

Farbrengen
Hasidic Gatherings with Rabbi Steinsaltz



Steinsaltz Center
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MAGGID



RABBI ADIN EVEN-ISRAEL
STEINSALTZ

FARBRENGEN

HASIDIC GATHERINGS
WITH RABBI STEINSALTZ

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz
translated by Rabbi Joshua Schreier

Steinsaltz Center
Maggid Books

Farbrengen
Hasidic Gatherings with Rabbi Steinsaltz

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Typesetting: Taly Hahn

Project Manager: Fruma Holland

Editor-in-Chief: Elḥanan Yisraeli

Editors: Elad Schlesinger, Yedidya Aviner, and Aharon Billet

Translation editor: Gaya Aranoff Bernstein

Copy Editor: Suri Brand

Writing of the Prefaces: Yisrael Malkiel

Consultation and Assistance in Editing: Sara Friedland Ben-Arza

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This volume is dedicated with gratitude to the memory of
the rare soul known to this world as

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"l

His life's work uplifted humanity through the study
of his spiritual teachings.

This volume is also dedicated to the memory of

Marvin P. Cohen z"l

a devotee of truth and lifelong learning.

His ongoing study of Torah and Talmud led to his continual
growth until his final breath.

Dedicated by the Burton G. and Anne C. Greenblatt Foundation



Reading a book of farbrengens isn't like reading and studying
any other book.

A farbrengen must be experienced through hearing the voice
of the speaker, through connecting with the burning of his
soul, and by cleaving to his great spirit.

Consequently, the publication of these farbrengens
is dedicated to the elevation of the soul of our master
and our teacher

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz zt"l

who hewed the words of this book from the fire of his soul,
and over the course of dozens of years and hundreds of
farbrengens illuminated the souls of tens of thousands of
listeners and students.

Our intent in the writing and editing of this book is to keep
the flame of his soul burning.

May it serve as a flaming torch that will illuminate the souls
of those who read it, wherever they may be.



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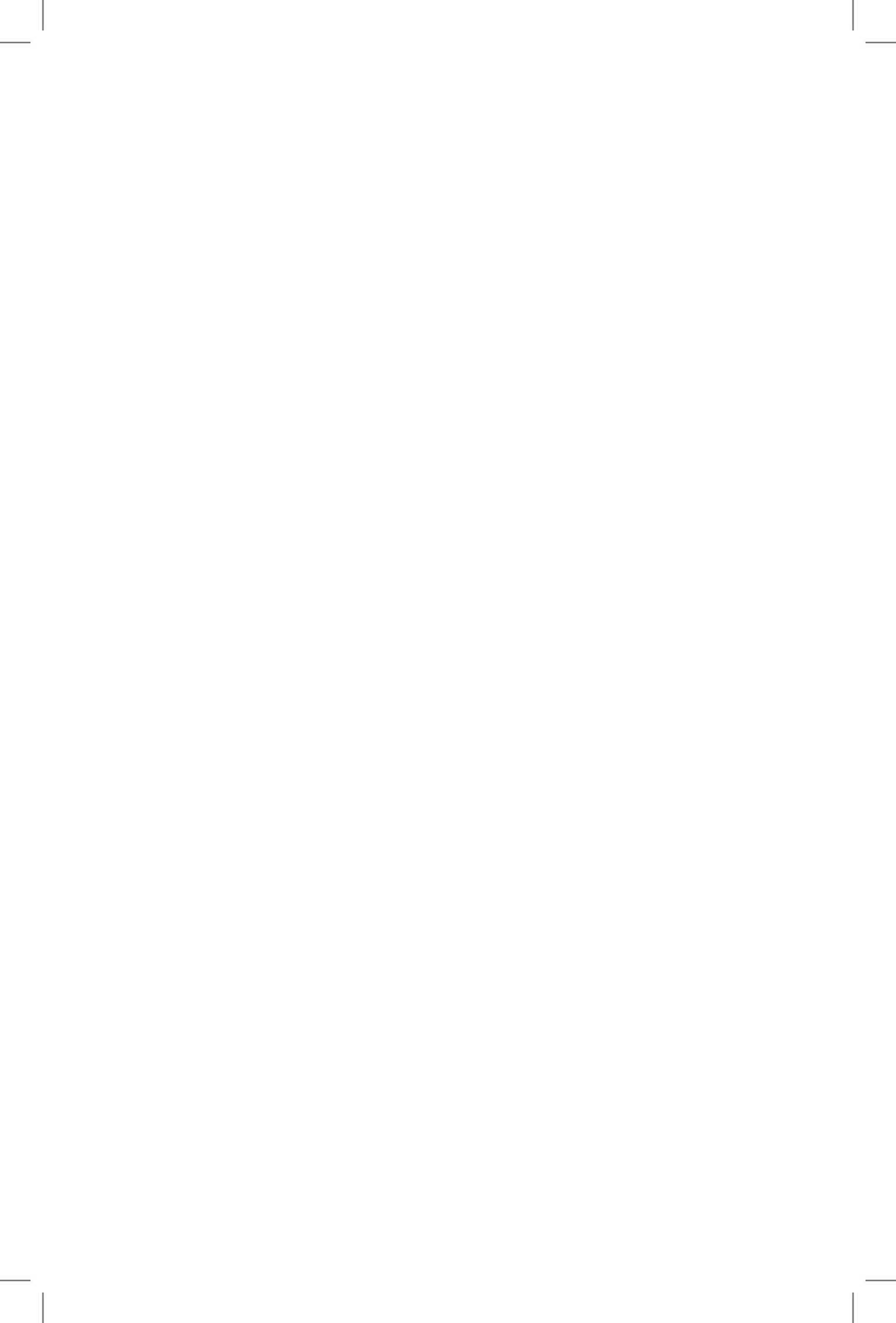
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Preface

A good farbrengen is one that can't be summarized in writing.

– Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

This book is a collection of ideas that Rabbi Steinsaltz discussed at hasidic gatherings, or farbrengens, with his students and others who came to hear what he had to say.

