

— Preface

Over 250 years ago, a revolutionary movement arose at the center of the Jewish world. With remarkable speed, the Hasidic movement spread throughout Eastern Europe and White Russia (now Belarus). Hasidism had a profound—and continuing—impact on Jewish spiritual thought and practice, changing it as no other movement has.

What is Hasidism? What is its innovation? Hasidism strives for consciousness of one's inner essence and simplicity—in relation to Torah, man, and divinity—and for this, there are no adequate words or direct definitions. Initially, Hasidism was an all-encompassing approach to life, a distinct way of praying, studying, and living that emphasized cleaving to and serving God with joy. Because it deals with man's inner essence, Hasidism defies easy definition or description. Our understanding is further complicated by the fact that the first generations of Hasidic masters, on principle, wrote little or not at all. Even the few writings we do have tend to be secondary sources, often fragmented and unsystematic, and are idiosyncratic to the specific environment in which they arose. Thus, they provide faint illumination, while essentially leaving us in the dark.

The *Tanya* does not purport to provide a comprehensive definition or explication of Hasidism. Nevertheless, it is the first—and in many ways, the only—systematic book of the Hasidic movement.

The *Tanya* is a small book, and it is not encyclopedic, yet it is—in a particularly Jewish sense—all-inclusive. The Written Torah is considered to be the ultimate source of the many details of Jewish thought that continually emanate from the Oral Torah. So, too, the leaders of the Chabad branch of Hasidism called the *Tanya* “the Written Torah of Hasidism,” the repository—in potential, in essence, and in full—of the whole of Hasidism.

The author of the *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, was born in 1745 in the small town of Liozna in White Russia. At a young age, he became a prominent disciple of the Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezherich

(1704–1773)—known as the Maggid (“preacher”)—who was the successor of the founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700–1760). The Maggid recognized Schneur Zalman’s greatness in Torah and his unique talent for systematic organization; he gave him the task of compiling, organizing, and recording all of the Jewish laws up to his day. (The Chabad Hasidim fondly refer to him in Yiddish as the *Alter Rebbe*.)

Rabbi Schneur Zalman’s compilation, known as *The Rav’s Shulchan Aruch*, the first volume of which was published when he was in his late twenties, was such a tremendous achievement that it established him as a great Torah luminary even among Hasidism’s detractors. It was only natural for Schneur Zalman to apply these same talents to the elucidation of the fundamentals of Hasidic teachings.

At first glance, the *Tanya* seems to affect the style of an ordinary book of *mussar*, practical advice intended to direct people in the path of God’s worship and of self-perfection. In fact, it takes an original approach to the basic issues of self-improvement, applying the principles of Hasidism to reveal the root causes of human failings and to devise comprehensive solutions.

The central innovation of the book was the creation of an original conception of the ideal to which a person should aspire: the *beinoni*. (Indeed, the *Tanya* is referred to as the Book of the *Beinonim*.) Historically, the *beinoni* represented a turning away from the predominant ideal of the Jew in the existing *mussar* literature to something more attainable, if no more closer to the abilities of the average person.

A *beinoni* is not righteous or evil, nor is he precisely something in between. This state of the *beinoni* is a condition of ongoing tension and struggle, but this fight—and our ability to conduct our lives within it—are the very purpose of the creation of humankind. As the *Tanya* explains it, this status is not simply the confrontation between good and evil, but rather the ongoing encounter between the two components of the human soul: the animal and the divine. The tension is between the part of the soul that draws us downward toward the earth and the part that aspires upward toward the divine.

The conflict, then, is not a war of annihilation, in which man seeks to destroy certain parts of his soul; rather, it is an effort to educate all the parts of the human soul, to create within them a consciousness and a feeling—until their aspirations merge with those of the divine soul, so that the person reaches a state of perfect harmony between body and soul, the earthly and the divine.

A companion message of the *Tanya* is the attainability of this goal. The *Tanya* seeks to demonstrate to the “average” man or woman that knowledge of God is there for the taking, that spiritual growth to ever higher levels is real and immanent, if one is willing to engage in the struggle. “For it is exceedingly near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it” (Deuteronomy 30:14).

The *Tanya*, then, does not create a system; instead, it clothes the essence of the system in structures that bring them to a level that is both higher and more revealed than anything that a story, a Hasidic maxim, a feeling, or a personal relationship could ever do. This, then, is how we should interpret the reaction of Rabbi Zusha of Anipoli, upon receiving this book: “I wonder how he managed to put such a great and awesome God into such a small book!”

Because this book is a “written Torah,” it requires, in every generation, an “oral Torah” to accompany it and to serve as an usher and guide. This is especially true in our generation, in which so many people grew up without any contact with the Hasidic world and are unable to access this book.

It is for this generation, and for these people, that this commentary to the *Tanya* is written. The book contains the precise text of the *Tanya* as it was written by the *Alter Rebbe*, along with its authorized translation, and a full commentary that provides source references. I have added extensive explanations of basic Hasidic concepts, theoretical background, metaphors and parables from daily life, and stories from the past and present lives of the Hasidim. The book also contains an expanded Glossary defining and expounding on various important terms and concepts.

This book is intended for all of those who have the mind and the will for it, who desire to access this world and grow through it.

— Introduction —

THE AUTHOR

The author of *Tanya*, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, was born on the 18th of *Elul* 5505 (1745), in the town of Liozna in White Russia (now Belarus). His father was Rabbi Baruch, a descendent of the famed Maharal, Rabbi Loewe of Prague. From his early childhood, Rabbi Schneur Zalman's genius and prodigious Torah knowledge were widely recognized. A few years after his marriage in 1760, he decided to study Torah at one of the great Torah centers. The two centers he considered were Vilna, home to Rabbi Elijah, the famed Gaon of Vilna; and Mezherich, where the great Maggid ("preacher"), Rabbi Dov Ber, successor to the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic movement, taught. Feeling that he knew a little about how to study Torah but virtually nothing about how to pray, he decided to go to Mezherich.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman arrived in Mezherich in 1764. Despite his student's youth, the Maggid soon counted him among the inner circle of disciples. The Maggid greatly appreciated his talents and Torah knowledge, giving the young man the task, in 1770, of compiling a new and updated *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law). Rabbi Schneur Zalman labored at this task for many years (parts of it underwent two drafts), but tragically, most of the work was destroyed by fire. Only a part of it (most of *Orach Chaim* and a few chapters from the other three sections) survived and was published after his death. The book, which is not a specifically Hasidic work, is known as *The Rav's Shulchan Aruch*; it is a tremendous halakhic ("relating to Torah law") achievement, adapting and condensing the gist of Torah law up to that time. The author's use of the Hebrew language is outstanding: he explains things concisely and clearly, in depth but without unnecessary complexities. His halakhic approach is similar, in many ways, to that of the Gaon of Vilna. Still, the work has earned an honored status

among halakhic authorities all over the Jewish world, and it serves as the basic halakhic source for Hasidim in general and Chabad Hasidim in particular. Were it not for the violent opposition to Hasidism that prevailed at the time, it would doubtless have earned even a more central position in halakhic literature.

In 1767, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was appointed Maggid in his hometown of Liozna; beginning in 1772, highly talented young men began to come to him for instruction in Torah and the service of God. Rabbi Schneur Zalman arranged these disciples in three *chadarim* ("rooms" or classes), instructing each according to his level. According to Chabad tradition, Rabbi Schneur Zalman began to consolidate his unique Chabad philosophy and approach in this same year, which is thus considered the founding year of Chabad Hasidism.

In 1774, Rabbi Schneur Zalman and his teacher-colleague, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, went as a Hasidic delegation to Vilna in an attempt to come to an understanding with the Vilna Gaon, the leading figure in the opposition against the Hasidic movement. But the Vilna Gaon refused to receive them.

In the same year, following the death of the Maggid, the Hasidic community accepted the central leadership of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk. But in 1777, under the pressure of persecution and excommunication by the opponents of Hasidism, which were directed mainly against the Hasidim of White Russia, Rabbi Menachem Mendel and a large group of Hasidim emigrated to the Land of Israel. Rabbi Schneur Zalman, who was initially in the group, was persuaded to return home and became one of the leaders of the Hasidic community in White Russia, together with Rabbi Israel of Plotsk and Rabbi Issachar Dov of Lubavich. In 1788, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, in a letter from the land of Israel, appointed him as the sole leader of the Hasidim in this region. This, however, was merely a confirmation of the de facto state of affairs, because Rabbi Schneur Zalman's comprehensive educational endeavor, both written and oral, and his impressive success in many public debates with Hasidism's opponents (including the famous disputation in Minsk in 1783), had made him the most important Hasidic leader in White Russia. Moreover, by this time, his teaching had also consolidated into a unique system within Hasidism, the system of Chabad (an acronym for *Chokhmah, Binah, Daat*; see Chapter 3).

Rabbi Schneur Zalman's influence continued to grow. Copies of his writings on Hasidic teaching circulated widely, and his published works, initially published anonymously, added considerably to the

spread of the Chabad approach and to the author's reputation. If his *Hilchot Talmud Torah* (Laws of Torah Study, published anonymously in 1794) demonstrated his knowledge of halakhah and of Torah in general, his *Tanya* (published in 1797) was a lucid and systematic articulation of the fundamentals of Hasidic teaching.

His influence spread not only throughout White Russia but increasingly also in Lithuania and even in Vilna itself, to the extent that several community leaders in this bastion of opposition to Hasidism were among his followers. This aroused the wrath of the *mitnagdim* ("opponents" of Hasidism), who, finding their old recourse of excommunication ineffective, availed themselves of their last remaining weapon: informing against him to the Russian government, which had recently annexed White Russia and Poland. The Rabbi of Pinsk brought a formal complaint to the Russian authorities, accusing a number of Hasidic leaders, and in particular Rabbi Schneur Zalman, of various offenses, both religious and political: sending money to the sultan of Turkey (actually funds he raised for the support of the Hasidic community in the Holy Land, then under Turkish rule) and the creation of a new religious sect, which Russian law strictly forbade. In 1798, as a result of these accusations, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was arrested and brought as a capital offender to Petersburg. After a secret trial, whose details we do not fully know to this day (though a number of authenticated documents and a great deal of legendary material are connected with it), he was exonerated of all charges and released from prison on the 19th of *Kislev* of that year. This day came to symbolize the public victory of Hasidism over its opponents and was established, in the lifetime of Rabbi Schneur Zalman, as the Festival of Redemption.

Historically, that 19th of *Kislev* represents a watershed in the development of Hasidism: from that point, it grew stronger, accelerated its spread, and gained tens of thousands of new followers. The date also is said to hold a deeper, spiritual significance. Hasidim came to see Rabbi Schneur Zalman's arrest, trial, and liberation as the earthly reflection of a heavenly trial, in which God was judging his activities and approach. To what extent ought the teachings of Hasidism to be publicized and disseminated? Is the generation capable of receiving these revelations? Would it uplift them spiritually, or would it perhaps cause more harm than good? The Russian authorities' verdict was, in its inner essence, the supernal verdict; the earthly court's decision to free Rabbi Schneur Zalman merely echoed the decision of the heavenly court, expressing the supernal vindication of Hasidism. Thus,

Chabad Hasidim celebrate the 19th of *Kislev* as the New Year's Day for Hasidism to this day.

The 19th of *Kislev* also marks a new period in Rabbi Schneur Zalman's teachings and works. The period before his imprisonment is known as "before Petersburg," and the period following it as "after Petersburg." Before Petersburg, Rabbi Schneur Zalman did not convey his esoteric teachings openly and clearly, leaving much to allusion. After Petersburg, the trickling wellspring became the great river of Chabad Hasidism, because Rabbi Schneur Zalman then felt that there was no longer any divine impediment to the teaching of Hasidism, and the time had come to elaborate on it and disseminate it without inhibition.

Following further slanderous accusations, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was summoned to a second interrogation in Petersburg in 1800, and after a lengthy imprisonment, though under much easier conditions, he was finally released by command of the new czar, Alexander I. On his return from prison, he moved to the town of Liadi and thus came to be known as the Rav of Liadi.

After Rabbi Schneur Zalman had largely overcome the opposition to Hasidism from without, a bitter dispute broke out within the Hasidic community, mainly over the intellectual nature of the Chabad system. The leader of the dispute, which also involved personal elements, was Rabbi Abraham of Kalisk, a disciple of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, who was later joined by Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuzh, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson. This dispute caused Rabbi Schneur Zalman deep sorrow, but it did not affect his standing, instead actually highlighting the uniqueness of his personality and his philosophy.

When Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was among the fiercest opponents of the French conquest. He feared that French rule would grant emancipation to the Jews and accelerate assimilation; he therefore supported Russia with all his power. As the French army advanced, he was forced to flee behind the Russian army to the interior of the country. He fell ill on the journey and on *Tevet* 24, 5583 (1812), died in the remote village of Pyern; he was buried in the nearby town of Haditz.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman was among the greatest Jewish personalities of his time: great in Torah, both in its exoteric or "revealed" aspect (that is, Talmud and halakhah) and in its esoteric dimension. He was learned in secular knowledge, a virtuoso of the Hebrew language, a master writer and editor, a born leader and superb administrator—in addition to being a charismatic leader, an ecstatic mystic, and a composer of

music. In each of his creative fields, he wrote books of permanent value that have become the basis of the Chabad Hasidism for all generations.

THE TANYA

The *Tanya* is not only one of the fundamental works of Hasidism, it is also one of the greatest books of moral teaching (*mussar*) of all time. Although the author modestly describes himself as a “compiler,” this is a most original work, both in its basic premise as well as in the many ideas and insights it expresses parenthetically. And though the author repeatedly notes that the book is intended for a select audience, for “those who know me personally,” it strives to solve the dilemmas with a most broad and comprehensive approach—an approach that is not specific to a particular person, time, or outlook.

Most moral works address themselves to personal problems and to the ways that a person can attain specific goals in specific areas. The advantage in such an individualized approach is that it deals with the specific questions that a person might ask himself; the answers supplied are likewise specific and definitive. On the other hand, the book is limited to the specific problems it raises and is thus of actual help only to specific individuals. Others might be impressed that the book is indeed a great and profound work, yet they will always feel that, as a book of moral teaching, it does not speak to them. It fails to answer their problems or to take into account their specific personalities and circumstances.

Tanya, by contrast, does not, in the main, address specific problems but delves into their root causes, seeking to distill the predicaments of humankind down to their most elementary maxims and to solve them in the most comprehensive way. The crux of the book is an in-depth summation of the workings of the inner soul and an analysis of good and evil in general and as fundamental forces at play in the soul and the primary sources of its dissonance. *Tanya* trains its students to see the many thousands of complexities, doubts, and drives within them as expressions of a single basic problem: the struggle between the good and evil in the human soul.

Although the book is written with great restraint, it energetically and dramatically depicts human life as an immense battle between good and evil that one endures throughout one’s lifetime, a battle between the forces that drag the soul down and the forces that strive heavenward. Each chapter develops from the previous one, and all are

interconnected, progressively leading their student to recognize the inner soul, its intrinsic duality, the array of conflicting forces within it and their respective strengths and weaknesses, and the battle's nature and vicissitudes.

In describing this battle, the author offers a completely new approach. The battle in a person's soul is actually not between good and evil (expressions he rarely uses, except when he needs to clarify a point by using the ordinary semantics of these terms) but between the two elements within the human soul: the Godly soul and the animal soul. The *Godly soul* is that part of the soul that aspires to the divine, in all its connotations. The *animal soul* is the part that relates to one's physical identity and one's involvement in the material world. These are not merely alternative terms for "good" and "evil" or for "body" and "soul"; they draw a far subtler distinction. The animal soul is not negative in essence, nor is it necessarily hedonistic. The animal soul can become refined and wise and achieve much in the life of the spirit yet remain animal. The animal soul is the soul of a human being as a biological creature, as a specific level of development in the zoological system. Even in this sense, humans are superior to other creatures in our ability to attain great heights in the realms of thought and feeling; still, we remain an animal among animals. It is in the Godly soul, in its aspiration to the divine, that man's uniqueness lies. The Godly soul yearns to cleave to and be absorbed by the divine, and only by this aspiration, by the constant struggle of the Godly soul to transcend its needs and its very self in order to attain identification with the divine light, does one achieve a true identity as a human being.

It is from this definition of the inner struggle of the soul that the appropriate solution emerges. This is not a war to the death, in which a person tries to destroy and obliterate a part of the self. As the animal soul is not fundamentally evil, the battle against it is essentially a battle of education. A person's task is to train the animal soul, to elevate it to a higher level of awareness and understanding, until it is unified, both in its objectives and in its aspirations, with the Godly soul. Thus, one achieves full harmony of body and soul, of earthliness and transcendence.

