Introduction

By Liel Leibovitz

WHY AND HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Once upon a time, or so the story goes, the Ba'al Shem Tov was sitting in his *beis medrash* when the richest man in town came prancing in.

The Ba'al Shem Tov — real name Yisrael ben Eliezer, the famous 18th-century rabbi who was the founder of the Chassidic movement — was known for his direct connection with the Divine, and the rich gentleman had a request he felt only the celebrated rabbi could accommodate.

Every year at Passover, the man told the Ba'al Shem Tov as he made himself comfortable in the rabbi's *beis medrash*, Jews pour a cup of wine for Eliyahu Hanavi (the Prophet Elijah). We then open the door, inviting the Prophet in. It is a beautiful tradition, the rich man said, but there was just one problem — he wasn't interested in symbolism. He wanted to *actually* meet the *real, live* Prophet, and he was willing to pay handsomely for the privilege. People were saying that the Ba'al Shem Tov could communicate with the Heavenly spheres; could the rabbi, perhaps, send a message into the Great Beyond and see if the Biblical figure was free for dinner?

"Of course," said the Ba'al Shem Tov, smiling. He pulled out a piece

of paper, scribbled down an address, and asked the man to show up at seven p.m. sharp.

The rich man was stunned, and a little suspicious. "That's it?" he asked as he got up to leave. "So simple? I just show up and I get to meet Eliyahu Hanavi tonight?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov nodded his head and assured the man that the Prophet will be waiting. But, the rabbi added, the Prophet being a man of great stature and importance, it was in poor taste to show up empty handed; he advised the man to stop at the marketplace and stock up on chicken, vegetables, baked goods, and all the delicacies he could afford. Growing excited now, the man assured the Ba'al Shem Tov that he'd throw the Prophet a real feast, then left the rabbi's study feeling elated.

The rest of the day was spent in feverish preparation. The wealthy man put on his best suit. He had his servant procure the finest foods available. And as the appointed hour approached, he began walking toward the address the Ba'al Shem Tov had given him.

He was a little bit surprised to learn that Eliyahu was waiting not in one of the town's nicer quarters but in a somewhat rundown neighborhood, but he figured there was no accounting for the taste of prophets. When he arrived at his destination, he took a moment to survey the house and was again taken aback to find it small and unassuming. He knocked on the door, and a tired-looking woman let him in. He handed her the bags of groceries and took a seat at the table, doing his best to ignore the woman's four thin children.

Ten minutes passed, then twenty. Seven o'clock turned to seven thirty, then eight. Finally, feeling as if he'd waited long enough, the man realized there must have been some misunderstanding. The rabbi might've gotten the address wrong, he reasoned, or the Prophet had other, pressing plans. In either case, Eliyahu clearly wasn't coming, and there was no point letting all this delicious food go to waste. He asked the woman to serve the meal and joined her and her children for dinner.

The next morning, the rich man returned to the Ba'al Shem Tov's *beis medrash*. With a somewhat reproachful look, he told the rabbi that the great Eliyahu never showed up. The Ba'al Shem Tov apologized briefly, retrieved another piece of paper from his desk, and wrote down

another address. As the rich man was walking out, the rabbi again reminded him to first stop at the market and procure a feast for Eliyahu.

And so, the rich guy got all dressed up once again. And, once again, he sent his man to the market to buy chicken and bread and fruit and cakes for the Prophet. And again, he went walking, looking for the new address the Ba'al Shem Tov had provided. This time, it was in an even poorer part of town. This time, the house in question was even smaller and more dilapidated. And this time, the woman opening the door was even more tired-looking, with more thin children running around.

Just as had happened the night before, the rich man walked in, handed over the goods, and sat down. Again he waited. Again, no Eliyahu. Again, he shared the feast with the woman and her kids, eating and fuming at the Ba'al Shem Tov.

The next morning, the rich man stormed into the rabbi's *beis medrash*, slamming his fist on the wise man's desk.

"Rabbi!" thundered the rich man, "do not mess with me! I am the richest man in town, and I won't waste my time on some wild goose chase! I am asking you again, and for the last time, can you or can you not arrange for me to meet Eliyahu Hanavi tonight?"

