



The Fearless Berdichever

An Essay on the Spiritual Zecher of
Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev z”l

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Presented to the Beit Din as Part of the Giyur Journey

The Hague / Ha’ag al Nahar Vlit, Holland

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Letter to the Beit Din

Dear Rabbis of the Beit Din,

Along with my portfolio documenting my Jewish development, I present to your esteemed court an essay rooted in the universal struggle for justice. With this work, I hope to connect to the sacred commandment to engage with the words of the Torah, inspired by the legacy of the eighteenth-century Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev z”l. This essay, distinct from my journalistic work, is a spiritual reflection inspired by Chassidic thought, submitted as part of my *giyur* journey.

My life path was shaped by my role as a witness to a Dutch cover-up surrounding the Srebrenica genocide, as detailed in my book *The Cover-Up General* (Giltay, 2014) and affirmed by a Dutch court ruling (ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2016:870). Years of struggle and legal proceedings brought me closer to Rebbe Levi Yitzchak, who, like me, fought against injustice with remarkable impact. His *chutzpah*, *gevurah*, and *kedusha* deeply inspire me.

The commitment to *tzedek* finds its origin in the Jewish tradition. In *Parashat Vayera* (Bereshit 18:19), Avraham receives from *Hashem* the command to teach his descendants “לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט”, meaning to practice *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. Did Avraham, our Patriarch, understand how far this command extended? Certainly, in Bereshit 18:22–33, he even engaged in a discussion with *Hashem* about the destruction of Sodom. Avraham’s legacy of moral courage and pursuit of justice was continued by countless descendants who fought against injustice through the millennia. Among them was the *tzaddik* Levi

Yitzchak of Berdichev, who, like Avraham, did not fail to address *Hashem* (Hammer, 2019).

This essay explores Levi Yitzchak's life and spiritual legacy through three thematic chapters. In "Defender of Israel," I narrate his courageous leadership of his *kehilla*. "Chutzpah Klapei Shmaya" delves into his fearless *tefillot* and spiritual attitude toward *Hashem*, while "Tikkun Shamayim" highlights his mystical commitment to harmony between heaven and earth. Finally, my concluding reflection connects Levi Yitzchak's example to the call for justice and spiritual courage.

This essay reflects my deep engagement with these values. For consistency, I use the transliterations "Yitzchak" and "Berdichev," though citations may employ spelling variations. A glossary and bibliography at the end provide further details on terms and references.

With respect and gratitude for the opportunity to present this work to your esteemed court,

The Hague / Ha'ag al Nahar Vlit, Holland,

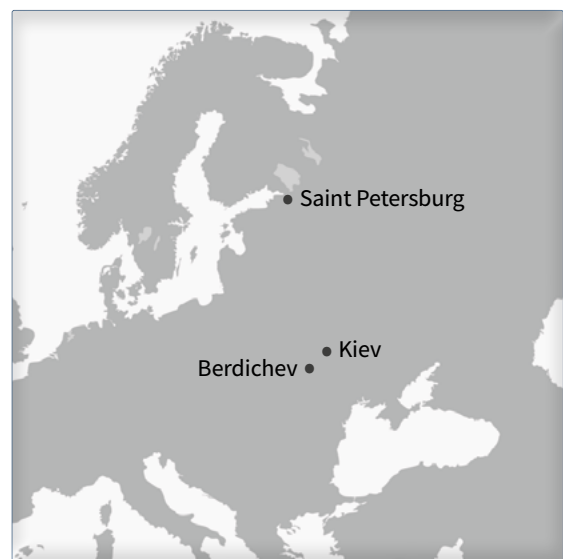
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1. Defender of Israel

Levi Yitzchak ben Meir of Berdichev (1740–1809), known as the Holy Berdichever, was a prominent Chasidic leader at a time when Chasidism, this mystical movement, was renewing Judaism in Eastern Europe. As a follower of the Maggid of Mezritch z”l, he grew into an influential figure in the Chasidic movement, both as a spiritual leader and as an *av beit din*. He served as a rebbe in various *shtetls* in Poland and Russia—Ryczywół, Żelechów, Pinsk, and finally Berdichev (Gorobchuk, 2009).

