



**TITLE:**

Hamoadim BeChassidus  
- Sugyos BeChassidus

**AUTHOR:**

R. Yoel Kahn

**PUBLISHER:** Maayonetecha, 5781



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**PUBLISHER:**

Sifriyat Eshel, reprint edition

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ISSUE #15

# Reb Yoel Built, We Benefit

BY SHMUEL SUPER

## Introduction

The recent passing of Harav Yoel Kahn, universally considered the preeminent expert on Chassidus, was a major loss for the entire Chabad community. Many articles have been written about R. Yoel and his contribution to Chabad Chassidus, each highlighting different aspects of his personality and work. In this article we will review some of R. Yoel's important written works, and highlight his unique contribution to the way Chabad Chassidus is studied and understood.

## Chassidus by Topic

With the notable exception of Tanya, most of Chassidus was not written in a systematic way. A *maamar* typically starts with a *pasuk* from the weekly parshah etc., and uses it as a starting point to explain a particular point. The following *maamar* can then address a completely different topic.

The body of printed sifrei Chassidus from our Rebbeim now spans hundreds of volumes. Every major topic in Chassidus is addressed in multiple different *maamarim*, each of which discuss it on a different level or from a different angle. As a result, a student can learn many *maamarim*, understanding each one of them quite well, yet still not have clarity on a given topic. What role does each level and aspect play in the full picture? What does each of the different explanations contribute?

In the past, the focus of *limud Chassidus* was very strongly on the *avodas Hashem* it is designed to generate. For this purpose, it doesn't matter so much whether one has all of the details of the topic fully organized. The important thing is to

learn the specific *maamar* at hand seriously, with wholehearted sincerity, and live with the message and feelings it conveys about serving Hashem.

There were individuals in the past that attempted to explain Chassidus in an organized and systematic way. Rabbi Nochum Tuvya of Piratin was one of the great chassidim of the Tzemach Tzedek, and later of the Kopust branch of Chabad. He wrote his own explanations of Chassidus, in the form of "*masechtos*," organized comprehensive treatments arranged by topic. But the Rebbe Rashab expressed his displeasure at this style of learning Chassidus. (See *Sefer Hasichos* 5705, p. 15. Nevertheless, we find in the Rebbe Rashab's *Igros Kodesh* (vol. 6, p. 9) that he wanted copies of R. Nochum Tuvya's *kesavim*.)

In our generation, however, the Rebbe wanted us to focus on a thorough understanding of Chassidus as well. In a very revealing letter to Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin (*Igros Kodesh*, vol. 27, p. 133), the Rebbe writes that for many years he has felt the saying he felt the need for works organizing Chassidus by topic. The Rebbe writes that he began preparing the groundwork for such a work himself, by writing *mafteichos* to the foundational sifrei Chassidus.

Eventually the Rebbe entrusted R. Yoel Kahn with the responsibility of implementing his vision, in the form of the *Sefer Ha'erchim* encyclopedia of Chassidus.

In *Sefer Ha'erchim*, R. Yoel took systematic organization to its most comprehensive level. In these volumes, every small detail of the topic is incorporated and analyzed. He took this so far that he was only able to complete eight volumes of *Sefer Ha'erchim* in his lifetime—all still under

the letter *alef*—and many find the work difficult to use due to its great length. The Rebbe wasn't completely pleased with the lengthy nature of *Sefer Ha'erchim*, but commented to R. Zevin that he finds it difficult to hold the editor back from *koching* in Chassidus (*Igros Kodesh*, vol. 32, p. 79).

But R. Yoel's work in the field of systematic explanation of Chassidus area is not restricted to *Sefer Ha'erchim*. Organization was his nature, and he brought structure to everything he taught.

R. Yoel's function can be compared to that of a builder. A builder takes pre-existing raw materials and fashions them into a complete structure, in which every piece serves a specific defined role in the larger edifice. Similarly, R. Yoel took the pre-existing material scattered among many sifrei Chassidus, and fashioned a building out of it. In this organized structure, there is a clear progression from level to level, every area is fleshed out with its full dimensions. When explained by R. Yoel, every element has its defined place, and they all combine together to form a complete building.

R. Yoel's perfectionism in writing was a significant barrier to publication. As a result, almost all of the works that appeared under his name were written up by others, based on his *shiurim* or dictation, and edited by him.

The last decade specifically saw the publication of a series of new *seforim* by R. Yoel, as Rabbi Eliyahu Kirschenbaum, a *mashpia* in Kfar Chabad entered the picture. R. Yoel was comfortable with R. Kirschenbaum's writing style, and collaborated productively with him on the publication of many articles and *seforim*.

## Machsheves Hachassidus

*Machsheves Hachassidus* were the first books under the name of R. Yoel as the author. The contents of these two volumes first appeared as articles in Kfar Chabad magazine, in the 5740s. R. Yoel recorded tapes specifically for this purpose, and the articles

were written up by the magazine staff.

These articles were later edited by R. **Menachem Mendel Kaplan**, and published in two volumes, in 5761 and 5765. They have recently been reprinted with a new cover, but no changes were made inside the books.

*Machsheves Hachassidus* addresses basic Torah concepts, explaining them as they are illuminated by the teachings of chassidus in general, and the *sichos* of the Rebbe in particular. The topics covered include the essence of the Jewish *neshamah*, Torah, mitzvos, *beriah yesh me'ayin*, *hashgachah peratis*, reward and punishment, miracles and nature, and more. *Machsheves Hachassidus* is written in a very simple style, using relatable *meshalim* and eschewing technical language. As a result, these books should be understandable to anyone with a basic Jewish education and knowledge of Hebrew.

For example, the chapter about the Chassidic definition of *tzadik*, *beinoni* and *rasha* (vol. 2, chapter 1) explains this basic concept from Tanya in simple everyday language, without resorting to the technical terms, such as *kochos hanefesh* and *levushim*, that are used in Chassidus.

Relatable *meshalim* are used to illustrate the ideas. To explain how a *beinoni* feels that any act not in accordance with Hashem's will is not even in the realm of possibility, an example is brought from the attitude of a *frum* person towards driving on Shabbos. While we can well understand the pleasure someone may feel from doing this, we can't even imagine doing it ourselves—the possibility doesn't even enter our minds. A *beinoni*, we are told, has this same attitude to all of Torah.

These books don't explain deep topics in Chassidus such as *sovev kol almin* and *memale kol almin*, and the *sefiros*. The topics chosen are general Jewish concepts, explained according to Chassidus. Rather than a work of deep Chassidic *haskalah*, *Machsheves Hachassidus* presents a chassidische *hashkafah*.

Readers will learn the chassidische *hashkafah* regarding key elements of Torah and Jewish life. These books are especially recommended for mesivta and high school age students who will benefit greatly from the clear and organized presentation of the chassidische perspective on life.

Not to be confused with the original *Machsheves Hachassidus* reviewed here, a separate *sefer* has been published recently by Maayanotecha titled *Machsheves Hachassidus – Torah Umitzvos*.

The introduction to this new *sefer* claims that most of the topics of the original *Machsheves Hachassidus* were readdressed by R. Yoel in the articles that make up the *Hamoadim BeChassidus—Sugyos BeChassidus* set we will review next in this article. The topics that weren't readdressed are Torah and Mitzvos, so these have been extracted and reedited. R. Yoel's *kuntres*

*Gidran Shel Mitzvos – Chukim Umishpatim* that was published separately in 5755 was added as an appendix.

But the assertion that original *Machsheves Hachassidus* has been superseded by *Hamoadim BeChassidus* and *Sugyos BeChassidus* is inaccurate. As will be explained shortly, the style of the latter *seforim* is quite different than *Machsheves Hachassidus*.

Content-wise as well, while there is significant overlap in the topics addressed, the content of the chapters is sufficiently distinct.

The reprinted original *Machsheves Hachassidus* reviewed here thus remains a unique work, best suited for younger audiences and beginners to Chassidus.

## Hamoadim BeChassidus—Sugyos BeChassidus

Available separately, *Hamoadim BeChassidus* and *Sugyos BeChassidus* are essentially a set. *Hamoadim* contains articles on the Yamim Tovim of the Jewish calendar, and *Sugyos* addresses concepts in Chassidus.

These *seforim* collect R. Yoel's regular articles published in the *Maayanotecha* journal, written up by R. Kirschenbaum. The *Maayanotecha* articles have been published in various forms over the years, reaching the *Sugyos/Moadim* form in 5773. The new 5781 edition includes 5 new articles in the *Moadim* volume, and a separate lengthy *kuntres* written by R. Yoel, *Mehusam Shel Yisrael*, has been appended to the *Sugyos* volume.

*Hamoadim BeChassidus* and *Sugyos BeChassidus* belong to the same general genre of systematic presentation of topics in Chassidus, but are written on a higher, more sophisticated level than *Machsheves Hachassidus*. The articles are more comprehensive, go deeper into the topics, and use the technical terms found in the original Chassidische *seforim*.

One important chapter in *Sugyos BeChassidus* addresses the reason for the creation of the world. Three different reasons are given for this in Kabbalah and Chassidus: (a) Hashem wished to express His powers, (b) so that the creations should acknowledge His greatness, and, (c) an inexplicable desire for a *dirah betachtonim*.

This chapter contains a section devoted to each of these reasons. For each reason, R. Yoel presents an in-depth explanation, an analysis of its meaning, an exploration of the level of *Elokus* it reflects, and a discussion about its practical implications for our *avodas Hashem*.

The chapter devoted to the upcoming Yom Tov of Chanukah in the *Moadim* volume explores the two miracles Chanukah: the victory in the war and the small jug of oil that lasted for eight nights.

The meaning of each of these miracles and the role they play in Chanukah is explained clearly

and methodically, weaving together a number of *maamarim* and *sichos* of the Rebbe. First, we learn that the decree leading up to Chanukah was a spiritual-themed decree, against Torah as a *divine* wisdom and way of life.

The miracles of Chanukah thus express the supernatural divine connection between the Jewish people and Hashem. The two miracles are complementary, expressing this truth on different levels: the miracle of the victory in war in a form that is *melubash* in nature, and the miracle of the oil in a form that transcends nature.

Taking a deeper look at miracles and nature, we learn that, counterintuitively, the seemingly lower form of miracles that appear in a natural guise actually possess an advantage over the overtly supernatural miracles.


The “natural” miracles express the compatibility of Elokus with the world itself—without needing to violate all of its rules. But a “natural” miracle alone can allow for the mistaken impression that everything was indeed natural, hence the need for a completely supernatural miracle as well to underline the complete subservience of the world to Elokus.

Finally, this understanding is applied to *avodas Hashem*. The super-rational *emunah* in Hashem inherent in every Jew is indeed the greatest expression of pure Elokus, but it must also be expressed within the realm of reason as well—showing that Elokus isn't an imposed foreign power but the very essence of the world itself.

The *Sugyos* and *Moadim* volumes do contain footnotes referencing the sources for some of the key ideas. But it would also have been a good idea to provide a list of the primary sources at the conclusion of each chapter, to enable those that wish to explore the topic further in the *lashon harav* to find it easily.

In addition, the *kuntres Mai Chaunkah* authored by R. Yoel in 5755 could have been included as an appendix to the *Moadim* volume. This *kuntres* addresses the same theme of Chanukah discussed above, but at much greater length and depth.

## Conclusion

The two sets of *seforim* reviewed above fill an important need in the field of *limud* Chassidus. Each chapter takes a topic from Chassidus and transforms it into a lucid and complete unit. As such, these *seforim* are not just for people taking their first steps in the world of Chassidus. Experienced students will also benefit greatly from the systematic organization and clear presentation of the topics in these *seforim*. The raw materials may be familiar to them already, but the well-constructed edifice R. Yoel fashions out of them will bring a new light a clarity to the topic. 

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