**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Vayetze 5774**

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**The Odd Odyssey of**

**A Country Club Jew:**

***One Woman’s Personal Crusade Against Assimilation and Intermarriage.***

**By** [**Sara Yoheved Rigler**](http://www.aish.com/authors/48865432.html)

 At 42, Bonnie Cohen was living her dream life. Her husband Alan was the CEO of a successful company. They lived in a big house in Southern California, drove a Rolls Royce and a Porsche, and traveled – First Class – all over the world. They climbed the Great Wall of China, but were unaware of another famous [Wall in Jerusalem](http://www.aish.com/w/).



**Bonnie and Alan in the early days.**

 The Cohens held a membership in two Jewish institutions: the local Reform Temple, whose services Bonnie half-heartedly attended one day a year, and the local Jewish Country Club, whose golf course Bonnie religiously attended four days a week.

 The Cohens had a son and a daughter, both in good colleges. In fact, the only reason they had joined the Temple was so that their son could have a Bar Mitzvah. They also sent their daughter Sheri to Hebrew School. She called it, “Jew jail,” and dropped out after two years.

 Then one autumn day in 1989, while cruising down the highway of her dream life, Bonnie hit a puncture. Her daughter Sheri came home from college and announced that she had joined Jews for Jesus.

 “But we’re Jewish,” Bonnie sputtered.

 “We’re Jewish,” Sheri shot back, “but we don’t keep kosher and we don’t keep Shabbos, and no one in our family does, and none of our friends do. It’s impossible today to keep the Torah. That’s why Jesus came. Because it’s impossible to keep the Torah.”

 Bonnie and Alan couldn’t argue the point. They knew nothing about Judaism, but they were confident that the rabbi of their temple could point out to Sheri her theological misconceptions. They dragged their daughter to the rabbi, whom they barely knew. Sheri came armed with a handbook, *365 Prophecies that Prove that Jesus is the Messiah.*

The clergyman’s response was like fighting a tank with a water pistol. “Sheri,” he said benignly, “I’m not going to argue Scripture with you. You’re a wonderful girl. You have a wonderful family. And the most important thing is family.”

 A few more platitudes and the meeting was over.

 As they left, he whispered to Alan, “Don’t worry about it. It’s a phase. It will pass.”

 It didn’t. Six months later, Sheri was engaged to a born-again Christian.

**The Secret**

 Bonnie’s best friend commiserated with the Cohens. “It’s a missionary sect,” she agreed. “But I know a rabbi who got my cousin out.”

 Desperate, Alan called the rabbi. He told the Cohens, “The only way you’ll ever be able to reach your daughter is if you learn Judaism and can answer her questions. I’m going to invite your daughter to my home for Shabbos and even if she doesn’t come, I‘d like you two to come.”

 Alan adamantly told Bonnie: “If Sheri doesn’t agree to come, do NOT accept the invitation, because I’m not going to anyone’s house for Shabbos, especially an orthodox rabbi.”

 On Thursday night, they took Sheri to meet the rabbi. Sitting around his dining room table, he invited Sheri to come for Shabbos. “I’m not interested,” was her curt reply. Then the rabbi turned to the parents. “Bonnie, I would love you and Alan to come. “

 Bonnie responded, “We’d love to.” Alan kicked her under the table, but it was too late.

 As Bonnie describes that first Shabbos: “They had a very small house, six kids in two rooms. But whatever they had, they wanted to share. They even invited us to stay over. I saw a husband who treated his wife like a princess, and I saw a wife who showed such honor to her husband. They sang and shared words of wisdom, and everything they said made sense.”

 The Cohens stayed till 1 am. At the end the rabbi asked them, “Did you have a good time?”

 Alan responded enthusiastically: “It was great.”

 “So come back next week.”

 “Okay,” Alan agreed.

 When they left, Bonnie turned to her husband and said, “These are the richest people I ever met in my life, and I want what they have. If this is Judaism, why are they keeping it such a big secret? Why didn’t anyone ever tell me about it?”

**The Basement Apartment**

 Six months later the Cohens made their first trip to Israel, studying Judaism with rabbis from Aish HaTorah. One afternoon someone took Bonnie to meet Rebbetzin Dena Weinberg, the wife of Aish HaTorah’s founder Rabbi Noach Weinberg. Rebbetzin Weinberg ran [EYAHT](http://www.eyaht.org/), a small school for young women with little Jewish background.

