

R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk  
And the *sefer*  
*No'am Elimelekh*

*No'am Elimelekh* is one of the most popular and significant early Hasidic books of teachings. As a student of the Maggid of Mezritch, the accepted successor to the Baal Shem Tov, R. Elimelekh's teachings carry the weight of the lineage, and thus authority. The generation following the Maggid saw the expansion of Hasidic teaching throughout eastern Europe. Many of R. Elimelekh's students became prominent figures in Polish Hasidic life: R. Yaakov Yitzhak, the "Hozeh" of Lublin; R. Yisrael Hopstein, the Maggid of Kozienice; R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt and others. His teachings, captured in this book, shaped the character of Hasidism as it evolved and grew, particularly in the nature of the Tzaddik as the central figure in Hasidic life. This introduction will place R. Elimelekh in the emerging Hasidic world, and identify some of the key themes of *No'am Elimelekh*.

R. Elimelekh b. Eliezer Lipman Weisbloom was born in 1717 in Lupachowo, a town near Tycotin (Tiktin; near Bialystock) in eastern Poland. His father was a land-owner there. His older brother was R. Zushya (later of Hannipol). Apparently they were raised in the spirit of the time, with a classical rabbinic education, which included the study of the Zohar and Lurianic kabbalah. The latter can be discerned in their early spiritual quest together. They set out to wander homeless, "expelled in exile" with the Shekhinah (a practice dating back, at least, to Lurianic times). Their wanderings were often quite arduous, and they suffered lack of food and shelter quite often. This they welcomed, as they understood their suffering to be both transformative for themselves (ridding them of material desires, saving them from the wiles of the *yetzer hara*) and redemptive for the Shekhinah. The self-denial and physical suffering of this period was formative of R. Elimelekh's spiritual orientation, and persisted even into his later years as a Hasidic master and Tzaddik.

It appears that their uncle participated in the circle of R. Dov Baer, and it is possible that it was through the former that he and his brother came to associate with the nascent group of hasidim around the Maggid of Mezritch. R. Zushya was the first to study with the Maggid, and it was he who brought R. Elimelekh into this circle. Not much is known about their time there, but it was not long after the death of the Maggid in 1772 that R. Elimelekh established his court and gathered students and followers around himself in Lyzhansk (Lezajsk) in Galicia.

That R. Elimelekh set himself up in a locality and began to serve in his role as Tzaddik is not altogether unusual. Most of his associates around the Maggid's table also found positions of leadership in communities throughout Galicia, Podolia, Volhynia and the Ukraine. To a certain extent this appears to be a focused, shared effort on the part of the Maggid's students to promote Hasidic values and teaching – to revive and raise up the spiritual lives of Jews throughout this region. Yet, it would be wrong to suggest that this constituted a "movement", or that these teachers all agreed on what "Hasidism" meant at that time. Indeed, it is not clear that anyone among the leading figures in early Hasidism (the Baal Shem Tov, R. Dov Baer, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polonnoye) actually had in mind the creation of a "movement".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Ada Rapoport-Albert "Hasidism after 1772: Structural Continuity and Change" in Hasidism Reappraised (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London; 1997).

The earliest “stages” of the emergence of Hasidism as we know it – the first three generations – are in some ways continuous with earlier pietistic groups. That is, there had always been *hasidim*, individuals who sought to deepen their spiritual lives, separating themselves from the common folk to focus on spiritual practice and personal piety. In the time of the Baal Shem Tov, this work would largely have been kabbalistic contemplations influenced by Lurianic teachings of the preceding centuries. These *hasidim* would have gathered in small groups, perhaps around an inspired leader. But, their primary interest was in personal piety devoted to cosmic transformation. It is possible, and likely correct, to see the Baal Shem Tov in this light. His spiritual practice included healing with amulets and natural remedies, but his primary concern was in personal prayer with a shamanistic bent. Through his prayer he was able to perform “ascents of the soul”, to travel through celestial realms, bringing “healing” there, and in the human dimension, as well. Although he was a charismatic figure, he still was not “the” leader of his circle of *hasidim*, again understanding this term in its classical sense. At this stage – and through at least the time of R. Elimelekh – a *hasid* was a pietist, intent on his own personal spiritual life. If he was in a group of *hasidim*, they may have all shared similar practices, but it was their personal work that counted. Only later did the term *hasid* come to mean a disciple or devotee of a particular teacher or Tzaddik. This transition came about largely through the work of R. Elimelekh.