The perpetual battle in the human soul, which stems from its dual nature, also has moral and pragmatic implications. The teachers of *mussar* have always recognized the almost vital need for a person to achieve total inner identification with his deeds and actions. The assumption is that a purely mechanical act has a low moral and spiritual value. However, few individuals are capable of truly attaining such

an inner identification. This leaves to most the choice of either giving up the spiritual struggle or descending to hypocrisy and self-delusion. The *Tanya*, by delving into the nature of the relationship between a person's two souls, finds an approach that is very different, indeed revolutionary. It readily acknowledges that not everyone is able to achieve complete victory for the Godly soul over the animal, but not everyone is required to do so. A state of war within the human soul, says the *Tanya*, is not a negative thing. A person might achieve perfection with respect not only to deeds but also to speech and even to inner thoughts—without achieving complete perfection within the soul. The *Tanya* requires a person to achieve perfection in the “garments” of the soul (thought, speech, and action) but not in the soul's essence.

Thus, the *Tanya* removes the veil of hypocrisy that has cloaked many a soul as a result of the demand to elevate us beyond our capacity. The recognition of the intrinsic duality of the soul enables a person to understand that his moral imperfection need in no way impede his aspiration and ability to fulfill his divinely ordained role. Once we know that our undesirable lusts and thoughts emanate from a fundamental source within ourselves that might not be within our power and duty to uproot, their presence within us is not tragic, nor will it necessarily bring about an unsolvable inner crisis. On the contrary, a person can achieve perfection precisely through this knowledge. One can be righteous in all particulars of one's life and at the same time be engaged in the constant struggle within one's soul. *Tanya* assigns to this spiritual persona a new moral status—that of the *beinoni*, the “intermediate.” The intermediate is the hero of this book: the book addresses him, discusses him, and carries his name (one of the titles the author gave *Tanya* is the Book of *Beinonim*). The intermediate is the “one who serves God,” whose entire life is a perpetual battle for the sake of the divine, whose inner struggle is a hymn of praise to his Creator. The concept of the *beinoni* as an ideal to which every person should aspire opens the door to everyone, regardless of spiritual status, to be counted among those who aspire for true greatness—those who serve God in truth.

But these points, despite their centrality to the work, do not summarize the *Tanya*. This is a book in which the incidental ideas, as well as the supporting chapters surrounding the central theme, are no less important than the main topics. The more one reads this book, the more one discovers illuminating thoughts and ideas, a comprehensive outlook on life, insight into the structure of Jewish history, and moral guidance on countless problems. This short book encapsulates an

entire philosophy and guide to life. As Rabbi Zusha from Anipoli expressed it: "How did he put such a great and awesome God into such a small book?"

If it is at all possible to define a work such as the *Tanya*, then its best description lies in the words of the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, who said: "*Tanya* is the 'Written Torah' of Chassidim, and studying it is like studying *Chumash*: everyone studies it, from the greatest scholars to the most simple of folk; each, according to his level, understands what he understands, and no one understands it at all."

A NOTE TO THE READER

The *Tanya* is indeed a short book, in terms of the number of words, but considering its wealth of expressions and numerous innovative ideas, it is a very long book. Together with the English translation and the commentaries, the *Tanya* is grand in its simplicity, multitude of terms, and explanations, yet it is also like a gigantic mountain soaring in the distance that cannot be encompassed in a single glance. This was not the author's original intent. Just as we will state about the *beinoni*, we may state about the Book of the *Beinonim*: its goal is not only to extract the truth but to extract that truth that the reader may transfer, absorb, and implement. Therefore, to preserve the spirit of the writing, to present clear methodology and understanding, and to allow the reader to grasp the ideas both intellectually and consciously, this volume provides the reader with only part of the manuscript, a single concise unit composed of the introduction and the first twelve chapters of the *Tanya*. In this unit, Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the *Alter Rebbe*, reveals the *beinoni*, augurs his existence and essence and exposes him, chapter after chapter, until in the twelfth chapter the *beinoni* is fully displayed and revealed.

The subsequent chapters of the *Tanya* delve deeply into the development and implementation of the ideas and are essential for the reader interested in reaching the later stage of the book. However, as the author mentions in the beginning of the *Tanya*, its path is a "long-short way." Long, indeed, but short in relation to what one may accomplish now. What the reader may accomplish now is to study and teach the ideas that these initial chapters present.

And if God so wills it, may He grant us the merit of continuing our studies until such time as the long and lofty path in the heavens will be also the earth upon which we are privileged to walk.