**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Vayeitzei 5775**

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**10 Years in Siberia:**

**The Remarkable Story of Eliezer Nanas**

**By Leah Abramowitz**

**As told by Rabbi Nachman Kahane**

I was working at the Ministry of Religion about 40 years ago as an assistant to the Minister of Religions, the noted and learned Zerach Wahrhaftig. One day an aide put his head through the door and said, "Come into my office,” he beckoned to us. “There's a man here you have to meet." We went into the adjacent office to see an elderly, slightly bent Jew who had made aliyah from Russia only two days earlier. His name was Eliezer Nanas.



In those days it was highly difficult to get out of Russia; the Cold War was at its height and Jews were severely restricted. Yet this clearly religious Jew had made it and his story was indeed fascinating. It turns out that he tried to observe all the mitzvot, even when it was nearly impossible while living in Moscow. In the end he was apprehended for the sin of attending a *heder* to teach Judaism to youngsters whose parents were willing to take the risk.

He was sent to Siberia for ten years, a death sentence for most prisoners. When after a long and arduous journey Nanas arrived at the work camp, he was thrown into a little hut where there was nothing but a bed, surrounded by vast, empty vistas and unending snow. The food that he received was hardly enough to keep body and soul together and in the extreme cold of Siberia one's caloric intake made all the difference between staying healthy and alive or succumbing.

**Assigned a Relatively Easy**

 **Job of House Painting**

A guard soon entered his hut to inform Eliezer that he had been assigned the relatively easy job of house painting. He was given a ladder, a paint brush, a pail and told to paint different areas of the huge camp. Misery, cold and despair were all around him. Yet Eliezer Nanas made friends and encouraged those that were obviously Jews and kept a relatively positive outlook. However when after a few days he didn't report for work, an angry guard came to look for him. "What's going on?" he asked the Jew. "Why didn't you come to work?"

"Today is my Sabbath," replied Eliezer. "We don't work on Shabbat."

"Ahah!" said the guard. "We've had guys like you in the past. We know how to deal with your kind. You'll simply get less and less food until you know how to follow orders," said the guard as he banged the door shut. Nanas returned to work on Sunday, but he started receiving less food. He began to feel weaker and weaker.

One day he was called to paint the house of the camp commander. The commander's wife treated him civilly and right away he felt that she was Jewish herself. He even said a few words in Yiddish to check out his suspicion and to establish contact. They began to talk even as he painted. She heard about his background and saw that Eliezer Nanas was not a common criminal but a spiritual person on a high intellectual level. She also heard that his rations had been reduced as a punishment.

**Wife Tries to Help the Prisoner**

That night the commander's wife approached her husband (who was also a Jew but never acknowledged the fact). She asked him to intervene to help the painter and reinstate his food allowance. "Don't interfere in camp matters," he yelled at her.

Their 16-year-old daughter was standing in the room and heard the discussion. "You'll go to *gehinnom* (hell)," his wife warned her husband in response.

"What's gehinnom?" asked the daughter curiously.

"Never mind," her mother answered. "It's got nothing to you with you."

"But I want to know," insisted the girl. She pleaded and kept up the pressure until her mother finally relented and told her what little she knew. "The old time Jews believed that when one leaves this earth you either go to *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden, or heaven) or to *gehinnom* (hell) depending on how you acted in this world," her mother told her reluctantly. "It has nothing to do with us. Forget the whole thing."

One day soon after, a guard came over to Eliezer. "You have a visitor," he told the surprised Jew.

"Who visits anyone in Siberia?" thought Nanas. Even his family had never been able to make the arduous trip. He stepped into the visitor’s room and saw a young girl. It was the commander's daughter. They looked at each other for several minutes, each one wondering what to say.

**Asks for a Half Share of His Gan Eden**

At last the girl said, "If I help you, will you agree to give me half of your Gan Eden?"

Eliezer was taken aback. But as he peered at her, he saw her sincerity and naive yet strong faith, "Yes, I'll give you half of my Gan Eden", he replied.

That was the end of the very short, decidedly strange conversation. Eliezer received his normal rations and he continued to stay in his hut on the Sabbath.

After several more weeks, the daughter was back to visit him once again. This time she was beaming. "Don't tell anyone yet, but you are going to be released. They're sending you back to Moscow," she said. "But remember we made a pact," she reminded the amazed Jew. "You're giving me half of your portion on the World to Come."

**Promises Her a Complete Portion in Gan Eden**

"Yes of course, but I don't know why you need it," Eliezer finally said. "You have a complete portion of *Gan Eden* waiting for you all on your own."

*Eliezer Nanas made aliyah to Israel shortly thereafter and was able to bring out his family after several months. He recounted his experiences in the book*[Subbota](http://www.amazon.com/Subbota-experiences-survived-captivity-slave-labor/dp/B00071GTIY/friendsofaishhat)*under the pseudonym of Avraham* *Netzach. Subbota, the Russian word for the Sabbath, became his nickname in prison because of his total commitment to observe Shabbat under brutal circumstances. He lived in Jerusalem for the rest of his life. There is a street in Ramat Shlomo named after him.*

*Reprinted from an email of last week’s Aish.com website.*

Portrait of Orthodox Girl in Synagogue

Wins International Photography Award

**‘Chayla in Shul’ will be displayed in**

**London’s National Portrait Gallery**

By [Maya Benton](http://tabletmag.com/author/mbenton/)|



**"Chayla in Shul," by Laura Pannack, winner of the National Portrait Gallery's 2014 John Kobal Award. *(Courtesy of***[***Laura Pannack***](http://laurapannack.com/)***)***

This week the National Portrait Gallery in London announced the winners of one of the world’s most prestigious portrait photography awards. Among the usual intimate family portraits, eerie shots of twins, dystopic depictions of urban poverty and suburban malaise, portraits of political officials—including a particularly unsettling close-up of Silvio Berlusconi—and politically engaged photographs of the victims and survivors of war-torn communities, is an image of a young, red-headed Orthodox Jewish girl.

The photograph, “Chayla in Shul,”[won](http://laurapannack.com/blog/image-of-the-week-john-kobal-award/) this year’s John Kobal New Work Award, given each year to a promising photographer under age 30. Laura Pannack, a British photographer and graduate of London’s esteemed Central Saint Martins College of Art, was awarded the £4,000 ($6,250) prize and a prestigious commission to photograph a member of the U.K. film industry for the National Portrait Gallery’s permanent collection.

Culled from more than 4,000 international submissions by roughly 1,800 photographers, 59 portraits were chosen by the judges to be included in this year’s exhibition, which draws more than 200,000 people to the National Portrait Gallery each year. The show opened Thursday and runs through February 22.

I spoke with Pannack just after the award was announced to learn more about the image that nabbed this year’s prize. Five years ago Pannack, who describes herself as a “cultural Jew,” moved to the Stamford Hill district of North-East London, an [area](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/8326339/Inside-the-private-world-of-Londons-ultra-Orthodox-Jews.html) heavily populated by Haredi Jews that has been subject of attacks and [media criticism](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/london-council-removes-unacceptable-stamford-hill-posters-telling-women-which-side-of-the-road-to-walk-down-9746012.html) in recent years. Pannack did not know much about the “very closed, very modest community” she encountered when she moved to the neighborhood, and quickly decided she would undertake a photographic project documenting her new neighbors.

Unsure how to best approach the project, she spent many months getting to know the families, working in the schools and with the women’s and children’s groups as they slowly invited her into their world. The result is an ongoing series (working title: Purity), documenting the lives and experiences of Jewish women living in Stamford Hill.

The photographer describes Chayla, the 11-year-old subject of her winning photograph, as extremely shy and introverted, very mature and extremely intelligent. Although the majority of the photographs in the Purity series are taken in people’s homes, Chayla is pictured in the women’s section of the synagogue led by her father, an Orthodox rabbi.

Girls on the cusp of adolescence—an enduringly popular subject for photographers—are often depicted as a complex mixture of awkward insecurities, confidence, confusion, rebellion, inhibition, [etc.] Yet Chayla, depicted here on the brink of womanhood, evinces an air of confident composure and studious equanimity, as though she knows exactly who she is. It’s one of the reasons it’s such a successful portrait.

The girl we see seems wise beyond her 11 years, photographed holding a prayer book, her stylish pink top, adorned with a bright pink sequined belt, contrasting with the high-necked, long-sleeve black shirt that is worn underneath it to make a more modest outfit. The pink sets off her bright orange hair and luminous English-rose complexion, and the beatific light source above her head creates a halo effect. When Chayla, the second-oldest of 11 siblings—and, until recently, the only girl—was told that her portrait had won this prestigious award and would be prominently displayed in the National Portrait Gallery, she was embarrassed; she doesn’t like to be the center of attention.

Pannack is among a significant number of contemporary photographers who are drawing inspiration from the Old Masters and bringing painterly qualities to the gelatin silver surface. Her portrait of Chayla, which calls to mind Vermeer and dozens of Dutch Baroque Madonnas—with their pale, luminescent visages and direct, see-through-you calm stares—offers a modern take on one of the many young women who populate the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age.

Unfamiliar with the Haredi community before she began photographing women in Stamford Hill, she observed that “some of the traditions and rituals have really surprised me; their lives are fascinating, and it’s an endlessly interesting project with tons to learn about. You never get to the end, it would take an entire lifetime to unravel and understand.” Pannack says she had witnessed “a lot of beautiful relationships and very strong women in these communities,” which she hopes to communicate in her photographs.

“Chayla in Shul” will occupy a prominent, public exhibition space in the center of London over the next few months, and Pannack hopes that those who view her photographs will gain a “positive perception of Jewish people and of the community.” The selection of this image is even more impressive given the context of seemingly endless reports of mounting anti-Semitic violence throughout Europe—particularly in [Paris](http://tabletmag.com/scroll/186966/new-spree-of-anti-semitic-attacks-in-france) and the [U.K.](http://tabletmag.com/scroll/183240/crisis-of-confidence-for-british-jewry), and especially against those [most easily identified](http://tabletmag.com/scroll/175622/jewish-teen-wearing-yarmulke-tasered-in-paris) as Jews by their dress and outward observance. It’s refreshing that this portrait of a thoughtful, Madonna-featured young Orthodox Jewish girl was awarded such a prestigious prize and will be prominently displayed in the National Portrait Gallery in Trafalgar Square.

*Excepted from the November 14, 2014 email of Tablet Magazine.*

Upbeat Uptown: Chabad Presence Gets a Boost in Harlem

**New center is geared to serve City College students and local residents**

**By**[**Menachem Posner**](http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/12145/jewish/Menachem-Posner.htm)

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| Rabbi Yehuda and Chani Shmotkin, here with their children, are helping to grow the Jewish presence in Harlem. |
| Rabbi Yehuda and Chani Shmotkin, here with their children, are helping to grow the Jewish presence in Harlem. |

When thinking of Jewish neighborhoods in New York, Harlem may not be the first to come to mind. Yet the area is celebrating the opening of its second Chabad center—Chabad of Hamilton Heights—founded this past spring by Rabbi Yehuda and Chani Shmotkin.

“The neighborhood is evolving so fast,” says local resident Leslie Dweck. “Great food and new coffee shops popping up are wonderful, but none of it is as special or important as building a nice community uptown where people can connect to each other, to their roots, and deepen their connection to Judaism,” she said describing the Shmotkins’ fledgling Chabad center.

Chabad first took root in Harlem in 2005, when Rabbi Shaya Gansbourg realized that it had a burgeoning Jewish population with almost no Jewish infrastructure. Working together with Rabbi Shlomo Kugel of Chabad of the West Side, Gansbourg and his wife, Goldie, founded what professor Jeffrey S. Gurock, the Libby M. Klaperman Professor of Jewish History at Yeshiva University, called “the revival of Judaism in Upper Manhattan.”

[**Rabbi Led Jewish Revival in Harlem**](http://www.chabad.org/article.asp?aid=2141263)

After the rabbi passed away in 2013 at the age of 57, his work was taken on by his children, Rabbi Yossel and Mushka Gansbourg.