“Farbrengen” in hasidic jargon is a gathering of hasidim for the purpose of spiritual elevation and strengthening. At a farbrengen, they eat, drink *lehayim*, sing, and talk about serving God. There is no preset program at a farbrengen. It develops organically from the proceedings depending on those present and the time and place.

It's hard to describe what transpired at a farbrengen led by Rabbi Steinsaltz. For many of those listening to him speak, these farbrengens contained moments of the kind that a person remembers and experiences throughout his life. He repeatedly emphasized that the farbrengen is not an occasion for Torah insights, nor, on a totally different plane, idle talk. A farbrengen is a time for speaking truth, for shedding the veneer to allow something to enter so that something will penetrate the heart and mind and spur a person to make a change. The change could be major or minor, a minuscule step or a great leap. The main thing is that it be genuine and true, not imaginary and not an ephemeral spiritual experience.

Rabbi Steinsaltz was fully present at these farbrengen with his entire being. This wasn't merely a speech or lecture, but it was an unvarnished, fervent, and sometimes acerbic talk aimed at those present in the room in general and in particular. Rabbi Steinsaltz would lead every stage of

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the farbrengen: the preamble to the farbrengen, the *lehayim*, the joyous dancing and longing melodies, the general talks about “what is a farbrengen” or “what is the essence of the day that we are commemorating,” and the emphatic discussions on the essence of a thing and other matters.

At times, Rabbi Steinsaltz’s words would assume the form of a long, coherent progression, and at times he would present several disparate ideas. He would explain the point in a concrete manner, analyze it thoroughly, and describe its various facets, cite parables, and tell stories until the ideas received color and form. He paid close attention to what was going on in the room and responded to the questions and statements of those present, the melodies that were sung, and the degree of enthusiasm of the attendees. He would frequently direct questions to the listeners, students, or incidental visitors, asking about their lives and how they intended to “do something” with the things that were said.

The farbrengens often continued until the small hours of the night, when Rabbi Steinsaltz’s words would converge and reach their conclusion. On many occasions, before he left the farbrengen, he would say, “I need to go, but you – stay and continue to *farbreng* until the morning.”

Over the years, Rabbi Steinsaltz conducted farbrengens in Israel and abroad, in institutions over which he presided, at public events, at official events, and at small, private gatherings. Most of the farbrengens that appear in this book took place in the Tekoa Yeshiva, some of them at Mekor Hayim Yeshiva, and a few in other places. Typically he held these farbrengens on certain occasions throughout the year. Most of these dates were days on which Lubavitch hasidim were accustomed to hold farbrengens, and accordingly, the content of most of the gatherings was tied to some extent to the Lubavitcher Rebbes and the history of Chabad Hasidism. The exceptions were the farbrengen held on the *yartzeit* of the Kotzker Rebbe and the farbrengen held on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s birthday.

This book is divided according to these dates, and in each section, the farbrengens that took place on that date are presented.

It’s not a simple challenge to commit to writing down that which was said orally, especially when the matter at hand is an organic, evolving event like a farbrengen. We sought to preserve Rabbi Steinsaltz’s

beautiful, invigorating language and sharp, direct speech, while suiting his words to the form and style of a printed book.

Since the book was edited after Rabbi Steinsaltz's passing and he did not review it, it's possible that there are some errors or inaccuracies that cropped up in the transfer of his words to written form. It goes without saying that responsibility for this is ours alone.

In editing the book, we related to each farbrengen as an independent unit, as a complete event that is a sum of its parts. Each farbrengen in the book stands by itself, and it's therefore possible that there will be ideas or stories that are repeated. Though we did attempt to limit redundancy, we allowed for repetition that contributes to the development of the farbrengen.

Despite all this, this book is not an attempt to summarize the content of Rabbi Steinsaltz's farbrengens. Any such attempt would be futile and also misses the point. It is futile because it's impossible to transmit in writing all the components of a farbrengen – the vitality of the event, the timing, the place, the participants, the atmosphere, the melodies, the togetherness, and especially Rabbi Steinsaltz's direct way of addressing his listeners. It misses the point because the main component of a farbrengen, as Rabbi Steinsaltz himself often told us, is not the content, but what one absorbs, what remains in the heart of the listeners long after the event.

This book is therefore an attempt to transmit in writing the seeds of a farbrengen, so that they will be able to grow and come to life in the reader's heart. The objective of the book is like the objective of the farbrengens themselves, even if the path is different, and, perhaps, complex: to rouse the reader to change and move something in his life. If at the live farbrengen the attendees are required to lend their ears and open their hearts, the responsibility of the reader is much greater, because he is required to listen and place the matters in his heart even more, reading them as ideas directed to him personally.

The original book, printed in Hebrew, was published at the end of the year of mourning after Rabbi Steinsaltz's passing. But this is not a memorial volume, first of all because Rabbi Steinsaltz never asked that a monument be left for him nor sought to make a name for himself, and second, because “the righteous in their death are called living” and “a

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righteous man who passed is found in all the worlds more than during his lifetime.” The book does not reflect Rabbi Steinsaltz’s departure from us, but rather his enduring presence in the world and a life that continues to live on even now. The purpose of this book is not to evoke Rabbi Steinsaltz’s memory in the hearts of the readers, but to inspire them to change and to move through his inspiration.

Part of the book deals with our connection to *tzaddikim* who have departed from the world but continue to live on in it. Likewise, one who searches will be able to find among the pages of this book a portal of connection to Rabbi Steinsaltz and the path he paved. This book, with its various ideas, reveals something of his internal life, his thoughts, his faith, and his focus on eternal life. Therefore, it contains a path and a way for us, not only to continue receiving guidance and spiritual vitality from Rabbi Steinsaltz, but also to connecting with him and ascending spiritually together with him.

Introduction

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1

What Does One Do at a Farbrengen?

IDLE TALK VERSUS WORDS WITH SUBSTANCE

At this farbrengen, we will try not to speak idle talk. Whatever I said at last year's farbrengen was, without a doubt, idle talk. I know this because it accomplished nothing.

