



*Jewish Tales
of
Mystic Joy*

Yitzhak Buxbaum



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Jewish Tales
of
Mystic Joy

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*This book is dedicated to
Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach
and to all Jews who show their fellow Jews
how joyful Judaism can be.*



S'micha *as a Maggid*

*W*hen my spiritual master, the holy and pure Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, gave me *s'micha* (ordination) as a *maggid*, a teller of sacred Jewish tales, he put his holy hands on my head and said:

B'ezrat HaShem

Maggid devarav l'Yaakov.

Aileh hadevarim asher tidabeir el bnai Yisrael.

Bizeh anu somchim v'tomchim u'm'chazkim yidei

Reb Yitzhak ben Meir Buxbaum

*sh'yichyeh lihiyot machzir al hap'tachim, pitchaihem
mikuvanim*

petach habayit sha'arei halev liban shel Yisrael

l'hachzir otam avaida mida'at da'at Elyon

b'divrei aggada sh'moshchim liban shel Yisrael

b'divrei hitorerut.

Kumi ori ki va oraich.

Yagid yagid

Y'orair y'orair

Yachzir yachzir

am Yisrael b'tshuvah shleima mitoch ahavah.

*Koh t'varchu v'yizkeh lirot b'haramat keren Yisrael mitoch
simcha.*

With the help of God,
Be a *maggid*, a teller of tales, and speak sacred words to
the seed of Jacob.
These are the words you shall speak to the Children of
Israel.
With this, we support, strengthen, and uphold the hands of
Reb Yitzhak son of Meir Buxbaum
To live a life of the spirit, making the rounds, knocking on
all doors, the doors facing each other, the door of the
Temple, the gates of the heart, the Heart of Israel
To return those who are lost, lost to mind,
the Mind of the Most High,
With stories that draw the heart of Israel and cause them to
awaken.
Arise, shine, for your light has come!
Tell, tell
Awaken, awaken
Return, return the People of Israel in complete repentance,
from love.
So shall you bless, and merit to see the raising of the honor
of Israel, in joy.

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NOTE TO THE READER

Although the language in this book sometimes refers to God as “King,” “Father,” “He,” and “Him,” God is not corporeal and has no gender. Men and women are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and God has both masculine and feminine traits.

Jewish Tales
of
Mystic Joy



Introduction

There are many Jewish tales that vividly show the joy, bliss, and ecstasy of holy people, particularly the *tzaddikim*, the Hasidic movement's charismatic leaders, and the Hasidim, their devoted followers. This book contains a selection of these tales that portray the mystic joy that comes from a passionate love for God.

The Jewish mystics say that the ultimate human aim is to attain the bliss that God intends for us. For that reason, we need to read and hear tales about mystic joy, to see the happiness that awaits us if we strive for holiness. The Hasidic stories draw us into the world of the tales and allow us to taste the mystic joy the tales describe. I hope that reading these enchanting sacred stories gives you holy pleasure and that their sweetness inspires you to seek mystic happiness and joy for yourself.

MYSTIC JOY

To fully appreciate the tales, we must understand the teachings of the Rabbis about mystic joy, about ecstasy and bliss.

According to Jewish mystic teaching, God's presence, the *Shechinah* ("Indwelling"), is everywhere, and there is no place where God is not present. One of the main goals of Jewish mystics is to go beyond mere belief and observance to attain spiritual experience,

acting and meditating so as to achieve *d'vekut*, a constant loving awareness of the Divine Presence. That is the essence of mysticism—directly knowing God.

D'vekut, say the mystics, brings with it intense spiritual delight, for, since God's nature is bliss, the essence of God-awareness is bliss. They often quote the Torah verse "There is strength and gladness in His place"¹—saying that if one reaches God's place, one will share in His bliss, for nearness to God produces mystic joy and ecstasy.

 An ancient rabbinic parable tells of a princess who married a very wealthy commoner. Eager to please his wife and make her happy, the man gave her everything a devoted husband could give his wife—a gorgeous mansion with the finest, most expensive furniture; an exquisite wardrobe; many personal servants to attend to her every need.

Yet he saw that she was unmoved by everything that he gave her and asked her about it.

She explained to him that no matter *what* he gave her, she had had better in her father's palace.² 

The Rabbis say that the "princess" is the soul that has descended to this world from heaven, and the parable teaches that no matter what a person attains materially in this world—money, a good job, a wonderful spouse and family—his soul will never be made happy by worldly things but only by spiritual things, for the soul is a "princess" from a higher realm.

According to Jewish mystic teaching, the soul is an actual part of God. Therefore, its essential nature is bliss and joy. The soul yearns for joy; it requires joy; but it can only be satisfied with spiritual joys and pleasures that reveal and disclose its true nature.

Why did God, who is perfect and needs nothing, create the world? The Jewish mystics say He created the world in order to share

His supreme bliss with creatures, with human beings. How, then, can a person attain this exalted state, reveal his innate potential, and share the divine bliss and joy? Only by cleaving to God in devotion, fulfilling His will, and delighting in divine providence.

All worldly happiness is ephemeral and susceptible to change, since it depends on a cause. When the cause disappears, so too does the happiness. Worldly success may disappear in an instant. Everyone knows about famous individuals—politicians, business magnates, celebrities—who fell from the heights of success to the depths of failure and humiliation. The Rabbis say there is a “wheel” in the world; someone on top today may be on the bottom tomorrow. Even if a person has arranged a wonderful life for himself, with family and work, with everything in its proper place, unexpected events can suddenly destroy his worldly happiness; the matter is out of his control.

One can never find permanent happiness in impermanent pleasures. Only divine joy is eternal and unchanging, because it manifests and reveals the inner truth of the human soul. All the enjoyments a person derives from external objects and worldly pleasures cannot compare to the immense joy that lies within us, if we can only tap it, if we can only contact our soul and its heavenly source of unlimited joy. When a person cleaves in devotion to the Divine Presence and shares in divine bliss, his joy is constant and immune to any worldly change. Who would not want that? Indeed, deep down, that is what everyone wants—unending, unchanging, unceasing joy.³

MYSTICAL AND JOYFUL HASIDISM

Most of the stories in this collection are Hasidic, which is no accident, since Hasidism actively fosters and encourages religious joy. Let us briefly consider the connection between Hasidic mysticism and joy.

Hasidism, which began as a pietistic revival movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, founded by Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, represents a living Jewish mystic tradition. Part of what made it different from the Judaism of its time is that it was both

mystical and joyful, with an emphasis on love of God and uninhibited devotion. The religious establishment of rabbis and scholars, however, emphasized the fear and awe of God. They tended toward strictness and severity and an accompanying sadness. In fact, the terrible antisemitism of the period had produced a sadness and depression among Jews that had infiltrated even Jewish religious life, giving rise to an ascetic and morose form of piety.

Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem Tov broke this spiritual bondage to sadness and misery and restored the Torah path of love of God and joy. One reason he was able to inspire a vibrant new religious reform movement is that he was a mystic who realized in his own life the abundant spiritual blessings promised by the ancient Jewish mystic tradition to those who achieve the goal of God-consciousness. He had reached God's place of bliss and joy and could lead others there.

The Baal Shem Tov ("Master of Divine Names") taught his new mystic path to the spiritually inclined among the religious elite, but he also reached out to the common folk. Many of the contemporary rabbis, who focused exclusively on the intricacies of talmudic scholarship and on an exacting observance of Jewish religious law, looked down on the often unlearned and imperfectly observant Jewish masses. Because the Baal Shem Tov cherished the common people's simple faith and devoted loyalty to Judaism and communicated to them his loving appreciation, large numbers of them flocked to Hasidism's banner, and the new movement expanded rapidly.

Another prominent innovation of the early Hasidic movement was its strongly communal orientation. Hasidic religious communities were organized around charismatic mystics called *tzaddikim* (plural of *tzaddik*) or *rebbe*s. Most people could not be full-blown mystics, but they could still be close to God by attaching themselves to true mystics, such as the Baal Shem Tov and his disciples, who would lead them to God and to the joy that comes from His nearness.

Early Hasidism produced a wealth of tales about the *tzaddikim*. Storytelling about them was viewed as a sacred act that inspired people to attach themselves to the *rebbe*s and to imitate their holy ways.

These tales described the rebbes' holiness and kindness, their mystic attachment to God, and also their ecstatic joy.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MYSTICISM AND JOY

The Baal Shem Tov taught that God is everywhere and always near, and a person who cleaves to Him through that fervent belief will experience His nearness and be filled with joy.⁴ He also taught that to make spiritual progress and achieve mystic states of consciousness, a person must be joyful. According to Jewish mystic teaching, since both God-awareness and joy are states of expanded consciousness, they naturally belong together and mutually affect each other. The Hasidic rebbes said that a person who is God-conscious becomes joyful, and a person who is joyful, even because of worldly joys and pleasures, draws closer to God. The mystics actually see divinity; they see that all the world and everything in it is alive with Godliness. Joy opens a person's eyes to this awesome and thrilling God-vision. Joy has tremendous spiritual power.⁵ If even worldly joy can bring a person closer to God, how much more is that true of spiritual joy! The Holy Ari, the great medieval kabbalist, revealed that he reached his exalted mystic level only because of the joy with which he performed the *mitzvot*, the Torah's divine commandments.

TRACING JOY TO ITS SOURCE

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, the great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov and a great Hasidic mystic, told the following parable:

 A man went to a wedding and walked around listening to what the guests were saying. He overheard some people saying, "Oh, the food here is terrific! I haven't eaten such good food in a long time!"

He thought, “They’re not really at a wedding. They’re at a restaurant.”

Then he overheard some people saying, “It’s so nice to see old friends and family. And the music’s unbelievable!”

He thought, “They’re at a party.”

Then he overheard some people saying, “Isn’t it wonderful that Moshe and Shprintza are getting married?”

“Ah,” he thought, “they’re at a wedding!”

After the feast, he went for a walk in the woods behind the wedding hall and reflected on his experience.

Finally, he looked up and said, “God in heaven, thank You so much for all the weddings in the world, that two people can join in love and become one!”

He walked on a while farther, then looked up and said, “God, thank You for all the joy in the world!”⁶ 

Weddings and the joining together of soulmates are the most intense expression of the joy that God gives to the world.

The kabbalists teach that all joy, all pleasure comes from God; it is a revelation of His *Shechinah*, His Divine Presence in this world. But joy and pleasure can be experienced on many different levels, higher and lower, one above the other. A person can enjoy merely the physical and sensual taste of food, or he can realize that the taste itself is Godliness and a manifestation of God’s closeness. The mystic path traces all pleasure and joy back to its single divine root. A mystic finds at the end that all earthly and bodily pleasures have their source in God, and he experiences all of life as a revelation of the one divine reality, a reality that is nothing other than an expression of bliss and joy.

JOY IN HIS PLACE

The Torah verse that says there is “gladness in His place” teaches that if one reaches God’s place, one will share His bliss. When a person begins the Jewish spiritual journey, he thinks that to reach God’s place, he must find holiness in a synagogue or near a holy teacher. And that is true. But eventually he realizes the deeper mystical truth. The Rabbis teach that “God is the Place of the world.”⁷ One of the traditional names for God is “the Place.”⁸ The Baal Shem Tov described the relation between God and the world as like a snail whose shell-home is part of its own being. Therefore, one is always in God’s place, for God dwells within the world, which is also divine. And since God is bliss, all the world that emanates from Him is bliss. A mystic realizes that there is nothing but Him and nothing but joy and bliss in everything that happens. All events—the good and the seemingly bad—are like waves of joy passing through the one Reality. Our very being is also part of that blissful Reality, and everything we experience, whether happy or sad, is in essence ecstasy and bliss, if we only seek our inner root.

JOY ABOVE AND BELOW

One way the Baal Shem Tov and the rebbes who followed him tried to shake the Jewish people out of their depression and melancholy was by teaching them that God wanted them to be happy. In fact, they said, if a person believes in God, he *must* be happy, for God is all good and everything He does is good. Sadness shows that one does not really believe this. To put it radically, sadness is a sign of atheism.

Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid (preacher) of Mezritch, the Baal Shem Tov’s great disciple and his successor as leader of the Hasidic movement, taught that the “face above” reflects the face below. God’s face toward you reflects your face. If your face is sad, so is God’s face to you; but if your face is joyful, so is God’s face.⁹ Sadness draws to you unhappy events; joy draws to you God’s blessings.

The *Zohar*, the central book of the Kabbalah, says:

Come and see! The lower world is always waiting to receive and it is called “the jewel.” And the upper world bestows [its light, which is reflected in the jewel] only according to the receptivity of the lower world. If your face shines with joy below, then Heaven [God] shines to you from above, but if there is sadness below, Heaven dispenses judgment. Therefore, serve God with joy, because a person’s joy draws to him joy from above.”¹⁰

If you are joyful, Heaven sends you blessings and adds joy to your joy.

LOVING JOY AND HATING SADNESS

According to Kabbalah, the worlds below reflect the worlds above. The mystic teaching that God’s face shines with joy at a person who is joyful expresses itself in this lower world in the common fact that everyone loves a happy person. In a profound but provocative insight, some Hasidic rebbes claimed that God finds a joyful person so irresistibly appealing that He cannot refuse even a joyful sinner entrance into His presence.

 There was a man in Lublin who was a notable sinner yet was granted an audience whenever he wanted to speak with Rebbe Yaakov Yitzhak, the holy Seer of Lublin, as if he were among the rebbe’s inner circle. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people came to visit the Seer at one time. Others who were less privileged than this man had to wait days, weeks, or even months to see the rebbe.

Some of the Hasidim were irritated by the favor shown to this man and complained among themselves, “Is it possible our master does not know that this per-

son is a great sinner? If the rebbe knew, he would certainly not be so friendly with him!”

When they told the Seer, he answered apologetically, saying, “I know about him as well as you. But what can I do? I love happiness and hate sadness! And he is such a confirmed sinner that even though most sinners momentarily regret their act afterward—which does not stop them, however, from going back to their sinning later—this man does not regret his sins the least bit and he is not sad for even a moment! I find his happiness so appealing that I cannot keep from talking with him!”¹¹ 

The Seer of Lublin’s attitude reflected the attitude of God. Just as even a sinner’s joy gains him entrance into God’s presence, depression blocks the divine light and keeps a person from approaching God. The ancient rabbis expounded the Torah verse “There is strength and gladness in His place” by saying that one may not enter the gates to the king’s palace wearing a mourner’s sackcloth.¹² Rebbe Yisrael of Rizhin, who, like the Seer of Lublin, loved joy and happiness and hated sadness and depression, reflected this “etiquette” of the divine palace. A morose Hasid, who always wept when praying and walked around with a glum expression on his face, who mistakenly thought that a pious person must be miserable and melancholy, was not allowed into the rebbe’s presence. “He is drawing nourishment from the unclean side,” the rebbe would say.¹³ If that Hasid wanted to be near the rebbe, he had to change his ways, abandon his misguided piety, and at least try to be happy!

The Rizhiner taught his Hasidim, “A Jew who wants to cleave to God, blessed be He, about whom it is said, ‘strength and gladness are in His place,’ cannot allow himself to become sad. If a Jew has forgotten to be happy, it is a sign that, God forbid, he has forgotten God. I must tell you,” he continued, “that I suspect that many nonreligious

assimilated Jews will attain the World to Come in the merit of their un-failing happiness.”¹⁴ Thus a happy sinner was permitted to enter the rebbe’s presence, but a morose Hasid was excluded!

It is, however, important to distinguish between two kinds of sadness. Whereas depression makes a person melancholy and closes him to other people and to God, the rebbes teach that the sadness of repentance—a person’s bitterness and heartbrokenness over his spiritual failures—eventually opens him to God and to people. In the end, such holy sadness always enlivens a person and leads to joy.

A person may enjoy many different kinds of pleasure in life. Each individual must choose which pleasures to enjoy, which of them to seek and focus on—the lower and lesser worldly pleasures or the higher and greater spiritual pleasures. The happy sinner to whom the Lubliner was attracted and the nonreligious people mentioned by the Rizhiner are certainly not the Jewish ideal! As the tales in this book reveal, the greatest worldly happiness, even if unblemished by regrets, pales beside the radiant mystic joy of those who have drawn close to the living God.

Religion not only *should* be joyful, it *must* be. A person who does not derive joy from his religious involvement will not progress spiritually. The Baal Shem Tov taught that the soul, whose source and root is in the World of Joy, requires joy by its very nature. Someone who deprives himself of the higher holy joy will be forced to seek and enjoy only lower worldly and bodily pleasures that are ultimately unsatisfying.¹⁵

The Baal Shem Tov, the Lubliner, the Rizhiner, and other rebbes taught that a religious person should avoid sadness at all costs. One could almost say they taught that sadness is forbidden! But their intention was not to make unhappy people doubly sad by telling them that they were also sinning! Their happy teaching “prohibiting” sadness should make a person smile! God so much wants you to be happy and joyful that He positively forbids you to be sad! This lesson can be a potent stimulus to joy. The whole point of the rebbes’ charmingly provocative teaching is for a person to use the powerful notion