



## THE PEDAGOGY OF FARBRENGEN

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### Background

Around 1775, the spiritual disciples of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Haradok<sup>1</sup>, a great Chassidic Rebbe, gathered in Haradok, a small Belarusian town of modest wooden homes, to learn from their master. Seated around a table, these Chassidim reviewed a Torah teaching recently shared by the Rebbe, which led to an engaging conversation about the Torah. They raised glasses of vodka to wish each other l'chaim - to life! They sang various niggunim - wordless melodies - and a Farbrengen ensued.

One noteworthy participant in the Farbrengen was Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi<sup>2</sup>, the founder of the Chabad school of Chassidic philosophy. He was a colleague and Chosid of Rabbi Menachem Mendel.

This is one of the earliest descriptions<sup>3</sup> of a Farbrengen. Over time, Farbrengens became a staple in the Chabad educational experience, complementing the study of Chabad Chassidic texts, prayer<sup>4</sup>, and the integration of Chabad Chassidic teachings<sup>5</sup> into daily life. The ultimate goal of

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<sup>1</sup> (1730?-1788).

<sup>2</sup> (1745-1812).

<sup>3</sup> This was recorded in a collection of letters by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), the future successor of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi as the sixth Chabad-Lubavitcher Rebbe. It was published as a supplement to the *Ohel Yosef Yitzchak Tehillim* by Kehot Publication Society.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the main sanctuary hall where the community gathered for prayer, Chabad synagogues had a back room, called the Chabdnitze, dedicated to those who engaged in the slow, hours-long Chabad style of praying.

<sup>5</sup> Each of the seven Chabad Rebbes authored upwards of twenty volumes of Chabad Chassidic texts, with some authoring significantly more.



studying and praying is to integrate the teachings into daily life. To that end, Farbrengen plays a fundamental role.

Farbrengens occur on special occasions within the Jewish annual cycle or the Chabad communal calendar. They can occur on personal birthdays, random Thursdays, after a couple's engagement party, or during a regular Shabbat afternoon lunch. Whenever two or more people gather, it can become a Farbrengen. There are also specific days designated for Farbrengens, such as Shabbat Mevarchim (the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of the new month) or the 19th day of the month of Kislev<sup>6</sup>.

Farbrengen, a Yiddish term meaning a gathering of people, can be traced to the German word "verbringen," which means to spend time with others. For 250 years, Chabad has used this term to describe a gathering of people connecting over and immersing in Chassidic ideas.

Farbrengens can be divided into two types: those led by the Rebbe, and those held among Chassidim<sup>7</sup>. While they share some key components, they also have distinct differences, which are beyond the scope of this paper to explore. Instead, this paper will focus on Farbrengens among Chassidim, the "average Yankels."

Farbrengens aim to address a dilemma a Chosid faces: how to bridge the gap between the values and ideas found in Chassidic texts and their application in the Chosid's personal choices and experiences. While this dilemma is not exclusive to Chassidim—every student of ideas and values struggles to find their expression in personal experiences—it is perhaps more acute for Chassidim. A student of Chabad Chassidut who neglects to apply the teachings to their personal

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<sup>6</sup> Regarded as the "Chassidic Rosh Hashanah." It commemorates the day in 1798 on which Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad, was released from imprisonment by the Tsar of Russia.

<sup>7</sup> There is a third type, which is a hybrid of the two: a Farbrengen for adolescent Yeshiva students led by their Mashpia (spiritual mentor). This type contains a degree of authority similar to a Farbrengen led by the Rebbe.



practices is considered as if they were placing an idol in the Beit Hamikdash (the Holy Temple) in Jerusalem<sup>8</sup>, which is regarded as the highest offense against G-d. Not only are they considered failed students, but their studying defiles the sacred texts.

To bridge this gap, a Chosid must practice Avoda Pnimis, or inner work. This involves taking the abstract and universal ideas of Chassidus—about G-d, the soul, the purpose of creation, evil, and more—and applying them to the Chosid's specific circumstances and unique context. In doing so, they fulfill their Divinely ordained mission of changing the world, beginning with the part of the cosmos over which they have absolute mastery: themselves. As our Sages<sup>9</sup> taught, "Humans were created as individuals so that each individual perceives that the world is actually only within themselves."<sup>10</sup>

This requires effort in two areas: the text and oneself. To truly grasp the text, one must be able to express its concepts in one's own unique voice and language. This is achieved through a slow and methodical study of the texts and the discovery and use of one's voice. Equally important is self-awareness, or as Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch<sup>11</sup> said, not deceiving oneself, because the only person being fooled is you. This begins with objectively observing and recognizing one's behavior, along with the patterns and themes that emerge. The result is personal honesty, rather than self-deception. Only under these conditions can Chassidic ideas be effectively applied and Avoda Pnimis practiced.