If the life and practice of the Baal Shem Tov was not discontinuous with cultural norms which had preceded him, then it appears that the period that follows was not either. That is, while many would say that R. Dov Baer became the Baal Shem Tov’s “acknowledged successor”, the nature of the spiritual marketplace at that time suggests otherwise. Even as R. Dov Baer was attracting and teaching students, so was R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoyye, and it was he who actually published the first “Hasidic” book, *Toldot Yaakov Yosef* (1780). He, much more than R. Dov Baer, promoted the teachings of his master, even as he couched them in his own terms, and for his own ends. Similarly, there were other teachers, students of the Baal Shem Tov and even the Maggid, who established “Hasidic” centers and promoted their own spiritual paths. Both R. Avraham of Kalisk and his teacher R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk did so in White Russia, while R. Aaron of Karlin established a center in Lithuania. Testimony to the fact that the “hasidim” in Lithuania were not identified as followers of the Baal Shem Tov or the Maggid is that they came to be known to their opponents and others as “Karliners”.

All of the above is to set the context for the appearance of R. Elimelekh on the stage of Hasidic history. We are not to imagine a programmatic movement flowing from the Baal Shem Tov, through the Maggid to R. Elimelekh. Rather, he is one of a number of students of the Maggid who internalized the teachings of his master and those of the Baal Shem Tov, yet who also felt free to present them according to his particular understanding and personal temperament. He established his own “Hasidic” center in Lyzhansk, as did those mentioned above, to serve as teacher and Tzaddik.

It is in the latter role that R. Elimelekh distinguished himself. While both the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid included teachings about the role of the *tzaddik*, the term generally indicated “a normative notion of moral righteousness (*zaddiq* as opposed to *rasha*’), with an overtone of that

mythical/mystical figure”<sup>2</sup> of the moralizing preacher whose ascetic acts and willing descent to battle evil saved a sinning generation from punishment. “In the writings of the Maggid’s school, even in the very *zaddiq*-centered *No’am Elimelekh*, the term still usually has a general, or at least ambiguous, sense; the reader frequently is given the impression that he too, with the proper awareness and behavior, might reach that state”.<sup>3</sup> That having been said, in the teachings of R. Elimelekh this personality takes on a unique and powerful role. Indeed, it is the person of the Tzaddik who is the focus of much of his teaching. The role the Tzaddik would play in the emergence of Hasidism as the primary form of Jewish life in Eastern Europe was shaped largely by the teachings of R. Elimelekh.

Arthur Green, in the article cited above, argues that from the start the impulse of the Hasidic teachers – the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid – was to challenge the established, corrupt leadership, obtuse to the needs of the people. There is something to this, yet we must still question the notion that the early Hasidic masters were “of the people” and that their success was solely due to their passionate commitment to the people, or their unique spiritual message. Glenn Dynner<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated that many of the early leaders of the nascent Hasidic movement were of the elite class of scholars, and that much of their success came from their honorable birth and social standing, their political acumen and their capacity to draw support from the merchant class. While these leaders engaged in political confrontation and usurpation of power in various localities, they did also turn their attention to the needs and concerns of the people, so it would not be fair to say that the success of Hasidism was not also related to this fact.

The two roles of the Tzaddik, one whose attention was his own development in seclusion, and one who functioned within the society, were already figures present in the teachings of the Maggid, R. Elimelekh’s master. But, even there, the societal role was to bring the people to *teshuvah* through his work as a *mokhiach*, a reproving preacher. The role of this Tzaddik was not to provide the people of his community with “children, life and sustenance” (cf. Moed Katan 28a). This was R. Elimelekh’s innovation, and a key element of the emerging figure of the Tzaddik.<sup>5</sup>

Mendel Piekarcz<sup>6</sup> emphasizes over and over that the particular role of the Hasidic leader as depicted in *No’am Elimelekh* is characterized by its social component. The Hasidic leader, the Tzaddik, did not function merely as a preacher, nor as a secluded pietist working on his own soul. He was to do both. The community had needs, dire needs, and R. Elimelekh taught that the role and function of the Tzaddik was to provide for those needs.

That which established the daily routine of the latter-day [third generation and beyond] Hasidic Tzaddikim was the social reality. While, according to R. Elimelekh, material experience, the needs of physical existence in this world are of the lowest order, of inferior value, material experience is nevertheless not inferior in importance to living in

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<sup>2</sup> “Typologies of Leadership and Hasidic Zaddik”, by Arthur Green, in *Jewish Spirituality from the Seventeenth-Century to the Present*, ed. Arthur Green (Crossroad Press, New York;1994), pg. 134.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Men of Silk: The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society* (Oxford University Press, Oxford; 2006).

<sup>5</sup> *No’am Elimelek* (with Introduction, formatted with citations, notes and indices; Heb.), ed., Gedalyah Nigal (Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem; 1978), pg. 20.

<sup>6</sup> “The New Direction in the Ideological/Social Goals of Hasidism in Poland and Outside – R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk and His Followers” (Heb.), *Gal-Ed*, 15-16 (1998): 43-80.

the first place....There is no possibility of spiritual life, i.e. religious life, without sufficient income.... As a householder is concerned for all who live under him, so a Tzaddik is obligated to be concerned for the material needs of the House of Israel in exile.<sup>7</sup>

The dynamic tension between the concern of the Tzaddik for his community and his desire and need for seclusion, to deepen his personal piety, generated the process by which he was able to provide for his community. The necessary precondition was for the Tzaddik to deepen his own personal devotion, attaining and sustaining complete attachment to God (*devekut*). Only then could he – or, perhaps better, would he be compelled to – turn his attention the particular needs of individuals. He would bring them what they needed through his subsequent prayer and Torah study. The interplay of these two activities was the generative force by which the Tzaddik fulfilled his role as provider. In this, we see in *No'am Elimelekh* an ongoing tension between the tzaddik as preacher, who rebukes the people to get them to change, and the tzaddik who focuses solely on his own spiritual experience.

One aspect of this tension is R. Elimelekh's attitude toward asceticism and self-mortification. As we have noted, his early years were spent in poverty and suffering, and it appears that these practices continued to resonate for R. Elimelekh throughout his life. He saw them as means to negate all physical needs, to remove concern for the material body from the mind and heart of the Tzaddik. Yet, he also recognized that for most people self-mortification would be experienced solely as physical pain without any spiritual connection. Moreover, many of the people he sought to serve were already suffering hunger and deprivation. They did not need to add more. So, while R. Elimelekh encourages the Tzaddik to engage in ascetic practices, he urges all others to connect themselves to the Tzaddik to receive their material needs, their spiritual practice to be developing joy and gratitude. It was up to the Tzaddik to provide them with the physical sustenance, family and life that they so rightly and desperately needed through his spiritual devotions.

While the Tzaddik plays a central role in R. Elimelekh's teachings, it is not always clear to whom he refers. That is, is this a unique role, one played by an individual? If so, then we may be speaking about *tzaddik hador*, or a "true", "great" or "complete" *tzaddik*. Or, perhaps, the *tzaddik* of whom he speaks is simply "a person (*adam*)", the ideal to which Jewish spiritual practice leads. Or possibly he refers to a *tzaddik* in training (see below). At this stage in the development of the Hasidic Tzaddik, no one is born to the role. True, those of eminent ancestry may more naturally attain this status, but they are at greater risk of hubris and therefore of failure. Those who rise to serve as a Tzaddik by their own efforts are more likely to bring humility with them. R. Elimelekh's bias toward the latter may reflect his own experience, but more likely is an expression of his antipathy toward all forms of pride.<sup>8</sup>

This hostility to haughtiness, of course, is not original to R. Elimelekh, but it is a significant element in his theory of the Tzaddik. He inherited from the Maggid a focus on the experience of nothingness/*ayin*. This is a state of consciousness in which all self-awareness is negated and one is emptied of any sense of separate existence from God. This is the goal of *devekut*. The *tzaddik*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pg. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. See also, [Men of Silk](#) regarding the role of well-born scholars as leaders of the nascent Hasidic "movement".

who attains the state of *ayin* touches the deepest root of the divine, a place/event in which all things exist at once without differentiation, and all events exist as potentially possible. The Maggid, then, took the rabbinic saying “There is no *mazal* (astrological sign) that has power over Israel (*ayn mazal l’yisrael*)” (Shabbat 156a) and interpret it to mean “*Ayin* – that is Israel’s *mazal*”. While here he suggests that the most recondite dimensions of the divine provide the sustenance and life-force for Israel, in time *mazal* came to be identified with the Tzaddik, who transforms himself to nothing – both as *ayin*, and in humility. This set of associations then could be applied to the saying from Mo’ed Katan 28a: “Life, children and sustenance are not dependent on our merit, but they are dependent on *mazal* (i.e. the Tzaddik)”. R. Elimelekh deepens this reading, understanding *mazal* to be related to the root *n-z-l*, to drip or flow. The flow of divine sustenance and life to the Jewish people is dependent on the work of the Tzaddik.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, paradoxically, the Tzaddik is able to serve as a conduit for the divine flow only when he leaves off his *devekut*. His descent from cleaving to God comes about, in part, through his own small inner movement of self-awareness and self-concern (*peniyot*). A Tzaddik who is complete (*tzaddik gamur*), who spends his whole time in contemplative *devekut* with the divine, knows only the sufficiency of his experience. In the divine realm there is no need for change; all is perfect in its fullness. In such a state, a Tzaddik would feel no need to change the conditions of the people around him as, from his inner perspective, all is as it should be. It is thus that the Tzaddik needs to experience some distraction and some minor “sin” to “descend” from his elevated consciousness to connect with his people. One such distraction is self-concern. His new awareness of their need energizes him to reconnect with the divine in order to redirect the flow of divine fullness (*shefa*) to provide for the needs of his people.

Another impetus may rest in the sins and mistakes of his people. Their sins – whether in thought or deed – affect the Tzaddik. He experiences descent in order to connect with his people, to rebuke or instruct them, and so help them transform themselves through *teshuvah*. This dynamic reflects the intimate connection between the Tzaddik and his community. “This will be for you a sign: if people are intimately connected to a leader then he is surely a Tzaddik”<sup>10</sup>. Those who devote themselves to studying with the Tzaddik and supporting him are given a number of titles in *No’am Elimelekh*: “helpers (*ozirim*)”, “beginning *tzaddikim*”, or “lesser *tzaddikim*”. Yet, in general, the title *hasid* in the sense of a disciple/devotee of a particular Tzaddik does not appear. *Hasid* and *hasidut* still refer to the quality of a person who would aspire to be a Tzaddik.

The absence of this sense of the word *hasid* reflects the fact that R. Elimelekh represents a transitional figure in the history of Hasidism. The Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid were spiritual masters who attracted fellow pietists and preachers, as well as students. They did not, however, demand of them exclusive loyalty. They came and went and, as we have seen, they even presented themselves as spiritual masters and guides at the same time. This is true, as well, in the time of the *No’am Elimelekh*. Young men circulated among these newly emerging charismatic teachers, seeking instruction and inspiration. They were not yet bound to any one teacher or another. When they did find a teacher who suited them, their relationship was understood to transcend personal preference or the power of the Tzaddik. Rather, they had each discovered in the other the presence of a divine spark from the same location in the original cosmic Adam.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pg. 29.

<sup>10</sup> *No’am Elimelekh, Bo*, cited in Nigal, *ibid.* pg. 21.

This afforded a merging of identity, if only for a moment, that permitted efficient and powerful transmission of Torah and charisma, not to mention material blessing. Even without this intimate connection, for the Tzaddik to be effective in providing for the masses they, too, must connect with the Tzaddik, to accept and sustain his leadership. Yet, they were free to leave his company and find another in whom they could place their faith, and so receive blessing.<sup>11</sup> It is only in the succeeding generation that the person of the Tzaddik became associated with a specific group of people, even extending over space and time, whose followers were bound to him in an exclusive relationship. It is then that the term *hasid* loses its meaning of “pietist” to become “devoted follower of a particular Tzaddik”.

While the relationship among Tzaddikim was generally cordial, if not loving, the emerging exclusive relationship of Tzaddik and *hasid* created some tension among them. We see this in stories from the earlier and later terms of R. Elimelekh’s career. In his early years as a Tzaddik, when his students were still under his tutelage, we hear this tale:

R. Naftali of Ropczycz was with R. Elimelekh with others of his fellows. R. Elimelekh was deep in *devekut* as he was studying with his students. R. Naftali noticed through the window that someone was rushing to R. Elimelekh’s house, so he went out to meet him, and asked him what he wanted. This person imagined that he was met by R. Elimelekh, and so he placed before him his request: the local land-owner wanted to remove him from his position as tax-collector, to beat him and punish him and take him to jail. R. Naftali took his staff in hand, and leaned on it with his head and hand, and acted as did his master, R. Elimelekh (as this was his way of behaving). He said to himself: “This is no longer a conflict; this is no longer a beating, etc.” He then said to the man: “Go home. God will prosper your ways”. The next day the same man returned to thank R. Elimelekh, as the land-holder had been struck with a strange death. But, he then realized that the rebbe who had promised this to him was not the one before him, and he stood speechless. R. Elimelekh asked him to tell him all that had happened, which he did, and R. Elimelekh understood immediately what had happened. He said to R. Naftali: “Naftali, you understand well the performance (*di kenst shoyen di kinst*)!” R. Naftali apologized, explaining that he did not want R. Elimelekh to interrupt his *devekut* and his study with the students, and that was why he went out to this person and did what he did as R. Elimelekh’s emissary – after all “one acquires good for another even if he is not present” (cf. Ketubot 11a).<sup>12</sup>

In this story we witness a student of the Tzaddik behaving as if he were a Tzaddik while still in the court of his master. R. Naftali does not seek to usurp his master’s position, but to save him from distraction. In mimicking R. Elimelekh he seeks to reassure the visitor that he will survive his trial, even if he – R. Naftali – is not yet a full Tzaddik, and can only enact what he has seen in his master. In this instance, R. Elimelekh responds with a bit of humor, and perhaps subtle chastisement, but without conflict as, apparently, the incident did not upset the relationship of Tzaddik and *hasid*.

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<sup>11</sup> Nigal, pg. 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ohel Elimelekh*, a collection of stories and traditions relating to R. Elimelekh and his students edited by R. Avraham Chayyim Simcha Bunim Michaelson, 1910, #40.

