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FROM NECHEMIAH TO NECHEMIAH

Rabbi Nechemiah of Dubrovna was born on the 15th of Shevat, 1788, and passed away on the 15th of Shevat 1852. He was a prominent chassid of the *Alter Rebbe*, the *Mittler Rebbe* and the *Tzemach Tzedek*. His second wife, Gitta Rachel, was the Alter Rebbe's granddaughter. Rebbe Nechemiah was known as a great scholar in the revealed parts of the Torah and was the study partner of the third rebbe of Chabad, the *Tzemach Tzedek*.

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When the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the *Tzemach Tzedek*, married at the age of 14, he received a dowry of 300 rubles. His friend, the 15-year-old Nechemiah, also had money to invest. They both wanted to fulfill the Rambam's guidance of not making their livelihood from Torah learning and so, they decided to build a workshop for the production of wax seals. While the two scholars were working in their shop, they would continue to learn Torah.

Once, they were so involved in their learning that they did not notice that a pot of wax had boiled and had started overflowing. A fire broke out and the entire shop was destroyed. That was the end of the wax seal workshop and all of their dowry money was lost. Later, Rabbi Nechemiah built a *tallis*-manufacturing workshop, from which he earned a comfortable living his entire life.

The first impression from this story is that the two friends were oblivious to their surroundings. This is actually what we would expect from Torah scholars, who are totally immersed in their study, with love. Nonetheless, we can see that Rabbi Nechemiah also has a practical side. First of all, he is an adjudicator of Jewish law. Second, while his friend the *Tzemach Tzedek* became a Rebbe and apparently was financially supported by his *chassidim*, Rabbi Nechemiah did not give up on his aspiration to work for his living, establishing a business that was both holy and profitable.

Further, he also liked to be identified with his profession and not with his rabbinical position. It is told that he once signed a halachic ruling he had issued with, "Nechemiah the craftsman."

In addition, Rabbi Nechemiah would not allow his son to publish his writings. They were published only after his death by his son, following strong encouragement by the *Tzemach Tzedek*, as the collection of

responsa, *Divrei Nechemiah*. He also wrote commentary on the Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*.

We can find parallels between Rabbi Nechemiah the craftsman and another artisan named Nechemiah from an earlier epoch. Nechemiah ben Chachalyah was one of the leaders of the return to Zion in the Second Temple period. While his partner, Ezra the Scribe, was a man of the book, Nechemiah was distinctly a man of action.¹ Upon arriving in Jerusalem he ensured that the wall surrounding the city would be built, at the same time, dealing with attacks from the different peoples who had immigrated to Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile.

Despite his name, which means "God's comfort," the biblical Nechemiah's actions were intense and goal-oriented. Perhaps because of these attributes, Ezra is identified in the writings of the *Arizal*, Rabbi Isaac Luria, with Moses, the giver of the Torah, while Nechemiah is identified with the *Mashiach*, who rectifies the world.

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After the second Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Mittler Rebbe, passed away, Rabbi Nechemiah did not want to accept his dear friend and former study-partner, the *Tzemach Tzedek* as his Rebbe. However, after some time, he dreamed that the Alter Rebbe came to him and asked him, "Nechemiah, why don't you have a Rebbe?"

"Who should I make my Rebbe?" asked Rabbi Nechemiah.

"*Menachem* (which means, "comforter") will comfort us in the present and in the future," the Alter Rebbe replied.

Rabbi Nechemiah understood that the Alter Rebbe was referring to the *Tzemach Tzedek*, whose name was Menachem. He rose in the morning, hitched his horse to his wagon and made the journey to Lubavitch, where he became a *chassid* of the *Tzemach Tzedek* with total self-nullification.

The words spoken by the Alter Rebbe in the dream were publicized in Chabad, particularly after Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneersohn, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe [who was named after the *Tzemach Tzedek*], assumed the mantle of leadership. The interpretation was that "Menachem will comfort us in the present" referred to the *Tzemach Tzedek*, and that "and in the future" was a reference to the seventh Rebbe.

Even though Rabbi Nechemiah ultimately accepted the *Tzemach Tzedek* as his Rebbe, their relationship remained one of sincere and egalitarian friendship.

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¹ "Ezra-Nechemiah" is the name of the 23rd of the 24 books of *Tanach*, the Holy Scriptures.

Rabbi Nechemiah of Dubrovna's connection to *Mashiach* and to the messianic biblical Nechemiah is particularly highlighted in the story of his passing:

The entire night of Rabbi Nechemiah's sixty-fourth birthday, he sat up, as was his custom, writing responsa. He was completely healthy. He awoke as usual in the morning and went to the synagogue, participated in the service and then prayed alone at length. When he finished praying, he suddenly died.

Like the practicality described in the first story, surprise is another messianic trait. One of the seminal verses describing the redemption is, "Suddenly, the master who you are requesting will enter his chamber" (Malachi 3:1).

Like the swing of a pendulum from side to side, Rabbi Nechemiah's sudden death caused new light to be drawn down into the world, with the same suddenness. This is the movement of "run and return," which alternates between the will to leave this world and to relate only to God and the understanding that our present reality is a part of the Divine truth.

In the merit of Rabbi Nechemiah, who died suddenly, may the light of *Mashiach* suddenly appear.

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*Source:* Excerpted and adapted-simplified by Yeerachmiel Tilles from an article by American-born kabbalah master, Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, on his English-language website, Inner.org.

*Connection:* TU B'SHVAT

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Nechemiah Halevi Ginzburgh of Dubrovna** [15 Shevat 1788 - 15 Shevat 1852]. His father, Rabbi Avraham Beirach, was a chassid of the Alter Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman. He himself was a prominent chassid of the first three Rebbes. His second wife, Gitta Rachel, was the Alter Rebbe's granddaughter. Rebbe Nechemiah was known as a great scholar in the revealed parts of the Torah and was the study partner of the Tzemach Tzedek. His responsa were printed in his book, "*Divrei Nechemiah*." He also wrote commentary on the Alter Rebbe's *Shulchan Aruch*.

**Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneersohn**, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lubavitcher Rebbe [29 Elul 1789 - 13 Nissan 1866], the third Rebbe of Chabad, was known as the **Tzemach Tzedek**, after his books of Jewish Law responsa and Talmudic commentary called by that name. He was renowned not only as the Rebbe of tens of thousands of chasidim, but also as a leading scholar in his generation in both the revealed and secret aspects of Torah.