

כתר שם טוב

Kesser Shem Tov

צוואה מהבעל שם טוב זכתו יגן עלינו

A will from the Baal Shem Tov, may his memory protect us:

Introduction

This short but profound tzava'ah (spiritual will) from the **Baal Shem Tov**, founder of the Chassidic movement (1698–1760), offers a deeply personal guide to daily divine service. Known for his teachings on deveikus (cleaving to G-d), joy, and sincerity, the Baal Shem Tov sought to make the inner path of spirituality accessible to every Jew. In this will, we hear his own voice—urgent, practical, loving—laying out the simple foundations of a life of holiness: study, good middos, daily mitzvos, care in Krias Shema, Shabbos, immersion, and yearning for every opportunity to connect with Hashem.

1. To be wholehearted in his service of the Blessed One — a complete service. And the main thing is not to forget these matters:

תמא, זא' להיות תמים בעבודתו ותברך עבודה א
ועיקר שלא לשכח הדברים

To study every day a portion of Mussar, whether much or little. And always to seek to attach oneself to good character traits and upright conduct.

לקמוד בכל יום שיעור מוסר הן רב הן מעט.
ולראות תמיד לדבק את עצמו במדות טובות
והנהגות ישרות

And not to leave any day without performing a mitzvah — whether a light one or a severe one. A sign for this: “Be as careful with a light mitzvah as with a severe one.”

ושלא להניח שום יום מעשיות מצוה בו הן קלה הן
חמורה, וסימנה הוי זהיר במצוה קלה כבחמורה

“Zahir” (careful) is from the verse: “And the wise will shine like the radiance” — meaning, the soul will shine and illuminate from a light mitzvah just like a severe one, for the Merciful One desires the heart.

פירוש: זהיר מלשון "והמשכילים זזהירו כזהר",
רצון לומר הנשמה תאיר ותזהיר ממצוה קלה
כבחמורה, כי רחמנה לבא בעי

And this is what it says (alternate version: “and a sign for this.” Another version: “see this explanation”): “He who guards a mitzvah will know no evil.”

וזה שאמר (נ"א: וסימנה. ועוד נ"א: תזהו פירוש)
,"שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע

“Shomer” means (like the verse) “And his father guarded the matter” — that is, he anticipated it. So too one must wait and anticipate from morning until evening, perhaps some mitzvah will come his way. A sign for this: “G-d's kindness all day long.”

שומר מלשון "ואביו שמר את הדבר", הינו מצפה,
כן צריך להיות ממתין ומצפה מבקר עד ערב אולי
"וידמו לו איתה מצוה, וסימנה "חסד אל כל היום

2. To be meticulous in Krias Shema, every word and syllable — this is a great matter.

**ב' לדקדק בקריאת שמע בכל תיבה ותיבה, והוא
דבר גדול**

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Even if he cannot pray without foreign thoughts, let him train himself in Shema without foreign thoughts.

אף על פי שאי אפשר לו להתפלל בלי מחשבה זרה, ירגיל עצמו בקריאת שמע בלי מחשבה זרה,

A sign: “Whoever recites Shema — demons flee from him,” whether harm to the body or to the soul.

וסימנה "כל הקורא קריאת שמע מזיקין בדיליו וממנו", הן הזק הגוף הן הזק הנפש.

3. To immerse in a mikveh as much as possible, especially when needed.

ג' לעשות טבילה כל מה שיוכל, ובפרט בעת הצרה.

4. To keep Shabbos according to Halachah in all its precision and details.

ד' לשמור שבת כהלכתו בכל דקדוקו ופרטיו

A sign for this: “תשב אנוש עד דכא” — “תשב” shares the letters of “שבת”. And our sages said: “אנוש” refers even to an idolater from the generation of Enosh — he is forgiven.

וסימנה "תשב אנוש עד דכא", תשב אותיות שבת, ודרשו רז"ל "אנוש" פירוש אפלו עובד עבודה זרה כדור אנוש — מוקלין לו.

[NOTE Summary

The Baal Shem Tov exhorts his followers to serve Hashem with wholehearted sincerity—“עבודה תמה.” Central to his guidance is not forgetting the basics: daily learning (even a little Mussar), striving for refined middos, and never letting a day pass without action—some mitzvah, however small. He highlights that even “minor” mitzvos bring light to the soul, for Hashem desires the heart. He interprets “שומר מצוה לא ידע דבר רע” as one who *longs* for mitzvos like one who “guards” or anticipates something precious—yearning for mitzvos from morning to night.

He then gives detailed emphasis to four practices:

1. **Krias Shema** — to recite each word with clarity and effort, even if one cannot maintain pure thought during davening.
2. **Mikvah** — to immerse as often as possible, especially when spiritually necessary.
3. **Shabbos** — to guard it with all its halachic precision and beauty, drawing down forgiveness even for serious sins.

These are not lofty ideals for the elite, but daily habits meant to sanctify even the simplest life. His tone is encouraging, deeply practical, and oriented toward bringing light into the soul through small, consistent actions.

Practical Takeaway

Sanctity is built in the details. Begin each day with one small act of Mussar learning. Choose at least one

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צוֹנָאָה מֵהַבְּעַל שֵׁם טוֹב זָכְרוּ יָגֵן עָלֵינוּ

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mitzvah to do with intentionality, no matter how minor it may seem. Say Shema slowly. Go to the mikvah if possible. Make Shabbos special—down to the details. And above all: *long* for mitzvos. Wait for them, watch for them, and let your soul shine through them.

Chassidic Story

One morning, the Baal Shem Tov asked his students to accompany him on a sudden journey. They rode for hours until they arrived at a small hut in a distant village, where an elderly water-drawer lived. The Baal Shem Tov entered, greeted the man with warmth, and sat silently while the man finished reciting *Krias Shema*—slowly, word by word, with intense concentration.

Afterwards, the Baal Shem Tov turned to his students and said, “This man has little Torah learning. He performs no miracles. But his *Shema* pierces the heavens and holds up the world. I wanted you to see what true service looks like.”

(Source: *Shivchei HaBesht*, ed. Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, story #46, corroborated in various Chassidic oral traditions.)

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