Looking the rich man right in the eye, the Ba'al Shem Tov nodded his head. Tonight, he promised the rich man, he will meet Eliyahu. He wrote down another address and handed it over to the man.

Satisfied by the rabbi's apparent sincerity, the rich man saw himself out, not before reassuring the rabbi that he would stop by the market and procure some delicious treats for Eliyahu. That evening, for the third time, the man dressed, collected the food his servant had purchased at the market, and started walking. And this time around, the address the Ba'al Shem Tov had given was in the most destitute part of town.

When he arrived at the new address, the rich man's heart sank. It wasn't really a home, but more of a ramshackle hut, its windows broken and its door hanging loosely on its hinges. He was about to knock, but then thought better of it.

"The Ba'al Shem Tov," he reasoned with himself, "must hate me. After all, I am a rich man and not too pious, and he must resent me for

not keeping all the Torah's commandments. He's just messing with me. If I knock on this door, I'm just going to spend another evening sitting and waiting for a prophet that obviously never arrives."

And so, the rich man began to walk away.

As he was walking, however, he heard a sound coming from inside the hut. It was a little girl, crying.

"Mommy," said the girl, "I am so hungry. We haven't had a bite to eat in two days."

"Don't worry, my love," said her mother. "The Ba'al Shem Tov promised me that any minute now, there'll be a knock on our door and Eliyahu Hanavi himself will walk in and bring us our dinner."

This lovely story urges us, of course, to realize that we must knock on every door that needs knocking, that we must be each other's Eliyahus and provide each other relief in times of great need. It is also a charming introduction to the ideas of Chassidus, the Jewish spiritual revival that swept through eastern Europe in the 18th century. And while the movement is much too complex to summarize here with anything approaching definitive authority, you need only to revisit this short story to see its tenets in action: Belief that G-d is everywhere in the universe; desire to be forever close to Him; conviction that our most seemingly mundane acts have a spiritual dimension and may elevate our religious practice.

Why, then, should those of us who don't define ourselves as Chassidic Jews care about Chassidus? Why now? Why approach this thicket of ideas, beliefs, and traditions not by reading long and difficult books of theology but by perusing sometimes fantastical stories about the lives of the righteous? And why, for that matter, study the life and works of the Nadvorna Rebbe, a relatively obscure figure in a firmament blessed with so many bright, shining lights?

The first two questions are intertwined, and, thankfully, relatively easy to answer.

Few, sadly, will deny that ours is an extraordinarily perilous moment for the world at large, and even more so for Jews. New technologies have risen rapidly, radically changing so much about how we live our lives. Humans, social creatures to the core, are now everywhere driven

to isolation by screens of all sizes that demand our attention and command our leisure time. The poor have grown ever so slightly better off; the rich immensely, unthinkably richer. Institutions, like the nuclear family or religion, that have, for millennia, given us succor are heavily embattled. At the time of this writing, a whopping forty percent of Americans eighteen and older are single, an all-time historic high. Not surprisingly, birth rates have dropped by a staggering twenty-three percent in the last fifteen years alone, an all-time historic low. And every year, we lose more than 100,000 of our friends, neighbors, and loved ones to what Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton labeled "deaths of despair" — suicide, drug overdoses, alcohol-related diseases. That, the two scholars noted grimly, is the equivalent of "three fully loaded Boeing 737 MAX jets falling out of the sky every day for a year."

Were we to lose as many people to anything else, we'd riot in the streets, demanding that the government take action immediately to stop this carnage. But our malady, it's clear, is spiritual — Americans, and people all around the world, are better off than we've ever been in the course of human events, and yet struggling to find reasons to live.

Enter Chassidus.

If it's about nothing else, Chassidus is about joy. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, one of the movement's most celebrated figures, taught us that there's no despair in the world whatsoever, and that it was a great mitzvah to be happy, always. He wasn't saying it was an easy feat to achieve; he was reminding us that Hashem did not put us here on this planet only to bring us misery and suffering. True, the Divine plan is one we'll never fully understand, just like a cranky infant doesn't fully understand why her mother is hovering above her with a spoonful of mush, insisting she eat. But His plan is always and ultimately good, and, what's more, it has a specific and all-important part for *us* to play. And by "us," Chassidus means us all: Unlike other forms of Jewish piety, which champion pure scholarliness and therefore favor the *iluis* among us, those few and great ones capable of much learning, Chassidus teaches that each of us is Hashem's partner in creation. We've a purpose, and if we have faith

— and a great Rebbe to guide us — we'll find it and then lead our lives with confidence and with *simcha*, a joy true and great and deep.