The definition of idle talk relates, not to its content, but to its effects. Speech that has no lasting effect is idle talk, regardless of what was said or how it was said. Simply put, words that accomplish nothing are idle talk; they become meaningless over time.

There is a very subtle, indiscernible difference between idle talk and speech that has substance. Batteries that are fully charged and batteries that are depleted may look the same, but only the former can activate appliances. Likewise, only words of substance contain a charge that will have an impact on the listener, while idle talk generates nothing.

There is no way to immediately determine whether a speech can be classified as idle talk because its outcome depends on the listener rather than the speaker. One would expect a meaningful speech to have an effect, but this is not always the case. Meaningful words can turn out, in retrospect, to be idle talk if they fall on deaf ears. From this perspective, even prominent Torah personalities can be guilty of engaging in idle talk if the words they say have no practical effect on their listeners.

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Many years ago, when I was a young man, I attended a Yod Tet Kislev farbrengen that lasted an entire night. In the morning, I asked the *mashpia* (spiritual mentor) who was there, “What do I take with me from this farbrengen?”

The *mashpia*, an astute man, shared a pearl of wisdom: “What you take with you is what you remember.”

If the listener doesn’t take what was said to heart, the words become meaningless, no matter how sublime the topic. The loftiest matters will remain lofty and will never descend from on high; they will have no substantive effect on the world whatsoever. At a farbrengen, one must speak about what is important and relevant to those present. If I were to speak now about what is transpiring in the realm of *Malkhut* of *Hokhma* of the world of *Atzilut* – a matter that has no practical relevance to your life – my words, however significant, will not have any effect.

When the High Priest sprinkled ritual blood in the Temple, “he would neither intend to sprinkle upward nor downward, but rather like one who whips.”¹ At a farbrengen, too, one must wield his words as one does a “whip” to ensure that they reach their target – so that they will enter and touch the heart. When one speaks “upward,” and the words fly above the listeners’ heads, or “downward,” and the words fly below the radar, the speech does not enter the heart.

I don’t want to speak to you now about colossal matters but rather to focus on the question: What does one do at a farbrengen?

Lubavitcher hasidim have a song: “What does one do in Lubavitch? One drinks whiskey, acts wild, and dances in a circle!” This song has a hasidic interpretation, but on its simplest level, it describes an experience and atmosphere. My question is the same as that of the song, and the answer, too, will describe an experience, an atmosphere.

So let us now address the question: What does one do at a farbrengen?

TOGETHER

At a farbrengen, Jews sit together. This simple feeling of togetherness is sublime and of unparalleled importance. This is actually one of the great

1. Mishna *Yoma* 5:3.

virtues of a synagogue. I'm not referring to the kind of synagogue where seats are purchased in advance or designated according to status. I'm referring to synagogues where people can sit wherever they want. And even though the atmosphere in those synagogues might not be noticeable, its power is exceptional. Not infrequently, a person who lost his way, who has been seeking something that has eluded him, enters such a synagogue and suddenly feels at home. He has finally found what he has been searching for after years of traveling to distant places.

What is it that makes the synagogue special? First and foremost, there is no place more democratic than the synagogue. Where else can a prominent wealthy man and a Jew who doesn't have the means to pay his grocery bill be treated as equals?

In a synagogue, both the prominent rabbi and the simplest of men count to make a *minyan*. As the saying goes, "It's impossible to make a *minyan* from nine rabbis, but ten shoemakers can make a *minyan*." In the synagogue, Jews of all types sit together, pray together, eat herring together at *seuda shelishit*, and sing songs off key together. In the synagogue, I can sit with people without concerning myself with how much money they have in the bank or whether they will appear in the newspaper tomorrow. I sit with a person, not his persona.

Does everyone in the synagogue actually like each other? Not necessarily. This unique atmosphere is not necessarily an outgrowth of love. But the feeling of togetherness is real; it stems from a sense of partnership, from being part of the *minyan*.

Hasidic synagogues consciously initiate the breaking of barriers. There are no designated seats; the most revered people sit next to the simplest. This emphasis on togetherness is actually fundamental to the synagogue by definition. In Hebrew, the term for synagogue is *beit kneset*, literally, "a house of gathering." *Beit kneset* is the conventional term, even though other terms, such as *beit tefilla*, "house of prayer," and *mikdash me'at*, "lesser sanctuary," appear in the sources. The terminology we use teaches us that the synagogue is essentially a place where people come together. Even the English word, "synagogue," from the Greek *sinagoga*, also means "people sitting together." So even though one person might be studying, another praying, a third belching, and a fourth yawning, all of the people sitting together in the synagogue comprise equal parts of a holy congregation.

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A farbrengen must transcend even that, because at a farbrengen individuals do not study or pray. It's not an academic lecture where the learned and honored are seated in front and the rest of the audience sit in the back. A farbrengen is based on feeling comfortable together, on eating, drinking, and rejoicing together. I'm not saying that people need to embrace each other; that is already a higher level of love among Jews. I'm speaking of Jews feeling that they can live in peace with the person sitting next to them. This is the most basic level of love among Jews.

Fifty years ago, I experienced this type of togetherness, and I remember it to this day. At that time, the Belzer Rebbe would travel to Jerusalem for the High Holy Days. On Friday night, people would come to the *beit midrash* after they had finished their Shabbat meal and wait for the Rebbe to come out and conduct the *tisch*, which typically started very late.

A hundred people sat together and waited on one long bench in a rather plain hall. Since they had already eaten their Shabbat meal and were not studying Torah, they all naturally they began to doze. I remember the sight clearly: a row of one hundred men, all of them sleeping, each with his head resting on the shoulder of the man sitting next to him. I remember that experience to this day because it warmed my heart. I'm certain that sitting on that bench were wealthy men and poor men, members of the upper class and simple people. And despite the differences in status, they were all comfortable sitting together and reclining on one another because of their shared experience. I'm not speaking of a shared ideology, like democracy, equality, or brotherhood. I'm speaking of something much simpler: the experience of simply sitting side by side and feeling at ease together.

