



Toldos Yaakov Yosef

by

*Rav Yaakov Yosef
of Polnoye*

*The 1st Chassidic Sefer
that was ever published
by the foremost disciple of
the holy Baal Shem Tov
Quoting his master over 200 times!*





Introduction

His Praises

Our Master the Holy Maggid of Mezritch often spoke about Rav Yaakov Yosef, praising his lofty spiritual levels, he said that Eliyahu HaNavi would reveal himself to the Toldos.

The Rebbe Reb Baruch of Mezibuz also lavished the Toldos with praise and related the following episode: My grandfather the holy Baal Shem Tov saw that the angelic Maggid which studied with the Toldos was not from the realm of truth and he himself brought him a true Maggid with which he then studied.

Once when Rav Baruch was reciting the passage from the Zohar Brich Shmay which we recite when opening the holy ark, he recited the passage “May I myself be counted among the Tzadikim,” and then he mentioned specifically the holy Rav of Polnoya.

Once the Rebbe Reb Zisha of Annipoli came to Zilkovi and stood in the local shul and prayed in a certain spot. He felt that his prayers were especially pure and refined more so than usual, on a level as lofty as that of the holy Baal Shem himself! He could not determine the reason for these feelings. However the congregants had a simple explanation, “This is the spot that the Toldos once prayed in!” they explained.

His Devotion

Though the Toldos often mentions teachings from his esteemed master and teacher the holy Baal Shem, sometimes his awe of the master and his holy lofty teachings was so great that we find he says things like “I received this mouth to mouth directly from my master and it cannot be written and explained in a book!” and based on the verse in Mishlei 25:2 “The honor and glory of G-d is to hide matters.”

His manner of praying was full of intense and fiery devotion so much so that his entire body shook and his flesh trembled! In fact he would often say about himself: “I find it easier to say ten novel interpretations of Talmudic hairsplitting logic than to pray just one time!”

He explained his enthusiasm's need with a parable: “Once a smith taught his young apprentice how to use the forge and the skills of working metal, however the young man was unable to begin since he forgot to teach him the basics and he lacked that one essential ingredient; he forgot to demonstrate to the apprentice how to light and kindle the fiery coals!

Similarly in regards to serving Hashem, a prayer infused with fiery enthusiasm and life causes the inner fire to combust and burst into flame.” This was true regarding his manner of studying and all holy acts and deeds it was all done with energy and accompanied by loud noise and excited enthusiasm.

His Heritage and Yichus

A scion of great rabbinic leaders he was descended from such famous rabbis as Rav Shimshon of Ostropoli, Rav Yosef Katz author of Yesod Yosef and the Tosfos YomTov, Rav Yom Tov Lipmann.

The Inheritance He Left Behind

Though the Toldos did not succeed his master as the next leader of the Chassidic movement (that was left to Rav Dov Ber the Maggid of Mezritch) and no dynasty was founded after him he left several important seforim and several disciples as a spiritual inheritance to us.

Among his disciples we find Reb Leib of Shpole, Rav Gedaliah of Linitz author of Teshuos Chen on the Torah and the famous Rav Yaakov Shimshon of Shpитеvka.

His sefer the Toldos Yaakov Yosef became the first Chassidic sefer ever published in 1780 in Koretz. He authored three others, Ben Poras Yosef, Tzafnas Paaneach and Kesones Pasim. He passed on, on 24th of Tishrei 1781.

(LeYesharim Tehillah – Yosef Daas pg. 15-17)



Samples of Some of His Pure and Holy Sayings

Attached in Dveykus

Toldos Yaakov Yosef (Bechukosai 2, Naso 12, Naso 17)

A parable: The king's son was lost and strayed from his father. He could not be brought back until one of the ministers removed his royal clothing and donned the simple clothing of a peasant. Then he was able to become friendly and come close to the king's wayward son, who had likewise become a lowlife.