Shmotkin, who was raised in Milwaukee, Wis., says he and his wife, who is from Montreal, will be focusing on serving students at the nearby City College of New York, in addition to local residents.



Rabbi Shmotkin offering students and faculty at City College of New York

an opportunity to perform the mitzvah of waiving the lulav and esrog.

Immediately after the new center was made official just before Passover, the rabbi says he “grabbed some boxes of matzah and began walking the streets of the neighborhood looking for people who needed some for the holiday. Someone asked me, ‘Rabbi, what are you doing here?’ I told him about our efforts in the neighborhood, and he offered to host some events in his home. Thank G‑d, we’ve had some very successful programs there.”

Besides holiday programs—a “Chanukah on Ice” show is in the works—the Shmotkins have been distributing challahs to neighbors and hold a weekly lunch-and-learn that attracts as many as 40 CCNY students.

And as soon as they can find a suitable apartment, the Shmotkins plan to continue to unfold what Dweck describes as “a beautiful mission.”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of Chabad.Org Magazine.*

**It Once Happened**

**The Baal Shem Tov**

**And the Ohr Hachaim**

Rabbi Gershon, the brother-in-law of the Baal Shem Tov, had finalized his plans to travel to the Holy Land. A disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, he conferred with him before his departure and was told: "When you arrive in the Holy Land make sure to attend the yeshiva of Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, known as the holy Ohr Hachaim in Jerusalem. He has two separate yeshivas there - one in which they study the revealed Torah, and another, known to only a very few people, where he teaches the esoteric secrets of the Kabbala. Do everything you can to be admitted to the second yeshiva short of divulging your identity, unless you have no choice."

Rabbi Gershon's journey was successful and he arrived in Jerusalem and proceeded directly to the Ohr Hachaim's yeshiva. Anxious to see how they learned there, he attempted to join the students as they reviewed their study. But each time he approached them, he was told that it was permissible to attend the yeshiva only with the explicit permission of the Ohr Hachaim himself. When the Ohr Hachaim would enter the study hall to deliver his daily lesson, all strangers would be asked to leave.

Rabbi Gershon decided to approach the Ohr Hachaim personally and request his permission to learn. "Who are you?" inquired the Ohr Hachaim.

"I am a Jew who has come from Poland and I desire very much to study in your yeshiva," answered Reb Gershon.

The Ohr Hachaim gave him a penetrating, critical look and asked, "Are you fluent in the study of the Five Books of Moses and the Talmud?"

"Yes, I am," replied Reb Gershon.

"Then I give you my permission to remain here, and I will instruct my staff to accommodate you," the Ohr Hachaim said.

Rabbi Gershon was pleased with the outcome and settled down for the week to learn in the yeshiva of revealed Torah. All the while he was inquiring as to how to gain admittance to the yeshiva of Kabbala. He discreetly asked various students about the secret yeshiva, but none of them had the slightest idea what he was talking about. Those few who were the privileged students, refused to answer his repeated questions. So, Rabbi Gershon was forced to approach the Ohr Hachaim again and ask for permission to attend the yeshiva of esoteric study.

The Ohr Hachaim was surprised by the request. "How do you know about the other yeshiva?" he asked, as he stared into Reb Gershon's eyes, plumbing the depths of his soul.

Reb Gershon, wanting to avoid a detailed response, just looked down and said, "I was told by my brother-in-law." He hoped that his answer would pass without further comment.

"What is his name?"

"Oh, his name is Yisrael," was the matter-of-fact reply.

"I don't know him, but you may come to my lecture tonight," was the reply.

For the next three nights Reb Gershon learned Torah with the select group of students, but on the fourth night when he presented himself to the doorkeeper, he was refused admittance. He was astonished and turned to the doorkeeper crying, "Why have I been refused admittance, when I have the permission of the Head of the Yeshiva to attend?"

"I'm sorry, but I am following the instructions of the holy rabbi. He said that you are unworthy of learning the secrets of the Torah , since you have not attended to the needs of the Sages."