This was not the case, however, when R. Levi Yitzhak took up his post in Pinsk (around 1775). Even though this new center of Hasidic teaching was over 200 miles away, many of R. Elimelekh's students departed to study with R. Levi Yitzhak. They may have been attracted to the possibility of combining Hasidic with classical yeshivah study, as Pinsk was more closely related to the Lithuanian tradition. Whatever the reason, this event created tension between these peers – both students of the Maggid – and their followers. While this incident ultimately found a peaceful resolution, such was not the case later in R. Elimelekh's life. During a period of illness, R. Elimelekh instructed his followers to go to his disciple, R. Yaakov Yitzhak of Lancut (later known as the “Hozeh” of Lublin) for consultations and help. Ultimately people stopped coming to R. Elimelekh and attached themselves to R. Yaakov Yitzhak. This caused R. Elimelekh great pain, and contributed to his mental and physical decline. Apparently the absence of followers for whom he could provide sustenance, and who would also inspire his devotions, left R. Elimelekh without purpose or energy to live.<sup>13</sup> In this brief story we witness the transformation of the Hasidic community. Initially Hasidic pietists gathered as local communities centered around a teacher/Tzaddik, yet free to move to other communities (or strike out on their own), as in the time of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid. We now see Tzaddikim creating established, centralized communities, in which *hasidim* are bound in their relationship to the Tzaddik. *Hasidim* may leave for another teacher, but this causes deep pain and conflict within the community.

As mentioned earlier, the connection between the Tzaddik and his *hasid* is rooted in the mystical conception of shared roots in primordial existence. They are related in a manner that transcends “genetic” relationship. But beyond this connection the *hasid* must also invest great faith in the power of the Tzaddik to provide for his needs. It goes without saying that the Tzaddik invests great love and concern for the wellbeing of his *hasidim*. This reflects a degree of mutuality in the *hasid*-Tzaddik relationship, despite the appearances of imbalance of power. “This is the principle: when a Tzaddik wishes to do some good for some person, he must first do good for that person, by giving him the faith to believe that the Tzaddik will be able to do good for him”.<sup>14</sup> For R. Elimelekh, it is the faith and relationship between these two that makes the flow of blessing possible, almost without the involvement of the Holy One. The needs and desires of the *hasid* generate the movement of the flow within the Tzaddik, the love of the Tzaddik draws it down, and the faith facilitates its arrival at its target. This mutuality is captured as follows:

The Zaddik thus performs a double task: he brings man near to God and he brings down God's grace from heaven to earth. Through his close attachment to God he can influence others to fear God. The Zaddik's prayer for “life, children and sustenance” helps others to attain these.... The Zaddik's followers support him with their worldly goods and in this way become attached to him through his dependence on them. Their welfare thus becomes his welfare and his prayers on their behalf are more readily answered.<sup>15</sup>

The material support that the Tzaddik received from his *hasidim* actually created some inner conflict and was a source of derision among the opponents of Hasidism. The *pidyon hanefesh*,

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<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., Nigal, pg. 11 and note 6. See also *Ohel Elimelekh* #165.

<sup>14</sup> *No'am Elimelekh, Beshalach*, cited in Nigal, pg. 37.

<sup>15</sup> “The Doctrine of the Zaddik in the Thought of Elimelekh of Zizensk”, Rabbi Louis Jacobs; The Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture, University of Cincinnati, 1978, pg. 7.

money given to the Tzaddik to “redeem” the *hasid* from his difficulties, or from sin, and to restore the proper flow of *shefa* could be seen as bribery or self-contradictory. After all, if the Tzaddik can provide for his *hasidim*, why can he not also provide for himself? R. Elimelekh denies that for the true Tzaddik the money has any personal significance. Rather, it serves as a sort of “key” that opens the sluices for the flow of *shefa*. But, the Tzaddik has (or should not have) no personal interest in the money at all. It is seen by him as just so much waste. After all, he is the conduit of such a great flow of blessing that he would sense no personal needs.<sup>16</sup> What is more, at least for R. Elimelekh, money never slept in his house. Whatever came in as gifts was distributed as *tzedakah* in turn. Further, the one “great” Tzaddik, in his holiness and intention to facilitate the flow of blessing to his people, inspires the lesser tzaddikim around him (like R. Naftali above) who then, in their way, bestow *shefa* on others. The system is mutual and cyclical.

One element of R. Elimelekh’s understanding of the role of the Tzaddik has to do with the nature of the power he exercises. The sages established the principle (Mo’ed Katan 16b): God says: “I rule over man – but who rules over me? The righteous one (*tzaddik*): I make a decree and he annuls it”. This surely is the principle on which R. Elimelekh stakes his claim, but how does it work? His first answer is that the Tzaddik does not actually bring anything new to pass. Rather, all exists as potential in the divine realm, both the negative condition (*dinim, gezerah*) and the relief from it, blessing and *shefa*. When the Tzaddik prays for healing or the like, and his prayer is answered, it is because he simply accessed that which was already present in potential, and now has been actualized. He can accomplish this for a number of reasons. He serves as God’s emissary, enjoying and employing divine power in concert with the Holy One. He attains this capability while in *devekut*, where he comes to share in divine eternity and infinite capacity. Alternatively, R. Elimelekh employs the principle established in the Zohar that what happens on the earthly plane influences the affairs of the supernal plane. Thus, if the Tzaddik aligns himself properly, his acts below affect the divine organization such that the affairs below match the Tzaddik’s intention. Another approach to this question suggests that the Tzaddik becomes a partner with God in the affairs of this world. So, for instance, R. Elimelekh cites this teaching (Kiddushin 30b): “Three are involved in (*shutafim*) [the formation of] man: the blessed Holy One, the father and the mother”, and then interprets as follows: “The father”, this is the Tzaddik; ... “the mother”, this is *Knesset Yisrael*, that is, the Shekhinah”. Since the Tzaddik is a partner (*shutaf*), he has a say in, he is “involved” in the life of human beings, and so can bring about a change in the circumstances affecting them.<sup>17</sup>

The outcome of the above is quite striking:

R. Elimelekh taught: “Thus we find that the world behaves according to the will of the Tzaddik”. This unique quality of the Tzaddik has a parallel verging on equivalence and identity, with God; it attributes to the Tzaddik even some of the Creator’s names and appellations. The assumption is surely that this quality is formed as a consequence of supernal *devekut*, where the boundaries of the Creator and the creature are blurred. Nevertheless, Hasidism never crossed the final limit ... avoiding elevation of the Tzaddik to the state of divinity...<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nigal, pg. 38-9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 46-47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 48.

R. Elimelekh died on Adar 21 1787. It is most likely that the text of *No'am Elimelekh* was compiled by R. Elimelekh himself, and the text shows no apparent editing by the publisher (which was quite common at the time). The manuscript was brought to print by his sons, R. Eleazar and R. Eliezer Lipman, and his student R. Menachem Mendel of Yaroslav, and published in 1788. In the first edition of the volume there appeared “stars” or hash-marks throughout. They would appear to indicate paragraph separations or some other form organization. But, since they do not appear in a number of parshiot it is not clear that this is the case. Two traditions<sup>19</sup> provide different – and piously imaginative – explanations. One suggests simply that the stars imply some secret meaning. The other claims that “the stars in the heavens are a commentary to the stars in the book”. Another website, devoted to honoring and promoting the teachings of R. Elimelekh explains:

There is an additional factor in understanding this genius of a book and that is there are \* on almost every sentence; this is because the sentence is incomplete; he starts a sentence and then STOPS at the \*; at this point the reader is expected to be in tune with the Rebbe Elimelech and is supposed to intuit his wisdom to fill in the missing space. This is the reason why so many people cannot understand the wisdom in this book. However, there is a solution to understanding and filling in the correct message at each \* and that is through spiritual meditation tuning in to the spiritual world; where the intuitive thoughts you receive will “fill in” each and every \*.<sup>20</sup>

What are we to take from R. Elimelekh’s teachings regarding the Tzaddik? We do not organize our communities around such wonder-working shamans. We emphasize the unique yet universal capacity of each individual to fulfill their potential, to manage his or her life for their benefit and that of the world. We honor our individual successes. What role can this Tzaddik play in our lives? I would offer two different avenues of approach here, and invite us all to reflect as we continue studying *No'am Elimelekh* together.

