זכותו הקדוש יגן עלינו ועל כל ישראל אמן

ס פ ר

# כתר שם טוב

ליקוטי דברי קדשו של קדוש ה'
אשר לא היה מימות הראשונים
כבוד קדושת אדונינו מורינו ורבינו

## ר' ישראל בעל שם טוב

זצוקללה"ה נבג"מ

# Kesser Shem Tov

*Crown of the Good Name*

Collected Teachings of

Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov

*(1698–1760)*

*Founder of the Chassidic Movement*

Translated with Elucidation

Kesser Shem Tov
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*Crown of the Good Name*

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# A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

**The Nature of this Work**

This volume presents an original English elucidation and commentary, prepared through a combination of advanced language and translation technology and human editorial oversight. The methods employed were carefully configured to adhere to Orthodox Jewish *hashkafa* and to preserve fidelity to the original Hebrew text. Even so, this edition does not carry the authority of a translation prepared and certified by a full team of rabbinic scholars.

**Usage and Limitations**

This translation is intended as a tool to help advanced learners access the depth of the original work. It is **not** intended to replace the original Hebrew source, nor to serve as a substitute for study under a qualified teacher.

Because the nuance of Torah study often transcends any single method of preparation, we ask the reader to keep two things in mind:

1. **Verification:** Any novel insight, ruling, or conclusion drawn from this translation should be checked against the original Hebrew.
2. **Consultation:** All practical questions or derived lessons should be discussed with and verified by a qualified rabbinic authority before being relied upon.

The goal of this edition is to make these teachings accessible to a wider audience, but the responsibility for accurate understanding and practical application remains with the reader.

# לזכות

**המסייע בהוצאת ספר זה לאור**
**ולזכות כל בני משפחתו:**

**הוריו, סביו וסבתותיו,**
**אחיו ואחיותיו וכל בני ביתם**

**יהי רצון שזכות החזקת התורה תעמוד להם**
**לברכה, להצלחה, לשמירה ולכל טוב**
**ברוחניות ובגשמיות**

*Dedicated to the merit of*

*the supporter of this publication*

*and his entire family:*

*his parents, grandparents, siblings, and their households.*

*May the merit of supporting Torah stand for them*

*for blessing, success, protection, and all good,*

*both spiritually and materially.*

## Chapter 1.18

*The soul's descent through the Four Worlds to elevate holy sparks and rebuke the faithless*


**Summary**

This teaching presents the Baal Shem Tov's mystical reading of the opening passages of Parashas Lech Lecha (Bereishis 12:1–13:2). He reads Avraham's journey as a map of the soul's descent through the Four Worlds: from Olam HaAtzilus (Emanation), through Olam HaBeriah (Creation) and Olam HaYetzirah (Formation), and finally into Olam HaAsiyah (Action), our physical world. Drawing on the Zohar's identification of Avraham with the neshamah (soul), he explains that the soul descends into the lowest world to witness people treating the Almighty's honor lightly and to rebuke them.

The teaching then explains the deeper purpose of this descent. The "famine in the land" represents a lack of emunah (faith) among the inhabitants of Olam HaAsiyah. Encountering this spiritual darkness — the soul's "descent to Mitzrayim (Egypt)" — causes it pain (*meitzar*) over the dishonor shown to God. Yet this contrast deepens its delight in divine service, following the principle from Koheles (2:13) that "there is an advantage of light from the darkness." The Yetzer Hara (evil inclination), represented by Lot, also serves this purpose: it becomes a "throne" for holiness when the left side (din, severity) is subdued by the right (chesed, lovingkindness). Avraham's cattle, silver, and gold signify holy sparks (*nitzutzos*) extracted from impurity through *birur* (spiritual refinement), like the silver Yosef gathered in Egypt.


**וְזֶה יוּבַן וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם And with this we can understand [the verse], "And Hashem said to Avram."**[1] The Baal Shem Tov introduces a mystical reading of the opening verse of Parashas Lech Lecha, shifting the plain sense of the narrative from a historical command given to the patriarch Avraham to a spiritual directive addressed to every soul. **רוֹצֶה לוֹמַר אֶל הַנְּשָׁמָה שֶׁנִּקְרֵאת אַבְרָהָם כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּזֹּהַר That is to say, [God spoke] to the neshamah (soul), which is called "Avraham," as stated in the Zohar.**[2] The Zohar on Parashas Lech Lecha reads Avraham as a name for the neshamah, the higher soul. In this teaching, that soul descends from the higher worlds into the lower realms. **לֶךְ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ הַיְנוּ מֵאֲצִילוּת לִבְרִיאָה "Go forth from your land" — that is, from Atzilus to Beriah.**[3] The phrase "your land" (**artzecha**) is interpreted as referring to Olam HaAtzilus (the World of Emanation), the soul's original "home" where it exists in a state of complete dvekus (spiritual attachment to God) and bittul (self-nullification). The first stage of descent takes the soul from this highest world into Olam HaBeriah (the World of Creation), where independent self-consciousness first begins to emerge. **וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ הַיְנוּ מִבְּרִיאָה לִיצִירָה "And from your birthplace" — that is, from**

[1] Bereishis 12:1 — "And Hashem said to Avram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"

[2] Zohar, Parashas Lech Lecha — The Zohar identifies Avraham as representing the neshamah (higher soul) and interprets the command "Lech Lecha" as the soul's descent through the spiritual worlds.

[3] The Four Worlds in descending order are: Olam HaAtzilus (Emanation), Olam HaBeriah (Creation), Olam HaYetzirah (Formation), and Olam HaAsiyah (Action). Each successive world represents a further degree of concealment of the divine light and a greater sense of independent self-consciousness.