Due to his central role in the spread and defense of Chasidism, Levi Yitzchak became the target of strong criticism from the *mitnagdim*, who disapproved of his mystical approach to Judaism. This led to his forced departure from Żelechów and later from Pinsk (Gorobchuk, 2009). He then settled in Berdichev. Although Chasidism enjoyed support there, he was still under attack:



Map Eastern Europe

In the late eighteenth century, this *shtetl* in the Russian Empire was the private property of the Polish Prince Maciej Radziwiłł, who imposed increasingly heavy taxes on its inhabitants. Even the *tzedakah*, intended for the poor and orphans, was unjustly taken from the collection boxes in the *shuls*. The prince also threatened to imprison Levi Yitzchak if

he did not pay a high tax of 500 zloty on his rabbinic position (Green, 2022).

Prince Radziwiłł had not anticipated the community's united support for their beloved rebbe. Thus, an unprecedented legal battle unfolded. Although Levi Yitzchak was under immense pressure, he and the *kahal* did not give up the fight for *tzedek* (Green, 2022). This ultimately triggered senate commission hearings in Saint Petersburg, as can be read in old Russian state archives (Petrovsky-Shtern, 2004).

“In the long run, the Russian authorities seem to have sided with the townspeople” of Berdichev, writes American Rabbi Arthur Green in his book *Defender of the Faithful* (2022, p. 37). He continues: “This seems to have initiated a long period of relative peace and success for Levi Yitshak, parallel to the growing prosperity of the town itself.” The rebbe, who was called the *Sanegor shel Yisrael*, the “Defender of Israel”, was allowed to remain in Berdichev. Under his leadership, the *shtetl* grew into one of the most important commercial centers of the Russian Empire, and later became the largest in the Pale of Settlement, the region where Jews were permitted to reside (Rosenthal & Dubnow, 1902).

Levi Yitzchak gained fame not only for his defense of the Jewish metropolis before worldly authorities, but also for his spiritual leadership. Driven by *ahavat Yisrael*, he protected Jews from a strict judgment by *Hashem*: “Renowned for his humility, Levi Yitzchak would intercede with G-d for mercy on behalf of even the most ignorant Jew” (Kaplan, 2019, p. 6). Thus, he placed *rachamim* above *din* in all his efforts toward his congregants, according to Dutch author Sjef Laenen (1998). “Like Hillel, he was a brilliant sage who understood that the world in his generation needed a Torah of chesed,” writes American Professor Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z”l in his book *Essential Teachings* (2020, p. 87).

2. Chutzpah Klapei Shmaya

In his book *Loving and Beloved: Tales of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev*, Israeli rabbi Simcha Raz describes how his eighteenth-century predecessor approached *Hashem* with genuine boldness. During a *Kol Nidre* service, Levi Yitzhak addressed the heavens on behalf of his community, saying:

Master of the universe, You see that I am getting old, and weak, and I have in my hand a large *maḥzor* with many pages of prayers. I muster my strength and recite all the prayers in this entire *maḥzor*, and ask for Your pardon and forgiveness. And You, Master of the universe, are a powerful champion. You have only to recite a single phrase – ‘I forgive.’ (Raz, 2016, chapter “Yom Kippur”)

The prayers of the Holy Berdichever consistently reflected his profound *bein adam la-makom*, as seen in his direct appeals to *Hashem*. He also once addressed *Adon Olam* in a prayer as follows:

Master of the universe! You became betrothed to us because we are beloved to You ... Therefore, we established a financial relationship. Thus I ask of You: keep Your word and discharge the debt, as You promised at the time of the engagement, since in our special situation we need a large dowry. (Raz, 2016, chapter “The Jewish People”)

Many Jews at that time lived in bitter poverty, which could lead to premature death. Levi Yitzhak's unconventional appeal to the Lord of the World to improve the socioeconomic conditions of his community must be understood in this context. Given the interplay between heaven and earth, his appeal strikingly expands in my view the concept of *tikkun olam*. Traditionally, this ethical principle focuses more on human actions to repair the world.

The audacious manner in which Levi Yitzhak reminds *Hashem* of His responsibilities in prayer is called *chutzpah klapei shmaya*. Literally, this means “boldness toward the heavens.” The term describes the courage to challenge *Hashem* in the name of justice and mercy.

This concept is rooted in Jewish tradition. A well-known example can be found in the *Talmudic* tractate *Bava Metzia* (Steinsaltz, n.d., 59b), which recounts a similar form of audacity in a debate about the ritual purity of an oven. The discussion escalates to the point that Rabbi Eliezer summons a heavenly voice, which loudly declares: “Why are you differing with Rabbi Eliezer, as the *halacha* is in accordance with his opinion in every place that he expresses an opinion?” Yet Rabbi Yehoshua refuses to yield. He rebukes *Hashem*—stating that He had no business interfering—after which Rabbi Eliezer's position was collectively rejected by the sages.

Years later, the *navi* Eliyahu describes to Rabbi Natan the Babylonian how *Hashem* responded to this rebuke: “The Holy One, Blessed be He, smiled and said: My children have triumphed over Me; My children have triumphed over Me” (Steinsaltz, n.d., 59b). From this, I conclude that *Hashem* appreciates that Abraham's descendants take seriously the

mandate to think independently about justice. The *Midrashic* tradition of interpreting the *Torah* across all times is *kivyachol* celebrated by Him.

Much like this *Talmudic* story, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak displays a similar boldness in his prayers. American rabbi Harold M. Schulweis z”l explains in his award-winning book *Conscience: The Duty to Obey and the Duty to Disobey*:

For conventional thinking, “talking back to G-d” smacks of heresy. But a significant genre of religious, moral, and spiritual audacity toward the divine authority—*chutzpah klapei shmaya*—finds a place of honor in Jewish religious thought. ... [It] confronts authority with awe and respect. It appeals to an authority within authority, to conscience shared by divine believers and the Supreme Commander, and to the godliness within G-d. (Schulweis, 2016, chapter “Conscience Confronts G-d”)

Although it may seem improper from a human perspective to address the Almighty so boldly, we must not forget that He is not human. Levi Yitzhak’s approach reflects an awareness that the relationship between G-d and His people is unique, and that—as Abraham already understood—standing up for justice should know no bounds. Moreover, as the spiritual leader of Berdichev, Levi Yitzhak did not choose this confrontational style out of selfishness: grounded in unshakable *emunah*, he advocated solely for the urgent needs of his *kehilla*.

Schulweis (2016) laments that few Jews are taught about the concept of *chutzpah klapei shmaya*:

The genre of spiritual *chutzpah* in the rabbinic tradition entails a deep Jewish conviction in the moral power and piety of the conscience. Regrettably, the appreciation of heroic piety is rarely transmitted to the contemporary Jewish student or parishioner. (Schulweis, 2016, chapter “Conscience Confronts G-d”)

Levi Yitzchak, on the other hand, prayed with *chutzpah* like no other. In his service to *Hashem*, his motto was “Be courageous!”, writes Schachter-Shalomi in his book *A Merciful G-d* (2009, chapter “Spiritual Audacity”). I admire his attitude, which testifies to his authentic partnership with *Hashem* and his sense of responsibility within creation. It is clear to me that his *chutzpah klapei shmaya* was based on *bitachon*, the confidence that *Hashem* would hear and bless his *kehilla*.

No less significant: Levi Yitzhak’s pleas appear to have borne fruit. Despite oppression by Prince Radziwiłł, the Jewish trading town thrived under his spiritual leadership. This suggests that with his *chutzpah klapei shmaya*, he indeed managed to tap into the divine in *Elohei Yisrael*, striking the right tone to move Him to bless his community. For me, this affirms the importance of the practice of addressing *Hashem* for higher purposes.

Kavanah

Levi Yitzhak’s spiritual boldness makes me want to understand more about his *kavanah*. How did he reach spiritually? What was the inner devotion of this powerful *tzaddik*? Schachter-Shalomi describes:

First, he deals with the preliminaries of prayer in which one invests one's entire being—engaging both a numinous sense of the *mysterium fascinans* (compelling mystery) and the *mysterium tremendum* (trembling mystery)—getting all the fibers of one's being to vibrate with the desire to give pleasure to G-d. ... For through this kind of fervor and energy in prayer, we can open a connection between the divine and the human. Through this we may stimulate a response from G-d above, which in turn, touches us here below. (Schachter-Shalomi, 2009, chapter “Whole-Hearted Prayer”)

The Ukrainian historian Anatoliy Gorobchuk (2009) points to the Berdichever's intensity: “Rabbi Levi Yitzhak prayed extremely emotionally, with loud cries and sobs—his cries, which came from the depths of his soul, rose to the heavens.”

Despite this spiritual fervor, Schachter-Shalomi (2009, chapter “Spiritual Audacity”) calls the Holy Berdichever “the humblest of all people.” This combination of spiritual boldness and interpersonal humility forms the core of his character.

Raz emphasizes Levi Yitzhak's unwavering dedication to the Jewish people. He was so devoted to them that he even vowed to continue advocating for them after his death:

I will not listen to the voice of the heavenly angels, and I will not enter Gan Eden. I will stand before the Creator and shake His Throne of Glory. I will not be silent until my prayer for the people of Israel is answered. (Raz, 2016, chapter “This World and the Next World”)

Rachamim

The American rebbe Yaakov Yosef Reinman offers in *Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev* (2011) another perspective on Levi Yitzhak's boundless advocacy. In addition to pleading for forgiveness and prosperity from *Hashem*, Levi Yitzhak wanted to uplift the spirit of his people. As a *tzaddik*, he saw it as his task to find the good in Jews and:

to point out those merits, both to G-d and to them. In part, this is to convince G-d to forgive them ... But the *tsaddik* understands this show of goodness also has a profound effect on his flock psychologically. Showing them their goodness rather than pointing out their sins is the best way of causing them to live up to the rosy picture the *tsaddik* paints of them. (Green, 2022, p. 72)

In *Kedusjat Levi*, Levi Yitzhak not only pleads for divine mercy for his people. As *av beit din*, he also warns earthly judges to temper their judgments with compassion:

The judges meting out justice on earth must also reflect the attribute of Mercy employed in the celestial spheres. When judges here on earth emulate the approach to the accused displayed in the celestial spheres, i.e. to assume that even if guilty, there are some excuses to be found for the conduct of the accused, then we can hope that, by taking this into consideration, our own judgment on New Year's day will also reflect this consideration shown to sinners who had fallen victim to the evil urge. (Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, n.d., chapter "Shoftim")

Levi Yitzhak goes very far in his defense of those who err. He reasons:

If, for some reason the body has not been equipped with as great an urge to serve its Maker, we have a justified argument against G'd Who, if he had provided the body with a stronger urge to serve Him, we would not go astray from time to time. (Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, n.d., chapter "Pinchas")

With this statement, the rebbe suggests that the responsibility of man for succumbing to the *yetzer hara* lies partly with the Creator, thereby powerfully protecting his *kehilla*. This shift testifies to his benevolence.

Simcha

Not only his *chesed*, but also countless anecdotes (Reinman, 2011) reveal Levi Yitzhak's cheerful nature. This is also evident from Schachter-Shalomi's observation in his chapter with the telling title "Divine Games" (2009): "when we consider the creative dialogues he would later have with G-d, it is hard to imagine that he himself did not possess a lively sense of humor."

Levi Yitzhak demonstrated throughout his life that no one, not even a prince or *Adon Olam*, is above criticism. May I, in line with this philosophy, also critically reflect on him? I can then imagine that he enjoyed challenging the Almighty with legal ingenuity. It perhaps offered him a spiritual outlet for his bravado. But let us not overstate this

speculation: as mentioned, the *tzaddik* prayed selflessly. Moreover, he could ultimately do nothing about the fact that G-d had created him as a man full of *simcha*.

3. Tikkun Shamayim

In the *Talmudic* tractate *Moed Katan* (Steinsaltz, n.d., 16b), the question is raised about who has authority over *Hashem*. The *amora* Abbahu surprisingly answers: a *tzaddik*. To the astonished counter-question of how a *tzaddik* could rule over the Almighty, Abbahu explains that a righteous person can overturn a heavenly decree, as he deduces from his exegesis of *II Shemuel* 23:3. Thus, this tractate endorses the concept that a human can influence the divine.

Some *tzaddikim* went even further in their assertiveness. *Hashem's* love for them would enable them to “impregnate” the divine spirit with a particular desire in their moments of mystical union (Green, 2022, p. 132). In doing so, they strove for “restoration of *shamayim*,” a form of *tikkun* that harmonizes heaven and earth.

