Through the Long *Night*

עַד עֲלוֹת הַשַּׁחַר

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Chassidic Tales & Teachings
For Mar-Cheshvan, Kislev, and Teves

Chaim Davies

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שנת זַי"ת רַעֲנָ"ן לפ"ק

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Mar-Cheshvan

מַרְחֶשְׁוָן

V'Sein Tal U'Matar

Prayer for Rain

1. The Farmer Who Knew How to Ask His Father

A member of the Slonim family from Eretz Yisrael visited Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, the Maharash. The visitor knew the Jews of the Land well. He had heard it said that simple Jews there possessed unusually lofty souls, but he did not understand what people meant.

"Do you know how to recognize a lofty soul?" the Maharash asked. Then he told a story he had heard from his father, the Tzemach Tzedek.

In a village near Jerusalem lived a God-fearing farmer who was profoundly unlearned. He could not distinguish the prayers for weekdays, Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh, and festivals.

Each week he traveled to Jerusalem on market day, sold his fruit and vegetables, and went to a rabbi who wrote out the prayer schedule he would need until the next market day.

One week he arrived in Jerusalem unexpectedly in the middle of the week and found every shop closed. He stood with his donkey and became frightened.

Perhaps he had made a terrible mistake. Was it Shabbos? Had he unknowingly ridden and traded on the holy day?

Then he saw a passerby carrying tefillin. It could not be Shabbos.

The passerby explained that a public fast had been proclaimed because no rain had fallen. The Jews were in the synagogue, praying.

The farmer's fear took a new form. He had already eaten. He had not said the special prayers. Every other week the rabbi told him what to do; why had the rabbi failed him now?

He left the donkey in the market, ran first to the rabbi's house, learned that the rabbi was in the synagogue, and then ran there crying.

"Rabbi!" he burst out. "What have you done to me?"

"What happened, my son?"

"You did not tell me that today was a fast. I ate, and I did not say the prayers."

The rabbi explained that this was not a regular date on the calendar. Jerusalem's leaders had proclaimed the fast because of the drought. As a nonresident, the farmer had not been obligated in their local fast.

"Why must people fast merely because they need rain?" the farmer asked.

"What do you think we should do?" the rabbi replied.

The farmer explained his own habit. When his field needed rain, he went outside and spoke simply: "Father, I need rain." Then rain came.

"Then perhaps," the rabbi said, "you should do the same here."

The farmer went into the synagogue courtyard. He wept and raised his eyes.

"Father," he pleaded, "will You allow Your children in the holy city of Jerusalem to perish from hunger? Do You not see that they need rain?"

The sky darkened. Rain began to fall.

The Maharash returned to the visitor's question. Could he now measure the height of the souls concealed among the simple Jews of Eretz Yisrael?

Source: R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, Sippurei Chassidim—Torah, no. 302, as attributed in Yerachmiel Tilles's "The Farmer Method," Ascent of Safed.

2. "Squeeze the Heavens"

During a drought, the Baal Shem Tov saw an unlearned Jew crying out in prayer over the words, "*Ve'atzar es hashamayim velo yihyeh matar*"—"He will restrain the heavens, and there will be no rain."

The words appeared to ask for the opposite of what the land needed. The Baal Shem Tov did not rebuke him, because he perceived that the man's prayer was being accepted Above.

After rain fell, the Baal Shem Tov summoned him and asked what he had meant.

The man explained that he understood *ve'atzar* to mean "He will squeeze." He was begging Hashem to squeeze the heavens until no rain remained Above because all of it had descended below. He even supplied a linguistic proof from the Aramaic rendering of a related biblical word.

Source: *Keter Shem Tov*, part II, §50.

3. He Stopped Before the Rain Fell

Jerusalem needed rain. Rabbi Shalom from the lands of the West—the tzaddik later identified with Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, the Rashash—decreed a fast and ordered everyone to gather in one synagogue and pray together. He asked

Rabbi Avraham Gershon of Kitov to lead the prayers and deliver words of awakening.

Jerusalem's listeners expected a preacher to quote the Gemara, Midrash, and verses in their exact form. An error would disgrace the speaker. Rabbi Gershon therefore spent the entire night rehearsing what he would say. By the morning watch, his voice had become hoarse.

"My speech has become impaired," he told his son, Rabbi Leib, and sent him to tell Rabbi Shalom that he could not lead.

