

CHAPTER ONE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Rubin

There is an old nigun I often heard from the Bobover Rebbe, zt"l. Sung in Yiddish, it speaks of secrets true to our inner selves. The words set to the haunting tune are attributed to the rebbetzin of the Ropshitzer Rebbe (1760 - 1827), a woman renowned for her wisdom and piety.

The song tells people to take a spodek (fur hat) and hide it in a safe place. In those days, rabbanim used to wear a spodek on weekdays. Why hide it in a secret room? The tune continues, "So we can tell our children's children that such a hat was once worn by ehrlicher Yidden."

The rebbetzin, whose husband was acclaimed as one of that generation's foremost sages, realized that times were changing and not necessarily for the better. It was vital that future generations retain a connection with their glorious past. The old fur hat would tell of a different time and place, when one lived in closer proximity to our heritage and our Torah goals. The spodek would help them know and connect with past generations.

Her foresight was acutely accurate. In the two hundred years since her era, the world, and the Jewish world in particular, has undergone vast upheavals. Not only the spodek has been forgotten, but a whole way of life.

When I was a child, Tehillim Yidden still abounded. Today, they are getting a bit thin on the ground. A Tehillim Yid did more than just say Tehillim; a Tehillim Yid lived Tehillim.

Tehillim, the Book of Psalms, is not just a sefer with some important lessons; it is the heart of Jewish life, the rhythm of our soul. Moshe Rabbeinu brought us the Torah, with its written and oral laws, giving us a pathway to Hashem. King David's gift to the Jewish people is Tehillim. It helps us find the expressions we need to proceed on that path.

When I was a yeshiva bachur, a man named Reb Shmuel had the job of waking up the bachurim fartugs. This quaint expression meant that he had to schlep some sixty adolescent boys out of their cozy beds at the unearthly hour of 5 A.M. He did this with one special tool Tehillim.

Reb Shmuel had a loud, booming voice, which was an asset to the job. On the other hand, he could not carry a tune or anything even vaguely resembling a tune. So it was no melodious, gentle wake-up call. At precisely ten minutes before five each morning, Reb Shmuel would start screaming verses of Tehillim and there was no way any of us could stay in bed with that going on.

Reb Shmuel had been through the Holocaust. He had experienced many of the shades of hell that

made up that singular tragedy. More than once, he told us that Tehillim was what kept him going.

To hear Reb Shmuel say his Tehillim was to hear the pain and the glory that is the Jewish experience. More than just sensing his deep feelings of hope, you actually felt those words being engraved into your soul. Though I never learned a shiur by Reb Shmuel, he was my rebbe. He taught me that Tehillim should be alive in your heart.

After I married, I got to know another Tehillim Yid. My father-in-law said Tehillim all the time. Between his many shiurim, he was constantly turning the pages of his well-worn Tehillim. He did much more than just recite the words. He lived them. Doubt and worry never entered his domain because the answers were always right there in King David's words.

My father-in-law would sit amid the hubbub of the family, his stream of Tehillim the background music of our lives. From kids' grazed knees to the inevitable difficulties life brought us everything was healed with those warm words.

My mother-in-law was no different, only a bit more organized about it. She had a particular number of kapitlech (chapters) that she said for each child, grandchild and ultimately great-grandchild. When her sight began to fail, she switched to a sefer Tehillim with huge letters. Toward the end of her life, even that sefer was of no use anymore, but she told us she felt she could still "see" the letters, even without her sight. Because she had imbued the walls of her home with her heartfelt Tehillim, those same letters remain in the memories of her loved ones.

We no longer have spodeks the likes of the Ropshitzer Rebbe's to hide for the next generation to gaze on, and I sometimes fear we may soon find it hard to show our youth what a Tehillim Yid is or what he stands for. It is with this in mind that I share some thoughts about the meaning of these cherished words. Maybe in this way we all can join together and at least aspire to being Tehillim Yidden.

The five books of Moshe start with the creation of the world. The first words are "Bereishis bara, at the beginning G-d created." The Bobover Rebbe, zt"l, used to point out that the word bara connotes bari, good health. Good health, both physical and spiritual, is the foundation for future growth. King David's five books of Tehillim tell us how to achieve this good health.

The first verse shows us our starting point: *Happy is the man who has not followed the advice of the wicked, stood on the path of sinners or sat among the scornful.* To build spiritually healthy life, we must first stay clear of negative influences. The canvas on which we paint our lives can become besmirched by the darkness the wicked spew forth. Painting over such the stain is difficult, and the pure, bright colors of Hashem's will be dulled. As King David tells us later, "Turn away from bad and do good" (Tehillim 34:15). Doing good starts with turning away from bad. Rashi translates Tehillim's opening words, ashrei ha'ish, as meaning "the praises of man." Turning away from bad not only makes for a happier person, but one who is praiseworthy as well.

In the convoluted world we find ourselves in, it's all too easy to fall into the trap of sitting with the scornful. Chutzpa is a commodity that is sold en masse to the herds of people too frightened to think for themselves. Even in the heimische world, all too often we can detect a smattering of scorn, derision and insolence.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) points out that the root of the word ashrei is ashur, which means to "strive forward." The wicked maintain that a Torah lifestyle is old-fashioned, a step backward for its adherents. They try to convince us that keeping Torah ideals is detrimental to our happiness, and that the Torah's rules are harsh and archaic.

King David tells us the truth. The only way to move forward is to steer clear of such counsel and become totally imbued with the Torah's values. The Zohar tells us that a gentile once asked Rabbi Elazar, "You say you are close to the King, so why are your people always in difficult circumstances while the other nations live in tranquility?"

Rabbi Elazar answered, "We are humanity's heart, and like a human heart, we feel all the pain and distress; the other nations are similar to other parts of the body."

The Sfas Emes (1847-1905) explains that our soul should likewise feel every nuance of spiritual pain. Because we allow materialistic goals to seep into our heart, we have become desensitized to spiritual matters and so no longer feel such pain.

How tragic. But, says King David, whose voice remains eternally fresh, we can avoid this pitfall. The first step toward real holiness, as this kapitel tells us, is to become aware of the negative forces evil, sin and cynicism that draw us away from our Source and to disassociate ourselves from them.

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