Reb Gershon turned away, puzzled, but resolved to do whatever was necessary to rescind the decree of the Ohr Hachaim. He noticed that the Ohr Hachaim donned a special pair of shoes and head covering before entering the bathroom. The next time he saw the Ohr Hachaim put on the special hat, he ran quickly and brought him the shoes. The Ohr Hachaim noted Reb Gershon's actions, but said nothing.

From that time forth, Rabbi Gershon was allowed to resume his midnight studies. He remained happily drinking in the learning at the Ohr Hachaim's yeshiva for the next few months. One day, he told the Ohr Hachaim that his own brother-in-law was a holy man.

"What is his name?" inquired the Ohr Hachaim.

"His name is Reb Israel Baal Shem Tov," Reb Gershon said.

"Oh," cried the Ohr Hachaim, "Of course I know him well. I see him very often in the supernal worlds. He is a holy man of unsurpassed greatness."

"Now I understand what happened to me in the Heavenly Court," continued the Ohr Hachaim. I had been sentenced to have some terrible calamity occur to me because of using a respected student of the Baal Shem Tov to perform a menial task for me. It was only through the intercession of the Baal Shem Tov that I was saved. If you had told me your true identity at once, I would have been saved the entire incident."

After this conversation, the Ohr Hachaim no longer permitted Reb Gershon to study in his yeshiva for, as he said, "You do not need me to teach you, if you have the Baal Shem Tov as a rebbe."

*Reprinted from last week’s edition of “L’Chaim Weekly,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

**L’Maaseh…A Tale to Remember**

**Viewing Our Prayers**

**As Seen by Hashem**

One day, in the Bais Medrash of Rav Naftoli of Ropshitz, a Jew came hurrying in. It was already early afternoon and he had not yet davened Shacharis! He quickly put on his Tallis and Tefilin, swayed back and forth a lot, and skimmed through the prayers turning the pages of his Siddur one after another. In a few minutes he was finished and started to put his Tallis and Tefilin away.

At that point, Rav Naftoli approached him and asked him if he could please speak with him for a moment. The man agreed, and Rav Naftoli began telling him a story. “There once was a poor man who could not afford more than simple black bread and potatoes to eat, and this was what he had every day. Each day he would come home and his wife would serve him the same food. One time this man came home and found that the food was not ready for him.

**Anticipating a More Special Meal**

His wife told him to wait while she finishes preparing the food, so the man sat down and waited. One hour passed and then two and his wife still hadn’t come out with the food. He thought to himself, ‘It’s usually so simple and quick to prepare the potatoes, and today it is taking so long. Perhaps today we are having some special type of food that takes much longer to prepare!’

He waited eagerly with expectation, but still, there was no food. He finally lost his patience and called to his wife and asked if the food was ready, and his wife hurried out of the kitchen with a plate of the same black bread and potatoes that he ate every day. He said to her, ‘Why did it take so long today to prepare the same thing you prepare every day?’”

**A Lesson to the Man**

Rav Naftoli looked at the man and said, “This story can be applied to you. Some people don’t daven Shacharis as soon as they get up because they are great scholars and it takes them a lot of time to prepare to daven. They purify themselves in a mikvah and collect their thoughts so that they will be able to daven with concentration. These tefilos are special to Hashem and they are worth waiting for, so to speak.

But you came very late for davening, and you could have offered a ‘special type’ of davening today, instead of the regular, casual prayers you usually say earlier in the day.” Rav Naftoli advised the man that he should view davening as if he is serving it and offering it to Hashem, and he should consider how Hashem may view it. (Tales of Tzaddikim)

**Answering a Loyal Chassid**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

Rabbi Yaakov Landa was a follower (Chassid) of the Rebbe Rashab of Lubavitch but not the usual type of Chassid. The Rebbe took an unusual liking to him and even made him his 'House Rabbi'.

Any Torah questions that arose in the household of the Rebbe; if a chicken is kosher, if something is permissible on Shabbat etc. would be directed to Rabbi Landa. Needless to say, the devotion of Rabbi Landa to the Rebbe was boundless.

In addition to being a great Scholar, Rabbi Landa was a very knowledgeable man in mundane things as well and was an expert at home remedies.