**Beriah to Yetzirah.** The word **moladtecha** ("your birthplace") alludes to Olam HaBeriah, the world of intellectual comprehension where the soul was "born" into consciousness. From there, the descent continues into Olam HaYetzirah (the World of Formation), the realm of emotion and spiritual feeling. **וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ מִיצִירָה לַעֲשִׂיָּה "And from your father's house" — from Yetzirah to Asiyah.** "Your father's house" corresponds to Olam HaYetzirah, from which the soul descends into Olam HaAsiyah (the World of Action), the lowest of the Four Worlds, which encompasses our physical reality. **שֶׁהִיא הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ Which is "the land that I will show you."** Olam HaAsiyah — the physical world — is the ultimate destination referred to in the verse as "the land that I will show you." The soul's descent through all four worlds culminates here, in the realm of material existence. **וְהַכַּוָּנָה אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ And the intention of "that I will show you"** — The Baal Shem Tov now explains **why** the soul must descend to such a lowly place. The word **ar'eka** ("I will show you") implies a revelatory purpose. **שֶׁתִּרְאֶה שָׁם מַעֲשֵׂי אַנְשֵׁי הָעוֹלָם הָעֲשִׂיָּה is that you will see there the deeds of the people of the World of Asiyah** — The soul is sent down specifically to witness the conduct of the inhabitants of this lowest world, to observe their spiritual state firsthand. **אֵיךְ מְקִילִין בִּכְבוֹדוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ how they treat His honor, blessed be He, lightly** — The root concern is the diminishment of God's honor (**kavod**) in the physical world. People in Olam HaAsiyah, preoccupied with material existence, fail to accord proper reverence to the Creator. **וְתוֹכִיחֵם and you shall rebuke them.** This is the neshamah's mission: to descend into the lowest world, rebuke its inhabitants, and awaken them to God's honor. Its descent thus benefits the world below, even as the next paragraph explains how the soul itself also gains from the encounter.

**וַיְהִי רָעָב בָּאָרֶץ "And there was a famine in the land."**[4] The Baal Shem Tov now continues the Zoharic reading of the narrative. The "famine" is not a physical lack of food but a spiritual condition in the world below. **רְאֵה שֶׁהֵם חֲסִירֵי מְהֵימְנוּתָא כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּזֹּהַר He saw that they were lacking in faith, as stated in the Zohar.**[5] The Zohar interprets the "famine in the land" as a deficiency in emunah (faith) — the term **chasiri meheimanusa** (Aramaic for "lacking in faith") indicates that the people of Olam HaAsiyah had become spiritually impoverished, disconnected from their trust in God. **דְּהַיְנוּ שֶׁמְּקִילִין בִּכְבוֹדוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ Meaning, they were treating His honor, blessed be He, lightly.** The lack of faith manifests specifically as a disregard for the honor of the Almighty — when emunah weakens, reverence for God diminishes. **וּלְכָךְ וַיֵּרֶד אַבְרָם מִצְרַיְמָה And therefore, "Avram went down to Mitzrayim (Egypt)."**[6] The Baal Shem Tov reads "Mitzrayim" not only as the land of Egypt but as a play on the word **meitzar** (distress, constriction). **שֶׁהָיָה מֵצֵר עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ יִתְבָּרַךְ For he was pained (meitzar) over His honor, blessed be He.** The soul's "descent to Egypt" represents the anguish and constriction it experiences when it witnesses how God's honor is diminished below. The linguistic connection between **Mitzrayim** and **meitzar** is a classic Chassidic hermeneutic device: Egypt symbolizes spiritual narrowness and suffering. **שֶׁמְּקִילִין בּוֹ עוֹלָם הָעֲשִׂיָּה that [the inhabitants of] the World of Asiyah were treating it lightly.** The soul grieves specifically because it is the people of Olam HaAsiyah — the very ones the soul was sent to rebuke — who are demeaning God's

[4]Bereishis 12:10.

[5]Zohar, Parashas Lech Lecha — The Zohar interprets the "famine in the land" as a deficiency of faith (*chasiri meheimanusa*), a spiritual rather than physical lack.

[6]Bereishis 12:10.

glory. **אָמְנָם עַל יְדֵי זֶה וַיַּעַל אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם However, through this, "Avram went up from Egypt"**[7] — The Baal Shem Tov reveals the paradox at the heart of this teaching: the very descent into pain and spiritual darkness becomes the cause of a **greater** ascent. This is the foundational Chassidic principle of **yeridah l'tzorech aliyah** — descent for the purpose of ascent. **לְהִתְעַנֵּג יוֹתֵר בַּעֲבוֹדַת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ to delight even more in the service of Hashem.** The ascent from Egypt/distress produces a qualitatively deeper pleasure and delight in divine service than the soul experienced before its descent. The encounter with darkness intensifies the soul's appreciation of light. **כִּי יֵשׁ יִתְרוֹן הָאוֹר מִן הַחֹשֶׁךְ For there is an advantage of light from the darkness.**[8] This directly refers to Koheles 2:13. Here, the light of holiness becomes more precious to the soul after it has witnessed spiritual darkness. **עַל שֶׁאֵינוֹ כְּאֶחָד מֵהֶם because he is not like one of them.** Having seen the spiritual poverty of the people of Olam HaAsiyah, the soul recognizes that it has not followed their ways. This contrast heightens its delight in divine service. **וּלְכָךְ וְלוֹט הוּא הַיֵּצֶר הָרַע עִמּוֹ הַנֶּגְבָּה And therefore, "and Lot" — which is the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination) — [went] "with him southward."**[9] Lot represents the Yetzer Hara that accompanies the soul on its journey. "Southward" (**ha'negbah**) points to the south, which in Kabbalistic symbolism corresponds to the right side and to chesed (lovingkindness). **שֶׁעַל יְדֵי הָרַע מִתְעַנֵּג יוֹתֵר בַּעֲבוֹדַת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ For through the evil, one delights more in the service of Hashem.** The very presence of the evil inclination, rather than being merely an obstacle, serves as a catalyst for greater spiritual pleasure. By overcoming the Yetzer Hara, one experiences a deeper connection to God than would be possible without the struggle. **וְנַעֲשֶׂה כִּסֵּא And it becomes a throne.** When evil is overcome and subjugated, it is transformed into a "throne" (**kissei**) for holiness. This is a fundamental Kabbalistic concept: the forces of the "other side" (**sitra achra**), when subdued, serve as a base and support for divine revelation — just as Olam HaBeriah is called "the world of the throne" upon which the kingdom of Olam HaAtzilus rests.[10] **וְנִכְנָע שְׂמֹאל בְּיָמִין And the left is subdued by the right.** The "left" represents gevurah (severity and judgment), while the "right" represents chesed (lovingkindness). Here, the Yetzer Hara is brought under the rule of holiness, so that what opposed divine service now supports it. This is the meaning of Lot going "southward": the left is subdued by the right. **וְאַבְרָם כָּבֵד מְאֹד בַּמִּקְנֶה בַּכֶּסֶף וּבַזָּהָב "And Avram was very heavy in cattle, in silver, and in gold."**[11] The Baal Shem Tov now reveals the spiritual fruit of Avram's descent and ascent. **פֵּירוּשׁ שֶׁהוֹצִיא נִיצוֹצֵי קְדֻשָּׁה This means that he extracted nitzutzos (sparks) of holiness.** Avram's wealth in Egypt represents holy sparks that were trapped in impurity. By descending into the darkness of Olam HaAsiyah and "Egypt," the soul can perform **birur** (spiritual refinement), extracting and elevating the divine sparks hidden in the material world. The cattle, silver, and gold represent those redeemed sparks. **כְּעִנְיַן וַיִּלְקֹט יוֹסֵף אֶת כָּל הַכֶּסֶף As in the matter of, "And Yosef gathered all the silver."**[12] The Baal Shem Tov draws a parallel to Yosef HaTzaddik, who gathered all the silver in Egypt during the years of