Toldos Yaakov Yosef (Naso 17)

A person has ups and downs in his life. Before he falls, he must attach himself with rapture and *dveykus* to Hashem so that if he falls, he can elevate himself again from those fallen spiritual levels and at the same time elevate the sparks of others who have fallen. Thus every generation has its leader, and when he dons the lowly clothing of his generation, then attaches himself to them. This occurs through sin, that he is able to have some connection with them, and then, when he repents, he can bring them all back with him to his previous level. Just as one who descends into the pit first ties himself with a rope, so the Tzaddik attaches himself to the Creator before descending to the level of his generation. Thus we say, "*Yaakov chevel nachalaso* — Yaakov's inheritance is like a rope" (*Devarim 32:9*): grasp this rope, which is bound to the Holy One Himself.

Note:

See also Zohar I:83a, 140b. The Zohar explains this idea with a parable: What is this compared to? It is like a man who wished to descend into a deep pit, but he was afraid that he would not be able to ascend afterward and come back out. What did he do? He tied a knot in a rope outside the pit. He said, "Now that I tied this knot I can climb out with this rope." Similarly, when Avraham was about to descend into Egypt, he first bound himself to his faith so that he could later come out.

Faith:

By doing a mitzvah with full faith and with attachment to Hashem through *dveykus* and with delight, this mitzvah then incorporates within it all 248 positive and 365 negative commandments. This is our sages taught (Makkos 24a) "Chabakuk came and established all the mitzvos on one principle, "A righteous Tzadik will live by faith." (Chabakuk 2:4)

[Toldos Parshas Chaya Sarah]

Just as the heart gives life to all the limbs of the body so is the commandment of faith the source and root of all the 248 positive commandments. This is an aspect of the positive commandment of "Anochi – I am the Lord your G-d," (Shemos 20:2) which is the source of them all. And faith is also love which is the root of all things. When a mitzvah contains both faith and love together a person who fulfills it merits life in the next world as the Rambam writes in his commentary to the Mishnah at the end of Makkos.

[Toldos Parshas Yisro]

Love of Hashem:

Love is drawn by none other than faith, which is a form of attachment and dveykus to Hashem. And when one does even one mitzvah with both elements of love and faith he is then attached to the root of all faith and it is as if he fulfilled all 613 commandments. This is because the Torah and its commandments were all emanated from Hashem's very essence which is true uniform unity and therefore by fulfilling one mitzvah completely and with love which is dveykus, this mitzvah captures through this unifying factor all the others.

It is therefore as if he has fulfilled all of the mitzvos which are the whole of His unity and are one complete Partzuf so to speak.

(A Partzuf is a Kabbalistic construct in the system of the Arizal whereby the sefiros or attributes of the Divine form complete sets of ten.)

[Toldos Parshas Yisro]

What is most difficult regarding the commandment to love Hashem is the fact that we are commanded to do what at first glance seems to be something contrary to man's ability. (*That is we are being asked to feel an emotion which we would normal classify as almost involuntary. To rephrase the question how can we be forced to feel love?*)

However the truth is through attachment and connection to the Torah and the path of Hashem then his heart will fill with love for Hashem on its own. This is also true regarding joy, (*another emotion which in regards to we could ask the same question*) he will then rejoice in loving Hashem etc.

[Toldos Parshas Shelach]

Love of Am Yisroel:

“Love your fellow as yourself,” (Vayikra 19:18) each and every Jew are rooted together in unity. Therefore one should never push another Jew away with two hands rather etc. (*the left pushes aside while the right hand draws near*).

Because if one pushes away his fellow he is in effect pushing himself away, since he is pushing away a portion of that unity and it is as if he is pushing the entire unified whole.

[Toldos Parshas Chayei Sarah]

Stories

The Uninvited Guests for the Seder Night

A young couple had recently married in some obscure township in the district of Vilna, and the bride began to observe some strange behavior in her husband. He would rise at midnight and recite the Tikkun Chatzos the midnight prayer lamenting the exile; at day break each day he would immerse himself in the *mikveh*; and he kept reading a certain book which he would keep hidden under his pillow.

The young girl told her father, who went and took the hidden sefer from beneath the pillow. He took and opened the book and his entire world went black for the sefer was the Toldos Yaakov Yosef, whose author was known as one of the leaders of the "Sect"- Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye! His own son-in-law had become ensnared by the dreaded cult of chassidim!

When he next saw his son-in-law he spewed forth his anger and fury over his son-in-law's head pouring a torrent of oaths and admonishments on him. When he saw that this had no effect at all, he changed his approach, and attempted instead to use some gentle persuasion to try to turn him away from the evil path he had chosen. But to no avail he saw that it was no use arguing and cajoling and instead he decided to demand that he divorce his daughter and give her a get. The young chosson refused to do either: he was bound to the chassidic movement with all his soul, and he did not want to divorce his wife.

His father-in-law saw the situation was hopeless and so he turned and poured out his woes to his fellow

townsmen for help and advice as to how to rid himself of this son-in-law. This threw the little town into turmoil, some held that all forms of pressure should be applied to force the young man to divorce his wife while others pointed out that a divorce issued under duress was invalid and that the poor bride would find herself in the middle of a labyrinth of Rabbinic responsa to decide if her get was kosher. The only way in their opinion was to offer the husband large sums of money so that he would agree to give the divorce on his own free will.

The entire town became a cauldron of boiling and heated arguments until the entire episode eventually reached the ears of the *poritz* the noble gentile ruler and landowner who ruled that region. This *poritz* was an old colonel. And when he heard that the whole uproar began with a book, he asked who its author was?

He was told that it was an individual who had misled his fellow Jews from the true path of the Torah; and that his name was Yaakov Yosef the Kohen, from the town of Polnnoye.

Upon hearing this, the *poritz* asked to see the book. He himself looked at the title page and saw the name of the book and its author printed in Russian at the bottom. He commanded that both the young man, his wife and his father-in-law and all their friends and relatives be brought before him. When all the parties had arrived the *poritz* spoke:

"The time has now come, to relate an incident which happened to me in my youth. Listen carefully, please and hear me out."

"Many years ago, when I was serving as a *Polkovnik* (полковник) or colonel, I was encamped one winter with my unit near Polnnoye. We received the order to move the camp. The procedure for such occasions was a full lineup early at day break during which the men were given their orders.

At roll call, three soldiers were found to be missing. So I ordered some other soldiers to go to nearby Polnnoye to locate them and bring them back. After a little while they returned, but with the strangest report. They located all three soldiers together in one house which was lit by candle light. At the head of the table sat an old man of impressive appearance. The three missing soldiers were standing there, speechless and dumb, frozen and unable to move not hand nor foot, as if paralyzed. I didn't believe such a strange story, so I sent off a different group of soldiers to verify the first report. But they returned with the same story.

I decided to go there myself. I took a few soldiers with me, and when I entered and saw the old man looking like an angel from heaven sitting at the table in deep meditation, I felt deep inside me both fear, trembling and awe. And I saw the missing soldiers, standing there deaf and dumbstruck as if nailed to the floor.

"I finally mustered up enough courage to dare and disturb his holy thoughts, and said: 'I see, sir, that you are a holy man. My soldiers here have to leave this place today together with the whole battalion. So could your honor please do something so that we will be able to move and walk out of here?'

"The old man answered: 'No doubt they have stolen something. If you remove the stolen objects from their pockets they will be able to leave.'

"Immediately we began searching their pockets, and found that they were full of all manner of silver vessels and objects. As soon as we removed them from their pockets two of the men walked normally and left, but the third remained frozen and paralyzed unable to move. His friends said, 'He must have something hidden in his boot.' And so it was. We discovered a small silver cup, hidden in his boot. We removed it and he too was able to move once more and he left."

How did this all happen? It was the first night of Pesach. When the *Seder* was over the family had all gone to sleep, leaving the head of the house, Rav Yaakov Yosef himself sitting at the table all night in

holy meditation. The door of the house had been left open, for this night is *leil shimurim*, a night guarded against all harmful beings. The three soldiers had passed by, and seeing through the windows that everyone was asleep, and the front door ajar, had simply walked in and began stuffing their pockets with leftovers and matzah from the table. Then they began stealing all the silver utensils which had been placed on the table in honor of the *Seder*. As soon as they had perpetrated their crimes they discovered that they could not move to leave, until the colonel released them.

