

## The Rebbe's Wisdom



### The Lubavitcher Rebbe's essays led November back to poetry

"The ideal Jew looks beyond the pleasures of this temporal life and envisions the spiritual reward that awaits him in the next one." Growing up, I kept hearing that refrain, but didn't see it practiced. At home, after a long day of seeing patients or many nights on call, father laughed loudly at the Marx Brothers' anarchistic humor and played Sam Cooke's sensual songs through aerodynamic Danish speakers. The ideal Jew lacked humor, appeared to be out of touch with people's real concerns, and was afraid of our family dog. At school, his children made fun of my father for not being a rabbi.

In college, I read Leonard Cohen and Pablo Neruda and dreamed of becoming a great love poet. I climbed a ladder to my girlfriend's window and proposed with a poem. Then in graduate school, I became deeply drawn to Hasidic life. The stories and mystical teachings started to take poetry's place. I finished my degree and enrolled in a Hasidic yeshiva.

I studied and studied, and then another crossroads: Should I go on for rabbinical ordination? "That way," my skinny study partner said, "you could stay in the world of Torah forever." How delicious a life of prayer and learning sounded. But was I really supposed to turn my back on poetry? Was I being true to myself?

Ultimately, it was the *Likkutei Sichot*, the collected discourses of Rabbi Menachem

Mendel Schneerson that helped supply the answer. On select Shabbat afternoons, the Lubavitcher Rebbe would sit before a sea of swaying Hasidim in a Brooklyn synagogue and share his interpretations of familiar biblical stories. Each talk took a similar, winding course. First a question, sometimes surprisingly simple. Then a proposed answer. Then a negation of that answer. Another question. Another answer. So on and so on. One doorway after another. The listener drawn ever deeper into the discourse. Until finally, a point of light—a new understanding merging the mystical and revealed schools of Jewish thought.

Without notes or sources in front of him, the Rebbe might speak for hours. A team of scholars would memorize his words—they couldn't use recording equipment on Shabbat—and distill them into essays, which the Rebbe himself would extensively edit. These *Sichot* or conversations were later collected and published in volumes organized according to the cycle of Torah portions and holidays. Ultimately, *Likkutei Sichot* would comprise 39 volumes and stand as the largest authoritative collection of the Rebbe's teachings.

Much has been written about the Rebbe. Still, his prolific output of original Torah interpretations remains a secret to most of the Jewish world. My first encounter with *Likkutei Sichot* came nearly a decade after the Rebbe's passing. While in graduate school, I started attending a weekly class on the text. The Yiddish seemed impenetrable, but I often discovered that things I felt intuitively—things I assumed put me at odds with Judaism—were at the heart of the Rebbe's theology.

In these pages, I read things with which the Jews of my youth would surely take issue: A Jew whose life is only about spiritual reward can find himself on a slippery slope toward idolatry. If you can help another Jew, help another Jew. But if you feel superior to him, you're the one with the problem. And if you've done everything to help a friend, but still he fails, then cry for him. But never cry for yourself. There is still work to be done.

And a Jew's connection to G-d is so unconditional that a sin cannot diminish it. And not even a pious act can strengthen it. It simply is. And yet, to feel this truth that was true before the world was set in motion, before creation, when it was just G-d and the Jewish soul, to feel it within this strange fi-

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nite box we call the world, to feel it as a soul in a body, you must pull the lever of *Teshuva* [repentance]. And this is Yom Kippur. When the unconditional relationship flows down into the world, revealing the level where we are connected beyond what we do or don't do. And yet, there is nothing like doing a *mitzvah*. Not because this is some heavenly video game that gets you spiritual points, but because a *mitzvah* is an embrace with G-d.

Just as often, I read things that shocked me: If you want to know G-d, you can only find Him in this lowly world. In the upper realms, He is putting on an act of sorts, expressing Himself as much as each world can take. And it's holy, very holy. To see it would blind you. But His Essence is here. And He is in the boardroom. And He is in the bedroom. Because, the Midrash says, "He desired a place in the lowest realm." And this is the reason for all of creation. And He will finally show Himself, after all these years, when you have sanctified these places, when you have made Him a home where He is comfortable.

And then there was one essay I couldn't believe had come from a rabbi. But the Rebbe said it. G-d wouldn't give the Torah until Moses's father-in-law Jethro, a man who had tasted every spiritual and secular discipline, joined the Jewish people. For the Torah is about transforming the world and all it holds. Only Jethro, who had arrived at the holy through the mundane and the secular, could prepare the Jews for the Torah's task. Reading this, I felt my divided world was no longer divided. There was no longer a Jewish self and a secular self. There was no longer my personality and interests on the one hand, and Judaism superimposed on me on the other. Judaism meant taking whatever you love and using it in a holy way.

Throughout *Likkutei Sichot*, the Rebbe quotes many times the famous line from Proverbs: "In all your ways, know Him." Do not run away from poetry, I think the Rebbe would have told me. Go back to it and find G-d there, too.