

For the Sake of the Children

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Rebbe Nachman's maternal grandfather was a mysterious figure in the history of Chassidism. The Rebbe's great-grandfather, the Baal Shem Tov, made the match between his daughter, Adil, and one of his students, Rabbi Yechiel, known as "the Deutschel" (the German). Rebbe Nachman's own brother, one of his earliest followers, was named after their grandfather. But who was he really? And how did he find his way to the Baal Shem Tov?

Not much is known about Rabbi Yechiel, but we do know that after he arrived in Eastern Europe he somehow came to the attention of the Baal Shem Tov. The founder of Chassidism sent one of his own disciples, Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Polonoye, to go and see if he would be a worthy addition to their circle.

When Rabbi Aryeh Leib caught up with "the Deutschel," he began

to ask him a series of questions meant to test his Torah mettle. Rabbi Yechiel answered, "I haven't known, I do not know, and I will not know!" When Rabbi Aryeh Leib reported the newcomer's strange answer to the Baal Shem Tov, the latter said, "I can tell from his words that he belongs here with us." Thus "the Deutschel" made his way to Mezhibuzh and to the inner circle of the Baal Shem Tov.

In time, the Baal Shem Tov decided to take him as a son-in-law. When asked what he saw in Rabbi Yechiel to make him worthy of such a distinction, the Baal Shem Tov answered, "I did it for the children!"

Rabbi Yechiel and Adil had two sons who became two of the greatest lights of their generation: Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuzh and Rabbi Ephraim of Sudilkov (author of the *Degel Machaneh Ephraim*). But it wasn't until much later, after the passing of Rabbi Yechiel himself, that the further intention of the Baal Shem Tov became known.

After Rabbi Yechiel passed away, the children of Mezhibuzh began to fall ill. Over the years, many of them died in inexplicable epidemics. The merit of the tzaddik, Rabbi Yechiel, had been preserving them all the while that he had lived. The Baal Shem Tov had really wanted him in Mezhibuzh "for the sake of the children"!

Based on Or HaArot I, pp. 241-243