[7] Bereishis 13:1 — "And Avram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the south."

[8] Koheles 2:13 — "And I saw that wisdom has an advantage over folly, as light has an advantage over darkness."

[9] Bereishis 13:1.

[10] The concept of the "throne" (kissei) refers to the Kabbalistic teaching that Olam HaBeriah is "the world of the throne," upon which the revelation of Olam HaAtzilus rests. When the forces of evil are subdued, they likewise become a "throne" — a supporting base — for the revelation of holiness.

[11] Bereishis 13:2.

[12] Bereishis 47:14 — "And Yosef gathered all the silver that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan."

famine. Just as Yosef — who embodies the sefirah of yesod (foundation), the channel through which divine energy flows into the world — collected the material wealth of Egypt, so too does the soul "gather" and redeem the scattered sparks of holiness from the lowest realms. The word **kesef** (silver) is related to **kisufin** (yearning, longing), hinting that what is truly being gathered are the divine yearnings and holy potentials trapped within the material world.

THE MAIN IDEA

> *Your soul came into this dark world to awaken others to Hashem's honor and uncover the holiness hidden here. When you overcome what pulls you away from Hashem, the struggle itself can deepen your joy in serving Him.*

## Chapter 1.19

*The secret of Chashmal and the three stages of Hachna'ah, Havdalah, and Hamtakah in Torah, prayer, and mitzvos*


**Summary**

This teaching presents one of the Baal Shem Tov's most foundational frameworks for personal spiritual work: the three-stage process of *hachna'ah* (submission), *havdalah* (separation), and *hamtakah* (sweetening). The disciple who recorded this teaching begins with the Kabbalistic discussion of *chashmal* (the fiery radiance seen in Ezekiel's vision) and the mitzvah of *milah* (circumcision) as explained in the Arizal's *Eitz Chaim*, and then "clothes" these abstract concepts in practical terms he received from the Baal Shem Tov. The key insight lies in splitting the word *chashmal* into two components: *chash* (silence) and *mal* (which bears the dual meaning of "speech" and "circumcision/cutting"). This yields a spiritual sequence applicable to Torah study, prayer, and all mitzvos: one must first be silent and humble oneself (*hachna'ah*), then cut away and separate the *kelipos* (*havdalah*), and only then engage in the sacred speech of Torah and prayer to sweeten harsh judgments at their root (*hamtakah*). The teaching is further illustrated through the Talmudic dictum that a Torah teacher must resemble an angel (Moed Katan 17a) — where the letters of *mal'ach* (angel) rearrange to spell *ke'ilem* (like a mute) — and through the verse *Lech Lecha* (Bereishis 12:1), where the three departures from "your land," "your birthplace," and "your father's house" correspond respectively to the three stages of *hachna'ah*, *havdalah*, and *hamtakah*. The Kabbalistic framework employed here draws on the interplay of *chesed* and *gevurah*: the sweetening of *dinim* (harsh judgments) is accomplished by accessing the root of *chesed* hidden within *gevurah* itself.


**נוֹדַע** מַה שֶּׁכָּתוּב בְּסֵפֶר עֵץ הַחַיִּים עִנְיַן מִצְוַת הַמִּילָה וְחַשְׁמַל[1] **It is known what is written in the book Eitz Chaim regarding the matter of the mitzvah of milah and chashmal.** The Arizal's **Eitz Chaim** connects the mitzvah of **milah** (circumcision) with **chashmal**, the fiery radiance described in Yechezkel's vision of the Divine chariot. The teaching will now explain how these Kabbalistic concepts apply to spiritual service. **וְנִרְאֶה לִי לְהַלְבִּישׁ הַדְּבָרִים And it appears to me to clothe these concepts.** The disciple will "clothe" these abstract Kabbalistic teachings by showing how they apply in everyday spiritual service. **שֶׁזֶּה שַׁיָּךְ בֵּין בַּתּוֹרָה בֵּין בַּתְּפִלָּה בֵּין בְּעֵסֶק הַמִּצְוֹת For this applies whether in Torah study, in prayer, or in the engagement with mitzvos.** The dynamic of **chashmal** is not limited to the esoteric realm; it is a practical principle relevant to all forms of Divine service. **וְזֶה סוֹד חַשְׁמַל And this is the secret of chashmal.** The deeper meaning of **chashmal** is now about to be revealed. **דְּקִבַּלְתִּי מִמּוֹרִי הַבַּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב סוֹד הַכְנָעָה וְהַבְדָּלָה וְהַמְתָּקָה For I received from my teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, the secret of hachna'ah (submission), havdalah (separation), and hamtakah (sweetening).** These three stages guide spiritual work. First, one humbles and submits oneself (**hachna'ah**). One then separates the holy from the unholy (**havdalah**) and finally sweetens harsh judgments at their root (**hamtakah**). **שֶׁצָּרִיךְ בְּכָל עֵסֶק תּוֹרָה וּתְפִלָּה Which one**

[1] *Eitz Chaim*, the primary Kabbalistic work of the Arizal (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria), recorded by his foremost disciple Rabbi Chaim Vital. The discussion of *milah* and *chashmal* explores the mystical dimensions of circumcision and the fiery radiance surrounding the Divine Presence in Yechezkel's vision (Yechezkel 1:4, 1:27).

**requires in every engagement with Torah and prayer.** This threefold process is necessary in every act of Torah study and prayer, not only for the spiritually advanced. **וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמְרוּ חַשׁ מָל And this is the meaning of "chash-mal."** The word **chashmal** (חשמל) is here read as a compound of two words: **chash** (חש, "silent") and **mal** (מל, "circumcise" or "speak"). This wordplay unlocks the practical secret of the concept. **שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לַחֲשׁוֹת עַד שֶׁמָּל וְכוֹרֵת הַקְּלִיפָּה That one must be silent until he circumcises and cuts away the kelipah (shell of impurity).** The first stage, corresponding to **hachna'ah**, requires silence and inner submission. One refrains from speech and humbles himself before God. Then, in the mode of **havdalah**, one actively cuts away the **kelipah** — the husk of spiritual impurity that clings to one's consciousness. **אָז יְמַלֵּל וִידַבֵּר לְמַתֵּק הַדִּינִין בְּשָׁרְשָׁן Then he may speak and utter words, to sweeten the dinim (harsh judgments) at their root.** After submission and separation, one engages in the sacred speech of Torah and prayer. This is **hamtakah**: sweetening the **dinim**, expressions of **gevurah** (strict judgment), by returning them to their root. **שֶׁהוּא סוֹד הַתְּפִלָּה שֶׁבֵּאֵר מוֹרִי בְּשֵׁם רַבּוֹ Which is the secret of prayer that my teacher explained in the name of his master.** The Baal Shem Tov transmitted this teaching about the inner nature of prayer in the name of his own spiritual mentor. Prayer, at its deepest level, is the process of sweetening **dinim** at their source. **וּלְכָךְ נִקְרָאִים מְחַצְּדֵי חַקְלָא[2] And therefore they are called "reapers of the field."** The Zohar calls those who engage in Torah study and prayer **mach'tzadei chakla** — "reapers of the field." The "field" symbolizes the Shechinah, the Divine Presence corresponding to **Malchus**. "Reaping" represents cutting away the **kelipos** that cling to the Shechinah. **וּלְכָךְ צָרִיךְ לְהַפְרִיד מִמַּחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ מַחֲשָׁבוֹת זָרוֹת And therefore one must separate from his thought foreign thoughts.** During Torah study and prayer, alien or distracting thoughts (**machshavos zaros**) arise. These are manifestations of the **kelipos**, and one must actively remove them from one's consciousness. **וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה גּוֹרֵם לְהַבְדִּיל וְלִפְרוֹשׁ מֵהַשְׁכִינָה הַקְּלִיפּוֹת And through this he causes the kelipos to be separated and removed from the Shechinah.** Removing foreign thoughts from one's mind during prayer has a corresponding spiritual effect: it separates the **kelipos** from the Shechinah and brings about a **tikkun** (rectification).[3] **וּלְכָךְ תֵּיבַת מָל סוֹבֵל שְׁנֵי פֵּרוּשִׁים And therefore the word "mal" bears two meanings.** The Hebrew root מל is deliberately ambiguous, carrying both senses essential to this teaching. **אֶחָד דִּיבּוּר, שֵׁנִי כְּרִיתָה וְהַבְדָּלָה The first meaning is speech; the second is cutting and separation. Mal** as "speech" (as in **ימלל**, "he utters") refers to the **hamtakah** stage — the sacred speech of Torah and prayer. **Mal** as "cutting" (as in **milah**, circumcision) refers to the **havdalah** stage — the excision of the **kelipah**. **וְזֶה נִמְשָׁךְ מִזֶּה And one follows from the other.** The two meanings are causally linked: only after the cutting (**havdalah**) can the speech (**hamtakah**) be effective. **וְזֶהוּ שֶׁאָמְרוּ חַשׁ מָל שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לְהַכְרִית הַקְּלִיפּוֹת And this is the meaning of "chash-mal": one must cut away the kelipos.** Returning to the overarching reading: **chash** (silence/submission) comes first, followed by **mal** in the sense of cutting and excising the **kelipos**. **וְאַחַר כָּךְ מָל דִּיבּוּר בְּעֵסֶק תּוֹרָה וּתְפִלָּה And**

[2] The Zohar uses the term *mach'tzadei chakla* ("reapers of the field") to refer to the holy Companions who engage in deep Torah study and mystical prayer, "reaping" holy sparks from the "field" of the Shechinah — i.e., separating and elevating the *nitzutzos* (sparks of holiness) trapped within the domain of the *kelipos*.

[3] *Kehot edition note:* The Kehot text includes here a bracketed reference: וכמו שכתב בראשית חכמה דף פא ע"ב ודף קל יעו"ש — "And as is written in *Reishit Chochmah*, page 81b and page 130, see there." This directs the reader to the Kabbalistic ethical work *Reishit Chochmah* by Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas, a disciple of the Ramak, which elaborates on the concept of separating the *kelipos* from the Shechinah.