Avoda Pnimis, which can also be called **insourcing**, faces various challenges, including the attraction of more pleasure-producing tasks, the loneliness of the process, and the predisposition towards self-deception or cognitive dissonance. Another obstacle arises from our early educational experiences, where learning focuses on texts and teachers, leading us to adopt

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, Purim 1928, Sefer Hasichot 5688, page 16.

<sup>9</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin, 4:5.

<sup>10</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>11</sup> The fourth Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch (1834-1888).



others' ideas—what we call "outsourcing." Additionally, technology exposes us to a vast array of other people's experiences and ideas, drawing our attention outward instead of inward. It also provides a platform to project an attractive persona, diverting our limited mental and emotional resources toward how we appear to others. For all these reasons, Avoda Pnimis is difficult.

The Farbrengen is an environment where the Avoda Pnimis muscle can be strengthened.

### [The Farbrengen and Avoda Pnimis](#)

Is the goal of education to accumulate knowledge and to study great ideas and immortal texts, or is it to elevate the individual to become a sublime person? Understandably, the answer is both; education involves acquiring knowledge and developing character.

Knowledge requires access to information, including texts and teachers available in the vernacular. Character development requires self-awareness, fully understanding personal experiences, choices, and dispositions. An obstacle to acquiring knowledge is access to resources, such as books and teachers. For character development, the primary challenge is overcoming habits. While resources for knowledge can come from various external sources, including schools and online platforms, addressing and changing habits must come from within.

Habits develop from familiar patterns practiced in the past or from observing the behaviors of role models and socially attractive individuals. Over time, these habits become rigid and form an impenetrable defense against perceiving what is truly happening in one's life. They can cause one to view personal experiences through a narrow perspective rather than expansively. This results in ignorance of the consequences they bring and the opportunities they offer. It also leads to equating inactivity with inability and confusing choices with inevitabilities.

Avoda Pnimis can break through the fortress of habit and the anxiety-driven urge to hide behind it. This is achieved by broadening one's perspective on experiences, looking beyond the convenient narrow view to explore past choices, and uncovering previously ignored motives. By



confronting these factors, one can then identify new practices to break old habits and adopt them in a manageable way that can eventually become routine.

At a Farbrengen, Avoda Pnimis draws strength from two essential resources that are at its core: the theme and the participation of others.

The theme is a big idea that a Farbrengen participant marines in, deeply valuing and considering it of utmost importance and consequence. Participants identify its elements, observe it from different angles, discover its nuances and uncover its varied layers.

The theme can be derived from various sources, such as the weekly Parsha or a Talmudic story. For a Chosid, it might be a mystical teaching or a story about a Rebbe, or a revered Chosid. Ultimately, the theme can be any concept that holds significance for a participant.

The theme becomes the playground for Avoda Pnimis. The discussions surrounding the theme, the insights that emerge, and even the debates it provokes, act as the playground's monkey bars, slides, and swings.

When a participant speaks at a Farbrengen, they are essentially inviting everyone to glimpse into their Avoda Pnimis. Fellow participants should receive what is shared with generosity. By actively listening<sup>12</sup> and responding with humility, they offer new insights that enhance the speaker's Avoda Pnimis. The speaker's sharing inspires others to explore their own Avoda Pnimis.

The singing of niggunim—melodies with or without words—fosters deeper reflection and internal awareness. Along with moments of contemplative silence, these elements provide invaluable nourishment to the Avoda Pnimis.

As the Farbrengen continues, a camaraderie develops among the participants, and a deepening kinship begins to forge. As they begin feeling each other's pains and joys, bonds of love develop.

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<sup>12</sup> Active listening, or practicing the art of listening, involves gently asking for more details, exploring the speaker's resulting emotions, and delving into the deeper meaning of what is being shared.



The love is most felt when they raise their glasses in l'chaim toasts and bless each other with their deepest desires<sup>13</sup>.