"Guide us," of course, points to the multiple dimensions of the Chassidic master. One such dimension is that they are — through the stories and lore around them — a living reminder of one of Judaism's most seminal ideas: the call to emulate our ancestors, an idea that goes all the way back to the Patriarchs — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — who serve as our timeless role models for spiritual lives. The classic work of Biblical exegesis known as the *Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu* makes it very clear that we're to regard these three giants of Judaism not merely as a vague source of faint inspiration, but rather as an ongoing and urgent spiritual challenge. Each of us, the book teaches, must ask, "When will my deeds measure up to those of our holy forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?" This isn't a mere rhetorical flourish; it's a demand, bold and immediate.

The Kotzker Rebbe, one of the great Chassidic masters, who could not and did not suffer fools, elaborated on this theme when he asked, somewhat sternly, how we can even dream of reaching the spiritual peaks these giants scaled, when we — gripped by streaming entertainment and digital technology and so many other distractions that grab us away from focusing on what truly matters in life — are operating on a level that seems far, far removed from the great ones of yore? Not one for delusion, the Kotzker Rebbe recognizes that we may forever fall short of these men who talked to G-d and stood tall for justice and tradition. But that, he insists, is no invitation to inaction. Because, if we're being candid, we are not called to match Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in piety — an impossible mission if there ever was one — but merely to model our minds, our hearts, our speech, and our deeds after them.

And we must do the same with the Chassidic masters, closer to us spiritually and chronologically than the giants of the Torah but still far, far elevated in learnedness, practice, and holiness. Hence the Chassidic stories: This genre, flourishing in 19th-century Europe, was meant to deliver much more than mere bedtime stories. These stories were designed as spiritual lifelines, especially for those without access to scholarly texts — the unlettered, women, and children. By bringing

the lofty masters to earth, and by weaving the struggles of daily life, like making a living and raising a family and confronting sickness and death, the stories depicted the Chassidic masters wielding Divine insights and meeting both the tangible and intangible needs of their communities. They were meant not as entertainment, but as instruction manuals for the soul, giving Jews spiritual superheroes they could strive to emulate.

Or maybe "superheroes" is an inept metaphor: Read enough Chassidic stories and you'll understand that a Rebbe's role isn't to deliver Heaven on a silver platter, like comicdom's Thor, but rather to elevate his congregants right here on this worldly plane, to help them discover and rekindle their Divine spark so that they may live better, more joyous, fulfilling and spiritual lives. And the Chassidic story is designed to do the exact same thing: In Chassidic tradition, storytelling isn't merely an artistic craft but a medium for igniting a yearning for something greater and more good in each and every person's life.

This is also precisely why Chassidic stories come in so many shapes and sizes. Some are very long, like novellas, while others take barely a few paragraphs. Some are mysterious, almost inscrutable, and others unfold almost like a Vaudeville act. Just like human beings, each Chassidic story has its own path to awakening, its own destination, its own journey into faith and devotion. True, they all bring to life the essence of great and pious rabbis, showing us their approach to wisdom and worship. True, they all inspire us to reflect on the rabbis' holiness, kindness, and connection with the Divine. And true, they all illuminate the miraculous, shining a light on those moments when the Divine breaks into our world through the words and the deeds of one righteous mortal. But these miracles, too, differ widely and wildly, from subtle reminders of G-d's benevolence to astonishing feats that comfort the meek and slay the wicked.

So which Rebbe, or Chassidic master, should we follow? Thankfully, it's not an either/or question, as our wise old teachers are all worthy of our attention and emulation. But this book will make a strong case for the Nadvorna Rebbe, one of our greatest — and, sadly, most obscure — Tzaddikim (righteous people) and teachers.

My dear friend and teacher, and this book's author, the inimitable Moyshe Silk, has done a marvelous job presenting the Rebbe's practice and teaching in great and sparkling detail, but the short, short version goes like this: Born Mordechai Leifer in 1824, in the Ukrainian town of Nadvorna, he was the scion of a great rabbinic family who soon rose to greatness himself.

Because the story of most Chassidic masters is, to some extent, also the story of the illustrious rabbinic dynasties from which they hail, a quick look at the Rebbe's lineage is in order; anyone wishing to learn much more about his esteemed family is welcome to consult this book's appendix for a fuller biography. To understand the Rebbe R' Mordechai (or affectionately in its diminutive, Mordchele) of Nadvorna is to understand a story centuries in the making — a story of survival, devotion, and spiritual brilliance passed down through generations. He wasn't just another link in the chain of a dynasty; he was the chain itself, forged from the traits and triumphs of his forefathers. In him, the traits and feats of generations of Tzaddikim converged and transformed, becoming a single, brilliant flame that illuminated his time and beyond. The Rebbe didn't merely inherit a legacy; he embodied it, a living, breathing testament to the greatness of those who came before him, with every thought that passed his mind, every word he uttered and every action he took.

The roots of this dynasty stretch back to Reb Yaakov ben Levi of Marvege, a 13th-century powerhouse whose brilliance in Talmudic scholarship was matched only by his profound connection to the Divine. His groundbreaking halachic decisions bridged the realms of rigorous study and celestial insight that would echo through the ages. His descendants carried his flame across medieval Europe, eventually seeking refuge in the Pale of Settlement. There, in the Jewish communities nestled in the Carpathian foothills, they replanted their roots. Names like Reb Chaim Tzvi, Reb Moshe the Saraf, and Reb Dovid echo through these hills — men who exemplified humility and dedication, embodying the values of their ancestor with every choice they made.

The Rebbe R' Meir Hagadol was the first to turn these roots into a towering tree. A contemporary of the Ba'al Shem Tov, he was both

mystic and man of action, balancing his hidden spiritual might with a public persona of honesty and integrity that earned him the title "Meir the Honest One." His sons, the Rebbe R' Aharon Leib of Premishlan and the Rebbe R' Dovid of Kalish, each took the family's legacy in their own direction. The Rebbe R' Aharon Leib, fiercely independent, even refused an offer from Eliyahu Hanavi to reveal the secrets of the Torah — he was determined to carve his own spiritual path. The Rebbe R' Dovid, meanwhile, established a court in Kalish, expanding the family's reach and influence.

The dynasty started to truly blossom under the next generation — the Rebbe R' Itzikel of Kalish and the Rebbe R' Meir of Premishlan. The Rebbe R' Itzikel's *ruach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration) and brilliant scholarship laid the groundwork for the family's eventual establishment in Nadvorna. The Rebbe R' Meir, by contrast, became a Rebbe of the People, known for his profound humility, boundless compassion, and unrelenting focus on the everyday struggles of his followers. He was a leader and a servant, a man who never hesitated to shoulder the burdens of his community while holding himself to the highest standards of halachic stringency. More than just a mentor, he was a role model for the Rebbe R' Mordechai, instilling in him an unyielding commitment to halachic precision, rigorous scholarship, and the highest standards of Divine service.

And then came the Rebbe R' Bertche, son of the Rebbe R' Itzikel, who took the dynasty to Nadvorna. Guided by providence and at the insistence of Rabbi Yitzchak of Radwill, the Rebbe R' Bertche moved south, where his concealed greatness became the foundation for the dynasty's future. He brought with him not just the legacy of his ancestors but also a profound love for his people. It was a love so deep that, during a devastating epidemic, he offered his own life to stop the suffering of others. His act of self-sacrifice was a moment of profound spiritual heroism that set the stage for his son, the Rebbe R' Mordechai, to lead.

The Rebbe R' Mordechai was the culmination of it all — a lineage of towering faith, unquenchable thirst for deep learning, uncompromising halachic stringency, relentless dedication, and boundless love. In him was the rigorous scholarship of Reb Yaakov, the mystical aspirations of

the Rebbe R' Meir Hagadol, the independence of the Rebbe R' Aharon Leib, the compassion, stringency and precision of the Rebbe R' Meir of Premishlan, and the selflessness of his father, the Rebbe R' Bertche. But he wasn't just an heir to these traits — he was their embodiment, a man who took the values of his forebears and made them his own. To meet him was to encounter not just one man but the entirety of the Premishlan-Nadvorna dynasty, distilled into a single, luminous presence. He was the past and the future, bound together in a singular force of faith, love, and unshakable devotion.

How, then, and why, do his teachings still resonate with us today? What have they to offer us hurried moderns, centuries removed from Nadvorna and the traditional life it made possible? What, to be blunt, can the Rebbe teach us today?

Generally speaking, Chassidic masters come in two "flavors." Some are fierce and holy seers: Chassidus draws heavily from Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and its more celebrated practitioners have frequently obtained the ability to see many more layers of truth and beauty than those visible to the untrained eye. Jewish lore is thick with stories about rabbis who could look into the future, commune with the dead, converse with animals, and achieve other seemingly miraculous and impossible tasks — actions above nature. Usually, these men were ascetics — the work of peering into the Heavenly spheres requires great concentration and meditation, and is, by definition, a solitary pursuit. In a word, these masters lived in the heavens.

Then, there were the people's rabbis, great communal leaders who spent their time caring for their flock, worried less about the heavens and more about the injustices and challenges presented to us here on earth.

Very few, if any, attempted, let alone achieved, both. And none who achieved both did so simultaneously. It's not too difficult to understand why: Mystics require glorious isolation; communal leaders the company of others. Mystics are focused on G-d; communal leaders on Man. We're blessed to have many great rabbis in each important category. But we have very few, if any, who straddled both.

Except for the Nadvorna Rebbe.

As this book will convey at length and in color, the Rebbe spent roughly half his life in glorious seclusion before emerging into the world and rising as a tireless advocate for the Jewish people and a revered shepherd to his flock. He used the gifts and skills and practices he'd perfected to again and again intervene on his people's behalf, directing them back to the path leading to flourishing and joy.

To capture this duality, and to give us a glimpse into his complicated persona and great achievements, this book is divided into two parts. The first, titled "The Maker," is a detailed exploration of the Rebbe's *Avodah*, Hebrew for "work," meaning the serious and committed practice of Judaism.

Long before we moderns began thinking about mindfulness, the Rebbe beat us to the punch. Being an observant Jew, he knew, didn't simply mean keeping kosher or keeping Shabbos. It meant elevating everything and everyone around you, because G-d was truly everywhere. To that end, the Rebbe, for example, would refuse to wear a pair of shoes, say, unless they were made by a pious cobbler, or dine at a table that was not made by a G-d-fearing carpenter. Because a table or a pair of shoes, he realized, weren't merely material objects, disposable and insignificant. They were manifestations of the people who poured their sweat and their labor into making them, and if these people weren't righteous — if they didn't sit down to work with hearts full of gratitude to Hashem — then their creations wouldn't be suitable for a person committed to making the mundane a bit more sacred, to bringing Heaven and earth a little bit closer.

If this seems extreme, consider, say, Amazon. These days, we're quick to take to the online giant, or any other e-retailer for that matter, and order everything and anything we need. We've fast delivery, a flat world adept at moving goods from one point to another, a facile culture of pressing buttons and expecting quick and easy solutions. There's much to praise about this kind of life: it's certainly more convenient to buy a new teapot, say, with a few strokes of a keyboard than it is to trudge to an artisan's home, place the order, inspect the process, and await the result. But a world of impersonal interactions and mindless consumption is a world that distances us not only from each other but

also from our full Divine potential, a world that dulls our ability to feel our way into G-d's grand and mysterious plan. It is, put bluntly, a disenchanted world.

The Rebbe strove to change all that. In the book's first part, we meet the solitary scholar and observe the eccentricities of his approach to his faith. We see his extraordinary learning ethic and command of both *nigleh* and *nistar* — the revealed and esoteric dimensions of the Torah, an inheritance from illustrious Torah luminaries such as the leading 13th-century Reb Yaakov of Marvege and the distinguished scholars of the Premishlan-Nadvorna dynasty that preceded him. By studying the Rebbe's approach to daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly religious practices, and by marveling at the religious stringencies he imposed on himself, also a product of his Premishlan heritage (notably his father's uncle, the great Rebbe Meir of Premishlan), we get a portrait of a man who lived to give to others, showing us a path to kindness and transcendence.

Which brings us to the book's second part. Titled "The Mystic," it is a collection of the Rebbe's recorded miracles. The word "miracles," of course, is loaded, controversial, and wildly inaccurate: The Rebbe wasn't orchestrating celestial pyrotechnics; he was simply using those extraordinary powers, stretching back to the unique abilities of Divine insight attributed to Reb Yaakov of Marvege and perpetuated in spades by the extraordinary Premishlaner-Nadvorna Rebbes that preceded him, to reach into higher realms of existence to bring those of us miles and miles below him some aid and some comfort. But to us rationalists, determined that there's a clear and understandable explanation to everything and that man, if given enough resources and enough time, could unlock each and every one of creation's mysteries, these stories are demanding. They challenge us to suspend disbelief, and see life in a brand-new way, rich with possibilities we hadn't dared imagine were available to us. It's precisely why we need them so direly; even those of us who'll insist on doubting the veracity of these stories may hopefully find in them, if not outright relief, than at least a spark of inspiration, a glimmer of a promise that what seems dark and hopeless today may tomorrow shine with bright, soothing light.

The book's second part, then, will detail the ways in which the Rebbe helped the poor, shepherded those who left the fold back into religious life, nurtured children, freed those shackled by onerous and mandatory army service, and saw to the earthly and ethereal needs of his chassidim, all while working in mysterious ways, also hallmarks of the Premishlan-Nadvorna tradition.

This book aims to transmit all of these virtues in a way that is inspiring and approachable even to those of us who are removed in time, space, and piety from the great rabbi. Read this book, then, not as a work of scholarship to be approached solemnly and mirthlessly, but as a self-help book of sorts — for really, what great book has any other purpose than to help the self blossom more fully? Let yourself be drawn into the quiet, powerful wisdom of these stories. Understand that they're not merely tales of the past, but keys to a better, more spiritually sustaining future. Jump around throughout the book if you wish, because the Rebbe was a real person, not a mythical figure, and a real person's life is not a novel. It isn't meant to be read linearly, like a great and thrilling story hurtling toward some clarifying conclusion. A real person's life is a cluster of hard-won insights pulled together by a thin, nearly invisible thread, and the Rebbe's is no different. Some of his practices may strike you as completely relevant to your own; if so, slow down and focus on those. Others may feel foreign and hard to understand; if so, skip it. Bite off and swallow whatever you need, whatever you feel might heal your heart and your soul. And, above all, observe the ways in which the Rebbe brought together the sacred and the mundane, the transient and the eternal, us and the heavens. Then ask, with awe but also with wonder, what we here today can do to follow his great example, engaging in the age-old, yet never more urgent task of repairing our broken world.

This book's author did just that. As the young son of divorced parents, living in a household long on tradition but short on means, Mitchell, or Moyshe, helped out by washing dishes at a Chinese restaurant owned by the parents of his high school friends. Diligent and brilliant, he soon taught himself Cantonese, then Mandarin, advancing from the unbearably hot kitchen to the front of the house and learning the humbling art of serving hungry people. Then came law school and

a long and thriving career and all the earthly trappings that might've distracted a less committed man to abandon Heaven for the time being and enjoy the riches and spoils of the earth. Silk, however, applied his endless energy not only to his work but also to Jewish communal life and scholarship, among other things spending thirty years and a small fortune to bring us the first modern translation of the *Kedushas Levi*, one of Chassidus's masterpieces, available for the first time in clear and lucid English. And when he was called upon to put aside his own pursuits and go serve our country as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury — negotiating, among other major achievements, our trade agreements with China — he answered the call, becoming the first chassid ever to hold a Senate-confirmed position.

Heaven and earth, the worldly and the Divine: these are complements, not contradictions. And now, Silk has given us the gift of the Nadvorna Rebbe, the guide we so desperately need in these broken, yet hopeful times.