had lost sight of the fact that his people were not as developed as he in their conception of God, consequently he wished to give them the Torah and the commandments, and the belief in God later; however, Bezalel recognized the limitations of the people and, therefore, first gave them a faith, and then the Torah and the commandments to support their faith -- first the tent of meeting and then the vessels for it.³⁰ Thus it was that a natural order was arranged for the Israelites to learn about their God, and to know the ways of serving Him.

Much too often in our lifetime, we are in such a

30. Kedushat Levi I, p. 174.

hurry to go places, to see everything, to experience all that is about us, that we are too busy to see the things of beauty which are closest to us. How often do we fail to recognize the beauty that is inherent in the Sabbath, that day of rest which is given us in order that we might reflect upon the week which has ended, and in order to thank Him for His numberless gifts and blessings which He has given to us.

It was an attempt to make us cognizant of this very fact that the Bible stated, "Wherefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath through-³¹ out their generations, for a perpetual covenant." For if we examine the verse, we see that the same thought is stated twice. Levi Yitzhok preached that when an individual faithfully observes the Sabbath, then he not only derives from this observance life itself, but also draws from the Sabbath some of its beauty, its majesty, and its holiness. With these feelings captured within his heart and soul, he is then able to serve God during the whole week, out of a sense of true devotion. Then it is naturally easier for him³² to observe the next Sabbath. Would that it would be so.

31. Exodus 31:16

32. Kedushat Levi I, p. 163.

4.

The fourth value that is inherent in preaching is that of its power to help change the direction of human lives. At times this means offering moral guidance to those who are in need of it, emotional support to those whose lives have been troubled, and spiritual uplifting to those who seem to be ready to give up living. At other times, it means simply helping people to live, by offering them goals and guides to help attain these ends.

If our goal is to serve God, how can we know that we are truly serving Him? For Levi Yitzhok the test for determining the purity of our actions is to check on our relationship to God. Even Abraham the Patriarch had his doubts as to his true relationship to God, therefore, "Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South --
Negbah;"³³ while he travelled, he checked on his own motivations for serving God -- whether they were based on a sense of fear, or a hope of a possible future reward, or a desire to satisfy himself, or a desire to please God alone. He was able to check as he proceeded Negbah; for the more he travelled into this land, this wilderness, this barren, desolate, and empty land, the more he realized how little

33. Genesis 12:9

he himself was, how empty, how barren he must appear in relation to the greatness of God. It is only when one realizes his own nothingness, then his devotion to God is motivated out of a sense of profound love.³⁴

Rabbi Levi Yitzhok once preached that there were four kinds of people who serve God. There are those who worship Him out of a sense of fear, for they are afraid both of that which is unknown and that which is bigger than themselves. Then there are those who worship God out of love -- the love of a possible future reward. Thirdly, we find people who serve Him for the purpose of satisfying only themselves; and finally we find those who worship God for His sake -- for the purpose of bringing satisfaction to Him. After all of his travelling, Abraham found that he belonged to this last group of righteous individuals -- those who served God for His sake.³⁵

We are then told that there are two kinds of righteous persons. On the one hand we have the individual, who serves God because of his great love for Him; this love is so intense that he is concerned only with his own prayers, and consequently makes no attempt to help those who have transgressed to return to the service of God. On the other hand, there are those righteous individuals who not only

34. Kedushat Levi I, p. 14.

35. Ibid.

serve God out of a sense of a deep passion, but they also try to help those who have strayed, back to the shelter of God's wings. Abraham and Moses were in this category.³⁶

However, Noah was one of the former, and all that is remembered about him is that "Noah was in his generations a man righteous and wholehearted; Noah walked with God. And Noah begot three sons ..."³⁷ But Levi Yitzhok continues in his sermon and points out that Noah really belonged in the latter category; Noah's problem was that he was so humble that he did not consider himself righteous enough that he could pray to God, that He might nullify His plans for destroying the people, and that God would listen to his plea.³⁸

Man must, therefore, serve God through worship and through obedience to His commandments. But what is man's relationship to God if he is an obedient son; and what is his status after worshipping Him? For the individual who worships God, he realized full well that he is still unable to grasp the greatness of the Creator as well as he might; consequently, he is consciously aware that He is still unknown to him.³⁹

36. Kedushat Levi I, p. 8.

37. Genesis 6:9f

38. Kedushat Levi I, p. 8.

39. Kedushat Levi I, p. 75.

This is what is implied in the Biblical statement,
 "and I will also surely bring thee up again."⁴⁰ For even
 though man has risen above the animals, and does presently
 dwell on a high plane, if we but continue to worship and to
 serve God, a worship which is endless and a service which
 is limitless, then with His help we will rise to even
 greater heights, continually climbing higher and higher
 toward Him.⁴¹

Even though some righteous person might eventually
 attain one of the higher plateaus, there is no guarantee
 given that he will remain there. For, at times, even right-
 eous individuals do fall from their places. This fall need
 not be the result of some transgression on their part; at
 times, it is the means by which God can demonstrate His
 love and kindness.⁴²

Having noted the status that man occupies in the
 divine scheme of things, let us examine one of the facets
 of the relationship that does exist between God and man.

Man must always be cognizant of the fact that every
 word he utters, every thought that he entertains, every move-
 ment that he makes -- that all of these make their impression

40. Genesis 46:4

41. Kedushat Levi I, p. 75.

42. Kedushat Levi I, p. 215.

above. Because man's standing is dependent upon the recorded impressions, he must be ever on guard, for God knows every thought and supervises man in all of his ways.⁴³

This is impressed upon us by the fact that Scriptures saw fit to write "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord your God."⁴⁴

The first mention of the phrase -- I am the Lord your God -- is for the purpose of reminding us that God does order our lives, and does supervise our actions. The phrase is repeated to emphasize the fact that God knows all things well; He possesses the ability to know all things, both in the actual thought process, as well as in the action state.⁴⁵

5.

Several sermons did manifest themselves as being ideal sermons for specific occasions. Whether they were actually written for those occasions is a question which we are unable to answer.

One seemed to be ideally suited for a rabbi's charge to a Bar Mitzvah boy. This is achieved by playing with the

43. Kedushat Levi I, p. 223

44. Numbers 15:4

45. Kedushat Levi I, p. 223

Hebrew of the Biblical text -- "Issachar is a large-boned ass."⁴⁶ By taking the letters which comprise the name of Issachar, we are able to form the two Hebrew words which mean -- there is a reward.

Levi Yitzhok then preached; what are the rewards which are mentioned here? They are the gifts which a child is accustomed to receiving in order to satiate his material and physical needs. But once one has reached thirteen years of age, these material and physical needs begin to occupy their proper secondary role, while we receive our spiritual rewards through the worship of God, which is our primary role in life. These material needs and physical desires are acceptable as long as they are kept in the proper perspective; it is only through the desire for the material that man can approach the spiritual and receive his reward. Levi Yitzhok then translates the Hebrew of this text as being, there is a spiritual reward; it is the result of the physical desires of the child.⁴⁷

Ideally suited as a text for a wedding sermon is the Biblical verse, "And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebecca, and she became his wife; and he loved her."⁴⁸

46. Genesis 49:14

47. Kedushat Levi I, p. 81

48. Genesis 24:67

Levi Yitzhok asks the question, why is it necessary to remark that Isaac loved Rebecca? The answer is to inform us that there are two kinds of love which a man can have for a woman. First there is the purely physical love; but this is really not a love for a woman, but a love of oneself. The other kind of love is that which stems from man's belief that through woman, the Creator's commandment can be fulfilled. This is love; this is the kind of love which Isaac^{49.} cherished.

On one Chanukah Levi Yitzhok delivered a sermon in which his goal was to show that God had indeed granted good things to Israel. On the Holydays of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, the Holy One Blessed be He, assigned to Israel a measure of His great goodness. However, this goodness did not reveal itself to Israel until Chanukah. On Chanukah His goodness makes itself known to us visually through the Chanukah lights. On Purim our sense of hearing is employed, for we hear His goodness enunciated in the reading of the scroll of Esther. On Passover, taste is utilized for we are⁵⁰ witnesses to His goodness as we eat Matzoh.

49. Kedushat Levi I, p. 40

50. Kedushat Levi I, p. 66

Chapter Four

1.