- R. Elimelekh recognizes that there are different degrees of “*tzaddikim*”, carrying forward the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid. When we read, then, about the power of THE Tzaddik, we might choose instead to consider it a description of the potential that we all hold. All of us have the capacity to connect deeply and intimately with the divine. All of us have the potential to witness and address the needs of those who suffer around us. We can be the vehicles through which others are blessed with “children, life and sustenance”, in the myriad mechanisms available to us to do so. All of us can strive to embody the core consciousness of non-self-interest which characterizes the Tzaddik. The more we are able to realize “it is not about me”, and then settle in to that way of living in the world, the more we will be able to participate in bringing about the transformation and salvation of our troubled world.

Ultimately, this means that we can all strive to be not only righteous, but truly to be *tzaddikim*. Yet, knowing our true physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual capacities, we realize that we may not be able to attain “*devekut*” or even clarity all the time. Thus, we will have to rely on each other, since some one of us will likely be in that state – clear, open, attentive, committed, awake – and we can rise up through them. And they, at some

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<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elimelech\\_of\\_Lizhensk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elimelech_of_Lizhensk)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.spiritualsecretres.info/rebbeelimelech.html>

time, will depend on us. This is the theory of “shared-Tzaddik-hood” elucidated by a Hasidic contemporary of R. Elimelekh, R. Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk.<sup>21</sup> Clearly it did not become the predominant model, but it is available to us to integrate into our study of *No'am Elimelekh*, and thus find greater connection with the image and function of the Tzaddik there.

- We can bring this question to bear on the role and function of the Tzaddik: “What would it mean to experience this in my own life?” This is a concrete and practical question. One ongoing response will be: practice mindfulness meditation and witness the outcome in your life. We might understand *devekut* as the product of concentration practice, of the focused attention of the mind on one subject (the breath, the Divine Name *YHVH*, God’s incomprehensible infinity and power, etc.). Through practice we might attain some sense of non-dual consciousness, of the oneness of all existence without separation or distinction, and the negation of ego. We might touch a quality of consciousness in which we recognize all of the infinite possibilities that exist in each moment, how our behavior can bring any one of them from potential into actuality. If, through practice, we can settle the mind and quiet the demands and distractions of the ego, then perhaps we will be able to direct our energies toward the care of others.

While it is clear (to me at least) that R. Elimelekh’s meditative practice by which he attained *devekut* was something like concentration practice. I imagine that he derived from his practice what I, we, learn as well. When, for instance, I teach that phenomena are “empty” of objective meaning, I mean that all things are interdependent, that they only come into being in relation to and because of all other things. They have no independent significance. This emptiness can be understood as saying that nothing has significance when placed in relation to God: it is *ayin* and not *yesh*. To the extent that R. Elimelekh absorbed elements of the Maggid’s teachings, he would hold that in reality there is nothing but God, and our perception of separateness, of independent existence is mistaken, based on misperception and egoism. Our true existence is within the undifferentiated totality of God. In that, we and all things and phenomena are empty. Yet, here we are reading, thinking, acting, doing. Our actions have consequences. Spiritual practice, the intention to live as a *tzaddik*, trains the mind and heart so that our actions become testimony to the infinite being of God. We take our place, act out our lives, to serve others, to reveal the holiness (that is, the presence of God, the absence of separation from God) in all things, and to be the most perfect manifestation of the divine intention we can be. There is nothing magical in this. We do not need to become shamans. We just need to wake up.

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<sup>21</sup> *Peri Ha'aretz*, letter #30.