**afterward, "mal" as speech — in the engagement of Torah and prayer.** Once the **kelipos** have been separated, one enters the stage of holy speech through Torah study and prayer. **שֶׁהוּא הַבְדָּלָה וְהַמְתָּקָה Which is havdalah and hamtakah.** The entire process of cutting and then speaking encompasses the two latter stages: **havdalah** (separation of the **kelipah**) and **hamtakah** (sweetening the **dinim** through sacred speech).[4]

**אִם הָרַב דּוֹמֶה לְמַלְאָךְ [5] "If the teacher resembles an angel" (Moed Katan 17a).** The Gemara teaches that one should seek Torah from a teacher who resembles an angel of Hashem, but not from one who does not. This teaching explains the statement through a rearrangement of letters. **הֵם אוֹתִיּוֹת כְּאִלֵּם These are the letters of "ke'ilem" — "like a mute person."** The four letters of the word **mal'ach** (מלאך — angel: **mem**, **lamed**, **alef**, **chaf**) can be rearranged to spell **ke'ilem** (כאלם — "like a mute": **chaf**, **alef**, **lamed**, **mem**). The teacher who "resembles an angel" is one who practices the quality of being "like a mute." **לִהְיוֹת מָל שֶׁהוּא חַשׁ עַד שֶׁכּוֹרֵת וּמָל הַקְּלִיפָּה To practice "mal" (spiritual circumcision) — meaning, he is first "chash" (silent) — until he cuts and circumcises the kelipah.** The angelic teacher first embodies the **chash-mal** dynamic: he is silent, engaging in the inner work of **hachna'ah** and **havdalah**, cutting away the **kelipah** that clings to his consciousness before opening his mouth to teach. **לְיַזֵּהֵר מִפְּנֵי הַחִיצוֹנִים To guard himself against the chitzonim (external forces).** The **chitzonim** ("those on the outside") are the forces of **kelipah** that seek to attach themselves to holy speech. The teacher must be vigilant that his words do not become a channel for these impure forces. **אָז תּוֹרָה יְבַקֵּשׁ מִפִּיהוּ Then Torah shall be sought from his mouth.** Only after completing this inner process — silence, cutting away the **kelipah**, and guarding against the **chitzonim** — does the teacher's mouth become a fitting vessel from which Torah may be sought, as the Gemara states.[6] **כִּי אָז נִכְנָס בְּלֵב הַשּׁוֹמֵעַ וּפֶרֶה וְרָבָה For then it enters the heart of the listener and is fruitful and multiplies.** When a spiritually purified teacher speaks Torah, his words can enter the listener's heart. There they bear fruit by producing further understanding, inspiration, and spiritual growth.

**וְכָזֶה יוּבַן לָךְ לֶךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ [7] And with this, one can understand the verse: "Go for yourself from your land."** The Baal Shem Tov now applies the three-stage framework of **hachna'ah**, **havdalah**, and **hamtakah** to the verse in which God commands Avram to leave his homeland. **שֶׁיִּתְרַחֵק מִן שָׁלֹשׁ בְּחִינוֹת הַנִּזְכָּרִים לְעֵיל הַכְנָעָה הַבְדָּלָה וְהַמְתָּקָה That he should distance himself through the three aspects mentioned above: hachna'ah, havdalah, and hamtakah.** The three components of God's command — "from your land," "from your birthplace," and "from your father's house" — correspond to these three stages of spiritual transformation. **שֶׁבְּאֵר**

[4] *Kehot edition note:* In the Kehot critical edition, the material presented here as a single chapter is divided into two subsections: §28-א contains the *chashmal* / *hachna'ah-havdalah-hamtakah* teaching (Paragraph 1), while §28-ב contains the teaching about the angelic teacher (Paragraph 2) and the interpretation of *Lech Lecha* (Paragraph 3).

[5] Moed Katan 17a. The full teaching states: "If the teacher resembles an angel of Hashem of Hosts, seek Torah from his mouth; and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth." This is based on the verse in Malachi 2:7: "For the lips of a *kohen* should guard knowledge, and Torah should be sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of Hashem of Hosts."

[6] Malachi 2:7 — "For the lips of a *kohen* should guard knowledge, and Torah should be sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of Hashem of Hosts."

[7] Bereishis 12:1 — "And Hashem said to Avram: Go for yourself from your land, and from your birthplace, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you."

**מוֹרִי זלה"ה Which my teacher, of blessed memory, explained.** This interpretation was taught by the Baal Shem Tov himself. **כִּי מִצַּד אַרְצִיּוּת וְעַכִירוּת בַּחוֹמֶר וְהַקְּלִיפּוֹת נִמְשָׁךְ גַּסּוּת הָרוּחַ For from the aspect of earthliness, turbidity, materiality, and the kelipos, arrogance is drawn forth.** The word **artzecha** ("your land") is related to **artziyus** (earthliness or materiality). Immersion in material coarseness and **kelipos** gives rise to **gasus ha'ruach** — arrogance and an inflated ego. **לָכֵן הִזְהִירוּ לְךָ לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ Therefore He warned: "Go for yourself from your land."** God's command to Avram is understood as a call to every soul: leave behind your earthliness and material coarseness. **וְיָבוֹא לְהַכְנָעָה And he will arrive at hachna'ah (submission).** By departing from "his land" — renouncing the arrogance born of materiality — one attains the first stage: genuine humility and inner submission before God. **וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ שֶׁהוּא תֶּרַח עוֹבֵד עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה "And from your birthplace" — which refers to Terach, who served idolatry.** The "birthplace" (**moladtecha**) alludes to the spiritual influence of Terach, Avram's father, who was an idolater. Terach represents the root of the **kelipos** — the deepest source of spiritual impurity from which one originates. **שֹׁרֶשׁ הַקְּלִיפּוֹת The root of the kelipos.** Idolatry is the fundamental **kelipah** — the attribution of independent power to anything other than God — and Terach, as its practitioner, represents its source. **וְיֵשׁ כֹּחַ הָאָב בַּבֵּן And the power of the father is present in the son.** A child may inherit spiritual tendencies from his parents. Thus, even a lofty soul can bear traces of its ancestry. **כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתַב הראב"ד בְּסֵפֶר יְצִירָה כִּי כֹּחַ הַבַּנַּאי בַּבִּנְיָן** [8] **As the Ra'avad wrote in his commentary on Sefer Yetzirah: "The power of the builder is in the building."** Just as a craftsman's energy and intention are embedded in his creation, so too the spiritual character of the father — including its impurities — is embedded in the child. **וּלְכָךְ צָרִיךְ הַבְדָּלָה לְהַפְרִישׁ וּלְהַבְדִּיל הַקְּלִיפָּה שֶׁמִּצַּד הָאָב הַמּוֹלִידוֹ And therefore one needs havdalah (separation) — to separate and distinguish the kelipah that derives from the father who begot him.** The second stage is to separate oneself from the **kelipah** inherited from one's father. This is the inner meaning of leaving "your birthplace." **וּמִבֵּית אָבִיךָ שֶׁהִיא בְּחָרָן "And from your father's house" — which was in Charan.** The third phrase refers to the specific location of Terach's household: Charan, which carries its own spiritual significance. **כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב וַיָּמָת תֶּרַח בְּחָרָן** [9] **As it is written: "And Terach died in Charan."** This verse identifies Charan as Terach's final home and prepares the way for the teaching's interpretation of the place-name. **וְדָרְשׁוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ זִכְרוֹנָם לִבְרָכָה עַד אַבְרָהָם הָיָה חָרוֹן אַף שֶׁל מָקוֹם** [10] **And our Sages of blessed memory expounded: "Until Abraham, there was charon af (Divine wrath) in the world."** The Midrash connects the name **Charan** (חרן) with **charon af** (חרון אף) — the burning wrath of God. Before Abraham appeared on the scene, the world was dominated by strict judgment. **שֶׁהוּא דִּין וּגְבוּרָה Which is din (strict judgment) and gevurah (severity).** Here **charon af** corresponds to **din** and **gevurah**, the Divine attributes of restraint and strict judgment. **וְאַבְרָם בְּחִינַת חֶסֶד יַמְתִּיק הַדִּין בְּשׁוֹרֶשׁ הַחֶסֶד שֶׁיֵּשׁ בִּגְבוּרָה וְהַדִּין הַהוּא And Avram, who is an aspect of chesed (lovingkindness), sweetens the din at the root of chesed that exists within that very gevurah and din.** Avram embodies the **sefirah** of

[8] Ra'avad (Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquières), in his commentary on Sefer Yetzirah. The principle "the power of the builder is in the building" establishes that a creator's spiritual force remains embedded within his creation.

[9] Bereishis 11:32 — "And the days of Terach were two hundred and five years, and Terach died in Charan."

[10] This Midrashic teaching connects the name *Charan* (חרן) with *charon af* (חרון אף, Divine wrath), indicating that before Abraham arose and introduced the attribute of *chesed* into the world, the world was subject to God's strict judgment. See Bereishis Rabbah.

**chesed**. Because every **sefirah** contains aspects of the others, even **gevurah** contains a root of **chesed**. Avram reaches that inner **chesed** and thereby sweetens the harsh judgment, transforming its severity into benevolence. This is **hamtakah**, the third stage. **כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בְּמָקוֹם אַחֵר בְּשֵׁם מוֹרִי זִכְרוֹנוֹ לִבְרָכָה אֵיךְ לְמַתֵּק הַדִּין בְּשָׁרְשׁוֹ As is written elsewhere in the name of my teacher, of blessed memory — how to sweeten the din at its root.** The disciple points to another teaching of the Baal Shem Tov that explains in greater detail how to sweeten **dinim** at their source. **וְאַחַר הַמְתָּקָה אָז תַּשִּׂיג בְּחִינַת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַרְאֶךָּ And after the hamtakah (sweetening), then you will attain the aspect of "the land which I will show you."** Only upon completing all three stages — **hachna'ah** (departure from "your land"), **havdalah** (departure from "your birthplace"), and **hamtakah** (departure from "your father's house") — does one merit the promise: the revelation of the Holy Land, the exalted spiritual state that God reveals to the soul that has undergone full rectification. The phrase "which I will **show** you" (אראך) implies a new level of spiritual perception — a Divine revelation that becomes accessible only after the threefold purification. **וְהָבֵן Understand this well.** This closing formula, characteristic of Kabbalistic and Chassidic texts, signals that the teaching contains further depths beyond what has been explicitly stated, and the reader is invited to contemplate and internalize its implications.

THE MAIN IDEA

> *Before you pray or study Torah, humble yourself and clear away the thoughts that pull you from God. Then your words can reach the heart and turn harshness into kindness.*

## Chapter 1.20

*The paradox of spiritual proximity — feeling near to God places one far, while feeling far brings one near*


**Summary**

This brief teaching of the Baal Shem Tov reads the phrase *"Atah Hu Hashem Elokeinu"* ("You are He, Hashem our God") as expressing a paradox of spiritual life. *Atah* ("You") is a second-person pronoun, implying direct presence, while *Hu* ("He") is a third-person pronoun, implying hiddenness and distance. In Hebrew grammar, the second person is called *nokhach*, meaning "present" or "facing," and the third person is called *nistar*, meaning "hidden." The Baal Shem Tov uses both the grammatical and spiritual meanings of these terms. A person who thinks he stands directly in God's presence is actually far from Him. Conversely, a person who feels hidden and far from God is in fact close and present before Him. The teaching warns against spiritual self-satisfaction and presents humility (*shiflut*) as the path to genuine closeness in *avodas Hashem*.


**מֵהַבַּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב. From the Baal Shem Tov. אַתָּה הוּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ. "You are He, Hashem our God."**[1] The Baal Shem Tov takes this well-known phrase as the basis for a teaching on the paradox of spiritual proximity and distance. **פֵּירוּשׁ כְּשֶׁמִּסְתַּכֵּל הָאָדָם שֶׁהוּא נוֹכַח ה' The explanation is: when a person considers that he is present before God** — The person believes that he stands directly in the Divine presence, in face-to-face intimacy with the Almighty. **זֶה תֹּאַר אַתָּה. this is the designation of "Atah" ("You").** In Hebrew grammar, the second person (**Atah**, "You") is called **nokhach**, meaning "present" or "facing." The Baal Shem Tov notes that when one addresses God as "You," it implies the speaker perceives himself as standing directly before God. **אָז הוּא רָחוֹק מֵהַשֵּׁם then he is in reality far from God** — Paradoxically, the very presumption of nearness creates spiritual distance. One who is certain of his own closeness to the Divine has fallen into a subtle form of self-satisfaction that constitutes a barrier between him and God. **תֹּאַר הוּא נִסְתָּר. this is the designation of "Hu" ("He") — the hidden one.** In Hebrew grammar, the third person (**Hu**, "He") is called **nistar**, meaning "hidden" or "concealed." The Baal Shem Tov teaches that despite the person's self-perception of closeness, his actual spiritual condition is that of **nistar** — God is hidden from him, addressed only in the distant third person, as "He" rather than "You." **מַה שֶּׁאֵין כֵּן כְּשֶׁמִּסְתַּכֵּל שֶׁהוּא נִסְתָּר וְרָחוֹק מֵהַשֵּׁם This is not so, however, when one considers himself hidden and far from God** — In this case, the person sincerely feels that God is concealed from him and that he remains far from the Divine presence. **זֶה תֹּאַר הוּא. the designation of "Hu" ("He").** That is, the person experiences his relationship with God as one of distance and concealment, using only the third-person mode of relating. **אָז הוּא קָרוֹב וְנוֹכַח ה' then he is in truth close and present before God** — This is the paradox at the heart of the teaching: feeling distant from God, when it comes from genuine

[1] This phrase appears in Yirmiyahu 14:22 — "Are there among the vanities of the nations any that cause rain? Or can the heavens give showers? Are You not He, Hashem our God?" (the Kehot edition cites this as the primary source). The phrase also appears in various liturgical contexts, including the weekday *Tachanun* prayers, and echoes such biblical verses as Nehemiah 9:6 and 1 Chronicles 17:26.

humility (**shiflut**), opens a person to true closeness. This recalls the verse, "From afar Hashem appears to me."[2] The Baal Shem Tov does not measure nearness by a person's sense of spiritual accomplishment. The one who feels far may in fact stand close before God. **תֹּאַר ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ: this is the designation of "Hashem Elokeinu" — "Hashem our God."** Here **Elokeinu** ("our God") expresses closeness and belonging. The full phrase captures the reversal the Baal Shem Tov describes: presumed nearness may conceal true distance, while humble awareness of one's distance may bring genuine nearness to God. True dvekus (spiritual attachment to God) grows from humbly recognizing one's spiritual distance, rather than confidently assuming that one has already attained closeness.

THE MAIN IDEA

> *Do not assume that feeling close to God means you are truly close. Humbly seeing how far you still have to go can bring you nearer to Him.*

[2]Jeremiah 31:2. This verse is a key prooftext in Chassidic teaching for the principle that God reveals Himself specifically to those who feel themselves distant.

## Chapter I.21

*Two approaches to spiritual distance from God: lamenting departure vs. focusing on return*


**Summary**

This brief but potent teaching of the Baal Shem Tov offers a radical reinterpretation of Tehillim 126:6, the well-known verse "He goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag; he shall surely come with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves." Rather than reading the verse as a single narrative of one person who first weeps and then rejoices, the Baal Shem Tov reads it as describing *two contrasting spiritual orientations* — two fundamentally different approaches to the experience of distance from Hashem.

The first type of person focuses on *halichah* (going, departure) — he is preoccupied with the fact that he has drifted away from the service of God, and he weeps and grieves over this distance. While his distress is sincere, the Baal Shem Tov teaches that this orientation yields only "seed" — raw, unrealized spiritual potential. The second type focuses on *biah* (coming, arrival, return) — he directs his consciousness toward returning to God, toward the intimate union that awaits him. This orientation generates *rinah* (song) and *simchah* (joy), and its fruit is "sheaves" — fully ripened spiritual abundance — achieved without the need for mere seed.

The teaching reflects a core Chassidic principle: one's inner orientation shapes spiritual life. Grief and self-reproach over distance from God may be sincere, but they can leave a person focused on that distance. Turning one's thoughts toward returning to God shifts the focus from departure to destination and gives rise to joy. The term *biah* can also suggest intimate union, reinforcing the image of drawing close to God.


**מִבַּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב בֵּיאוּר פָּסוּק הָלוֹךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבָכֹה From the Baal Shem Tov: an explanation of the verse "He goes along weeping"**[1] The Baal Shem Tov offers a novel reading of this verse from Tehillim, dividing it into two contrasting spiritual types rather than reading it as a single continuous narrative. **פֵּירוּשׁ שֶׁאִם חוֹשֵׁב לַהֲלִיכָה וּבוֹכֶה וּמִצְטַעֵר עַל הֲלִיכָתוֹ מֵעֲבוֹדַת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבָּרַךְ The interpretation is: if a person's thought is focused on the "going" — the departure — and he weeps and grieves over his going away from the service of God, blessed be He.** The Baal Shem Tov reads **haloch yelech** ("he goes along") as describing a person whose entire consciousness is oriented toward **halichah** — the "going away," the distance he has traveled from God's service. His mind dwells on the departure itself, and he is consumed with sorrow and anguish over his spiritual remoteness. While this grief may seem pious, the Baal Shem Tov reveals its limitation: by fixating on the distance, one remains trapped in the consciousness of separation. **אָז סוֹפוֹ נוֹשֵׂא מֶשֶׁךְ הַזֶּרַע Then his end is that he "carries the seed-bag."** The verse describes this person as carrying **meshech hazera**, the seed-bag. In the Baal Shem Tov's contrast, the image is still one of seed rather than gathered sheaves: his grief has not brought him to the joyful outcome described in the second half of the verse. **מַה שֶּׁאֵין כֵּן מִי שֶׁחוֹשֵׁב לְעִנְיַן לְבִיאָה But this is not so for one who directs his thought toward "coming" — toward arrival**

[1] Tehillim 126:6 — "One who goes along weeping, carrying the seed-bag, shall come back with songs of joy, carrying the sheaves."

