

JOURNEYING WITH A REBBE: What Does The Niggun of Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev Say to Each of Us?

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SHORT BIO/SUMMARY:

Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev (Levi Yitzchok Derbarmdiger (compassionate in Yiddish) ([Zamość, Poland](#), 1740–1809), also known as the holy **Berditchever**, and the **Kedushat Levi** (from the name of the book of Torah commentary he wrote), was a [Hasidic](#) master and Jewish leader. He was the rabbi of [Ryczywół](#), [Żelechów](#), [Pinsk](#) and [Berdychiv](#), for which he is best known. He was one of the main disciples of the [Maggid of Mezritch](#), and of his disciple Rabbi [Shmelke of Nikolsburg](#), whom he succeeded as rabbi of Ryczywół.

Levi Yitzchak was known as the "defense attorney" for the Jewish people or the protector, because he would intercede on our behalf before God. He would undo divinic decrees: his favorite rabbinic quotation was Moed Katan 16b. "The blessed Holy One issues a decree, but the *tsaddik* nullifies it." He was called a *melits tov* or a *melits yosher*, one who intervenes or speaks out as the role of the defending angel saving Israel from punishment.

He always saw good in people. Known for his compassion for every Jew. One of the models of the *tsaddik* was "to find the good in Jews then, to point out those merits, both to God and to them. In part, this is to convince God to forgive the, and the *tsaddik* is loved for that intermediary function, appealing to God for Israel, even demanding of Him that He forgive. But the *tsaddik* understands this show of goodness also has a profound effect on his flock psychologically. Showing them their goodness rather than pointing out their sins is the best way of causing them to live up to the rosy picture the *tsaddik* paints of them. from chapter of *The Hasidic Tsaddik* and the quest for Models." (from [Defender of the Faithful](#))

BOOKS ABOUT THE BERDITCHEVER (also see *Kedushat Levi* (his Torah commentary) in Sefaria, translation (interpretation) by Eliyahu Munk)

1. [Defender of the Faithful, The Life and Thought of Rabbi Levi Yitshak of Berdychiv](#), Arthur Green
2. [The World of a Hasidic Master, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev](#), Samuel H. Dresner
3. [A Merciful God, Stories and Teachings of the Holy Rebbe, Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev](#), Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Netanel Miles-Yepez
4. [Tales of the Hasidim](#) (one chapter), Martin Buber
5. [Souls On Fire, Portraits and Legends of Hasidic Masters](#) (one chapter), Elie Wiesel

Two favorite pieces of Torah

Excerpt from Kedushat Levi, Lech L'cha, (Gen. 12:1) translation by Jonathan Slater

s.v., o yevoar el ha'aretz asher ereka

או יבואר, אל הארץ אשר אראך, הכלל כאשר האדם מסופק אם לעשות או לא אזי ישכיל בשכלו אם יש לו איזה בהירות השכל אזי יעשה, וזו אשר אראך לשון בהירות השכל
 “[The Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house] **to the land that I will show you**” (Gen. 12:1)

Here is the rule: when you are uncertain if you should do something or not, you should pay attention. If you sense clarity in your thinking, in your inner awareness, then you should do this thing. This is the meaning of God’s promise “I will show you (*ereka*).” **This word implies clarity of awareness.**

Excerpt from Kedushat Levi, Shmot, (Ex.3:7-9) translation by Jonathan Slater

s.v., vayomer YHVH ra'oh ra-iti et oni ami asher bemitzrayim ve-et tza'akatam shamati mipnei nogshav etc. ve-atah hinei tza'akat benei yisrael ba eilai etc.

ויאמר ה' ראה ראיתי את עמי אשר במצרים ואת צעקתם שמעתי מפני נוגשיו כו' ועתה הנה צעקת בני ישראל באה אלי כו'. הנה לבאר, כי כשהאדם מבקש איזה טובה מהבורא יתברך אזי לא יהיה עיקר כוונתו מחמת דבר הנוגע לעצמותו רק עיקר כוונתו יהיה כדי שעל ידי זה יעבוד את הבורא יתברך שמו בטוב לב. והנה ישראל במצרים היו בקטנות השכל וצעקתם היה מחמת דבר הנוגע לאדם לעצמותו ולא צעקו שיושיע להם מצרתם בכדי שעל ידי זה יעבדו את הבורא ברוך הוא ויקראו עם ה', כי במצרים היו בקטנות השכל. והנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עשה להם שני טובות. אחד, מה שהושיע להם בצרתם מיד מצרים ועוד עשה להם טובה גדולה שקיבל צעקתם כאלו צעקו בשבילו, כלומר כאלו צעקו שיושיע להם מצרתם שעל ידי זה יקראו עם ה'. וזהו רמז בפסוק ראה ראיתי את עמי מפני נוגשיו, רמז ראיתי את עמי עמי אשר רוצים להיות עמי. וזהו הרמז בפסוק ועתה הנה צעקת בני ישראל באה אלי, כלומר כאלו עיקר צעקתם אלי בשבילי אשר רוצים וצועקים שאושיע להם בשביל לעבוד אותי. ורמז בפסוק שלפניו ואת צעקתם שמעתי מפני נוגשיו, מה שצעקו בשביל עצמם מפני נוגשיו מפני שהיו במצרים: **בשיעבוד והיה להם שכל קטנות**

“**And the Lord continued, ‘I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters;** [yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.] **Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me;** [moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt’]” (Ex.3:7-9).

When we want some good or other from the Blessed Creator, our fundamental intention should not be to satisfy our personal ends. Rather, our intention should be that with this boon we would better be able to serve the Blessed Creator with a full heart. **When Israel was in Egypt, their awareness was limited, and their outcry emerged from their personal needs. They did not cry out for God to save them from their suffering so that they would be better able to serve the Blessed Creator, to then be called the “People of Adonai.” Surely, in Egypt their awareness was constrained.**

But, the Holy One benefited them in two ways. One was that God saved them from their suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. The second, greater benefit was that **He received their outcry as if they had been crying out on God’s behalf, that is, as if they had cried out that God save them from their suffering so that they may be called the “People of Adonai.”**

This is hinted at in our verses. “I have marked well the plight of My people” – that they want to be My People. So, too, in the verse “Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me” – as if the fundamental intention of their outcry was to “reach Me,” for My sake. They cry out their desire that I save them so that they might serve Me.

This is how we can then interpret the earlier verse “I have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters” – they cried out only for themselves: because of their taskmasters, because they were in Egypt bondage, their awareness **was constrained.**

Jonathan Slater: We often think that our spiritual endeavors can only be effective when we are fully aware of our intentions and undertakings. Levi Yitzhak suggests that even when our awareness is limited, when we are constrained in our own Mitzrayim, in some fundamental way we are still oriented toward God. And, God knows this, then acting on our behalf. **God listens carefully, hearing our true deep desires even when we can’t express them directly – to serve God with a full heart.**



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Intimate Song for You

(From The Hidden One, Cantor Richard Kaplain, z”l, in Yiddish)