 Bonnie was led into a shabby 3-room basement apartment in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Kiryat Sanz. Taken aback, she wondered, “How in the world would anyone want to study here?”

 She met Rebbetzin Weinberg, whom she considered, “the kindest, wisest woman I ever met.” Although she intended to spend only a few minutes in the school, Bonnie was fascinated by the classes and stayed all afternoon.

 For the rest of their stay in Jerusalem, Bonnie attended many classes at EYAHT. One day they received the news from America: Sheri had married her born-again Christian fiancé in a church wedding. Bonnie was overwhelmed by the trenchant feeling, “If only my daughter had had an opportunity to come here and learn this Jewish wisdom, her life would be very different.” Out of the smoldering ashes of her dreams for her daughter a wisp of smoke started to take the form of a new dream. “What can I do to make sure this doesn’t happen to other Jewish girls?” Bonnie asked herself. EYAHT was her answer.

**A Sign**

 Years passed. The Cohens continued to learn Torah and became more observant. While living in the San Fernando Valley, they purchased a condominium in Jerusalem as a second home. When the construction was completed, they came for a ten-day visit in January, 1994. “I fell in love with the Land of Israel,” Bonnie reminisces, and she wanted to stay there. When it was time to return to California, Bonnie cried, begging Alan to stay for one more week.



**Bonnie and Alan today**

 Alan refused. “I can’t be gone from the office one more day,” he insisted. “I have to run my business. If you want a second home in Israel, I have to be able to pay for it.”

 His wife’s tears, however, finally won Alan over. “Okay, one more week,” he conceded, “but you have to go back with a smile. No more tears.”

They extended their ticket by one week. In the middle of that week, on January 17, 1994, the deadly Northridge earthquake struck. At 6.7 on the Richter scale, the earthquake killed 67 people, injured 8,700, and caused twenty billion dollars in damage.

 The earthquake struck at 4:31 am. Had the Cohens returned to California according to plan, they would have been asleep in their bed, not far from the epicenter, when the earthquake struck.

 Alan phoned his business partner and asked him to go to their house and board up any broken windows. A few hours later, the partner called them back to report that their house had suffered major damage, and was condemned by the city.

 “If we had been there, do you think we would have been hurt?” Alan asked apprehensively.

 “No,” his partner answered. “You would have been dead. Four times dead.”

 He went on to describe the scene in their bedroom. A bridge of lights weighing 350 pounds spanned the two armoires on either side of the bed. The partner told how the bridge of lights had flipped off and landed on the top of the bed, just where their heads and shoulders would have been. The thick plate glass mirror behind the bed had shattered into large pieces, slicing through the comforter like a guillotine.

 A massive chest of drawers usually on the other side of the room had been thrown onto the end of the bed with such force that it had completely collapsed the bed. Their large TV had flown from its nook, and had landed in the middle of the bed.

 Alan and Bonnie put down the phone and gazed at each other. When they could speak, their first words were: “What is life all about? How many cars can you drive? How many vacations can you go on? How many rounds of golf can you play? We’re not going to wait for another sign from G-d.” That very day they decided to move to Israel.

 “My respect for my husband zoomed up,” recalls Bonnie. “He was at the top of his earning capacity and his business was growing when he made the decision to move to Israel. Alan couldn’t even read Hebrew, but he decided that his business and all it earned for us was no longer the most important thing in his life.”

 Bonnie pauses and adds, “We downsized our life. Which really means that we upgraded our life. I existed in California, but I live in the Land of Israel.”

**“The Hardest Thing I Ever Did”**

 As the years passed, the Cohens donated generously to Aish HaTorah and to the operating expenses of EYAHT, which remained in a three-room apartment. When the Aish HaTorah World Center, with a large, imposing *Beit Midrash* [hall of study] for men, was dedicated in 2000, Bonnie decided, “We really need to do something for [women](http://www.aish.com/ci/w/My-Modesty-Revolution.html).”

 She went to [Rabbi Noach Weinberg](http://www.aish.com/rn/mm/82246137.html) with her idea. “I have this dream,” she told him. “If we raise $1 for every Jew we lost in the Holocaust, we would have 6 million dollars, and we could build a building for women to study Judaism.”

 Rabbi Weinberg responded with his signature question: “Bonnie, do you know that Hashem loves you?”

 Bonnie responded: “Yes, I know with all my heart that Hashem loves me.”

 “Then you’re going to do this,” responded Rabbi Weinberg, “because Hashem wants you to do this, and you’re doing it for all the right reasons, and you’ll be successful.”

 Now that she was armed with Rabbi Weinberg’s blessing, Bonnie had only one problem: How was she going to raise $6,000,000 when she had an absolute aversion to asking for anything? “The hardest thing in the world for me was to ask anyone for anything. My mother used to say, ‘You would die of thirst before you’d ask anyone for a glass of water.’”

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**The new EYAHT building.**

 Everything else necessary to actualize her dream, Bonnie did with fortitude and finesse. She and Alan found a plot of land in central Jerusalem, tore down the ruined building that stood there, and hired an architect to design a five-story building that would house classrooms, dormitory rooms for 72 young women, a multi-media center, a gym, and two kitchens. But how was she – the former country club golfer who drove a Porsche – going to get up the gumption to ask her friends and strangers for money?

**Turning Her Approach Inside Out**

 Mentally, she turned her approach inside out. She wasn’t taking; she was giving. “I realized I wasn’t asking them for money; I was giving them an opportunity to be part of the greatest mitzvah in the world: to build up the next generation of amazing Jewish women who would [marry Jewish](http://www.aish.com/jw/s/Why-Bother-Being-Jewish.html) and raise Jewish children.”

 Still, it was excruciating for Bonnie. She steeled herself and called a wealthy friend, explained her dream, and asked for a donation of one million dollars. The friend said she needed time to think about it, and Bonnie should call back in a week. A week stretched into two, with Bonnie dreading to make the call. Finally Alan insisted, “You have to call her.”

 “I can’t,” cried Bonnie. She sat in her bedroom staring at the phone for half an hour. “I couldn’t summon the courage to pick it up. I was so afraid she’d say, ‘No.’”

 Alan pushed her; she dialed the number and waited with baited breath. Her friend said, “I have good news and bad news for you. Which do you want first?”

 “Give me the bad news,” Bonnie murmured, her heart plummeting.

 “We can’t do it all at once. We have to spread it out over three years.” The voice paused. “The good news is that we’re going to give you the million dollars.”

 Bonnie gasped, a gasp so loud Alan heard it two rooms away.

 Emboldened, the next day, she appealed to a second friend, who donated $800,000. “This will be easy!” Bonnie exulted. She thought she’d have the funds in no time.

 She then approached a former golfing partner, a mega-wealthy friend whose foundation gives to charity more than $30,000,000 each year. Back in their country club days, Alan had helped this woman’s son get launched in his chosen career, while Bonnie had done many personal favors for her, so Bonnie assumed that a mega-donation was a shoe-in. Bonnie sat down with her friend, explained her dream, showed her the plans, and asked for a donation.

 The friend gave a wry smile, shook her head, and said, “Bonnie, it’s not my thing.”

**The Pain of Rejection**

 Bonnie went home and cried for days. She thought, ““If she’s not going to give me, no one will give me.” She felt like she was one-third up Mount Everest and stranded. She had reached that point by helicopter, but looking up at the sheer ascent in front of her, she realized she would have to climb the rest of the way up step by painful step. And she was as suited for fundraising as a paraplegic is suited for mountain climbing.

 Bonnie went to Rebbetzin Weinberg and lamented that she just couldn’t do it. The Rebbetzin encouraged her, “Just say, ‘I’m going to do it with Hashem’s help,’ and you’ll succeed.”

 Bonnie went home and broke through the wall of her comfort zone – every day. She mounted repeated mailing campaigns, stuffing and sealing the envelopes and affixing the stamps herself. She made phone calls, her hand freezing on the phone each time. She solicited everyone she met. Dining in a kosher restaurant in New York, she struck up a conversation with the people at the next table and told them she was building a school in Jerusalem for Jewish women. They donated $500.

 Little by little, Bonnie has raised $5,700,000. She still needs $300,000 to finish the building. But the opening date of the new EYAHT has been set for January, 2014. “There might be a hole where the elevator is supposed to go,” Bonnie smiles, “but we’re opening.”

 “My life is now powered by one ideal: how do I reach more girls, especially today when so many [girls](http://www.aish.com/sp/so/48906632.html) are assimilating and intermarrying for no other reason than the lack of a Jewish education. I just want to give girls an opportunity to make an educated decision as to how live their life Jewishly. For all we gave her, that’s an opportunity my daughter didn’t get.”

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Aish.com*

**Why Orthodoxy is Growing**

**By Dennis Prager**



**Mr. Dennis Prager**

 As almost every Jew knows by now, according to major reports on American Jewry — such as the most recent and most highly regarded Pew report — Orthodoxy is growing, while Conservative and Reform Judaism are shrinking.

 Before presenting my explanations, I think it important to note that I have no denominational ax to grind. I was raised Orthodox, and went to yeshivas through the end of high school. But I left Orthodoxy early in life and have always been involved in Jewish life — Conservative, Reform, Orthodox, Chabad, Jewish federations and writing for Jewish publications.

In a nutshell, I wish all Jewish endeavors well.

**Why Orthodox Judaism is Prevailing**

 I believe that Orthodoxy is prevailing and that the non-Orthodox denominations are diminishing for the following reasons:

 First, Orthodoxy makes more religious demands on its followers (and they are demands, not suggestions). Orthodoxy demands strict religious ritual observance — at the very least, Shabbat, *kashrut*, daily prayers with *tefillin* (for men), and regular attendance at synagogue on Shabbat and all the holidays (how many non-Orthodox Jews can even identify Shemini Atzeret, as much a Torah holy day as Passover?).

 I can cite a personal example to prove this point. Non-Orthodox Jews nearly always assume that I am an Orthodox Jew when they learn that I do not broadcast on Shabbat or on any of the Torah holidays. If many Reform and Conservative Jews took all those days off from work — as the Torah demands — few Jews would make that assumption. (I do broadcast on *yom tov sheni*, the rabbinically added day for Jews outside of Israel.)

 Like all other religions (with the prominent exception of Protestant Christianity), Judaism has not been able to survive without ritual observance.

 Second, the more Orthodox one is, the more he or she is likely to live among Orthodox Jews. One’s entire social life (outside of work) revolves around fellow Orthodox Jews. That makes it, to put it gently, very difficult to leave Orthodoxy. If you do, you are likely to lose your whole support system and probably most of your friends, as well. You may even risk alienating your family.

 Third, the great majority of Orthodox Jews send their children to Orthodox Jewish day schools — usually through high school. The Orthodox child rarely has close non-Orthodox, let alone non-Jewish, friends, thereby reinforcing Orthodoxy both experientially and socially from the earliest age.

**More Orthodox Jews Marry**

**And Have More Children**

 Fourth, more Orthodox Jews marry; they marry younger, and they have more children than non-Orthodox Jews. Among other reasons, many non-Orthodox Jews bought the nihilistic nonsense — and the Jewish dead end — of the zero population growth movement. And fewer and fewer of them believe that marriage and children are mandatory. On the contrary, many consider a successful career at least as fulfilling as marriage and family. It would be instructive to conduct a poll among non-Orthodox young Jewish women, asking them this question: “Would you rather have a great marriage and family or a great career?”

 I have asked this of many young Jewish women, and at least half have responded that they would choose the great career. Just this week the Huffington Post published a column titled, “6 Reasons Never to Get Married.” The author? A woman named Leah Cohen.

 It is hard to get further from Judaism and imperil Jewish survival than having Jewish women value career more than, or even as much as, marriage and children.

 Fifth, as if all of the above were not enough, Orthodox Jews believe G-d chose the Jews and is the ultimate author of the Torah. Very few non-Orthodox Jews believe G-d is the author of the Torah; but it is inconceivable that Judaism can long survive among Jews who do not believe that G-d created the world, took the Jews out of Egypt and gave the Torah.

 Sixth, Israel is central to almost all Orthodox Jews. Incredibly, and tragically, it is increasingly peripheral to many other Jews.

 Seventh, the further from Orthodox Judaism one gets, the more one is likely to adopt leftism/progressivism as one’s moral code and worldview. Just as the Orthodox Jew is steeped in Judaism from the earliest years, most non-Orthodox Jews are steeped in leftism at home and in school from elementary through graduate school. How else to explain the phenomenon of young women thinking career will give their lives as much or more meaning than marriage and family? How else to explain the alienation from Israel among so many non-Orthodox Jews?

 I write none of this to make the case for Orthodoxy. I find most of the reasons admirable and a few disturbing. But truth is truth. Any one of the seven reasons would suffice to explain why Orthodoxy is increasing and non-Orthodoxy isn’t. All seven make the case incontrovertible.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) Update. The article originally appeared in the October 23rd edition of the JewishJournal.com website. Dennis Prager is a nationally syndicated radio talk-show host (AM 870 in Los Angeles) and founder of* [*PragerUniversity.com*](http://www.PragerUniversity.com)*. His latest book is the New York Times best seller “Still the Best Hope: Why the World Needs American Values to Triumph” (HarperCollins, 2012).*



**Photographer Sees World Through a Different Lens**

**By Menachem Posner**

Marc Asnin is a tough-speaking, sturdy New Yorker whose external roughness belies the artist’s eye that made him a serial award-winning photographer.



**Marc Asnin**

 Throughout his professional career, he has taken shots for major media outlets like *Life*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *French Geo*, *La Repubblica*, *Le Monde* and *Stern.*

 On Sept. 11, 2001, Asnin was sent by *Time* magazine to Lower Manhattan to document the burning World Trade Center. “I arrived at the North Tower after the South Tower had fallen. I was under a fire truck for a few minutes with a fireman whose face I never even saw. Then I scoured ground zero for a few hours, looking for my assistant,” who he eventually found.

 He says he felt so fortunate—so blessed—to make it home that day that he wanted to thank G‑d, and show his faith and bond with fellow Jews. “From that day on, I began covering my head wherever I go,” says Asnin, who often sports a crocheted black beanie. He also wears *tzitzit*, a small garment with biblically mandated fringes, under his shirt.

**Profoundly Influenced by Two Jewish Men**

 During the course of his life, he says he has been profoundly influenced by two Jewish men: His gangster uncle, Charlie Henschke, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. Both men lived just a few blocks from one another in Brooklyn, N.Y., but inhabited universes that were light years away.



**The Lubavitcher Rebbe, giving a weekday address in 1992.**

**(Photo: Marc Asnin, alightamongthenations.com)**

 “Uncle Charlie grew up a gangster. His father was a Jewish gangster. Uncle Charlie would tell me about how his Judaism was robbed from him. There was money set aside for his bar mitzvah, but his parents took it to buy a used television. He felt bad about it.”

 Asnin first encountered the Rebbe in 1988. “I had been photographing the Cuban Jewish community, and the head of the community needed to come to New York to get supplies for the Jewish school in Havana,” relates Asnin. “I took him to the address he gave me, 770 Eastern Parkway, and I realized that the people we were going to meet were Chassidim. At that time, they were all the same to me. Well, the Rebbe was standing there distributing coins to children to give to charity. Eventually, we found the Argentinian rabbi we were looking for, and that was that.”

 In the winter of 1992, while working with *The New York Times Magazine*, he was assigned to photograph the 89-year-old Rebbe for a cover story on the Rebbe’s influence that extended far beyond his Brooklyn neighborhood to the world at large, from average people in need of personal advice, to world leaders seeking his counsel on geopolitical affairs.

 Asnin recalls his surprise at how approachable the Rebbe was. "I had photographed lots of famous people, and most of them don’t let you get close. But the Rebbe had no problem with me staying up close,” says Asnin. While the Rebbe met thousands of people who lined up to spend a brief moment of personal blessing and at times consultation with him, Asnin stood close to document the Rebbe’s interactions.

**A Different Energy Flowing from Him**

 "When you looked in his eyes . . . he was just very intense," Asnin remembers. "There was a different energy flowing from him. It was not the average interaction. It was the most special assignment I've ever had."



**Marc Asnin's photo of the Lubavitcher Rebbe taken in 1992 was selected by New York Times editors as one of the “25 Most Memorable Covers” of the previous 100 years. (Photo: Marc Asnin)**

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 In 1998, as the 20th century was drawing to a close, Asnin’s photograph of the Rebbe was selected by *The New York Times Magazine* as one of the “25 Most Memorable Covers” of the previous 100 years.

 As to the overall atmosphere at “770,” as the Eastern Parkway synagogue and center are widely known, Asnin says he “was amazed at how relaxed and easy everything was. By then, I had pretty much written off synagogue attendance as stuffy and oppressive, but this was something different, fluid and human. I had never felt welcomed at synagogue, but the people at 770 genuinely welcomed me. It was overwhelming but enthralling, and I kept on thinking, ‘Wow, this is incredible!’” As a result, Asnin maintained a close connection with some of the Chabad-Lubavitch rabbis he had met.



**Charlie Henschke, during his "bar mitzvah" (Photo by Marc Asnin)**

**Keeping Up With Charlie**

 In addition to his many assignments, Asnin continued photographing his Uncle Charlie in the rough-and-tumble Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn—a project that would span three decades, recalls Asnin, who was recently awarded the 2013 Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for his book “Uncle Charlie.”

 “Over the years,” Asnin says, “my perception of my uncle changed.” At first, says Asnin, “he was my godfather, and I looked up to him. But he did some pretty bad stuff, committing crimes to get ahead. He struggled with mental illness, drug addiction, and strained relationships with his former wives and his children.”

 With an attitude that changed from admiration to sympathy, Asnin eventually convinced Charlie to go with him to 770 to celebrate the bar mitzvah he had missed in childhood. He told him it was “a one-time thing,” and his uncle relented.

 Once there, Charlie was offered a borrowed set of *tallit* and *tefillin*. “He did not even know what they were at first,” recalls Asnin. “But when he finally put them on, it made him so happy. He is normally pretty tense and always in a rush, but there, he was happy. It was like he finally got back the bar mitzvah that was stolen from him.”

 Still, says Asnin, “he was all tattooed up; most people in society wouldn’t go near him. Only the Rebbe and his followers would have embraced him.”



**Asnin helps a young man don tefillin while on assignment**

**in Las Vegas. (Photo: Marc Asnin, alightamongthenations.com)**

 “Being friends with rabbis like that really influenced me, and it influenced my friends as well,” he continues. “They are so surprised by how humble and nice the rabbis are. I know that the rabbis probably wouldn’t think of themselves as progressive, but they really are. The Rebbe was progressive, reaching out to everyone.”

**‘The Deeper Story’**

 Asnin says the inspiration for his next project after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, India, when Rabbi Gavriel and Rivkah Holtzberg were murdered in their Chabad house with four of their guests, Asnin was sent to chronicle the carnage. He recalled a quote about how “the Rebbe searched out every Jew in love, as they had once been searched out and hunted down in hate,” and that motivated him to embark on a new project of his own.

**A Tribute to the Holtzbergs**

 As a tribute to the Holtzberg’s memory, he decided to take pictures of Chabad’s wide-reaching influence on world Jewry in every continent.

 “The Rebbe was a real revolutionary,” he explains. “He did not just sit back and watch the Diaspora crumble. You see his commitment through the commitment of the *shluchim*. The *shaliach* in Dagestan who was recently shot [Rabbi Ovadia Isakov] said that he is going back to serve his community.”

Asnin’s focus is on the diverse group of people touched by Chabad all over the world. “Wherever you go, they are there knocking up *mezuzahs* on doors and helping people into *tefillin*, but there is more to the story. The deeper story is that they are embracing all kinds of people.”

 “I have been to prisons with Chabad rabbis all over the world—in Moscow, in Florida and in a women’s prison in New York. I photographed and interviewed some teenage girls who come from a horribly abusive house. The Chabad rabbi and his wife took them in to their home. I don’t know many people who would do that.”

 Asnin plans to publish a collection of the photographs he has taken during his time with Chabad. The 1,000-page work will likely fill two volumes with photographs and text: one on Eurasia and the other on the Americas. The books, to be titled “A Light Among the Nations,” are a collaborative effort with editorial director Josh Herman, who has been traveling with Asnin and writing the text to accompany the photographs. The two have created a web site, [www.alightamongthenations.com](http://www.chabad.org/article.asp?AID=%202362655), to accompany the project.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Chabad.Org*

**Tales of the Gaonim**

**Too Long without a Rav**

**By Rabbi Sholom Klass**

The Gaon Yosef Ber Soloveitchik, while chief rabbi of Slutsk, was in poor ﬁnancial straits. It was a poor community, and there was very little money for the rabbi. Once, a delegation from Mohlev arrived to offer the gaon the position of chief rabbi of Mohlev, which was a larger and wealthier town. The gaon, however, refused the offer.



Rav Yosef Ber Soloveichick

“Do you consider the town of Mohlev inferior or is it below your dignity to become a rav there?” the surprised delegation asked.

“On the contrary,” replied the gaon. “Mohlev is a greater town than Slutsk, and it would indeed be an honor to occupy the chair which the Gaon, Malbim had occupied in your town for many years. But, unfortunately, it has been many years since he is gone, and no rav has occupied the seat since.

This is similar to a widow who has not remarried for many years. After a while she gets used to living alone and she will not respect or care for another man. Mohlev has been so long without a rav that they would not know how to honor and respect a new one.”

**Helping Others**

When the first wife of the Gaon Reb Yosef Ber died, he took another wife who had eight children from her ﬁrst husband. The gaon found it very difficult to support so large a family, but he suffered in silence, never complaining.

Once, one of his relatives asked him why he had married a woman with so large family.

He answered, “I have fulﬁlled the mitzvah of freeing an agunah, a deserted woman.”

“Freeing an agunah?” asked the astonished relative. “She is no agunah. Her husband died and what has that to do with you? Why did you have to marry her?”

“She wasn’t an agunah in the true sense,” replied the gaon. But if I hadn’t married her she would have felt deserted, for who would have taken a woman with eight children?”

**The Charity Collector Gives Charity**

Once, a charity collector for one of the yeshivos, known as a meshulach, came to the Reb Yosef Ber on an Erev Shabbos. As it was nearing evening, the gaon invited him to spend the Shabbos with him.

“Before you change your clothes for Shabbos, will you please loan me ﬁve pennies?” Reb Yosef Ber asked the meshulach.

The guest didn’t hesitate a minute. He took out ﬁve pennies and gave them to the gaon. Saturday night, after Havdalah, the gaon took out the same five pennies and returned them to his guest.

The yeshiva collector was astonished at the gaon’s behavior. “If the master will excuse my impudence, I would like to ask him a question,” said the meshulach.

“You may ask,” replied the gaon.

“Why did you borrow five pennies from me Erev Shabbos, and now after Shabbos return the exact pennies?” the meshulach inquired.

“It’s simple,” replied the gaon. “You are always traveling around the country, from town to town and from city to city, always borrowing, begging and pleading for money for the yeshiva. You are constantly urging people to give charity, and you are instrumental in providing them with great mitzvos. But you, however, never have the opportunity of gemilas chesed, helping others by loans or charity. Therefore, I wanted you to also have the mitzvah of gemilas chesed, of loaning me money which you so kindly did Erev Shabbos.”

**His Occupation**

Once a young man entered his study. He was a former disciple of his, having studied under him when he was the Rosh Yeshiva of Volozhin.

Reb Yosef Ber welcomed the pupil with open arms and invited him to have dinner with him. After a while the gaon turned to his former pupil and asked him, “What are you doing now?”

“Thank G-d,” replied the erstwhile student, “I have become a merchant and am very successful. I have made a lot of money during the past few years.”

The gaon listened attentively and he asked him, “What are you now doing?”

The student stopped talking momentarily and he thought that perhaps the gaon did not hear his reply. He again repeated, “Thank G-d, I have become a very successful merchant and I have made a lot of money.”

Instead of acknowledging what he had heard, the gaon again repeated. “But what are you now doing?”

“I trust my rav and master will forgive me, but this is the third time you have asked me the same question and I have repeated the same answer,” said the student in wonder.

“It is true, you have answered me the same thing three times,” sighed the gaon. “But that is not the answer I wanted to hear. You have nothing to brag about regarding money for it all belongs to G-d. G-d gives you life, health, money, riches and all wealth. It is not of our doing. But what are you doing?

“Are you doing good deeds? Do you give a lot of charity? Do you help the poor? Do you devote time every day to the study of the Torah?

“These are the things which you are required to do. Therefore, I ask you, what are you doing? Not what G-d has done for you.”

*Reprinted from the April 19, 2013 edition of the Jewish Press.*

**Who's Who**

**Yocheved**

Yocheved (Jochebed), the daughter of Levi, was born as the Children of Israel entered Egypt. She was married to her nephew Amram and gave birth to Miriam, