

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points of the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל

באתי לגני י' שבט תשמ"ג בלתי מוגה

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TRANSFORMING EVIL TO GOOD

I HAVE COME INTO MY GARDEN, MY SISTER, MY BRIDE² – THE PREVIOUS REBBE explains this in terms of the Midrash³: that at the beginning of existence, the essence of the Shechinah, the Divine Presence, was in this world – in the Garden of Eden, together with Adam and Eve. Then as a result of Adam's sin, the Shechinah was hidden from this world and departed to the first firmament; as a result of Cain killing Abel, to the second firmament, and so on. Eventually as a result of seven⁴ serious sins the Shechinah departed to the seventh firmament.

Then came seven Tzaddikim, righteous figures beginning with Abraham. Each brought the Shechinah one stage closer to the physical world. Then came Moses, the seventh, and (as it says in a Midrash⁵) 'all sevenths are precious'. Moses was therefore able to bring the Shechinah back into our world, in

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Praying for a Refuah Shelemah for Henya Rivka bas Brochah Devorah Leah 'תחי'

¹ Maamer Bati Legani 5743 (1983) 'I have come into My Garden.' Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak Schneersohn, sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, had this discourse printed and asked that it should be studied by his followers on 10th Shevat, 1950, the Yahrzeit of his grandmother Rivka (wife of the fourth Rebbe, R. Shmuel). On that day Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak himself passed away. Beginning in 1951, his son-in-law and successor Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the seventh Rebbe, would teach an elaboration of that first Bati Legani discourse, which has 20 chapters. In 1951 the Rebbe focused on chapter 1 of the original, in 1952 on ch.2, and so on. After reaching chapter 20 in 1970, in 1971 the Rebbe began again from the beginning. This discourse of 1983 focuses on ch.13 of the original discourse by Rabbi Yosef Yitzhak. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² Song of Songs 5:1

³ Shir Hashirim Rabbah on 5:1.

⁴ The other five are: the beginning of idolatry in the generation of Enosh; the sins which led to the Flood; the Tower of Babel; the evil of Sodom; and the immoral lewdness of Egypt in the time of Abraham.

⁵ Vayikra Rabba 29: 11. The full list of seven generations of Tzaddikim is: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, Kehat, Amram, Moses.

particular, first in the Divine revelation on Mount Sinai, and then into the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary.

This is the true role of a Tzaddik: to draw G-dliness into the world. Since Scripture states ‘Your people are all Tzaddikim’⁶, every Jew is to be considered a Tzaddik and has this role, in order to make a dwelling for the Divine in this lowest of all worlds. At the same time, it is Moses who has the leading responsibility in this task, and hence it was Moses who transmitted the very important command to the Jewish people: ‘they should make for Me [G-d] a Sanctuary, and I will dwell within them’⁷. The text does not say ‘I will dwell in it’, in the Sanctuary, but ‘in them’, meaning inside every single Jew. The Divine therefore dwells spiritually in each Jew, but the way to achieve that is by means of the physical Sanctuary, skilfully created out of wood, gold, silver and copper, and so on, as directed by Moses.

The wood is described in the Torah as wood of *shittim*, a word which relates to *shtut*, folly. The wood was used to construct planks, each one being called a *keresh*, which is an anagram of *sheker*, falsehood. The construction of the Sanctuary, and the task of life in general, is to transform folly and falsehood into something sacred, into the planks of the holy Sanctuary.

In order to aid the Jewish people in this difficult task, a special treasure house has been opened. It is compared to the treasure of a King which has been stored for generations, concealed from the common eye. Now however, in order to succeed in a war which challenges the very essence of the King, the sublime treasure house has been opened and its contents have been given by the King’s officers to each individual soldier. At the first level, this is the ‘treasure of the fear of heaven’⁸. There are also higher and higher levels of this treasure.

Thus in Tikkunei Zohar⁹ it speaks of ‘the radiance of the Infinite which extends upwards without end, and downwards without limit’. The upper reach is to the sublime, exalted heavenly treasure; but the descent of the radiance below, to lower and lower depths, is about the existence of lower and lower depths of negativity and evil. Yet even there the Divine is present, although hidden, and has to be revealed.

Indeed, the ultimate purpose of evil is that it should be transformed into good. We see this in a comment by the Baal Shem Tov. A verse in Psalms (34:15)

⁶ Isaiah 60:21

⁷ Ex.25:8.

⁸ Berachot 33b, and see Shabbat 31b. Some explain that this ‘treasure of fear of Heaven’ is accessed through Chassidic teachings, which have only recently been revealed. The battle against the King can be understood as the battle of secularization against religious faith, or the ongoing battle against the Jewish people.

⁹ This is a separate volume of the Zoharic literature. See the end of Tikkun 57.

states: ‘turn aside from evil and do good’. This is often explained as two different aspects of the person’s service of the Divine: on the one hand, keep away from the negative things which the Torah has forbidden; on the other, pursue those things which the Torah declares are positive, the Mitzvot. But the Baal Shem Tov explains that this approach is only at the beginning of one’s service of G-d. Later we should be able to explain the verse differently: we should endeavour to make the bad into good. That is the goal which the Zohar describes: to turn darkness into light, and to transform the bitter into the sweet.

How do we do this? G-d helps us in this task, by putting the source of evil in the Torah. Indeed, that is why evil exists at all: because G-d ‘looked into the Torah and created the world’¹⁰.

This is why the Zohar, Talmud and Maimonides include lengthy depictions of the spiritual sources of evil, or definitions of evil behaviour, such as in Maimonides’ Laws of Idolatry¹¹. Through this inclusion in the Torah, the negative behaviour actually becomes part of the Torah, something sacred, like all parts of the Torah. When we study these parts of Torah we neutralize the negative power or positively transform it to good.

The ideal is that the tangible temptations in our surroundings no longer tempt us as something to be desired, but instead have become part of the Torah in which every word connects us to the Divine.

The fact that the Torah includes these aspects, neutralizing them, enables each person to focus on the Divine imperative which lies both within and beyond that area of thought or behaviour. Instead of being caught by the lure of an inappropriate desire, the individual focuses on G-d and is able to fulfil the Baal Shem Tov’s counsel, to transform bad to good.

In order to help each person plumb those depths, turning bad to good, he or she is given the exalted treasure from the sublime heights of the Infinite above.

Through this process of transformation of evil, the Divine Presence will again dwell fully in the world, in the Holy of Holies in the Temple and in the heart of each individual, transforming the world in its entirety to good, with the coming of Moshiach and the dawn of Redemption.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care

¹⁰ Zohar II 161b.

¹¹ See Zohar II 262b ff., the tractate of Talmud called ‘Idolatry’, and the ‘Laws of Idolatry’ in Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge.