


UNITED WISDOM

# Hasidic Everyday Life: Finding Meaning in an Ordinary Action

Traditions and Worldviews

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# Hasidic Everyday Life: Finding Meaning in an Ordinary Action

> *“joy and an open heart”*

Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya, the opening of chapter 26. A fragment of the English version published by Chabad.org; the page does not name its translator.

## About this article

The cup is washed, the message sent, the child fed. We can live such a day feeling that nothing substantial has happened: we merely kept life running while real life waited for a free evening. Hasidic texts propose another question: what did these ordinary actions serve, and what kind of person was the one who performed them becoming? In a religious context, the subject is service to God within the material world, not a pleasant mood layered over household chores. This article examines that view mainly through Tanya by Shneur Zalman, the founder of Chabad, preserving the difference between one school and the diverse Hasidic movement. We consider intention, joy, discipline, and the relationship to another person, together with the approach's difficulties: the danger of justifying a deed with a good motive, a demand for constant inspiration, and the temptation to declare our experience a universal truth. The practical conclusion is more modest than a promise to transform every moment: an ordinary action can be performed more attentively, and its spiritual interpretation does not release us from examining its consequences.

## I. Why everyday life takes center stage

Ordinary life becomes a spiritual question when we stop treating it as an empty interval between significant events. We often divide the day in advance: work and cleaning here, real conversation there, and meaning somewhere else. This scheme is convenient for a schedule, but quietly turns most of life into expendable material. If only exceptional experience matters, we must constantly wait for the next exception.

The Hasidic turn toward everyday life concerns this very boundary. God's presence in the world is understood as a religious ground for service among things and relationships. “Service through the material” does not mean that any pleasant activity is automatically sacred. It asks about life's direction: can bodily action participate in what a person prays and studies for? The opening of the collective study *Hasidism: A New History* presents this motif alongside specific communal practices and relationships. Scholarly introduction, pp. 1–2.



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A hypothetical example helps here. Two people cook the same dinner. One rushes to finish an unpleasant duty; the other is tired too, but tries to let loved ones eat in peace. The difference lies neither in the ingredients nor in an unbroken elevated feeling. It lies in how the action relates to care. This is our example for understanding the question of intention, not evidence that every act of care is already a Hasidic practice.

The thought that everyday life has value is not exclusive to Hasidism. What distinguishes it here is its place in a particular religious world, with commandments, prayer, study, and a kabbalistic language. Remove that context and a useful modern observation remains, but the tradition's content changes. It is therefore worth proceeding along two paths at once: understanding the Hasidic meaning from within and separately asking which limited distinction readers with other beliefs can use.

## II. A movement, a school, and a specific voice

Hasidism cannot be reduced to one universal formula about joy. The movement took shape in the eighteenth-century Eastern European Jewish world; its early history is associated with Israel Baal Shem Tov. Later, different communities arose around teachers and their successors. Historical study needs to examine not only leading teachers' ideas but followers' lives, relationships within communities, and their changes over time. This is how the authors of the new collective study frame their task. Introduction, pp. 1–3.

This article deliberately takes a narrower ground: several chapters of Tanya by Shneur Zalman of Liadi. That permits discussion of a specific text rather than a vague “Hasidim believe.” Chabad is a particular school within the movement. Readers should not take its formulations as an exhaustive position of every Hasidic branch. Still less can one moral teaching show how every member of a modern community behaves.

Why does this distinction matter for everyday life? Because the same general thought can be understood differently. Emotional enthusiasm matters more to one person, study to another, connection with a teacher and community to a third. Even if all use “service,” their everyday forms and explanations will differ. A historical tradition lives through these specific combinations, not through a brief dictionary definition.

This caution has a positive side too. We need not choose between accepting someone else's religious world completely and turning it into a collection of pleasant aphorisms. We can read a particular chapter, understand its premises, and preserve what remains unfamiliar. Attentive understanding does not demand immediate agreement. It asks readers to know whose voice they hear.

## III. Intention changes direction but does not cancel norms

In Tanya, chapter 7, the direction of action is explained through *kelipat nogah* — an intermediate realm containing good and evil. The vitality of permitted material things belongs to it. It can rise into holiness or descend into impurity. In the author's example, meat and wine serve to broaden the mind for Torah or to enjoy the Sabbath and festivals; the same permitted things can feed only bodily craving. Intention changes the direction of permitted action specifically, rather than canceling prohibitions. The author's text on the page must be distinguished from Yosef Weinberg's explanations.

This structure cannot be replaced by “only the feeling matters.” That phrase loses both the religious aim and the distinction between things according to whether they are permitted. The original question is more precise: to what is the vitality gained in ordinary action devoted? Food need not look ascetic to enter service. Pleasure is not excluded beforehand either, since a festive meal has its own religious purpose. But pleasantness alone does not determine a deed's direction. Everyday life thus gains significance without turning every bodily desire into a spiritual achievement.

Our analysis reveals two levels of assessment. First comes whether the action is allowed within the given norm; then, what the permitted action is used for. The levels cannot be reversed. Confidently announcing a high aim does not answer the first question, while observing an outward rule does not exhaust the second. A material act therefore does not disappear behind inward intention. Instead, it becomes the place where intention must become definite: what strength was gained, and what will it now serve?

For an outside reader, the transfer is limited. We can examine our own aim, means, and result separately without calling them the movement of kelipat nogah. For example, someone says they work for their family. That explanation requires relating earnings to actual care and to time already promised to loved ones. The check does not reproduce Tanya's metaphysics; it uses the difference between a beautiful name for an aim and a definite direction of action. Preserving the distance is more useful than declaring every conscientious deed secretly Hasidic.

## IV. The material does not become a backdrop

The meaning of an ordinary action cannot be found if the action itself is poorly performed. Food must actually nourish, work produce a result, care attend to the need of its recipient. Otherwise, a spiritual explanation becomes a beautiful inscription above an unfulfilled duty. Here everyday life tests depth better than an exceptional experience: the cup will remain dirty if we reflect at length on the holiness of water instead of washing it.

The opposite extreme also gets in the way. We can perform everything flawlessly while treating ourselves and others as machine parts. The result remains, but the human relationship disappears. A spiritual interpretation of material action proposes examining both sides: the quality of the work and its place in life. Neither replaces the other.

Consider someone caring for an older relative. Time, prescribed medicines, cleanliness, conversation, and the caregiver's own right to rest are needed. Finding meaning in care may sustain them, but will not create missing resources. Moreover, “all your labor is sacred” can become pressure if used to persuade someone to endure an unmanageable load without help. The task's importance does not prove that one person must perform it endlessly.

An important limit to a modern reading emerges. Our relationship to ordinary life can become more attentive, but should not turn every circumstance into a deserved trial. Not every fatigue calls for a more elevated interpretation; sometimes the division of labor needs to change. Not every irritation means spiritual failure; sometimes it shows that someone has gone too long without rest or cannot express a need.

A religious idea is read seriously when it meets reality's resistance. We do not prove its truth through a well-chosen everyday example. We examine what questions it helps raise, what duties it makes visible, and where its modern application must stop.

## V. Joy as the capacity to act

Joy at the beginning of Tanya's chapter 26 is connected with the vigor of spiritual action. Shneur Zalman compares inner struggle to a contest: strength alone is insufficient if someone acts sluggishly. The text also allows specific moments of bitter reflection on wrongdoing and distinguishes them from constant dejection. This is guidance on religious service, not a clinical account of mood disorders. Opening of chapter 26.

An important question follows: what attitude helps someone perform the next worthy deed? But no duty to appear cheerful at all times can be derived from it. A smile easily becomes a social demand hiding fatigue, loss, or fear. When others already know which mood is correct, the person stops speaking honestly. The language of joy then destroys the possibility of support.

It is more useful to distinguish joy from a display of joy. The former can appear in a quiet readiness to continue, gratitude for a meeting, or a sense that the task matters. The latter depends on how one must look before others. Even vigorous action does not always come with a pleasant feeling. We can show care while remaining sad; we can speak cheerfully and do nothing.

A hypothetical example: after a hard day, someone has promised to help a friend. They need not force themselves to feel festive. They should determine whether help is manageable now, then either fulfill the specific promise or honestly agree on a change. The question of inward state remains significant, but does not eclipse the real obligation.

For a reader outside the religious context, the value of this discussion lies in distinguishing states from ways of acting. Not all self-criticism is useful, however deep it seems; not all cheerfulness deserves trust, however convincing it looks. Mood becomes a subject of attention, not a verdict on a person. The modern practice ends here with its own question, preserving the religious text's more definite aim.

## VI. Discipline without waiting for a perfect feeling

Comparing chapters 7 and 26 reveals a difference between direction and the capacity to act. The first asks what material strength serves; in the published opening of the second, joy is opposed to heaviness that hinders spiritual struggle. These are different questions. A deed can have a religious aim and still be difficult. A lively state by itself does not show that one has directed strength toward service. One criterion cannot replace the other.

Chapter 26's image of wrestlers reveals the force of the second question. Even someone with an advantage can lose if they act sluggishly and heavily. This is not a description of the quality of all people experiencing sadness, but an image of a particular religious effort. Its meaning is lost if it becomes an order to look happy all the time. The scene concerns the possibility of entering action: mood should assist work, rather than become another performance of one's spiritual success.

Our practical question about constancy follows. Wait for perfect composure and an important task may never begin; treat every strain as proof of fidelity and we can stop noticing exhaustion. A concrete task helps distinguish the cases. Are extra efforts needed now, a clearer intention, or rest after which action becomes possible? This is not a medical conclusion drawn from Tanya. It preserves the distinction between aim, state, and deed found in reading the two fragments.

Within the religious tradition, established forms of prayer, study, and commandments sustain this connection. Outside readers can understand their function without appropriating their content. Their own practice will differ: a brief reminder of what matters, a check of promises, a clear end to the working day. Similarity of function does not turn these actions into religious equivalents.

Discipline becomes more humane when it includes the possibility of error and return. One inattentive day does not erase all that preceded it, but neither does it disappear simply because the person professes good principles. We must see the specific omission, repair what

can be repaired, and continue. This movement is less spectacular than a promise of complete transformation. But it leaves room for a real person whose strength and circumstances change.

## VII. Another person limits our account of ourselves

In chapter 32 as rendered by Tzvi Freeman, love for another Jew is grounded in the souls' shared source. But the author does not stop at mild disapproval of evil. For a particular fellow who has sinned and has not repented after admonition, he retains the requirement to love the good in him and hate the evil at once. He then introduces compassion for the divine soul held captive by evil: it can awaken love and overcome hatred. The addressee is the Jewish community, and the modern English rendering is not a literal critical edition.

The sequence matters. The unity of souls does not make differences of behavior nonexistent; named evil does not turn the whole person into their wrongdoing. Compassion is not added at the end as a pleasant recommendation: it changes the relationship between love and hatred. Readers may not share the religious demand for hatred, but must see it before assessing the proposed response. Replace the difficulty with general advice to be kinder, and the precise inner problem the chapter addresses becomes unclear.

The modern extension begins after this distinction, rather than passing itself off as the original meaning. Human dignity, a right to distance, and refusal of humiliation can be discussed without claiming these categories are already formulated in chapter 32. The text offers narrower material: a negative judgment of a particular action coexists with another attitude toward the same person. Our task is to name the grounds of our own assessment clearly, without assigning convenient content to someone else's religious language.

A hypothetical scene: a colleague makes a mistake that harms shared work. We can explain it through bad character; we can pretend nothing happened to seem kind. A third path is to clarify the fact, discuss repair, and avoid turning one failure into the person's final definition. This is a limited ethical example, not a translation of religious teaching into corporate psychology.

The meaning of an everyday action therefore does not belong only to its performer. It unfolds in relationships where another has a response, a boundary, and sometimes justified disagreement. A good account of ourselves withstands that encounter. If it requires everyone else to remain silent, the account itself deserves examination.

## VIII. Testing meaning in one difficult conversation

Chapters 7 and 32 place different obstacles before readers. In the first, a permitted action still needs to be directed toward service. In the second, a shared spiritual source does not remove the difficult assessment of another's deed. In neither case does a good general name finish the work of distinction. Our modern example will be more modest: it tests how people translate professed care into definite actions. Religious categories will not become ready answers to a family dispute, but help us notice an overly quick move from motive to self-justification.

Consider a hypothetical family scene. One person wants to preserve shared evenings without work messages. Another sees an urgent reply to a client as care for the family's income. Both call their motive good. If the dispute ends in a contest of motives, each keeps a reason to feel right. It is more useful to clarify the action: which messages are truly urgent, how long a reply takes, what was already promised to loved ones, and who is left with everyday duties.

Clarification does not remove inner work. It makes that work less convenient for self-regard. One person may find it unpleasant to admit that talk of duty hides a wish not to miss a single work request. The other may find that demanding complete presence leaves no room for exceptional circumstances. Seeing a mixed motive does not mean declaring oneself bad. It is a chance to change a specific agreement.

After the conversation, actions are needed: dedicated time, a clear rule for exceptions, a redistribution of the load. Here the difference between intention and evidence of intention appears. Words show what a person wants; a repeated deed lets others understand what to expect. We cannot read another's soul and judge its direction finally. We can check whether what was promised was done.

This example is not in Tanya and claims no religious solution to a family dispute. It develops our limited practical distinction. A material action has human recipients. If their response is excluded from the check, discussion of meaning remains enclosed within one participant's account of themselves.

## IX. What is lost when tradition becomes a technique

Hasidic thought can easily become “find magic in every moment.” The advice sounds pleasant, but removes the difficult parts: a specific faith, commandments, community, duty, and the distinction of what is permitted. What remains is an experience available regardless of how one acts. A historical text starts serving a modern desire for pleasant experience.

An equally crude reduction treats religious service merely as a way to increase productivity. Joy is then judged by tasks completed, and inner life becomes an instrument of workplace efficiency. But “what for?” is broader than “how to do more?” Sometimes a substantive answer

leads to reducing the load, refusing a questionable task, or restoring time for loved ones. Meaning can limit activity as well as accelerate it.

Nor can religious metaphysics become an established scientific fact. Talk of spiritual forces and the elevation of the material has a particular theological structure. Here it is explained as a structure of beliefs and practice. Its psychological plausibility for an individual is not experimental confirmation of a picture of the world.

This does not make intercultural reading useless. A precise boundary makes substantive comparison possible. We can see how two traditions return attention to food or speech, then ask why they do so. One speaks of service to God, another of virtue or ritual order. A shared situation does not erase different aims. The difference helps readers define their own position more clearly.

Careful borrowing therefore begins by naming the operation honestly. We read, compare, ask a question, and create our own exercise. We do not present the exercise as an ancient rite or declare ourselves a school's representatives. This honesty makes the encounter less spectacular and more substantive: another's thought retains the ability to correct us.

## X. Meaning remains in what is done

Everyday life need not become an unbroken spiritual celebration to matter. Its value appears as a person sustains life, fulfills an obligation, learns to notice another, and repairs what can be repaired. A Hasidic reading adds its own religious ground. It links ordinary action with service to God and thereby revises the familiar division between material and spiritual.

Our path through specific chapters of Tanya has shown several limits without which this turn becomes too easy. Intention does not cancel a norm. Joy does not require a public smile. Discipline does not mean constant self-testing. Love does not remove distinctions between deeds. Reading one school gives no right to speak for the whole movement.

These limits do not obstruct meaning; they make it testable in life. If someone starts speaking better about care but loved ones still bear the whole burden, the contradiction matters. If an elevated explanation prevents acknowledgment of a mistake, it has become too sheltered from reality. If a spiritual practice broadens attention while preserving another's right to respond, there is a more serious ground for considering it useful.

At the beginning, the cup seemed a sign that anything substantial had yet to begin. Now we can see it differently: a small task can participate in a meaningful relationship. But the cup does not become proof of metaphysics, and washing it is no universal solution to inner conflict. Meaning need not be grand to be real for the person acting.

Perhaps the most mature result of such reading is the ability to wait less for perfect conditions. We need not first become wholly inspired to answer more honestly, fulfill a manageable promise, or let another rest. We need to know what it is for and check what was done. An ordinary day then stops being merely preparation for life: relationships receive their concrete form within it.

## What this means in practice

Choose one repeated action whose significance you usually miss. It might be cooking, beginning a work conversation, or returning home in the evening. Do not try to change the whole day at once. First name whom and what the action serves. The formulation should permit a check of the result: “let the person finish their thought in peace” is more useful than the vague promise to “bring light.”

Then check the means separately. Does it breach an agreement, shift work to another person, or demand too much of you? A good motive does not close these questions. After acting, ask whether your participation became a little more precise and how the other person responded. An unpleasant answer is material for clarification, not evidence of the interlocutor's insufficient spirituality.

A return to intention can be linked to one transition in the day. Before answering in a dispute, it helps to define the aim: understand, defend a boundary, or punish. Before resting, acknowledge that recovering strength also has a place in life. Every movement need not carry an inward report. Attention should help action, not create another impossible duty.

For someone within Hasidic tradition, such questions have a religious ground and should be understood alongside its norms. For outside readers, the proposed exercise is our own secular adaptation of a narrow distinction, not a Hasidic ritual. It promises neither to remove sadness nor resolve every conflict. Its possible result is more concrete: seeing an aim, a limit, and a human response in one ordinary task.

Another useful check is the possibility of stopping. Suppose you decide to respond more attentively to loved ones' requests. After a week, every free moment is taken up with help. An exercise that began with care has become a ban on having your own affairs. Its scale then needs to change: name a manageable share, refuse the excess, and explain the boundary without accusation. Participation's spiritual significance does not prove an obligation to participate always.

In another case, someone chooses to speak less and do more. That can improve relationships, but can also hide an important need. If silence means no one knows about their fatigue, speech is needed. A good practice permits revision through its result. It does not defend the initial form merely because the form seemed noble.

It therefore helps to set a simple review date beforehand. After a few days, see whether the action's quality improved, agreements became clearer, and room for rest remained. Do not judge yourself by uninterrupted inspiration. Name separately one fact, one interpretation of your own, and one unknown. For example: the conversation ended without interruption; you think you were more attentive; you do not yet know whether the other person felt it. The next step is to hear them, not increase confidence in your version.

If reflection begins consuming more strength than the chosen task, reduce the exercise. Sometimes one pause before replying is enough. Sometimes it is better to set self-observation aside temporarily and fulfill a clear duty. Practical value is not measured by a method's complexity. It appears in whether responsible action and respect for oneself and others have become easier.

## Key quotation

> *“you have not lost the reward”*

Shneur Zalman, Tanya, chapter 32, the paragraph after the reference to Hillel's teaching, a short fragment of Tzvi Freeman's English rendering. The immediate context concerns love for another Jew even when an attempt to draw him toward Torah has failed. Broadening that scope would be our separate step, not the fragment's literal claim.

## Connections between traditions

These are our analytical comparisons. A shared question does not prove influence or make the answers interchangeable.

| Positions and sources | Ground for comparison | Substantial limit |
|---|---|---|
| Shneur Zalman, Tanya, 7, and Epictetus, the Enchiridion, 46 | An ordinary action shows life's direction more convincingly than talk of principles. | Service to God within the commandments differs from Stoic work on judgment and virtue. |
| Shneur Zalman, chapter 7, and Epictetus, §36 | Food is considered together with purpose and relationships to others, rather than appetite alone. | Epictetus emphasizes social appropriateness; Tanya emphasizes the religious direction of the permitted. |
| Shneur Zalman, chapter 32, and Epictetus, §43 | An attitude to a person is not exhausted by judging one deed. | Jewish spiritual community and a Stoic reminder of brotherhood have different grounds; a safety boundary is determined separately. |

| Positions and sources | Ground for comparison | Substantial limit |
|---|---|---|
| Shneur Zalman, opening of chapter 26, and Epictetus, §§50–51 | The move from an accepted principle to action matters. | Joy in religious service is not identical to the Stoic ideal of rational constancy. |
| Shneur Zalman, chapter 7, and Maimonides, the Guide, I.54 | Action allows more concrete speech about a relationship to the divine. | Tanya asks about the direction of permitted human action; Maimonides about God's actions without human emotions. A shared theme of action does not mean an identical metaphysics. |
| Shneur Zalman, chapter 32, and Deuteronomy, 24:17–22 | A relationship to another receives a religious ground. | Love within a named community and a specific duty toward the stranger, orphan, and widow have different addressees and forms. |

## Primary sources

• Shneur Zalman of Liadi. Tanya, chapter 7. Primary text with explanations by Yosef Weinberg, Kehot/Chabad.org; the section on permitted material activity and intention was read, not the whole book. The publisher's explanations are separated from the author's text.

• Shneur Zalman. Opening of chapter 26. A published English fragment with no named translator; ground for discussion of joy and spiritual action. The entire short fragment was read.

• Shneur Zalman. Chapter 32, English rendering by Tzvi Freeman. The chapter and note were read; ground for discussion of communal love and its limits. The three chapters are one work in different published renderings.

• David Biale, David Assaf, Benjamin Brown, Uriel Gellman, Samuel Heilman, Moshe Rosman, Gadi Sagiv, Marcin Wodziński. *Hasidism: A New History*, Princeton University Press, 2018. Introduction, pp. 1–3. Scholarly ground for the historical context; the opening of the publisher's excerpt was read, not the whole book. The excerpt was not reprinted.

• Epictetus. The Enchiridion, §§17, 36, 43, 46, 50–51, translated by Elizabeth Carter, Internet Classics Archive. Primary Stoic text; the specified paragraphs were read for limited comparisons.

• Maimonides. The Guide for the Perplexed, I.54, translated by M. Friedländer. Primary philosophical text; the chapter was read and used in the comparative map.

• Deuteronomy 24:17–22. Biblical text, English version JPS 1917 at Mechon Mamre; the specified verses were read to distinguish recipients of care.

## Tags

Hasidism, Chabad, Tanya, Shneur Zalman, Baal Shem Tov, Judaism, everyday life, intention, kavvanah, service, material world, spiritual discipline, joy, attention, commandments, community, care, responsibility, love of one's neighbor, dignity, boundaries, religious practice, Kabbalah, history of religions, intercultural reading, Epictetus, Maimonides, virtue, ordinary action, meaning of life

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