In the synagogue, Levi Yitzchak acted as a “defending angel in the heavenly court.” For instance, he once made a remarkable plea in which he used *halacha* against *Hashem* to implore a blessing for his community. Since the first day of *Rosh Hashanah* coincided with Shabbat, he invoked the *mitzvah* of *pikuach nefesh* with his characteristic ingenuity:

But this is the holy Shabbat ... You may only violate it (and writing is such a violation) to save a life! Therefore, You have no choice but to write us all in the Book of Life!
(Green, 2022, p. 148)

Jewish theology embraces the idea that a *tzaddik* can influence divine decisions. My interpretation of this principle is that the power of prayer is potentially boundless, and that the miraculous can manifest in the course of seemingly natural events, as Levi Yitzchak also philosophizes (Green, 2008). I have experienced that my prayers bring about subtle yet meaningful turns.

Levi Yitzchak explains his ability to influence the heavenly will through the event at Sinai, which he sees as a “descent” of *Hashem*. According to him, by handing over the *Torah* to the Jewish people, *Hashem* voluntarily relinquished His almighty position, giving the people a unique role in the partnership with G-d (Green, 2022). He interprets the command: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests” (*Shemot* 19:6), as a mandate for Israel to, as priests, exert influence on the divine will.

My view on this is more universal. I believe that not only Jews but also Christians, Muslims, and others who pray intensely can influence divine decisions. However, what matters is to *daven* with the right *kavanah*, or “priestly” attunement, as my example, the Holy Berdichever, did, in order to be heard in the heavenly court. The restoration of *shamayim* is a noble ideal, requiring unprecedented *tahara* to achieve something beautiful.

Zecher

My rebbe Hannah Nathans has in the past led group trips to places “where the Chasidic rabbis walked, sang, and meditated” (HaMaKor, 2025). During these trips, the mausoleum of Levi Yitzchak in Berdichev, which is now in Ukraine, was visited. This final resting place “has drawn Jewish pilgrims and petitioners for centuries—men and women

beseeking the great rabbi to intercede on their behalf on High.” (Margolin, n.d.).

Although pilgrimages to Berdichev hold deep meaning, mystic-rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh (2014) of Chabad emphasizes that a physical visit is not necessary. The third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek z”l, stated that “any Jew who is in trouble and recites chapters of Psalms with wholehearted intent and asks to be saved in the merit of Levi Yitzchak the son of Sarah Sasa, will undoubtedly be helped from above” (Ginsburgh, 2014). This chassidic idea, that a spiritual connection can suffice, is further elaborated in the concept of the “hall of Levi Yitzchak” (2014).

This hall is said to be a new space created in heaven, where the *zecher* of Levi Yitzchak’s pleas for the Jewish people is immortalized. Ginsburgh (2014) welcomes this immaterial metaphor:

Apropos, we learn from this that there are new things created in the heavens even today, which did not exist in the early generations. These come into being by means of the new Torah interpretations and new Divine intentions and manners of service of the Almighty that are innovated by the sages of each generation. (Ginsburgh, 2014)

Ginsburgh’s vision aligns with my belief in an evolving heaven. Like many rabbis, I believe that the collective consciousness of humanity grows over the centuries, and that righteous people like the Holy Berdichever play a significant role in this.

Already the *amoraim* depict in *Berachot* 17a of the *Talmud Bavli* the *Olam Haba* as a spiritual realm without physical activities such as eating, drinking, or competition,

emphasizing its symbolic nature. I view these heavenly descriptions, including the “hall of Levi Yitzchak,” not as literal, physical spaces but as poetic metaphors for spiritual realities. In my view, the story of this hall thus beautifully illustrates the spiritual *zecher* brought about by Levi Yitzchak’s positive intentions.

Conclusion

A Chasidic perspective suggests that telling stories about *tzaddikim* is considered spiritually superior to studying the *Torah* (Ginsburgh, 2014). I can affirm this through the writing of this essay. While reading about the Holy Berdichever, I was sometimes brought into a spiritual atmosphere that moved me and for which I am grateful.

The example of Rebbe Levi Yitzchak serves for me—and I hope for everyone—as a model of daring yet appropriate *bein adam l'akom*: dare to fight injustice and be the advocate for those who have no voice, from the oppressed to the victims of war. In doing so, when it concerns matters of life and death, use the prayer practice of *chutzpah klapei shmaya*. Take your responsibility to harmonize heaven and earth and address the injustice to the divinity of the Almighty. Like Levi Yitzchak portrayed: Be courageous!

May his legacy be a *zecher tzaddik livracha*—a lasting memory of the righteous one who calls us to justice and inspires us to bring the messianic world of *tzedek* and *emet* closer.

Glossary of Jewish Terms

LEMMA	MEANING
Adon Olam	<i>“Lord of the world”</i>
Ahavat Yisrael	<i>Love for the Jewish People</i>
Amora	<i>Talmudic commentator</i>
Av Beit Din	<i>Head of Jewish court</i>
Ba’al Shem Tov	<i>Founder of Chasidic Judaism</i>
Bava Metzia	<i>Talmudic tractate on civil law</i>
Bein Adam Lamakom	<i>Relationship between man and Hashem</i>
Beit Din	<i>Jewish court</i>
Berachot	<i>Talmudic tractate on blessings</i>
Bereshit	<i>Genesis, first book of the Torah</i>
Bitachon	<i>Trust</i>
Chassidism	<i>Jewish mystical movement</i>
Chesed	<i>Kindness</i>
Chutzpah	<i>Brazen audacity</i>
Chutzpah Klapei Shmaya	<i>Audacity towards heaven</i>
Daven	<i>To pray</i>
Din	<i>Judgment, law</i>

Elohei Yisrael	<i>G-d of Israel</i>
Emet	<i>Truth</i>
Emunah	<i>Faith</i>
Gan Eden	<i>Garden of Eden</i>
Gevurah	<i>Strength</i>
Giyur	<i>Conversion to Judaism</i>
Halacha	<i>Jewish law</i>
Hashem	<i>“The Name”, designation for G-d</i>
Kabbalah	<i>Jewish mysticism about the Torah and the divine</i>
Kahal	<i>Community leadership</i>
Kavanah	<i>Devotion in prayer</i>
Kedusha	<i>Holiness</i>
Kehilla	<i>Community</i>
Kivyachol	<i>So to speak</i>
Kol Nidre	<i>Name of the opening of Yom Kippur evening</i>
Machzor	<i>Prayer book for holidays</i>
Midrash	<i>Rabbinic interpretation of biblical texts</i>
Mishpat	<i>Justice, jurisprudence</i>
Mitnagdim	<i>Opponents, specifically of Chassidism</i>
Mitzvah	<i>Commandment</i>
Moed Katan	<i>Talmudic tractate on holidays</i>

Nahar	<i>River</i>
Navi	<i>Prophet</i>
Olam Haba	<i>World to Come</i>
Parasha	<i>Torah portion</i>
Pikuach Nefesh	<i>Saving a life, Jewish principle</i>
Rachamim	<i>Compassion</i>
Rebbe	<i>Chassidic leader</i>
Rosh Hashanah	<i>Jewish New Year</i>
Rosh Yeshiva	<i>Head of Jewish educational institution</i>
Sanegor shel Yisrael	<i>Defender of Israel</i>
Shamayim	<i>Heaven</i>
Shemot	<i>Exodus, second book of the Torah</i>
Shemuel	<i>Samuel</i>
Shuls	<i>Synagogues</i>
Shtetl	<i>Eastern European Jewish town</i>
Simcha	<i>Joy</i>
Tahara	<i>Ritual purity</i>
Talmud	<i>Collection of Jewish law and tradition</i>
Talmud Bavli	<i>Babylonian Talmud</i>
Tefillot	<i>Prayers</i>
Tikkun	<i>Repair, improvement</i>

Tikkun Olam	<i>Repairing the world, Jewish principle</i>
Tikkun Shamayim	<i>Repairing the Heavens, in Kabbalistic thought</i>
Torah	<i>Jewish Bible, Five Books of Moses</i>
Tzaddik	<i>Righteous person</i>
Tzedakah	<i>Charity</i>
Tzedek	<i>Justice</i>
Vayera	<i>“And He appeared”, Torah portion</i>
Yetzer Hara	<i>Evil inclination</i>
Yom Kippur	<i>Jewish Day of Atonement</i>
Zecher	<i>Remembrance</i>
Zecher tzaddik livracha	<i>May the memory of the righteous be a blessing</i>
Z”l	<i>May his memory be blessed</i>

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