

RECOLLECTIONS

*The Torah Temimah Recalls
the Golden Age of European Jewry*

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chassidim into *poshim!*” When this comment spread publicly, it succeeded in adding more fuel to the rage of the *chassidim*, increasing their suffering.

The remark was characteristic of the Noda BeYehudah, who never passed up an opportunity to express his objection to *chassidim* and *chassidus*. The following story is related by his student, the Gaon Rav Eliezer Palklash, the Chief Rabbi of Prague, in his work *She’los U’Teshuvos Teshuvah MeAhavah*, vol. 1, no. 1:

It once happened that a person came to recite a blessing over the *esrog* of the Noda BeYehudah, and he began to recite the prayer *Y’hi Ratzon* printed in the *machzorim* and in the work *Likutei Tzvi*, which is based on various *chassidic* concepts of different combinations of the letters of God’s Name and other ideas. When the Noda BeYehudah heard this, he was outraged and said angrily, “I refuse to give my *esrog* to one who recites the *Y’hi Ratzon*,” and he did not give him the *esrog*.

It appears to me, however, that the Noda BeYehudah was not just reacting in anger to the *kabbalistic* nature of this prayer and its allusions, but, rather, there was an instructive purpose in his action; he was trying to teach a special lesson fundamental to Jewish law. There is a general halachic principle that *mitzvos ein tzrichos kavanah*—the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* does not require intention. Even those authorities who maintain that *mitzvos* do require intention, refer only to situations in which a particular action could have another purpose other than fulfilling a *mitzvah*. For example, a person who harvests and grinds

wheat for the purpose of producing *matzos* for use at the Pesach Seder must intend to perform these actions for the sake of the *mitzvah* because harvesting and grinding are done all year around for producing *chametz* wheat as well. Only the intention with which the wheat is harvested and ground single these activities out as a *mitzvah*. Another example would be lighting a candle for Shabbos and drinking a cup of wine for Kiddush. Since lighting candles and drinking wine are frequently done without any intention to perform a *mitzvah*, there is an opinion which maintains that there must be special *kavanah* when these acts are performed in fulfillment of a *mitzvah*.

But in a case where an action is only performed for a *mitzvah* and is never done in any other situation, for example, the *mitzvos* of Tefillin, Tzitzis, Shofar And Lulav, the actions themselves declare their intention and there is no need for any special *kavanah*.

This is why the Noda BeYehudah was so adamantly opposed to saying the *Y'hi Ratzon* prayer before the *mitzvah* of taking the *esrog*, which needs no special intention according to all *poskim*, even those who normally require intention for the fulfillment of *mitzvos*. Perhaps this is the reason why Yaavetz, in his *Siddur Beis Yaacov*, omits the *Y'hi Ratzon* for the *mitzvah* of Lulav in spite of the fact that his *siddur* is full of special prayers based on the *kabalah* and combinations of God's Name in numerous other places.

To even the score somewhat, I shall report an explanation told in the name of Rav Levi Yitzchak from Berditchev in defense of the *LeShem Yichud* and *Y'hi Ratzon* prayers. He found a hint for saying such prayers in the verse in *Tehillim* [45:2] "My heart whispers [to me to perform] a good deed; I say my actions

for the King.” He explains this verse in the following way: “When my heart prompts me to perform a *mitzvah*, I say beforehand that the action I am about to perform is for the honor of the King.” According to Rav Levi Yitzchak, although *mitzvos* do not require *kavanah* and are fulfilled even without it, one who wishes to have *kavanah* may do so and is praised for his expression of love for the *mitzvah*.

There was another reason for the anger which the chassidic *gedolim* had for the Noda BeYehudah. According to reliable sources, the Noda BeYehudah once met the founder of the chassidic movement, Rav Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, and spoke to him in a way which cut deeply into the Baal Shem’s heart. His words were taken even more seriously by the Baal Shem’s followers and admirers—all the chassidic sects and groups—since the Baal Shem Tov is considered to be the leader of them all. This was all the more intense and painful because of the Baal Shem Tov’s own deep respect for the erudition of the Noda BeYehudah.

The story goes as follows:

Before coming to Prague, the Noda BeYehudah was the Rav in the town of Yampoli in the Podolia district. Since Rav Yisrael Baal Shem Tov lived in the city of Meziboz, the two would often meet in the nearby town of Brody, where the Noda BeYehudah had studied before entering the *rabbanus*. The Baal Shem Tov was very impressed with his wisdom and showed him great respect.

One day, they both happened to be staying at the same inn on the road and sat down to eat together at the same table. As the innkeeper was serving them a bowl of soup with boiled chicken, she told them that she had just become aware of a cer-

tain *she'elah* that came up when she was salting the chicken. It seems that the salting board she used for kashering the chicken did not have the usual number of holes needed for the blood to drain away. The Noda BeYehudah thought for a moment and announced that the chicken was kosher and may be eaten.

The Baal Shem Tov also pondered the question. After the Noda BeYehudah announced his ruling, the Baal Shem Tov said, "I knew all along that the chicken was kosher." The Noda BeYehudah was amazed and asked him how he knew this. "Because," the Baal Shem Tov answered, "I did not see any impure spirit resting on it."

The Noda BeYehudah was very disturbed. "Whether one is permitted to decide a halachic question on this basis is another matter," he declared, "but one thing is certain: this kind of decision-making can only lead to abandonment of Torah study and a destruction of the covenant made with those who study and know it. This is clearly stated in *Mesechta Shabbos* [138b]: 'The Torah is destined to be forgotten from the Jewish people, as it is stated [Amos 8:12], "Behold days are coming, says Hashem, and they will search out the word of God and they will not find it." What is meant by "they will search"? A woman is destined to take a loaf of *terumah* and go to the synagogues and *batei midrash* to learn if it is pure or impure.' The question is clear. Why does she need to take the loaf with her? Can't the question be asked without the loaf in her hand as most questions are, without the food actually being brought in? Further, how does this indicate that the Torah will be forgotten from Israel?

"But one question is answered with the other. For when the Torah is forgotten from Israel, they will no longer be able to decide *she'elos* according to *din Torah*, and they will have to decide

the question by determining whether ‘an impure spirit rests on it.’ This is why it was necessary to bring the loaf to the synagogue—in order to see if an impure spirit was resting on it.”

Although the Baal Shem Tov must have been very upset and hurt by these words, he was no stranger to critics nor was he afraid of them, and thus he showed no reaction. But the great chassidic leaders of his generation and future generations could never forgive the Noda BeYehudah, as I have explained. This was, perhaps, the secret of the emotional criticism which the Rebbe expressed over the works of the Noda BeYehudah, and about this we can apply the verse, “A fire has come out of *Cheshbon!*”

Although the Noda BeYehudah’s comment on the chicken was sharp and to the point, if we examine the Baal Shem Tov’s words carefully, we can conclude that they did not contradict the accepted halachic rule that “It is not in heaven,” a rule which only applies to deciding halachic questions. In our story, one must note that the Baal Shem did not decide a halachic decision based on his revelation, but only announced that he could tell that in actuality all the blood had been removed and thus that the decision was correct.

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While we are on the topic of the Noda BeYehudah, I will relate what I remember hearing about his greatness of spirit and accomplishments for the Torah and the Jewish community. Some of the following incidents I heard directly from my father, who heard them from my grandfather, Rav Yaacov Berlin. He used to travel through Prague every year on business and became very close to Rav Eliezer Palklash, the Noda BeYehudah’s student, Rav of Prague.