(For instance I once was at a wedding when the groom suddenly began suffering from an uncontrollable nosebleed. One of Rabbi Landa's sons (Rabbi Moshe who is now chief Rabbi of Bnei Brak) rushed to him, said he had a trick he learned from his father, found a piece of string, tied it very tightly around the base of the fellow's little finger and after a few seconds amazingly the bleeding completely stopped!! Since then I have used this tens of times to help people with nosebleed and it works every time!)

When the very contagious and deadly disease of Typhus broke out in Russia near the turn of the century Rav Landa had ample opportunity to use his skills. The regular doctors, besides having virtually no treatment for Typhus, were also understandably very reluctant to come in contact with the sick while Rav Landa both did have remedies and did not fear for himself when it came to saving others.

He succeeded in healing hundreds but it was almost inevitable that he eventually contracted the disease himself.

In a matter of days he lost consciousness and his life was hanging in the balance for several weeks until the crisis finally passed and he came to.

The only problem was that when he was sick and unconscious the Rebbe Rashab, passed away unbeknownst to him.

Every day Rav Landa was taken from his room outside into the sun to get stronger until after several more weeks he was back to his old self. Of course all the time he was recovering he asked everyone that passed by about the Rebbe's health but the Chassidim agreed among themselves not mention a word to him about the Rebbe's passing. The answer was always the same 'the Rebbe is fine'.

But Rabbi Landa sensed that something was wrong and kept asking until somehow he got the one person that didn't know about this agreement and he heard the bitter truth.

A normal person can understand what a terrible blow this must have been to him; A Rebbe is more than just a leader or even a father, the Rebbe virtually reveals and connects to the soul and true essence of the Chassid.

And the relation between Rav Landa and the Rebbe Rashab was even deeper and more personal than that; Rav Landa had been near the Rebbe day and night and his life was virtually tied up with his.

That night Rabbi Landa wrote a short letter to the Rebbe. He folded the letter up, put it in an envelope and the next morning when he was taken outside he waited for the same man to pass, handed him the letter and requested that he put it on the Rebbe's grave and tell no one about it.

In the letter he wrote that he wanted the Rebbe to take him away from this world. He wanted to be with the Rebbe because he felt that life was worth nothing without him.

Two days later the Rebbe's son, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak (who became the Rebbe in his father's stead) came to visit Rabbi Landa. He pulled up a chair, sat next to his bed where he was lying in the sunlight and said, "I just was by my father's grave and he gave me a message to give over to you,"

Rav Landa ushered up all his strength, propped himself up on the bed and prepared himself for the Rebbe's message from 'beyond'. When the Rebbe's son saw Rav Landa was ready he continued.

"My father said: "Stop making stupid requests!'"

The second story occurred several years afterwards.

Rabbi Landa had an offer from some very solid and trustworthy businessmen to join them in an investment outside of Russia that was almost sure to bring in big profits. These businessmen, besides being his friends, admired his deep mind and ability to think straght and felt he would be an asset to their endeavor. He would not have to leave the country, rather he would give advice and invest a portion of the money.

It was very tempting. Rabbi Landa had a good business sense and this seemed a sure thing but he could not make such a decision without consulting the Rebbe.

Here was a problem. He was still tied heart and soul to the Rebbe Reshab and the Rebbe Reshab had left this world years earlier. So he decided to consult the Rebbe's son and replacement (Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, nicknamed the Raayatz) before he said yes.

He set an appointment with the Raayatz and when the time came entered with awe and trepidation to ask his question.

As he entered he noticed a large tractate of the Talmud on the table between them with one page folded over.

He asked his question and the Rebbe Raayatz pointed to the Talmud and said, "Open it up please."

Rabbi Landa did as he was told; he opened the book to the folded page and immediately caught his eye a line that said "It is better to invest money near one's home than far away."

"This is pure prophesy!" He thought to himself, "He knew what my question would be and how to answer it through this page of the Talmud!"

"Not at all," answered the Rebbe Raayatz aloud. "It wasn't my prophesy. You see, just before you entered, my father (the Rebbe Rashab who had passed away years earlier) was here and told me to fold over this page of the Talmud and show it to you. It was he that gave the advice!"

*Reprinted from last week’s email from Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim*