

NEPHESH HACHAIM: INTRODUCTION

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Nephesh Hachaim: Introduction

1.

R' Chaim of Volozhin never wrote an introduction to *Nephesh Hachaim* but his son R' Yitzchak did so in his place, and we'll be encapsulating it here, in this first part ¹. R' Yitzchak's first point is that ordinarily an author would write an introduction himself that would humbly and modestly offer why the work was written and what its objectives were. But since his father didn't write one, R' Yitzchak set out to offer an introduction that would, ironically, almost boldly do all it could to cite his father's greatness ². We'll encapsulate that introduction in this first part and go on from there to highlight the makeup of *Nephesh Hachaim* itself.

R' Yitzchak says that he'd hardly know where to begin to express his father's greatness, and that he himself was unworthy of the task. But R' Chaim's reputation is already well known, he then says, and he goes on to depict something of the great man's personality and accomplishments. For one thing, aside from being a great, prodigious, and righteous scholar, he is also known for having established the great Yeshiva of Volozhin – the first actual yeshiva as we know it -- and for having had many hundreds of students ³.

But even when he was young he was known to have been an amazingly diligent student who'd study day and night. At first he was a disciple of the well known author of *Sha'agat Aryeh* – R' Aryeh Leib Gunzberg (c. 1695 – 1785), whose legal decisions were oftentimes accepted by Chassidim and Mitnagdim alike.

Then he became the principal disciple of the great and world-renown Gaon of Vilna, R' Eliezer (1720 – 1797). The Gaon was not only a scholar of great depth and accomplishment but also an ascetic, kabbalist, philologist, and arguably the greatest Jewish scholar of the post-Talmudic era, and the one man who could lead the charge against the nascent Chassidic movement that seemed to threaten Jewish life at the time ⁴. R' Chaim not only absorbed his teacher's wisdom, he also served him humbly, and shivered in awe even many years later when he related things that his teacher had said.

So humble was R' Chaim that he had no compunctions about drawing close to the poor and

unlettered, he'd lecture about things that would not only speak to scholars but to those same simple individuals, and he'd somehow purposefully and unpretentiously address both in the course of his public teachings. He cared little about his physical settings or accoutrements, or his honor (never taking offense about anything untoward said about him), so humble was he. And he never took solace in all of the good and holy things he'd done, but always expected more of himself and questioned his own motivations.

Most tellingly, R' Yitzchak, his son, remembers his father constantly asking him if he were doing enough to help others with their troubles, "since people weren't created for their own situations in life (alone) but to help others as much as they can".

The Introduction ends in a rather poignant way. R' Yitzchak reports that on his death-bed R' Chaim handed R' Yitzchak his handwritten copy of *Nephesh Hachaim* and directed him to do two things after R' Chaim would pass: to publish *Nephesh Hachaim* as soon as possible, and to see to the well-being of the by-then successful and world-famous Volozhin Yeshiva; and he then died.

Believing that his father would have understood just how much work was required to keep up the yeshiva, R' Yitzchak focused on doing that, and thus didn't have time to publish *Nephesh Hachaim* until some time had passed. But R' Yitzchak took the tragic and haunting facts that his newest baby passed away about a week after his birth and that his "precious, beautiful, charming, and beloved" eight year old son Simcha Naftali Hertz also died within that period as signs from Heaven that he shouldn't have delayed publishing *Nephesh Hachaim* in fact. So he set out to do that.

Thus ends the gist of the Introduction to *Nephesh Hachaim*.

2.

A lot of theories have been enunciated about R' Chaim's intentions when he wrote *Nephesh Hachaim*. Was it perhaps meant to be a diatribe against the Chassidic movement, in line with the thoughts and actions of his teacher, the Vilna Gaon – or perhaps an acquiescence to the movement's strength and numbers by that point? Was it a revelation of just how much the two schools of thought converge -- or how they differ? Was it meant to be the embodiment of non-Chassidic Kabbalistic standards – or a statement to the affect that while there are differences, they aren't fatal and that the schools are closer than thought despite the marked differences? Many argue one way or the other.

In any event we're presented here with a glorious text of Mussar, Kabbalah, and Jewish Thought that serves as the most fundamental statement of "Lithuanian", "Yeshivish", non-Chassidic attitudes and perspectives. And it has allowed for great Yeshivish thinkers like R' Shlomo Elyashiv, the author of the magisterial *Leshem Shevo Vachlama*; for the many Mussar masters, from R' Yisrael Salanter onwards to contribute to Jewish Thought; and for the very many students of their thoughts to grow in the service of G-d in ways that would not have been possible without *Nephesh Hachaim*.

The book is comprised of four "Gates" and a section entitled "Chapters" that lies between the third and fourth gate. The first gate discusses just what our having been created "in G-d's image" means; our ability to affect heaven and earth; the potency of our words and thoughts; our souls and their connections to G-d; the nature of repentance, and more.

The second gate discusses Jewish prayer and the import of the wording; the consequences of sin; what's involved in "whole-hearted prayer"; intentions in prayer, and more.

The third gate is the most esoteric and complex, and it's actually *skipped* by many because of that as well as because of the knotty implications that can be drawn from it. We'll be especially careful in our wording and explanations there. It discusses the idea of G-d being the "site" upon which the universe stands; the danger in discussing this along with the *need* to discuss it in our day and age; G-d's perspective of things versus our own; the nature of G-d's having apparently withdrawn His being in order to allow for the creation of mortal beings, and the pros and cons of discussing this; G-d's absolute rule, and more.

The "chapters" section discusses the dangers of egocentrism; purity of heart and altruistic service to G-d; the idea of attaching oneself onto G-d's presence; practical mitzvah-observance and prayer; fearing G-d's exaltedness versus fearing retribution, and more.

And the fourth gate encapsulates what had been said before and expands upon ideas like the importance of Torah-study and studying it altruistically; the fear of G-d; attaching oneself onto G-d's presence and onto His Torah; the significance of original Torah insights; the personal and universal impacts of studying Torah; the fact that G-d's presence dwells in this world when people study Torah, and more.

May G-d grants us the wherewithal to draw from the wisdom within *Nephesh Hachaim* and to thus serve Him wholeheartedly.

Footnotes:

¹R' Yitzchak included a number of rather erudite scholarly footnotes to this Introduction which we've omitted since they would have taken us far afield and wouldn't have served our purposes here.

²Though it's not generally known, in fact most introductions are the very *last* thing written in a book. For it's the venue through which the author presents the gist of the ideas that he'd come to realize after having written the book and dwelled on the points he made. R' Chaim consequently didn't write an introduction because he was still editing and adding on to the book right before his passing.

³Before the establishment of the Volozhiner Yeshiva gifted young men would study with their local rabbi or perhaps from a more accomplished and learned rabbi of another town or city until he himself earned ordination and went on to be such a rabbi and teacher. But R' Chaim perceived that

that system could no longer thrive -- or compete with the Western university system that was beginning to attract intelligent and inquisitive young Jewish men.

So the Volozhiner Yeshiva (and the entire yeshiva system) was created so as to be the hub of Jewish intellectual life. It was lively, intense, and thrilling, and there were always people studying there and parrying with each other in a search for truth.

⁴ Though it's hard to imagine now, at the time the Chassidic movement seemed to be a threat to traditional Jewish life with its new practices and areas of concentration.