If we were to undertake an intensive analysis of the homiletical style of Levi Yitzhok, we would be faced with an insurmountable problem. His sermons based on the sedrahs of the week and the holidays, as they have been preserved for us in the Kedushat Levi, are not complete. What we do have preserved is the biblical text, if any, upon which he based his sermon, and a brief resume of the body of the sermon. Consequently, any analysis which wanted to consider his exordium to the sermon, and his development of the sermonic message, could not possibly be undertaken.

From the information that we do have, we could conclude that Levi Yitzhok was a textual preacher. A vast majority of the sermon nuggets which are at one's disposal give definite evidence that he preferred to base his sermon on a biblical text. In these textual sermons, his goal was to make the biblical verse meaningful and relevant for his congregation. As such, his sermons dealt with only the one point which he wished to emphasize. His purpose was to help his people live as better individuals and as better Jews, so as to become true servants of God. For example, if we look at his sermon based on the verse, "This is the statute of

the law which the Lord had commanded ..."¹ even though the reasons for the Torah and the mitzvot are hidden from mankind, it is still incumbent upon him to observe and to fulfill all of the precepts, because they were commanded by God. All of the specific reasons for their observance have disappeared; only the essential and general reason still remains -- fulfill the divine commandments. This creates a problem for mankind; in fact, it leads to a conflict within him -- a conflict between his soul and his body. His soul, because of its relationship to God's throne, desires to serve Him continually without interruption; his body, however, will not serve God and fulfill His commandments, because it does not know the reasons behind their being -- if it did know the reasons, then it would serve God unquestioningly. For the worthy individual, he sees to it that his soul has control over his body, and that he does fulfill and observe all of the mitzvot and the Torah, even though the reasons are no longer known to us.²

Throughout his sermons, Levi Yitzhok presents one overwhelming theme, which is repeated time and time again. The theme presented is that man, in order to truly and faith-

1. Numbers 19:2¹

2. Kedushat Levi I, p. 224.

fully serve God, must continually reexamine himself until he realizes that he is nothing before the presence of God. For only when man realizes his own littleness, his own minuteness, his own nothingness when compared to the greatness of God, only then can he truly and sincerely have faith in his God. To this end, man must ever strive.

Through his sermons, Levi Yitzhok was able to speak directly to his congregation, for he neither flattered them by talking over their heads, nor did he insult them by talking down to them. His effectiveness lay in the fact that his intention was to help his people become better worshippers of God, and to this end were all his sermons directed.

2.

Because of the extent of the love which the people held for Rabbi Levi Yitzhok, it would be folly on one's part to consider the incidents, as they are related in the legends about him, to be wholly authentic and accurate. We can, however, obtain from the legends general pictures of the man's character as they appeared to those who loved him most dearly.

The story is told of an innkeeper in Berdychev, who himself was not in favor of the hasidic way of life, who also

doubted the stories that he heard about the Rabbi and his condition when he prayed. Resolving to see for himself, the innkeeper went to the Rabbi's home while the Rabbi was praying on the occasion of the New Moon. The Rabbi became so enraptured by his prayers that he began to sing loudly and dance about wildly, all the while taking with him the innkeeper. The innkeeper finally freed himself and left in haste, believing that surely some other powers were involved other than those of this earth.³ True, it was a known fact that Levi Yitzhok would become so ecstatic and enraptured while praying, that it involved his own body, and, at times, even led him to faint. Since we are dealing with legends and their components of times and imagination, reality is frequently clouded by all of the mind's various embellishments.

One other problem when dealing with the legends is the factor of true authenticity. Frequently, there can be found a striking similarity between those legends which are attributed to one individual and those of another. Again, this is only to be expected. Frequently in the course of transmission, the name of the actual hasidic leader is forgotten and another name is substituted. There is also the possibility that in the transmission of these various

3. Tales of the Hasidim I, p. 208-209.

legends, that the transmittor could have reasoned, if it was good enough for X, it surely is good enough for Y.

There is a legend attributed to the Baa1 Shem, in which he said, "When I reach a high rung of knowledge, I know that not a single letter of the teachings is within me, and that I have not taken a single step in the service of God."⁴

There is a legend attributed to Levi Yitzhok in which he is asked, "Why is the first page number missing in all the tractates of the Talmud? Why does each begin with the secondary? To which he answered that it is for the purpose of showing that however much a man may learn, he should always remember that he has not even gotten to the first page."⁵

Here we have two legends, attributed to two different personalities, sharing a similar theme. There does exist the possibility then of other legends being more identical to those attributed to other hasidic personalities. Even if this be so, and the authenticity of the legend be disproved, nevertheless, we are still able to utilize the legend as an expression of the feelings which the people did have for him. From the legend we are able to determine the status

4. Tales of the Hasidim I, p. 52.

5. Tales of the Hasidim I, p. 232.

which Levi Yitzhok occupied in the Hasidic community. Thus the legends which are attributed to him, whether authentic or not, do help to give us a picture of the man, and the impression which he made upon his people.

3.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhok was a truly gentle Hassid. His whole life revolved around his people, for whom he possessed a deep affection. His love for them was limitless; it exceeded all bounds. It was a love so strong, that it occupied the same place of reverence as the letters of the Torah. For just as a Scroll of the Law becomes holy when it is sewn together, and it is forbidden to make any type of correction or erasure, so, too, is the people Israel, for whom they are united in God's love, none may be blotted out.⁶

His love for Israel was so intense that he was actually blinded to the shortcomings of his people. He refused to recognize obvious transgressions and obvious insults for what they were. His people could do no wrong. When the wife of one of his enemies met him on the street and poured a pail of water over his head, Levi Yitzhok went to the synagogue and prayed to God that He not punish the woman for she was only carrying out her husband's command,

6. Hasidic Anthology, p. 497.

and, therefore, was an obedient wife.⁷

For Levi Yitzhok, prayer and service constructed the avenues of communication between man and his Creator. One had no meaning and was of no effect without the other. "For if man's mouth and his heart are not in perfect harmony, he cannot expect his prayers to be acceptable on high."⁸ If man is sincere in his devotion to God, and his actions and prayers testify to this effect, then prayer can be meaningful; there is also the hope that they will be answered and fulfilled, even if it is the earnest request of a father that he find worthy husbands for his daughters.⁹

Levi Yitzhok's own prayers were directed toward the day of the coming of the Messiah, and on behalf of his people Israel. He earnestly believed that the day of the Messiah was near at hand, and that soon there would be an end to evil and suffering. This day of the Messiah would take place on the Ninth of Ab. When it failed to materialize, then Levi Yitzhok truly wept as he recited the book of Lamentations.

On behalf of Israel, he would pray on the departure of the Sabbath, "Creator of the Universe! Thou who guidest

7. Hasidic Anthology, p. 237.

8. Hasidic Anthology, p. 490.

9. Hasidic Anthology, p. 400.

the weary with strength, grant strength unto the children of Thy people Israel, that they may praise and serve only Thee and Thee alone; that the days of the incoming week may bring with them strength, health, blessing, life, and sustenance. May these blessings come unto us and unto all Israel. Amen!"¹⁰

By means of his sermons, Levi Yitzhok helped guide his people in living a life of true devotion to God. The purpose of his sermonic message was to make Judaism more meaningful for his people. This was accomplished by interpreting the Biblical verses so that they would affect the lives of his listeners, and assist them in their serving God. For every day God renews the works of creation. Daily He makes us cognizant of new insights and new ways. For man, if he worships God, he can acquire new insights today, that were hidden from him yesterday. Every day we receive new blessings as a sign of His lovingkindness.¹¹

4.

For Levi Yitzhok, his life was truly a life founded upon and sustained by love. His love for His God exceeded all bounds; it was the basis of a personal relationship in

10. Romance of Hasidism, p. 171.

11. Kedushat Levi I, p. 258.

which he conversed with his Creator in the same manner as he conversed with another human. He never failed to argue with God, if he felt that Israel was being treated unjustly. If it was a question of whether God or Israel was in error, unfailingly, God appeared as the guilty party.

His love for his people earned him the title -- the defender of Israel. On their behalf he pleaded and argued with God. His love for them blinded him from noticing any of their faults. For their sake was the world created; for their sake did God exist; for their sake he lived. When he did pass away, no rabbi was appointed to fill the vacant pulpit in Berdychev. The congregation could find no one to fill the place he had left empty.

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