

The Volper

When the **Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of Chabad Chasidism)** remained in Russia after Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Horodok/Vitebsk went to Israel, the Rebbe began to spread his teachings over the vastness of Russia, sending rays of the light of Chasidic philosophy to every city and town. At first he had very few chasidim, and the chasidic movement was quite limited in scope, but day by day its light was revealed and people came to Liozna to investigate for themselves.

Here is the story of one who became an exceptional advocate of the Alter Rebbe:

He had shabby clothes and a persistent smell of vodka about him. He was tall and skinny, and had prominent cheekbones, but his most distinguished feature was the sparkle in his eyes. Very few people knew him. He was known as the Volper; nobody knew his first name.

The few who did know him also knew that the Volper was a prodigious Torah scholar who used to be a student of the *Maggid of Mezritch*. He had shared a bench with the great Chasidic luminaries, such as Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, Rabbi Zushe of Anipol and his brother Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, and even with the youngest of the group, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi.¹ Together they had absorbed Torah and Chasidic teachings from the great Maggid.

The Volper however, had unique qualities which set him apart from the others. After the Maggid finished speaking, the other students would go over to the Volper to hear him repeat the Maggid's teachings. When he spoke, everything was clear and his audience would be completely overcome.

Nobody knew what led to the Volper's downfall. At some point, he began drinking excessively. He even began to frequent bars. He did not speak about himself. Wherever he went on his wanderings, his mouth would spew forth pearls of Torah and wisdom, even the deepest secrets of Torah. The more he drank, the more the "secret came out," the secrets of Torah. People who did not understand him mocked him.

One day the Volper arrived in Liozna in White Russia, where he went to the local study hall. The Alter Rebbe was there with his Chasidim and outstanding students, and he was saying a deep Chasidic discourse. The Volper sat in a corner, and in a rare moment of seriousness and lucidity, he

¹ Then based in Vitebsk, with his in-laws.

rested his head on his hands and listened closely to the Rebbe's teachings. Nobody paid him any attention at all.

When the Alter Rebbe had concluded, he left the study hall and went home. The Volper also left the study hall, backpack on his shoulders, to continue his wanderings. Before leaving though, he hiccupped loudly and proclaimed with a peculiar smile, maybe one of pain or longing, "Ah, we all ate from one bowl, but he got all the *gedichte* (the thick portion of the soup)."

Word got around, until the Alter Rebbe was told what had been said. "That was the Volper," the Rebbe said. "If I knew he was here, I would have tried to get him to stay with us so that he wouldn't wander anymore."

The Volper continued his wanderings. Eventually he arrived in Vilna, a large city full of Torah scholars. Nobody paid him any attention. He entered a hostel where he got a warm meal. Then he removed a bottle of vodka from his worn satchel and poured himself a big glass.

The scholarly drunkard settled down in his place and went to sleep by the warm oven, while mumbling secrets of Torah. He quoted from works of Kabala and concepts from the innermost teachings of Torah, and every so often he burst into drunken laughter.

Reb Yudel stood nearby and listened closely to the drunk. Reb Yudel was a highly esteemed Torah scholar. He was a close student of the Vilna Gaon, and merited a seat of honor in the study hall. At first he thought his ears were deceiving him, but then his amazement continued to grow. He realized that drunkard was an outstanding scholar, conversant in all aspects of the Torah.

Reb Yudel stood there and listened until the drunkard let forth a snore and nearly fell asleep. Reb Yudel shook him by the shoulder. "Tell me, dear brother," he said in his ear, "where did you get all this from?"

The Volper cocked an eye at him, and Yudel suddenly saw the mysterious sparkle in his eyes. It scared him a bit and he edged away. "Ah, ah... You want to know where I got this from?"

Reb Yudel nodded his head silently. He was too shocked to utter a word.

"N-n-no!" whispered the drunk. "I can't tell you now. But if you want Torah such as this, go to Liozna where you will find peace for your soul."

Reb Yudel reeled backward in dismay. He knew very well who was in Liozna, for he was one of the greatest opponents of Chasidism and its proponents. Yet the drunkard's words entered his heart, and a fierce battle was waged therein. "If this drunk knows so much, what does the Rebbe himself know?!" he wondered. A few days passed until he resolved to travel to Liozna to hear Torah from the Alter Rebbe. He knew he had a lot to learn.

Like other great Torah scholars, Reb Yudel finally arrived in Liozna, where he became an outstanding chasid of the Alter Rebbe, and a great scholar in Chasidism. The Rebbe eventually sent him to Liepelei in order to serve as rabbi of the city and to bring the light of Chasidism to the people living there.

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*Source:* Edited and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the post on *LChaimWeekly.org* (#899) of the original article by **Menachem Ziegelboim** in *Beis Moshiach Magazine*.

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Dov Ber** [of blessed memory: c.5460 - 19 Kislev 5533 (c.1700- Dec. 1772 C.E.)], the son of Avraham and Chava, known as **the Maggid of Mezritch**, succeeded his master, the *Baal Shem Tov*, as the head of the Chasidic movement. Most of the leading chasidic dynasties stem from his disciples and his descendants. The classic anthologies of his teachings are *Likutei Amarim* and *Torah Ohr* (combined by Kehas Publishing as *Maggid Devorav l'Yaakov*), and *Ohr HaEmmes*.

**Rabbi Shneur Zalman** [of blessed memory: 18 Elul 5505 - 24 Tevet 5573 (1745 - Dec. 1812 C.E.)], was one of the main disciples of the *Maggid of Mezritch*, successor to the Baal Shem Tov. He is the founder of the Chabad-Chassidic movement and the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

*Connection:* Seasonal – This Monday night-Tuesday is 208<sup>th</sup> yahrzeit of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Chabad.