The plan for one great assembly fell apart. People returned to their usual places of prayer. Rabbi Shalom prayed in his own beis midrash, and another man stood before the amud. During the service, Rabbi Shalom heard that Rabbi Gershon's voice had returned. Immediately after the silent Amidah, he removed the substitute from the amud and sent Rabbi Gershon forward to repeat the Amidah and continue with Selichos.

Rabbi Gershon completed the repetition. He began the opening of Selichos—and then stepped away from the amud. He would not continue.

Afterward, Rabbi Leib asked his father why he had stopped. During the opening, Rabbi Gershon explained, the prayer had flowed easily in his mouth. He recognized this as a sign that his tefillah would be accepted. Had he continued, rain would have fallen immediately. He feared that such a visible answer to his prayer might bring him to pride.

Therefore he stopped. Rain would nevertheless fall afterward for two or three consecutive days.

And so it was.

Source: *Shivchei HaBesht*.

4. The Rain Would Fall That Day

Before Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov was publicly known, a strange episode forced him to leave the village where he had been living. He was taken by Rabbi Gershon of Kitov and Rabbi Moshe, rav of Kitov, to a woman thought to be mad or possessed. The spirit speaking through her claimed to know that Heaven had forbidden the young Rabbi Yisrael from using holy Names until he reached the age of thirty-six. He threatened to convene a beis din and expel the spirit. It begged to leave peacefully. After those present agreed to learn Torah for its benefit, it departed. Because of the disturbance that followed, the young Baal Shem Tov could no longer remain in his former place.

An innkeeper took him into his home as a melamed for his children. Only one room was available, and the innkeeper warned that people considered it unclean or haunted. The Baal Shem Tov accepted it. He confined the destructive forces to the attic; when they caused disturbances, he rebuked them, and they became quiet.

Then the village desperately needed rain.

The non-Jewish residents carried their religious images around the village according to their custom. Nothing happened.

The Baal Shem Tov told the innkeeper to send through the surrounding countryside and gather enough Jews for a minyan. He declared a fast, stood before the amud, and led the prayer. The congregation prolonged its tefillah. There was great weeping.

One of the gentiles asked the innkeeper why the Jews had prayed so long and cried so bitterly. The innkeeper said truthfully that they were asking for rain.

The gentile mocked them. His own people had carried their images and had failed; what could the Jews expect from their prayer?

The innkeeper repeated the mockery to the Baal Shem Tov.

“Go tell the gentile,” the Baal Shem Tov answered, “that today there will be rain.”

And so it was.

Source: *Shivchei HaBesht* §5.

5. The Woman Who Was Said to Hold Back the Rain

While the Baal Shem Tov was still living in a village tavern, the region needed rain. An unnamed non-Jewish woman, described as a sorceress, was said to possess a destructive spirit and to have performed magic to prevent the rain.

The Baal Shem Tov prayed. His prayer spoiled her working.

The spirit told the woman who had frustrated her. She went to the Baal Shem Tov’s mother.

“Tell your son to leave me alone,” she threatened, “because I will cast a spell on him.”

His mother thought the dispute might concern an unpaid liquor debt. She warned her son: “Leave that woman alone. She is a witch.”

“I am not afraid of her,” he answered.

He continued what he had begun and again prayed for rain.

The woman came to his mother a second time and afterward sent the destructive spirit against him. When it

reached the Baal Shem Tov, it could not enter within four cubits of him.

"You dared come to me?" he demanded.

He ordered it to turn back immediately and harm the woman through a small opening. The spirit obeyed and injured its mistress.

The Baal Shem Tov then seized the spirit and confined it in a "prison" in the forest, unable to move from that place.

Years later, after the Baal Shem Tov had become publicly known, he passed through the forest with companions. He stopped, went aside, and looked at the spirit still sitting in its confinement. He laughed greatly.

His companions asked why he was laughing, and he told them the story.

Source: *Shivchei HaBesht* §62 (numbered §64 in another edition), from the compiler's father-in-law.

6. Bring Your Winter Clothes

When Rabbi Nachman of Horodenka lived in Tiberias, he walked with such concealment that his stature was not publicly known. A severe drought eventually became the occasion through which he was revealed.

He told the people of Tiberias to accompany him to the burial cave of Rabbi Chiyya and his sons and pray there for rain.

The day was exceptionally hot and clear—"clear as the very heavens in purity." Rabbi Nachman nevertheless ordered everyone to take winter clothing as protection from storm and rain.

At the city gate stood the city's official and judge. When he saw the strange procession carrying heavy clothes beneath a cloudless sky, he laughed and spat in their faces.

If they returned to the city and no rain had fallen, he threatened, he would trample Rabbi Nachman beneath his feet.

They left the city and climbed to the cave. There they poured out their prayer before Hashem.

The sky darkened with clouds. A tremendous, driving rain began—so heavy that without the winter garments they could not have made their way back.

The same official was waiting at the gate.

Now he lifted Rabbi Nachman onto his shoulders and carried him into the city.

Tiberias rejoiced in the rains of favor and blessing. Hashem's Name was sanctified publicly, and the non-Jews exclaimed: "Who is like You among the powers, and who is like Your people Israel?"

Source: R. Moshe Kliers, *Tabor HaAretz* (1906), fol. 109b, from elders of Tiberi*as*.

7. The Name They Were Told to Call

Rabbi Avraham of Kalisk was close to several Sephardic Jews in Tiberias. Before they left on a long journey, they came to take leave of him.

"If you find yourselves in need of anything," he instructed them, say:

"אֱלָקָא דְאַבְרָהָם דְיָתֵיב בִּטְבֶרְיָה עֲנֵנִי."

"God of Avraham who dwells in Tiberias, answer me."

In one of the countries through which they passed, rain had not fallen for a long time. A large crowd came out to meet the travelers from the Holy Land and begged them to pray. Perhaps, the people said, the merit of those travelers would bring an answer.

At first the men refused.

The crowd pleaded again and again, until the travelers consented. They repeated the words Rabbi Avraham had given them.

The heavens darkened with clouds, and abundant rain fell.

Source: R. Mordechai Chaim Slonim, *Maamar Mordechai*, III, p. 40.

8. He Bought Rain by Paying for Someone Else's Healing

Reb Aharon Sapir of Kraków dealt in timber with partners. They bought entire forests, felled the trees, gathered the logs, bound them into raft-like formations, and floated them toward markets such as Danzig and Warsaw.

A prolonged drought lowered the rivers until the timber could not be moved. The merchants' capital lay stranded. After weeks without rain, bankruptcy threatened.

Reb Aharon traveled to Rabbi Yechezkel Shraga Halberstam of Shinova and met him in Krenitz, as one telling places it.

"Rebbe, have mercy on me and my partners," he pleaded. "Pray that rain come as quickly as possible."

The Shinover Rav put another person's pain before the merchant's crisis. His brother-in-law, Reb Naftali Elimelech—the father of Rabbi Itzikl of Pshevorsk—suffered from rheumatism. Rain made his pain worse.

"How can I pray for rain," the Rebbe asked, "when my brother-in-law suffers from the rain?"

If Reb Aharon would pay for Reb Naftali Elimelech to travel to healing baths, the Rebbe said, he would pray. The

fuller telling names the baths at Piešťany and sets the expense at 150 rubles.

Reb Aharon accepted the expense.

The Rebbe promised that he would be helped. Reb Aharon did not wait for clouds. He telegraphed his partners that rain would come shortly and ordered them to gather and tie the timber securely so that the water would not scatter it.

Other merchants laughed. Their own logs remained loose.

A tremendous downpour came. On Friday afternoon, as the Shinover Rav went to the mikveh, water entered or soaked his shoes.

"I had not meant it to such an extent," he remarked.

Reb Aharon's timber, already bound, traveled safely and profitably. The loose timber of the scoffers scattered and was lost.

Then a new dispute began. Reb Aharon asked his partners to reimburse their shares of the therapeutic journey. They refused. Who could prove that the rain had come because of the Rebbe's intervention? Perhaps it had simply rained.

The Shinover Rav sent a written confirmation. The rain, he wrote, had come in the merit of the money given for Reb Naftali Elimelech. Therefore all the business partners were halachically obligated to pay their shares of that expense.

Years later, Rabbi Itzikl of Pshevorsk made a special journey to one of Reb Aharon's grandchildren to inspect the Shinover Rav's original handwriting for himself.

Source: *Yud-Gimmel Oros LeBeis Sanz*, I, Shinova section, from R. Yaakov Leizer.

Rachel Imeinu

The 11th of Mar-Cheshvan

9. Before Going to the Fathers

At his table on the night of 11 Cheshvan 5737, Rabbi Moshe Mordechai Biderman of Lelov, the Birkas Moshe, recalled his grandfather's instruction about a journey to Chevron. Before visiting the graves of the Avos, one should stop at Kever Rachel.

Rabbi David Tzvi Shlomo Biderman had explained the order through an ordinary scene at home. A child who wanted his father to excuse him from going to cheder would approach his mother first. On washing day, when help was needed in the house, she could plead his case. The child knew where to begin.

So too, a Jew going to the fathers should first go to the mother.

The Birkas Moshe also transmitted a similar saying in the name of Rabbi Elazar Mendel of Lelov: a mother can accomplish something with the father more quickly.

The same intimacy was remembered in Rabbi David Tzvi Shlomo's greeting when he entered Kever Rachel after

Shabbos. He would say, simply, “A gute voch, Mame. A good week, Mother.”

Source: Shimon Tikotzky, “Toras Imecha,” Ohel Moed—Lelov, no. 649, pp. 3–4.

10. A Mother Likes to See Her Children Eat

On 11 MarCheshvan, according to the Lelov tradition, Rabbi David Tzvi Shlomo Biederman of Lelov came to Kever Rachel. He stood in prayer and Tehillim with great feeling and tears.

Inside the chamber he saw several Jews eating and drinking.

“Is this how one behaves?” he asked. “Is it honorable to eat and drink in such a holy place?”

One of the men answered simply: “A mother likes to see how her children eat.”

Rabbi David’l stopped saying Tehillim. He smiled and repeated the thought in Yiddish: “*A mame hot lib tsu zen vi ire kinder essen*”—a mother likes to see her children eating.

Source: *Otzar Yisrael* and *Ohel Moed—Lelov*, no. 649. The 11 Cheshvan setting belongs to the later Lelov telling.

11. Forty Years Away

A man preparing to leave Eretz Yisrael for America came to Rabbi David Tzvi Shlomo Biderman of Lelov to receive a farewell blessing.

Before he left, the Rebbe instructed him to go to Kever Rachel.

The Rebbe quoted the promise given to Rachel: “Veshavu vanim ligvulam”—“The children will return to their border.” He wanted the traveler to pray there so that he would merit to return to Eretz Yisrael.

The man followed the instruction. Then he sailed for America.

His stay lasted approximately forty years. Only afterward did he return to the Holy Land, as he had prayed to do before leaving.

Source: R. Yisrael Rosenzweig, Otzar Yisrael, as quoted in Ohel Moed—Lelov, no. 649, p. 4.

12. At "Serve Hashem with Joy"

Rabbi Yochanan of Tolna once accompanied Rabbi Shimon Natan Neta Biderman of Lelov to Kever Rachel.

The Lelover began the fourth book of Tehillim, opening with "Tefillah leMoshe." Rabbi Yochanan watched the intensity with which he recited the words.

When he reached "Ivdu es Hashem besimchah"—"Serve Hashem with joy"—he sprang into the air.

Rabbi Yochanan would later describe how the leap had appeared to him: the Lelover seemed to be standing in the air, carried by his longing and joy in serving Hashem.

"I saw it myself," he said. The sight never left his memory.

Source: Imrascha Chiyasani—Tolna, as quoted in Ohel Moed—Lelov, no. 649, p. 4.

13. The Woman at the Prison Window

Rabbi Mordechai, the Maggid of Chernobyl, devoted much of the money entrusted to him to pidyon shvuyim, the redemption of Jewish prisoners. Then he himself was imprisoned by the authorities.

His followers could not obtain his release. They did secure permission to bring him his tallis and tefillin, food, and other necessities.

Even in prison he continued distributing charity. Poor people came to the small window of his cell on Thursdays to receive their customary help for Shabbos. For the women, he placed coins on the windowsill.

One woman approached, but when he prepared to give her money, she stopped him. She had not come for charity. She had a question.

She recalled the account in the Gemara of Nechunya, who dug wells for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. When his daughter fell into a deep pit, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa declared that she would be saved. Could the very thing to which a righteous man devoted himself become the cause of his child's ruin?

"Your father occupied himself with redeeming captives," the woman said, "and you do so as well. How can you be held captive?"

"What can I answer you?" Rabbi Mordechai replied. "It is a wonder to me too."

She answered that Heaven had wished him to feel a prisoner's bitterness for himself, so that he would understand the greatness of redeeming captives still more deeply. Now that he knew that suffering, the time had come for him to leave.

She blessed him with immediate freedom and disappeared.

That same day, the prison official told Rabbi Mordechai to go home. The official himself did not know what had brought about the release.