As a Farbrengen winds down, participants are invited to reflect on what emerged and consider how to transition out of this sacred space. Is there a manageable action they can incorporate into their lifestyle to anchor their Avoda Pnimis? Is there a blessing they wish to offer themselves or fellow participants? Or do they prefer to continue reflecting on what occurred during the Farbrengen? In any case, participants are encouraged to share how they are departing from the Farbrengen, whether through a new practice, a blessing, or continued contemplation.

Often, joy erupts as participants celebrate the successful breakthrough of habitual inertia and the liberation of the inner self. Dancing may ensue, solidifying their love for each other and marking the success of the Farbrengen's Avoda Pnimis.

### The Elements of a Farbrengen

- Space and Time

When the CEO of a ten-thousand-person organization walks into the doctor's office for their annual checkup, they leave their authority at the door and enter with the same humility as the teenager seated across from them in the waiting room. Upon entering a designated space, we adapt to its expectations and leave behind the aspects of ourselves that don't fit there.

A Farbrengen space should be designed so that when participants enter, they intuitively conform to the space's expectations for intimacy, authenticity, and slowness. The seating should be arranged around a narrow table, with seats placed close together to foster intimacy. The table

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<sup>13</sup>These blessings have a profound impact. As Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi famously remarked at the Farbrengen in 1775 mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a Chassidic Farbrengen could accomplish more than the Divine angel Michoel (Michael) ever could.



should be set with drinks, finger foods, and local appetizers such as herring and crackers for those with an Eastern European background. Shot glasses and beverages for toasting l'chaim. Alcohol can be available for those legally permitted to drink.

Being fully present, without any distractions or competing demands on your attention, is essential for a Farbrengen. This is why Shabbat, particularly Shabbat afternoon<sup>14</sup>, is an ideal time for Farbrengens. The prohibitions on the use of electronics, travel, and other activities during Shabbat create a unique sense of presence that is hard to replicate at any other time of the week.

If held on another day of the week, phones should be left at the door, and if kept in a participant's pocket, they should not be used. Using a cell phone during a Farbrengen disrupts the experience entirely.

To convey the mystery of the journey—where the destination is unknown, and the duration uncertain—it's recommended not to set an end time for a Farbrengen. However, the minimum duration is typically between one and a half to two hours. A good Farbrengen lasts three to five hours, while an exceptional one can extend to seven to nine hours.

The length of the Farbrengen is primarily determined by the participants' capacity and willingness to be present and engaged. As they uncover greater depths and nuances, and richer connections, the experience soars higher and expands broader, revealing greater color and richer hues within all participants.

- Framework

The entry into the Farbrengen experience begins with the theme that initiated the gathering. It can be a holiday, a milestone, or the group's shared purpose; it can really be any theme. After the

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<sup>14</sup> It is the practice in our home for the Shabbat afternoon meal to be a Farbrengen. Often, these Farbrengens extend beyond the end of Shabbat, lasting up to nine hours.



initial start, the conversation can divert to other related or unrelated topics, as long as they are aligned with Avoda Pnimis.

- Participants

A Farbrengen is a relational experience, an interdependent Avoda Pnimis. While the arena for Avoda Pnimis is within the individual, it is best undertaken in the company of others. Moreover, one of the most crucial skills for Avoda Pnimis can be developed only through relational interactions, never in isolation. In Chassidic terminology, this skill is called bitul—the ability to connect with someone or something in such a way that they, rather than you, occupy the space<sup>15</sup>.

The skill of bitul is fundamental for relationships with G-d, Torah, Mitzvos, others, and oneself. One way to practice bitul is by listening to another person, holding and honoring what they are sharing, being curious about the details, noticing their feelings, and understanding the deeper meaning of their words. At a Farbrengen, bitul is key. For this reason, a Farbrengen requires at least two people and cannot be done alone.

Listening to a Farbrengen recording or podcast can aid in hisbonanus, inner reflection, but it does not provide the opportunity to practice bitul.

Through bitul, one can courageously explore their own experiences, deficiencies, choices, interests, and passions with greater authenticity and less bullshit<sup>16</sup>, curbing the slide into self-deception.

Additionally, practicing bitul toward the person sharing provides them with greater insight into themselves, offering perspectives they couldn't achieve on their own. This gift is reciprocated when roles reverse, and the listener becomes the speaker.

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Sholom Dovber of Chabad-Lubavitch (1860-1920), Sefer Ha'maamarim 5769, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> See On Bullshit by Princeton professor Harry Frankfurt, Princeton University Press; 1st edition (January 30, 2005), one of my favorite books.





Conversations at Farbrengens are not necessarily linear or confined to a single theme. Topics may shift as they pass from one participant to another. The tone can also fluctuate, ranging from somber to humorous, intense to lighthearted, and sometimes even becoming harsh, as long as it remains rooted in love and authenticity.

Silence and reflection hold significance in Farbrengens, with occasional extended quiet moments among active participants being necessary. Silence also provides a pause, allowing for a transition into another gear.

It's important for participants to leave a Farbrengen quietly and without drawing attention to themselves, to avoid disrupting the flow. This guideline applies even to active participants at the center of the Farbrengen, though it may be more challenging for them due to their significant contribution to the collective experience.

- Food

Food, primarily appetizers or finger foods, is essential to fuel the participants and also serve as a chaser to the alcoholic l'chaim, making herring a traditional Farbrengen staple. Entrees such as meat, fish, or chicken can be distracting and should not be on the table. However, a dinner can evolve into a Farbrengen once the formal meal is completed.

- Sharing from Within

The Farbrengen theme can be explored in various ways. It can entail discussing a personal struggle, a Chassidic concept or story, a Talmudic passage or tale, a recent world event, a personal encounter, or even a scientific discovery or technological breakthrough, as long as it serves as a vehicle for exploring one's Avoda Pnimis. The key is to speak with personal authenticity. Anyone who can share in this manner is privileged and invited to speak at a Farbrengen.



Some individuals are skilled in Avoda Pnimis, having practiced it extensively; such individuals are often needed to facilitate a Farbrengen. Successful facilitators, however, inspire others to share their Avoda Pnimis<sup>17</sup> as well. They are the catalysts for a memorable Farbrengen.

- L'chaim

Throughout the Farbrengen, toasts of l'chaim are offered between specific individuals or the entire group together. These toasts can be blessings for others or oneself, or expressions of hopes and aspirations. They serve as moments to pause and deepen the love and connection among participants, acknowledging each other's needs or sharing personal desires and dreams.

Understandably, this can be done with any beverage. Practicing l'chaim with alcohol, however, offers the benefit of relaxation and ease, reducing inhibitions and enhancing the Farbrengen experience. Care should be taken not to drink excessively as it would undermine the thoughtful and intentional nature of the Farbrengen<sup>18</sup>.

- Niggun

A niggun emerges from a speaker when they reach the limits of what they can articulate in their Avoda Pnimis. The melody is an attempt to tap into the depth of the inexpressible—the mystery and yearning. The niggun may arise spontaneously at the end of a sentence or after a silent pause. It can be initiated by either the speaker or a participant.

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<sup>17</sup> Farbrengens, where the speaker showcases oratory skills, knowledge of Chassidic concepts and stories, or personal anecdotes, is a failed leader, and will unlikely inspire others to share and practice listening. One of the common pitfalls is to Rebbeflex (my term), where speakers share stories of the Rebbe they uniquely know of, or that they or their ancestors experienced, flexing their connection to Rebbe but devoid of their Avoda Pnimis.

<sup>18</sup> Starting in 1963, the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Chabad-Lubavitch (1902-1994), instituted a ban limiting anyone under the age of forty to no more than four shots of alcoholic L'chaims. This directive is documented in Toras Menachem, vol. 36, p. 352.



Singing a niggun can also unite the participants. In this case, it's important to choose a melody familiar to most participants. However, when the niggun is associated with the speaker's Avoda Pnimis, familiarity is not necessary. In both instances, the niggun should continue as long as needed and should not end after just a few repetitions.

Some sing with their eyes closed or gaze into the distance. Occasionally, one participant will be swept away by the niggun, prompting everyone else to join in with repeated and intensified singing. The niggun will continue until the participant reaches their intended goal or gives up getting there.

Wordless niggunim are often sung, as they offer greater freedom for the imagination to find its own meaning.

Singing also serves as a transition between topics. Multiple niggunim can also be sung consecutively before the conversation resumes.

- Action Item

As the Farbrengen concludes, it's time to return to everyday life and reintegrate into the routine. After all, that is where life is lived, and where choices for improvement are made. A resolution in the form of a manageable deed serves as a valuable tool for reintegration. The essence of the Farbrengen is encapsulated in this action item, whether large or small. Later, when this resolution is practiced, the potency of the Farbrengen invigorates an ordinary Tuesday in March.

### [In Summary](#)

A Farbrengen has two primary goals: for participants to engage in individual Avoda Pnimis and for participants to connect with one another. These goals are achieved through four key elements: **Sharing** - engaging in conversation, **Cheering** - toasting l'chaim, **Singing** - singing



melodies, and **Silence** - designated contemplative reflection. Each element contributes to achieving both goals.

**Sharing:** Delving within yourself and speaking about what arises on the specific theme marks the first step of Avoda Pnimis. By inviting others to do the same and listening to each other, the bonds between participants are deepened.

**Cheering:** Raising a l'chaim at the end of sharing brings aspirations or blessings to life, adding depth to the Avoda Pnimis. When done in response to someone else's sharing or as a communal l'chaim, it further deepens the bond between participants.

**Singing:** The niggun melody helps participants access reflections that are unripe for expression or inexpressible, taking the Avoda Pnimis to deeper levels and revealing new insights. Since the niggun is created by all participants' voices, it also fosters a remarkable connection among them.

**Silence:** Avoda Pnimis ultimately occurs within oneself, which is why the inward focus achieved through silence is essential for a Farbrengen, especially amid the external stimulation of conversation, song, and l'chaim. Silence also facilitates deeper personal exploration.

### Last Word

The Farbrengen has been a cherished ritual among Chabad Chassidim for over two and a half centuries. The essential components of a Farbrengen can be traced back to the earliest recorded gathering in Horadok, detailed at the beginning of this paper: they include a theme based on the Rebbe's teaching; friends—the gathered Chassidim; conversation; drinks and well-wishing. However, merely combining these elements doesn't guarantee a successful Farbrengen, any more than mixing the ingredients listed on a Coca-Cola bottle recreates the world's best-selling soft drink. There are intangible, perhaps even unspoken, elements in a Farbrengen that are recognized only by the outcome—a great Farbrengen—but not easily identified. This paper attempts to provide the recipe for these essential ingredients.



Some may dispute this effort or even consider it futile—like trying to teach an ancient art to uninitiated foreigners. I acknowledge the validity of their perspective. However, two factors compel me to develop the pedagogy of Farbrengen nonetheless.

One factor is the growing apathy towards Farbrengens among Chabad Chassidim. Some men who spent their formative years in Yeshiva, immersed in Torah, Chabad Chassidic teachings, and Farbrengens—a staple in Yeshivot—have become indifferent to Farbrengens. This includes men who have dedicated their lives to the Rebbe through lifelong service as his emissaries. They view Farbrengens as lifeless or disconnected from reality. Alternatively, they attend Farbrengens, but these gatherings have become little more than men's club get-togethers where they hang out and shoot the breeze over good food and drink, leaving a Farbrengen's spiritual potency untapped.

The second factor is the calling, amplified by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, to spread the wellsprings of Chassidic teachings, including Avoda Pnimis, of which a Farbrengen is a cornerstone. This also involves making Farbrengens accessible to Chabad women. While women hold gatherings called Farbrengens, these lack several key elements discussed in this paper and are more akin to inspirational speeches delivered to people seated around a table with food and drink, punctuated by singing.

This pedagogy also aims to make Farbrengens accessible and practiced by the broader Jewish community, aligning with efforts to make Chabad Chassidic teachings available to all Jewish people, regardless of their prior knowledge or experience.



### What are the obstacles to practicing a Farbrengen?

For someone who has never participated in a Farbrengen or a similar experience like a Tish<sup>19</sup>, the main obstacle is unfamiliarity. To them, I suggest finding elements within the experience that are familiar, such as meaningful conversations, singing, and toasting. Use these as anchors as you embrace the unique form and flavor of the Farbrengen.

To someone familiar with similar social or religious gatherings like a Tish or a Farbrengen-in-name-only, but for whom the inner work required for a Farbrengen is unfamiliar, I offer this advice: Dive into this new experience. You will be amazed at how naturally it unfolds and at the treasures you discover along the way.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle will be faced by those who have participated in flawed and unsuccessful Farbrengens. The bad habits observed and practiced in those settings may be difficult to unlearn and undo. To my dear brothers and sisters, I say: with Avoda Pnimis, you can reclaim what the Chassidim in Horadok gifted us 250 years ago. L'chaim!

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<sup>19</sup> A Tish is a gathering where participants sing frequently, with intervals of sharing ideas or experiences. In contrast, a Farbrengen emphasizes conversation and exploration, with singing interspersed throughout. This reflects their differing goals: a Tish aims to elevate a person to a higher reality, while a Farbrengen seeks to help a person deeply understand and engage with their reality.