"Now when I saw this wondrous thing," continued the *poritz*, "I asked the holy rabbi to bless me twice. Firstly with children, for I was childless back then; and secondly, with a long life. He agreed, and blessed me. Then I asked him to tell me when my end of days would.

"The end of man's life is a secret matter that cannot be revealed," he said. "But you should know that just before the end of your life an episode will present itself to you when you publicize my name among those Jews who do not know me." "The rabbi's blessings were fulfilled. G-d blessed me with children, and as you for yourselves see I lived till old age."

"Now tell me," concluded the *poritz*, "is there anyone among you who would still speak a word against a holy man like that? No one here should see it as a sin that this young man should study a book written by such a holy man of G-d? I am now ordering you that you make peace between yourselves at once - and let no one here dare lay a hand on this young man!"

All those present were electrified by the old *poritz's* tale and they all promised to follow his instructions and to stop bickering and live in peace.

"It is now clear," added the old *poritz*, "that the end of my life is near, for the last words of the holy man have been fulfilled. However I am very pleased that I have been able to bring peace between you, thanks to the name of the holy rabbi who is now in Gan Eden." And indeed, a few months later the old *poritz* passed away.

(Sippurei Chassidim Al Ha'Moadim #310)

Stories

Buying the Toldos to Save Berditchev

Rav Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkasz author of *Minchas Elazar* told the following story:

When Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polnoya printed his holy sefer the *Toldos Yaakov Yosef* on the Torah he traveled to Berditchev on the day of the trade fair. He brought with him two hundred copies to sell. He rented a storefront and placed a copy or two of his book open in the window to display it to passerby who might be interested in purchasing it. He was sure without a doubt that anyone who would just read a few lines and see what he had written would run to snatch up a copy.

However when some interested potential buyers asked him the price of a volume and the *Toldos* answered them that the price was a *Rendil* (a very valuable gold coin worth hundreds of dollars), they laughed and went on their way saying: "For a whole *Rendil* we can buy a new wardrobe and shoes to match!" Days passed with no sales and the fair was drawing to a close. The *Toldos* was despondent, he began to feel very disappointed.

Somehow word got to the Berditchiver and the *Kedushas Levi* knew the entire story. He told his faithful *Rebbitzen* the entire story, "Our dear friend Rav Yaakov Yosef has come here to Berditchev to sell his new sefer at the fair. His asking price is too high and I am afraid that in his anger and

disappointment at his situation the entire city will be punished as a result."

Based on her husband's sage advice the Rebbitzin decided to sacrifice one of her prized possessions. She quickly hurried off and went to pawn her shterntichel (a beautiful crown of silver or gold and diamonds) for the sum of two hundred rendils. She handed the entire sum of money to the Berditchiver so that he could purchase all the seforim and save the town from the impending tragedy.

The holy Berditchiver took a young man as his emissary and gave him the entire sum, a small fortune and asked him to try and bargain with the Toldos. "Ask him to give you a discount if you buy forty or fifty books," explained the Berditchiver. He hoped thereby to make the sale seem authentic and so that the Toldos would not suspect a thing.

However when he approached the Toldos, the latter would not budge a cent from his asking price. No matter how the young man haggled and tried to wheel and deal the Toldos stubbornly replied: "Even if you were to take the entire lot of two hundred books, I will not lower the price by even a kopeck." Finally the young man purchased all two hundred seforim for the entire sum. Afterwards the Toldos having finished his business decided to visit the Rav of Berditchev before talking his leave of the city. When he came to visit the Berditchiver he excused himself for not visiting yet since he was busy with the mitzvah of selling his seforim.

The Toldos then recounted to him the entire story of and of how pained he was that at first no one bought any of his seforim, "However," concluded the Toldos, "finally Hashem sent me a young man with a good head on his shoulders who really appreciated my sefer and valued it so much that he bought all two hundred copies for the price I asked!"

The Berditchiver listened and smiled, "really you don't say?!" was all he remarked at the wondrous tale.

(Otzar HaSippurim Vol. IV #15 p.29-31, Chodesh BeChodsho Munkacsz Nisan 5757 Vol 37 p52)