**and return.** The Baal Shem Tov contrasts a second orientation: instead of focusing on the departure, this person focuses on the **biah** — the coming, the return, the arrival at his destination in God's presence. The word **biah** carries the additional Kabbalistic resonance of intimate union,[2] suggesting that this person's consciousness is directed toward closeness and connection with the Divine, rather than mourning the distance. **וְזֶהוּ שֶׁכָּתוּב בֹּא יָבוֹא And this is what the verse says: "He shall surely come."** The phrase **bo yavo** marks the second person's focus on coming toward God. Its emphatic doubled form strengthens the image of arrival, in contrast to the first person's attention to departure. **וּמִכֹּחַ זֶה הוּא בְּרִנָּה וְשִׂמְחָה And from this power, he is in song and joy.** His focus on coming toward God gives rise to **rinah** (joyous song) and **simchah** (joy). Rather than remaining absorbed in sorrow over spiritual distance, he looks toward renewed closeness, and that orientation brings joy. **לְבַסּוֹף נוֹשֵׂא אֲלֻמֹּתָיו בְּלִי זֶרַע In the end, he carries his sheaves — without mere seed.** The contrast culminates in the harvest: the second person carries **alumos** — bound sheaves — rather than the seed-bag carried by the first. The striking words **b'li zera** ("without seed") sharpen the contrast between seed and completed sheaves. The Baal Shem Tov thus connects a joyful focus on coming toward God with the verse's image of a completed harvest.

THE MAIN IDEA

> *Do not stay fixed on how far you have drifted from God. Turn your thoughts toward returning to Him; that focus brings joy and helps your efforts bear fruit.*

[2]The term *biah* in rabbinic and Kabbalistic usage commonly denotes marital union and intimate connection, adding a layer of meaning to the Baal Shem Tov's teaching: the one who directs his thought toward *biah* with God is oriented toward the deepest possible spiritual intimacy.

## Chapter I.22

*True humility versus false humility, and how the evil inclination corrupts holy qualities*


**Summary**

This teaching of the Baal Shem Tov distinguishes genuine humility from its counterfeit, a difference that shapes one's entire spiritual life. He begins with the verse "And now, Israel, what (*mah*) does Hashem your God ask of you?" (Devarim 10:12). The Baal Shem Tov reads *mah* both as a question and as a reference to self-nullification, the level of "What am I?" embodied by Moshe Rabbeinu. In Kabbalistic terms, the Zohar reads chochmah (wisdom) as *koach mah* — "the power of selflessness." When a person attains this level of bittul (self-nullification), even fear of Heaven becomes a "small matter," just as it was for Moshe.

The Baal Shem Tov then exposes the danger of false humility through a daring reading of Bereishis 22:24, interpreting the name "Reumah" — Nachor's concubine — as *re'u mah*, "see what [I am]," meaning a person who parades his own humility before others. This "concubine" (*pilegesh*) of holiness is a corrupted form of the genuine quality: it looks like humility but is in truth a subtle vehicle for pride. Such false humility "gives birth to Tevach" — i.e., the yetzer hara (evil inclination) *slaughters* the person spiritually through this very corruption.

The teaching culminates by showing that just as the names of the holy tribes — Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehudah — embody sanctified spiritual qualities, each has a corresponding distortion in the realm of kelipah (impurity): self-display, pursuit of reputation, association with the righteous for ulterior motives, and the craving for praise. The practical lesson is that one must constantly examine the motivations behind even one's most seemingly pious actions, for the yetzer hara is capable of corrupting the holiest qualities into instruments of ego.


**וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל**[1] **"And now, Israel, what does Hashem your God ask of you?"** The Baal Shem Tov takes as his starting point this well-known verse from Devarim, which introduces the Torah's fundamental demand of the Jewish people. **פֵּירוּשׁ שֶׁיִּהְיֶה עָנָיו וּמַדְרֵגַת מָה The interpretation is that one should be humble, attaining the level of "mah" [selfless "what-ness"].** The word **mah** ("what") in the verse is both a question and an allusion to deep humility. It points to the level of **mah**, a state of bittul (self-nullification) in which a person feels, "What am I?" This is the inner dimension of chochmah (wisdom), which the Zohar reads as **koach mah**, "the power of selflessness." Moshe Rabbeinu embodied this quality when he declared, "And we — what are we?" **וְעַל יְדֵי זֶה יִרְאָה יִהְיֶה מִלְּתָא זוּטַרְתִּי כְּמוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה רַבֵּינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם And through this, fear [of Heaven] will be a small matter, as it was for Moshe Rabbeinu, peace be upon him.** The Gemara asks, "Is fear of Heaven a small thing?" and answers, "Yes — for Moshe it is a small thing."[2] The Baal Shem Tov teaches that anyone who attains the level of **mah**, true self-nullification, can likewise find yirah (fear of God) a small

[1] Devarim 10:12 — "And now, O Israel, what does Hashem your God demand of you? Only this: to fear Hashem your God, to walk only in His paths, to love and to serve Hashem your God with all your heart and soul."

[2] Berachos 33b — The Gemara asks: "Is fear of Heaven a small thing?" — since the verse implies it is merely a small request. The Gemara answers: "Yes, for Moshe it is a small thing." The Baal Shem Tov extends this: for *anyone* who attains Moshe's level of *mah* (true humility), fear of Heaven likewise becomes a "small matter."