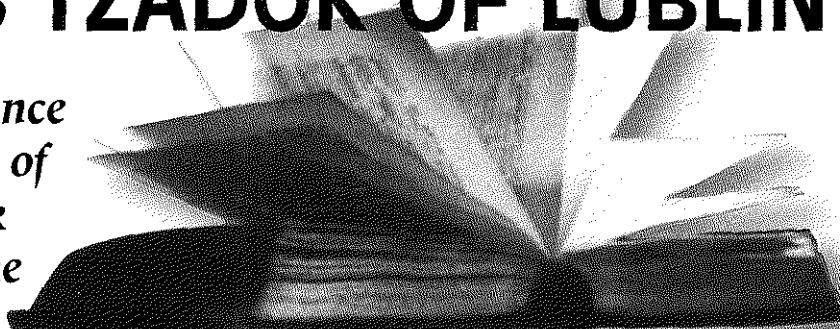


Of Uniqueness and Unity: An Appreciation of REB TZADOK OF LUBLIN זצ"ל

*The Relevance
and Appeal of
R' Tzadok
in our Time*

*A Hundred
Years Since
His Passing:
1823-1900*



I. THE ENIGMA OF HIS INFLUENCE

He was a Chassidic master for only about the last dozen years of his life. He had no children, and no enduring Chassidic dynasty or *kehilla*. Given his lack of descendants and *Chassidim*, the decimation of Polish Chassidic Jewry in the destruction of World War II might logically have consigned him to obscurity.

He was orphaned at an early age, spent much of his life in reclusive isolation or exile, and at times suffered the heartbreak of familial turmoil and Chassidic controversy. He easily could have been crippled by pain or bitterness. Much of what he wrote was lost in the upheaval of the *Churban* in Europe. The writings that remain are mostly written in stream-of-consciousness style. Most, even those ostensibly organized around a given topic, do not adhere to a clear structure. His writings are often cryptic and sometimes difficult to comprehend.

Yet 100 years after his death, Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin enjoys great influence among scholars of all types. Virtually unread in the Lithuanian *yeshivos* of Europe¹, his works are now found and often quoted in the current manifestations of those very *yeshivos*. At least three *mafteichos* (indices) of his works, organized

by topic and citation, have been published in the past fifteen years. A two-volume *Haggada Shel Pesach* using his voluminous relevant writings has been published, and at least two collections of his works, arranged by topic, have been published, one in 1981, one in the past year. Yeshiva students have been introduced to Reb Tzadok through the writings of Rabbi Dessler זצ"ל, Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, זצ"ל, and others². A number of current authors, writing in both Hebrew and English, have drawn upon Rav Tzadok in their works.

Although other Chassidic works, such as the *Sfas Emes*, have also "crossed over" to be learned widely by all types of *lomdei Torah*, their popularity may be partially attributed to the large numbers of Gerrer Chassidim who flourished both before and after *Churban* Europe. Reb Tzadok, however, did not have any built-in constituency to disseminate his teachings. He was certainly an incredible *tzaddik*, possessed of an indomitable spirit in the face of trying *nisyonos*. These qualities, however, were evident in many other *tzaddikim*, especially those of the following generations who lived during two world wars and the *Churban* of Europe. Therefore, it must be that his *derech halimud* and his message were truly extraordinary; and now, one hundred years after his death, his voice resonates even more clearly than ever. Despite his lofty terminology, ethereal concerns, and minimal practical advice in most of his writings, his message seems to

have been developed for our times, for our society, for our concerns – almost as if he could sense and know just what we would need.

II. THE ENDURING MESSAGES OF REB TZADOK

Reb Tzadok was a highly creative and original thinker, but there is no reason to credit him with being the first and only developer of certain themes. Reb Tzadok clearly built upon a multitude of sources and was particularly attracted to some of them. He was well-versed in the works of the *Maharal*. He studied the writings of Rav Nachman of Bratzlav regularly, even writing a commentary on one of his books. Reb Mordechai of Izbica, founder of the Izbica-Radziner Chassidic dynasty, was Reb Tzadok's personal mentor in *Chassidus* and his gateway into the demanding and scholarly approach of Kotzk. Yet Reb Tzadok built upon these giants and created a body of thought that brought together their ideas and those of others in a unique worldview.

Thus, one may say that in addition to his own novel approaches, Reb Tzadok fleshed out, highlighted and developed certain themes in a way that made them accessible to the sensibilities of 20th Century Jewry³. These themes have succeeded in resonating in a land and society he never saw or contemplated – in the hearts and minds of many *bnei Torah* in America and elsewhere.

Fishel Mael, of Baltimore, is a *musmach* of Yeshivas Ner Israel and the author of *Sefer Shivtei Yisroel*, a study of the characteristics of the Twelve Tribes based on *Chazal* and later *sefarim*.

A Deeper, Richer Approach to Chazal: The Significance of Events

Reb Tzadok consistently pursued another course. An event was fully understood by addressing *why* it had to happen *where* it did, *when* it did, and to *whom* it did. Details could be researched individually – perhaps one would first have to understand what *midda* was associated with this place, this animal, this nation, this plant, and then connect the pieces together to understand their synergistic relationship in the event at hand. One has a more meaningful understanding of *Chazal* when one understands how, for example, the essence of Yericho is distinct from that of Chevron⁴; how the *midda* of a donkey is distinct from that of a dog⁵; why events are associated with Kislev compared to Shevat or Adar⁶. Even the vicious slander of the cynics in Avraham's generation is not seen as random spitefulness; the significance of the aspersions they cast upon Yitzchak's paternity was worthy of study and examination⁷. If only one read more widely, and more carefully, treating each detail as an integral part of the protag-

throughout Torah literature, crossing boundaries of *Gemora*, *Midrash*, *Halacha*, *Kabbala*, and even liturgy – perhaps exemplified by Rabbi Schorr’s *Ohr Gedalyahu* – is a clear legacy of Reb Tzadok’s works⁸. Once again, this does not minimize the trailblazing contributions of the *Maharal*, the *Maharsha* and many others; it only points out the extent to which Reb Tzadok inspired serious study of *Aggada* and provided contemporary *lomdim* with the confidence and desire to embark on unraveling these mysteries.

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Everything in its Place

Consistent with this view that nothing in Torah is arbitrary, Reb Tzadok fleshed out the details of various relationships and in other cases simply made the case for underlying order. For example, he followed the *Bnei Yissas'char* and others in writing extensively on the relationship of the Twelve Tribes to each month of the year.

He also postulated that every concept occurring in a specific tractate of the Talmud, though seemingly unrelated, was in fact exactly where it belonged. For example, the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza appeared in *Mesechta Gitin* because the dissension in *Klal Yisroel* that led to the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash* paralleled the discord that leads to the dissolution of a marriage.⁹ Aggados about the *manna* appear

late in *Mesechta Yoma*, because eating on Erev Yom Kippur in anticipation of a day of complete spirituality is akin to the spiritual eating of *manna* in the desert.¹⁰ In this way, Reb Tzadok underlined his admonition to take into account every detail mentioned in a *Chazal*.

The Unique Role of Every Group

Every group – whether a *Shevet* (Tribe) in *Klal Yisroel*, men compared to women, or *Kohanim* and *Leviim* versus the rest of *Bnei Yisroel* – has a unique mission. Even various nations have specific roles, either as embodiments of certain positive qualities or as counterpoints to all or a subset of *Klal Yisroel*.¹¹ For example, the modesty exhibited by the Persian nation was primarily a ruse to allow clandestine fulfillment of immoral desires. Nevertheless, it was a positive quality that differentiated them from the nations of their time and gained them a role in the building of the Second *Beis Hamikdash*.¹²

The roles that groups play may be more or less “important,” but only in the sense that they will tend to be accorded more or less recognition or visibility. Relative obscurity does not detract from the essential irreplaceable nature of each one’s function.

The Ascendancy of Each Group In its Time

Contrary to the fashionable notion that everyone has his or her arbitrary “15 minutes of fame,” Reb Tzadok postulated that different groups and their representatives rose to the forefront according to the needs of the generation. When someone assumed leadership, it was evidence that the person’s individual and group characteristics had to be ascendant at that time and were needed to combat the perils facing *Klal Yisroel* at that time.¹³

From Reb Tzadok’s perspective, the relationship between the individual leader and the generation was often rec-

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iprocal – even *Moshe Rabbeinu* was to some extent an exemplar of his generation rather than solely a towering outside influence¹⁴. This gives one a wider view of the kings, prophets and other key persons who assumed leadership roles in *Tanach* and beyond. Why did a leader come from a certain *Shevet* or a combination of *Shevatim*? Why did Shimshon need to be a descendant of both Dan and Yehuda?¹⁵ (When *Klal Yisroel* needed a leader who embodied judgment, it called for Shimshon, a scion of a *Shevet* whose name – Dan – was indicative of their drive for the rule of *din*.¹⁶) In what ways were the positive qualities of Yeravam emblematic of his lineage from Efrayim?¹⁷ Reb Tzadok did not supply all the answers, but he did open minds to ask the questions – why was this leader a male, female, or a shepherd? – and to engage in *ameilus* – yes, *ameilus* in the study of *Tanach*, *Midrash*, and *Aggadah*! – to find the answers.

Because Reb Tzadok postulated that each group provided a unique perspective, *midda*, or strength¹⁸, one could begin to see the unity of the whole – what the totality of *Klal Yisroel* needs as its component parts. A prime example is the Twelve *Shivtei Yisroel*. Each contributes a specific strength to the nation, while conversely, each struggles to overcome specific *nisyonos*¹⁹, thereby perfecting the totality of *Klal Yisroel*. One begins to appreciate that even the less visible and less celebrated contributors are vital and irreplaceable.

III. MESSAGES FOR OUR TIMES: THE UNIQUE ROLE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL

Just as he delineated the role of every subgroup, Reb Tzadok stressed the unique potential contribution of each person²⁰. This concept is articulated in *Pirkei Avos* (“... you have no person without his hour and no thing without its place” – 4:3), but was made explicit even at the communal level by Reb Tzadok. This is not the standard, often unconsciously condescending way of comparing some Jews to generals and others to privates and foot sol-

Reb Tzadok fleshed out, highlighted and developed certain themes in a way that made them accessible to the sensibilities of 20th Century Jewry

diers. It is certainly not the secular attitude of winners and losers, “in-crowds” and hangers-on. Reb Tzadok’s view of *Klal Yisroel* was a noble perspective of an organism in which each person performs his or her role, with each individual absolutely required for the smooth functioning of the whole²¹.

Reb Tzadok’s perspective can be seen as a basis for meaning and hope in our times. We live in a period of great homogenization and devaluation of individuals. The global village, with its massive shared media and products, minimizes the appreciation of individuals as contributors in their own communities. As noted by economists, the local musician, artist, businessman, or philanthropist is now dwarfed by the performances or renown of distant (and even deceased) competitors. Large urban communities make individuals irrelevant, reducing many from contributors to mere marginal consumers. Large work organizations with highly

specialized workers producing small portions of nebulous products (reports, legislation, etc.) have replaced artisans producing tangible benefits for others. The result is often a numbing sameness and anonymity in our time. Even in our spiritual communities, abundance of resources and celebration of the famous few can leave many feeling devalued and unable to contribute.

Modern man has found two responses to this problem. One is alienation, a listless dragging through life, tinged with the vague sense of failure, which can be stilled only temporarily by conspicuous or addictive consumption. The other is striving for celebrity, along with its relatives: fame, notoriety (“any publicity is good”), and the desire for *kavod* as a means for self-validation. To spin a variation on Descartes: “I am known, therefore I exist.” Members of the religious community are not immune to trying to dull their pain through these methods.

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Reb Tzadok suggests an alternative: to know that perfecting one's unique role is of cosmic importance. When a person realizes that even in anonymity one's contributions are vital, one's life can be suffused once again with meaning (This concept has been elaborated by Rabbi Dessler as well²².) Reb Tzadok purposely spent much of his own life in seclusion despite many entreaties that he take a more visible communal role. His words can therefore have even greater credibility for those burdened by their anonymity.

Teshuva: The Fulcrum of One's Purpose

Reb Tzadok did not view *teshuva* solely as a correction of aberrant behavior, but rather – if anything – as a primary means for growth. Similarly, Reb Tzadok also viewed the cyclical concept of “*yerida l'tzorech aliya*” (falling back in order to grow to higher spirituality) as a necessary aspect of true growth. While some excel by being consistently righteous, mastery of *teshuva* provides others with their greatest potential for productivity.²³

Moreover, the areas in which a person has failed are to be viewed neither as arbitrary sins, as random *nisyonos*, nor even as indications of being a sub-standard person. Reb Tzadok was quite

clear that the opposite was true²⁴.

Every person should know that in the area that his evil inclination is strongest – in that area itself he is a ready vessel to become especially pure. Similarly, a person should know that in the areas where he has sinned most – in that area he is a ready vessel to be especially righteous and pure of heart ... because every person was born to fix and improve a specific area that is unique to him, and no one else was given this exact mission.

How different this is from the pressurized secular (and *kal v'chomer* religious worlds) in which a false misstep in career or schooling is seen as catastrophic and irrevocable, in which a blemish on one's record, a youthful indiscretion, or a crisis of faith or deed is a fatal flaw consigning one to shame and the shadows of communal life. If luminaries such as Reuven and David Hamelech could rebound from public setbacks and continue to play exalted roles, there should be hope of redemption and forgiveness for others (and from others) as well.

The Individual's Unique Struggle

Reb Tzadok's vision is noncompetitive. It does not require “zero-sum games” in which people tie their happiness and success to

achieving access to scarce resources such as a slot in a yeshiva high school, a specific *shidduch*, or a certain type of occupational position. Rather, each person lives in his or her own trajectory, fighting one's battles over one's own proclivities, drives, and *nisyonos*.

The glory of life is in overcoming one's own constraints, fulfilling the highest percentage of one's own potential, even if *no one knows*. In fact, each person has areas in which he or she has a relatively easy and natural ability to succeed and withstand temptation; in those areas, one is expected to set standards of excellence, to show how great a person can be. By contrast, fulcrum areas – those areas in which the person must struggle mightily – are the person's battlefield, the areas in which one could glorify Hashem's name most by demonstrating the power of *teshuva* and *bechira*.

The Centrality of Burning Desire

A recurring theme in Reb Tzadok's writings is the centrality of *cheshek* – the burning desire to strive, to achieve, and to improve. The *Avos* are differentiated by the focus of each one's *cheshek*²⁵; the superiority of women is embodied in an unquenchable *cheshek* that is inaccessible to most men²⁶; and Rachel Imeinu's qualities are tied to her great *cheshek* for children²⁷.

Even Haman has a hand in this quality: Reb Tzadok said that Haman's burning desire to destroy *Klal Yisroel* had value – so much so that *Klal Yisroel* had to “fight fire with fire” and rise to the occasion with their own *cheshek*²⁸. Blasé, cynical, detached approaches to life, while consistent with the aforementioned alienation of the times, are foreign to Reb Tzadok's worldview; they are but variations of sleepwalking compared to Reb Tzadok's ideal of a vibrant spiritual life of growth and *teshuva*.

IV. WHAT TO COME AWAY WITH

The writings of Reb Tzadok are so vast that other individuals will certainly come away with



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different views of the essence of his teachings²⁹. It would be fitting that different people, according to their *neshamos*, their interests, and their cognitive styles, would find different aspects of Reb Tzadok's *hashkafa* most compelling. One would hope that this article will spur others to find that which is most meaningful to them in Reb Tzadok's thought. Nevertheless, these are one person's perceptions of some ideas and practices that might perpetuate his memory and his message and that could be used for spiritual growth and hope:

1. In learning: strive to find significance in each statement, every detail in *Chazal* and their *Aggados*. We do a disservice to *Chazal* when we treat their statements and stories as fuzzy, generic material meant for vague inspiration. The dictum "*ein meshivin al hadrush*" was never meant as a justification for sloppiness. When we dissect the seemingly inscrutable in *Chazal* to uncover meaning, we increase the possibility of breaking through to new vistas of *machshava*. That perpetuates Reb Tzadok's legacy.

2. Take our own lives seriously – we should each strive to find our points of excellence. We certainly cannot become a community of academic-like specialists ("I'm only into *Baba Metzvia*, *shatnez* testing, and *shidduchim*; the rest is for others.") Reb Tzadok would not advocate abandoning the needs of spouse, children, and others in a single-minded quest for fulfillment. A person, however, may sometimes need to step back from socially driven, obligatory expressions of spirituality to figure out the hard questions:

What *mitzva* (or area of *chessed*) do I feel strongly about mastering for myself?

Which *mitzva* (or area of *chessed*) do I wish to strengthen and bring alive for others?

What should I learn that will allow me to be engaged, enthusiastic and driven – despite the many demands on my time?

What *limud* will allow me to excel

and make an ultimately unique contribution?

3. And the reverse as well. We should avoid trying to work around our failings as if they are embarrassing, immutable properties of our essence. Life is not a job resume in which we highlight our strengths and gloss over the rest. Rather, we should embrace knowledge of our vulnerable points – those desires or weaknesses that we stumble over again and again, that interfere with fulfilling our life's missions. Refining the areas in which we are most lacking may never gain us recognition or competitive advantage, but it is the place where we can most be *mekadesh Shem Shamayim*,

where we can demonstrate the reality of *Hashem's* existence by embodying the miracle of *teshuva*. The excellence we show by breaking through the despair of our chronic failures is an incomparable, defining act of courage that can never be replicated by anyone else.

4. And finally, as a *zechus* for the memory of this great *tzaddik*: To do whatever we must, despite all the distractions of our tumultuous, harried society, to fight lethargy and smugness; to fight the dread that our best days will never come or have passed us by; to maintain, by whatever means, the *cheshek* to grow and strive; and no matter what, to never, ever give up. ■

¹ Rabbi Avrohom Boyarsky of Baltimore, a *talmid* of the Chofetz Chaim, told me that although Reb Tzadok's reputation as a great *Rebbe* was known, his *sefarim* were not found in Radin and were not learned in the Lithuanian *yeshivos*.

² I have been told that Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz זצ"ל and Rabbi Hutner זצ"ל had an important role in introducing American *bnei yeshiva* to Reb Tzadok's writings.

³ This is an example of the *Chiddushei HaRim's* principle that every generation is provided with scholars who can interpret *divrei Torah* in ways that are relevant to and necessary for that generation.

⁴ *Pri Tzaddik*, *Hoshanna Rabba* #29; *Kometz Hamincha* p. 48.

⁵ *Tzidkas Hatzadik*, #23.

⁶ *Pri Tzaddik*, *Kislev* #2; *Pri Tzaddik*, *Shevat* #1; *Resisai Layla* p. 22 and p. 172.

⁷ *Pokeid Akkarim*, p. 5.

⁸ A similar progression from solely text-based commentaries to topic-based essays also took place in the realm of *lomdus*, although the advent of essays devoted to complete treatment of *sugyos* took place earlier. An example of this genre

would be the *Shev Sh'mattesa*.

⁹ *Pri Tzaddik*, *Erev Yom Hakipurim*, #1.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Tzidkas Hatzadik*, #256.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *Pri Tzaddik*, *Shekalim* #1; *Takanas Hashavin* p. 55.

¹⁴ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #76.

¹⁵ *Pokeid Akkarim*, p. 40.

¹⁶ *Takanas Hashavin* p. 43 (see also *Pesachim* 4a).

¹⁷ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #159.

¹⁸ *Takanas Hashavin* p. 55; *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #198.

¹⁹ *Resisai Layla* p. 32; *Takanas Hashavin* p. 51; *Machshavos Charutz* p. 12 and p. 55.

²⁰ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #249.

²¹ *Yisrael Kedoshim*, p. 21.

²² *Michtav M'Eliyahu* vol. 1 p. 250.

²³ *Takanas Hashavin* p. 29.

²⁴ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #49.

²⁵ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #248.

²⁶ *Resisai Layla*, p. 220.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *Tzidkas Hatzadik* #250.

²⁹ See for example Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, *Jewish Action*, Fall 1996, pp. 31-35.

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