The sense of togetherness of the farbrengen is not based on a profound connection between people, like the intense love between David and Yonatan. It can be a much more basic connection. Often one will see strange groupings of very different people sitting together. This is what creates a farbrengen.

The sense of togetherness at a farbrengen is, to a large extent, similar to that of soldiers in a tank. The soldiers didn't choose each other, and they may have little in common. But after being together for a long time in extreme proximity, a connection is formed; an experience is shared.

At a farbrengen, too, people draw close to one another until, from a random collection of individuals, a group with a sense of unity and togetherness is formed.

In the book of Malachi, it is written, “Then those who fear the Lord spoke one to another, and the Lord listened and heeded; a book of remembrance was written before Him.”² The verse does not tell us what precisely those who fear God said to one another. Maybe one said to the other, “Do you know where I can get a discounted airline ticket to New York?” In truth, it doesn’t matter. The point is that “the Lord listened and heeded; a book of remembrance was written before Him.” God listens to two Jews who are sitting together peacefully, doing nothing more than speaking to one another openly and without reservation. That is sufficient for God to record it in the book of remembrance.

The foundation of a farbrengen is reaching such a state, that of “then they spoke with one another” – when individuals are able to sit together without consideration of status. When I attend a farbrengen, I must think about more than what I’m about to hear, whether I’ll hear words that encourage, teach, or even insult me. I must also think about whether I’m capable of sitting with different kinds of people without feeling alienated, without feeling like I don’t belong. I must ask myself: Am I able to be present without wondering what people think of me or what I think of them? Am I able to be one with everyone else at the farbrengen?

THE SOURCE OF SOULS

This togetherness may sound simple, but it is, in truth, a very sublime matter. There is a hasidic saying attributed to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Hasidism also known as the Baal HaTanya, that he might have said in the name of Rabbi Avraham HaMalakh, the son of the Maggid of Mezeritch: “What ten Jews can accomplish at a farbrengen, even the angel Mikhael is unable to accomplish.” The blessings uttered by Jews sitting together at a farbrengen are more effective in achieving healing and salvation than those of the angel Mikhael himself.

2. Malachi 3:16.

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What is the source of this special power? The answer is that the holy aspects of the togetherness experienced at a farbrengen can ascend to the highest of heights.

It is written in the teachings of Kabbala that the soul contains five levels. The most basic level, common to every Jew, is *nefesh*. A worthy person can attain the next level, *ruah*. Above the level of *ruah* is *neshama*, which is usually the highest level that a person can achieve. Only the most extraordinarily virtuous person can reach the level of *neshama*. The level above *neshama* is *haya*, which appears in Psalms as one of the names of the soul. It is revealed only rarely, and only to special people at very special times.

Many years ago, I studied with a Jew who had devotedly served as a rabbi in the Soviet Union for years. The rabbi told me that he had been privileged to sense the revelation of the *haya* aspect of the soul. This happened after he had been apprehended by the government authorities due to his religious activities. At one point, they stood him against a wall and were about to execute him. Then, whatever happened, happened; somehow he was spared. He told me that after that incident, he could sense the *haya* aspect of his soul. When he studied Torah and prayed, he had a clarity that he had never experienced in his entire life. The *haya* level is latent within the soul, but it is revealed at rare times to rare people.

Above the level of *haya* is *yehida*, also mentioned in the book of Psalms. This level is called *yehida*, literally, “a single unit,” because at this level the soul reach its original source, the place where all the souls unite into a single point. My *yehida* and that of other people is the same exact *yehida*. At the *nefesh* or *ruah* levels, there can be great differences between me and another Jew, but at the *yehida* level of the soul there are no differences. *Yehida* is the first spark, the original source of all the souls before they individuate and separate into the lower, distinct levels.

When Jewish people sit together at a farbrengen, having something to drink, possibly dozing, to a certain degree they reflect the mingling of souls that occurs at a level known as *Knesset Yisrael*. This is a level even higher than that of the upper level of Garden of Eden. At the level of *Knesset Yisrael*, souls are not seen as wealthy or poor, learned or ignorant, worthy of eternal life or headed for eternal disgrace. In the

repository of souls that is the realm of *Knesset Yisrael*, there is no distinction between them.

Whether the farbrengen commemorates Yod Tet Kislev, Ḥai Elul, or the commemoration of one *tzaddik* or another, the essence of the farbrengen is Jews being together, seeing one another, connecting with one another, trying somehow, to the best of their abilities, to remove all veneers, all masks, most of which are false. The essence of the farbrengen is to exist in absolute brotherhood. In this way, perhaps, they can attain a sense of life at the level of *Knesset Yisrael*.

The Midrash states that God consulted with the souls of the righteous when He sought to create the world.³ It's hard to fathom how it could be that there were souls that preceded the giving of the Torah, that preceded the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, even the very existence of the world. But these formless souls, having not yet been given an incarnation that would give them shape. Still, God consulted these souls whether it was worthwhile to create the world. He did not seek the counsel of angels regarding this matter, as they are similar to a group of intellectuals who don't stop bickering. He specifically asked the pure, unadulterated souls of the righteous whether it's worthwhile to create a world. These souls sat together, perhaps like Jews sitting in the *mikve* and conversing, and they determined whether there should be a world and what it would be like.

At a farbrengen, as we sit together and have something to eat and drink here in this lower world, we are actually able to reach a place of inherent sanctity, where everything exists at their source. We go back in time, past the generations, and exist together in a place where exalted souls extend a hand to one another.

In *mikva'ot* of old, it was possible to see a group of Jews sitting together in the water, just relaxing and talking to each other. That is precisely how a farbrengen begins – with a group of Jews relaxing together. From there, it's possible to reach great heights.

When a person comes to a farbrengen, he doesn't know whether he will hear words of Torah or, even if he does, whether he'll remember them. What he does know is that he'll be sitting with other Jews, eating,

3. *Bereshit Rabba* 8:7.

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drinking, talking, possibly dancing, and sometimes just being silent together. A sense of togetherness suddenly becomes palpable, and everyone present find themselves in another state of being.

So what does one do at a farbrengen? The answer, first and foremost, is that one should internalize the togetherness, feel it, revel in it. Then it becomes possible to move on to the rest.

THE LIVING WILL TAKE IT TO HEART

Aside from this point, the aspect of togetherness, the essence of a farbrengen can be described by the words of the verse “The living will take it to heart.”⁴ At a farbrengen, people sit and talk, but most importantly, they open their hearts to the possibility of change. But in order for this to happen a person must be “alive” – fully present, conscious of his surroundings, with a genuine desire for the experience to enter his heart.

Sometimes a person contemplates the way he is living his life and it breaks his heart; it makes his soul shudder. Other times a person doesn't feel any particular distress, turmoil, or even great hopes when he thinks about his life. But as long as a person is truly alive and able to feel the pain of something missing in his life, he is compelled to change.

Rabbi Simḥa Bunim of Peshishā once came upon a group of people while walking with his hasidim. He asked his hasidim to approach the group in order to see how they were dressed. To their consternation, the hasidim saw that they were all wearing shrouds under their clothing. It turned out that these people were dead, each one living in the world of imagination.

The hasidim returned to the Rebbe, distraught. “Perhaps we too are dead!” they cried. “Could it be that our lives are also nothing more than figments of our imagination?”

The Rebbe answered, “As long as a person has an inkling of a desire to repent, he is clearly and unequivocally alive.”

The ability to experience the pain of remorse distinguishes between a person being truly alive or dead.

4. Ecclesiastes 7:2.

The Rebbe also said that a person must always be conscious of his own mortality. He must see himself as if his head is on an anvil and someone above him is wielding a sword and about to decapitate him.

“Rebbe,” one of his disciples asked, “what should I do if I can’t see myself in that way?”

The Rebbe replied, “An inability to picture this scenario would indicate that one has already lost his head.”

THE LIVING DOG

It is written in the book of Ecclesiastes, “A living dog is better than a dead lion, for the living know that they will die, but the dead do not know anything.”⁵ Why is a living dog better than a dead lion? Surely, in his lifetime, the “dead lion” was not just any lion. Surely, he was an exceedingly righteous, virtuous, important rabbi who accomplished wonderful things in heaven and on earth. When he was eulogized, he was most likely described as “our master and teacher, Rabbi Aryeh Leib, son of Rabbi Lavi, rabbi of such and such congregation, grandson of Rabbi Shaḥal, rabbi of such and such *beit midrash*...”⁶ Wasn’t Rabbi Aryeh Leib, a “dead lion,” better than a living dog? All the praises in the world were written on his tombstone. Contrast this image to that of a living dog, possibly a mongrel whose father was a street dog, whose grandfather ran around who knows where.

The answer is that, lion or no, once dead it has reached the end of its path. Even if the dog is a wretched, lowly creature, it can still wag its tail. The dead lion can’t move a hair on its mane, while the living dog is capable of movement. The dead lion’s carcass decomposes, while the living dog must eat, drink, and find shelter, and these problems compel it to walk, seek, take action, and move forward. The dead lion is no longer troubled by these matters. The problems that define the life of a dog compel it to see the world around it and figure out how to navigate its way through it.

The dog’s genealogy is irrelevant. The living dog, whoever it may be, is capable of considering its situation in life. Something could reach it

5. Ecclesiastes 9:4–5.

6. *Aryeh*, *lavi*, and *shaḥal* are all words that mean “lion.”

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and cause it to move from its place. This is the glory of the living dog. At best, a dead lion could be placed in a museum or have books written about it, while a living dog can move forward and accomplish something in this world.

Every farbrengen revolves around the living dog. At the farbrengen, I seize the living dog and say to it, “I don’t know who you are. I don’t know how talented you are, how many transgressions or how many *mitzvot* you have performed, but if you’re already here – why are you standing still? Why don’t you move forward? Why postpone the next step until tomorrow? Why don’t you jump? Why don’t you run?”

These questions can be posed only to the living dog. They are no longer relevant to the dead lion.

THE BOOKS OF LIONS

Dead lions have written wonderful books on all sorts of topics. Almost all of the Torah that people study is from the teachings of dead lions. The question is not how wonderful these books are, but rather what is the extent to which they have an impact on my life, whether or not they touch me personally.

I have said before that the old books on ethics are manuals for angels, and as manuals for angels, they are excellent. When I open *Chovot HaLevavot*, *Orhot Tzaddikim*, or *Sefer HaYashar*, I find wonderful advice, but not for a person like me. I understand what these books are saying, but they were written by lions for lions who have never been burdened by a dog’s problems.

I’m not a lion; I’m a living dog standing outside in the rain. I’m cold, and my stomach is rumbling. The living dog’s problems will not be resolved by seeking answers from dead lions.

At a farbrengen, we don’t sit and discuss the lofty ideas from this dead lion or that dead lion; we don’t cite what is written in their books. We focus on the interests of the living dog: What does a person who lives in this world need to do? What can I do so that tomorrow will be better than today? It is for answers to these questions that one participates in a farbrengen.

The ideas internalized at a good farbrengen can’t be summarized in writing. At every farbrengen, there are moments when the listeners take

out their notebooks and write down the words of Torah and wisdom they have heard. After a certain number of farbrengens, a large collection of Torah insights has accrued. But those who are occupied with simply recording Torah insights have missed the point.

This phenomenon evokes what was said by a certain Jew who had written a doctorate about the revelation at Sinai. He spoke at a synagogue and asked the congregation whether God could reveal Himself today the way He revealed Himself at Sinai. "Of course," he answered. "God could reveal Himself in that way. But He doesn't reveal Himself in that way because He's afraid people would photograph Him and sell the pictures in tourist shops for small change."

The same can be said for those who sit at a farbrengen and record Torah insights. Those words of Torah ultimately have no effect because the purpose of the farbrengen is in the here and now. A farbrengen is not an event where one goes to learn sublime or profound subject matter to be studied later. It's an experience in which I open my heart in the moment so that I will be moved and affected in the present.

WHO ARE THEY SPEAKING TO?

When a person is in the proper frame of mind at a farbrengen, he can hear completely general statements and feel like they were said specifically to him. By contrast, when a person is in a normative frame of mind, he can be opaque, totally closed off, and unable to hear anything that is being said, even if it is explicitly directed toward him. For a person like that, any statement will automatically be understood as a general statement meant for others.

This often happens when a person recites the confession: "*Ashamnu*. We have been guilty of sin." The heart won't accept this burden. It would be much easier for a person to recite the confession about his neighbor, to beat the chest of the person standing next to him, rather than his own.

There is a terrible story about Hershele from Ostropoli, who served as the entertainer in the hasidic court of Rabbi Barukh of Medzhibozh. One day Rabbi Barukh asked Hershele if he had a new story to tell. "Some time ago," Hershele replied, "I met Satan. I asked him how he was. He said that he was fed up with his work. He was fed up sitting with all sorts of lowly people and inciting them to commit transgressions. He

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was fed up with his lot, with having to deal with repulsive people day and night.

“Sometime later, I met him again and saw that he was smiling and happy. I asked him what had happened, and he told me that he changed the description of the people he associated with. He now goes to the righteous, and he makes his living in peace and comfort.”

Rabbi Barukh turned to Hershele and said to him, “You can’t possibly be referring to me.”

Hershele answered, “All the rabbis to whom I told this story said the same thing.”

A good farbrengen is one where I understand that the words being spoken are directed toward me. The message relates, first and foremost, to me and only incidentally to others. It’s of no help to me if others fulfill *mitzvot* and perform good deeds. It’s of no help to me if so-and-so advances while I remain mired in my muck. What’s the point of saying, “Leave the *mitzvot* for the dead lion,” while I continue licking my piece of rotten meat? When a person is told to move, he shouldn’t think that his parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors need to move. He should realize that those words are directed toward him in the here and now.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

When the farbrengen is over, after sitting together for several hours in brotherhood and friendship and after all that was said either penetrated or didn’t, the only serious remaining question is, what now? All other questions are null and void and, like the dust of the earth, lack validity and relevance. After people have been sitting at a farbrengen for two hours or ten hours, after all the drinking and the singing, after all that was said and done, the question remains: What happens next?

It can’t be that after the farbrengen a person will go home, cover himself with his blanket, and go to sleep, and that will be the sum total of his experience. The farbrengen should give him a jolt that won’t allow him to sleep, that will leave a mark on him, that will leave him restless and unsettled. The farbrengen should be like a periodic booster shot, and its effects should be felt for at least several years to come.

Another big danger that occurs after the farbrengen is over is when a person makes the necessary change he must undergo contingent on

matters that are external to him. He says to himself, "I'll do it later in life. Everything will be different then. Meanwhile, I'll continue to engage in my nonsense."

There are people who wait for the moment they retire to begin living. Some postpone the change they need to make in their lives until they get the promotion they want, while others decide they'll change when they marry. But I know several married people who, although they are certainly happy, didn't transform in any way just because there was a wedding. Even when change takes place, it is not always the comprehensive, absolute change that people envision.

The bottom line is that a person shouldn't postpone the actions he must take to transform his life to a later date when he'll supposedly be a new, wonderful person.

And so the most important question at every farbrengen remains: What happens tomorrow? The essence of every farbrengen is what a person takes from it. He should leave a farbrengen with at least one takeaway – one action that he intends to take on, one aspect that he intends to change. If he experiences farbrengen after farbrengen but never moves forward at all, perhaps he should travel back in time, return to the farbrengen, and effect the change he should have made.

ONE SMALL STEP FORWARD

One need not take on something significant in the wake of the farbrengen to progress in life. Taking just one small step forward is enough.

There are different ways of making a significant change in one's life. One can do it the way one blows up a mountain: by taking explosives and detonating them. Although this path can result in great change, it can also dismember a person, leaving him in small, useless fragments. Often, change needs to happen in a much more subtle, incremental manner.

I once drove in Sweden on a road that was hundreds of miles long. It ran through a huge forest for its entire length, and there were nothing but pine trees on either side. Mile after mile, all I saw were pine trees. This continued for hundreds of miles: only pine trees and more pine trees. The road was extraordinarily monotonous, but amazingly, after traversing all those miles, I was ultimately able to reach a different place.

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Many people would prefer their internal change to take place in one big dramatic explosion. But when changes of that kind occur, they are frequently a passing delusion, a fleeting deception of the senses. By contrast, though the path of small, continuous changes might feel monotonous, it's ultimately the best way to progress. If a person follows the path assiduously, he can effect true change and reach a new place in his life.

When a person takes one small step at a time – say, he learns one mishna a day – he is a little further down the road than he was yesterday. Furthermore, the movement forward is more significant than the magnitude of the change, because it's not enough to make a significant change. Even if he walks out of a farbrengen with his entire face aglow, like Moses when he descended from Mount Sinai, and he feels like a different person, it isn't enough. As long as a person is alive, he must always be moving forward. In that respect, it hardly matters whether the change that was effected was big or small. What matters is whether the person took a step in the right direction.

Sometimes one is blessed with inspiration from on high. The gates are wide open, and he has the opportunity to make big, significant changes. But usually lasting change need to be made with steady persistence over time, in dark times and good ones, in sadness and in joy. If one truly wants to change the course of his life, he shouldn't expect one big explosion that will turn his life upside down. He should simply start moving forward, with small steps or big ones, as much and as often as he can. That's the only way to effect real change.

LENDING A HAND TO OTHERS

Sometimes a person comes to the conclusion that he can't change, and if that's the case, he can still help others to do so. They say that a horse, a soldier, and a hasid are useless when they're old. An old horse is no longer able to run, an old soldier is no longer able to fight, and as for the old hasid – if he's old, he should already have become a Rebbe.

Jokes aside, if a person feels that he is in the category of an old hasid, where he has reached a point where he feels he is no longer making progress, he can at least help others advance. When a person is no

longer able to improve, if he feels like he is completely burnt out, he can still help others.

A lion that is about to die can at least contribute its mane for the benefit of others. A person can't help others attain a level beyond his own, but he is still capable of lending a hand to others within the parameters of his own level.

People today are becoming more divided, like islands scattered in the vast ocean, each in isolation, caring nothing about the existence of the others. Gathering together at the farbrengen is intended, among other things, to put an end to this tendency to isolate, to spur us to care about one another and extend a helping hand. At a farbrengen, people sit together, look for the good in each other, and this presents them with the opportunity to offer help to the others. Each person at the farbrengen must think, *Someone is standing here. What can I do for him? What can I say to him that will bolster him?* People are sitting together in brotherhood and fellowship, and each has the chance to look at a person to whom he had never previously given much thought and ask himself, *How I can lend him a hand?*

It's rarely possible to change someone's entire life with a few words, but sometimes a smile is enough to transform someone's day. I had a relative in Israel who was an Egged bus driver. After years of driving on a certain route, he was transferred to a different one. That very day letters began arriving at the Egged offices demanding that he be restored to his original route. One woman wrote, "I used to see him every morning, and he would always say 'good morning' to me. That would make my day! I miss him."

An Egged bus driver, while driving his regular route from Raanana to Tel Aviv, can brighten someone else's day.

The farbrengen doesn't deal with profound issues, but rather the stomachache of so-and-so, my neighbor. What does one do when someone has a stomachache? A great *tzaddik* could, perhaps, cure the stomachache by reaching out to Heaven. As for me, I can, at least, go to the person in pain, smile at him, and offer him comfort. I can't always elevate my own heavens, but I can help ease someone else's burden. When I do this, I have, in a certain sense, moved the world.

Our entire world is awaiting the end of days. We work, we pray, and we anticipate a time when all of a sudden the whole world will begin to shine. We're awaiting a time when God will bring about the great reform that we have not succeeded in achieving. We are waiting for the moment when He will decide that His small creations have allowed too much time to elapse. "I'm fed up with you, He will say. "You don't know how to finish this chapter of the story. Let us now agree that the current state of the world is over and done, and begin the next chapter."

We wait for this every day, for Him to decide that there's no choice but to send the Messiah, who will bring order to the world. Until that time comes, we can still attempt to do small things to improve the world, to remove the weeds from our little garden while trying to help our neighbor with his garden next door. Is the existence of the world dependent on the removal of those weeds? I'm not sure. But if we work on it, at least there will be fewer weeds.

Preparing the Receptacles

RINSING AND WASHING

To have a long-lasting effect, inspiration and ideas require a receptacle to contain them. A person can talk and talk, but the words don't necessarily remain with the listener, and even if an idea does penetrate, it goes in one ear and out the other. One can speak of profound matters, but the words can easily go to waste, and nothing will result from them. The reason for this is simple: they did not enter the receptacle.

When a person has a good thought or notion relating to repairing an aspect of his soul, there is nothing better he can do than to craft a receptacle for these ideas. When a person takes a thought and crafts a receptacle for it, even a small receptacle, something of that illumination, of the flow of inspiration that came to him, will remain with him and won't be wasted.

Beyond crafting a receptacle, one must also make sure that the receptacle is clean. When one pours wine into a dirty goblet, a chemical reaction is initiated between the wine and the dirt, resulting not in wine but rather in dirt with a certain percentage of alcohol, which is much worse than plain dirt. Plain dirt isn't very harmful, but when dirt is given

potency, it is a much greater problem. Occasionally, whether at a farbrengen or elsewhere, a person hears ideas that not only do not benefit him, but they cause harm because his receptacle is dirty. As a result, the wine within is ruined.

According to the *halakha*, a cup for *Kiddush* requires washing and rinsing – washing on the outside and rinsing on the inside. If one cleans the goblet on only one side, it remains dirty on the other. That's why one must clean both sides of the goblet. How can one make certain that the person is clean from without and within? Just as one washes and rinses a material receptacle, the same is necessary with a spiritual receptacle. It requires washing on the outside and rinsing on the inside. At a farbrengen, one cleans the receptacle on both sides: he drinks, and sings a tune. The drink, though it enters the body, functions as the washing from without. The tune has the effect of rinsing from within.

When washing with drink and rinsing with song, one must do so properly. Sometimes one pours water on a stain, and the small stain spreads and becomes much larger. By the same token, sometimes a person who has a minor transgression in his head downs a shot of whiskey, and the transgression expands along with the drink. At a farbrengen, one must drink in a manner that will reduce the stain and work on it so that the stain will be eradicated.

By the same token, singing a tune once isn't enough. It may be enough to fulfill one's obligation, but in order to rinse the receptacle well, one must sing the tune again and again until the dirt begins to be cleansed.

There is a difference between the washing of the cup on the outside and rinsing it on the inside. If the outside of the cup is dirty, it's unpleasant to the touch, but this is nothing more than a matter of aesthetics. But if the cup is dirty on the inside, everything that enters it is sullied. The defect is liable to render other things defective. Drinking the shot is not so important, because it merely accomplishes a very superficial cleansing. For the cleansing to be internal, to have a significant effect, one must sing the melodies. At a farbrengen, much greater effort must be invested in singing, the internal rinsing, than in the drinking, the external cleansing.

One must sing the melody the way he washes a dish: washing it once and then a second time, scrubbing it again and again until all the dirt

and residue is washed away. In the same manner, one should sing each song several times so the receptacle will be well scrubbed, so that another layer of dirt, will be washed away. One should repeat the melodies again and again and allow them to be internalized until the receptacle is rendered suitable.

THE SOUL'S PURIFICATION

The power of melody to purify the soul is related to its central characteristic: In contrast to other sacred matters, melody, in and of itself, has no content. If a person wishes to tell a story – for example, “I woke up this morning and ate breakfast” – he can relate it verbally in any language, or he can relate it in pantomime. But it's impossible to tell a story clearly with music alone. By its nature, music transmits the condition of the soul rather than content. In this sense, music can accomplish what words cannot.

When a person says that someone is happy, the words themselves can't transmit the actual feeling of happiness. It's even more difficult to do this with a drawing. But with singing, it's actually possible to transmit a feeling. Music is like the encompassing light discussed in books of Kabbala and Hasidism rather than the inner light, because it's impossible to internalize the melody and know exactly what the melody is saying. It's possible to understand something, to understand its process and where it is leading, but it's impossible to transmit or receive explicit content from it.

This characteristic of melody is connected to the concept of purity. We could say a lot about the purity of the soul, but those words don't engender purity itself. What is dirty remains dirty even after everything was said, after all the speeches and homilies. A person can pound his heart numerous times, but the heart remains as it was before. To achieve purity of the soul, one must employ something that doesn't function on the track of comprehending defined content, but rather, something that rouses the loftier powers of the soul.

I once read a story that, interestingly, I haven't found in any work of Chabad. It is a story about “*Arba Bavot*” (Four Gates), a well-known melody that was composed by the Baal HaTanya. He delivered many Torah discourses in his lifetime. The number of treatises we have in our

possession is significant, and we know that the majority of them have been lost. Anyone who has read these treatises knows they can't be summarized with brief sayings or clever remarks, because they are so complex. The story goes that one day, after the Rebbe delivered one of his treatises, an elderly hasid, who had been his follower for many years, approached him and said, "Rebbe, what can I do? I'm not a Torah scholar, and when the Rebbe speaks, I don't understand a word. Can the Rebbe explain to me what he said in plain words that even I can understand?"

The Baal HaTanya gave it some thought and then said to the hasid, "I can't explain it to you in words, but I will sing you a melody that contains all of my Torah." And the Baal HaTanya promptly sang the "*Arba Bavot*" melody for the hasid.

As I said, this story isn't found in any of the Chabad works, perhaps because, in a certain sense, it's inconsistent with the Chabad approach, an approach that is based on internalization and intellectual comprehension. I don't know if the story took place precisely in this manner, but what is certainly true is that the one who related it heard the melody and thought it expressed the essence of the Baal HaTanya's teachings, even though it did not express it in words.

There are melodies you can sing while washing the floor or splitting logs. The Baal HaTanya's melody isn't one of them – not only because it wouldn't be suitable, but also because it transports a person to another world, a world without specific, defined content.

The melody isn't analogous to the actual drink that is poured into the cup, but it does at least flow into the cup and rinse it.

A MELODY THAT SPARES A PERSON FROM SIN

The melody can't convey everything it needs to say to me, because melodies don't know how to speak. It can't say, "Repent," but it can tell me that I'm not in a good place. It can tell me that the circumstances in which I am mired are tiresome. It can tell me that I'm not doing well. It can tell me that I'm not my true self. This is the power of melody.

But even after a person has heard a melody several times, he still doesn't know what he needs to do the next morning, but the melody might help him learn what not to do the next morning. When the melody reverberates in a person's mind, even if he doesn't understand what it's

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saying, it still places him in a certain frame of mind, and that frame of mind can, at times, affect him more than several homilies or profound ideas.

The Gemara states that *tzitzit* (ritual fringes) have saved people from serious transgressions. There are also many stories about melodies that have saved people from transgression. These people intended to commit a sin when suddenly a melody started playing inside them, and they were simply unable to carry it out. One can do many things with a good hasidic melody, but one can't eat pork with it. Imagine someone who plans to commit some indecent act, and suddenly something starts playing inside him. When a melody starts playing inside him, when it reverberates within his mind, it's impossible to stop it. And whether or not he understands it, it has a significant effect.

A melody must be heard more than once for it to reverberate within a person. At a concert, hearing a song once may certainly be enough. Really, how many times can they play the same melody? But the melody sung at a farbrengen is not a concert. It's more like a laundromat. Washing heavily soiled clothing one time isn't enough. One must wash it again and again before a change can be seen.

PURGING THE VESSEL IN BOILING WATER

There is a melody that rinses like cold water, and there is a melody that is more like scouring with hot water. And then there's a melody that has the power to purge. Just as there is no difference between cold or hot water at their essence, the difference between the types of melody described here is not about their content. Rather, the difference is in their effect.

As a rule, all the upbeat melodies that are sung at a farbrengen loudly, energetically, and while clapping hands are like a rinse in cold water. Even if these tunes can be sung enthusiastically, they are cold at their essence. For minor surface dirt, rinsing in cold water is sufficient.

Then there are melodies that are more like scouring in hot water. These melodies have more meaning, more content. They aren't necessarily louder, and at times might even be sung softly, but they penetrate more deeply. A melody of this kind can wash away more substantial dirt.

And then there are melodies that are deeply profound, melodies that have an impact similar to purging in boiling water. When a person immerses himself in a melody of that sort, he undergoes transformation. For one thing, forbidden and repulsive elements are cleansed from him. At the same time, he becomes a kosher vessel into which other, holy matters can be introduced. When a person isn't merely scalded with boiling water, but is immersed in it, it leaves a deep impression.

It is said in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that in the verse where God said to Noah, "Come you and your entire household into the ark,"⁷ the word for "ark," *teiva*, also means "word." The Baal Shem Tov spoke of this in the context of prayer. One must enter the word one utters. One should not just say it and spit it out, but one should enter its essence. When a person enters the word, it can shield him and lead him through the "great waters," the turbulence and turmoil, that he will encounter in the world.

In the same manner, a person must completely enter the melody. In order to enter the word or the melody, one must go in all the way. When a person prays or sings a melody, all of him must be immersed in it. If he is only halfway in, it is tantamount to a person who purges a vessel with half the vessel outside the water, in which case the purge is ineffective. But if he enters it entirely, he becomes transformed, and when he emerges, he is a completely different person. At that moment, he can achieve reparation and purity.

7. Genesis 7:1.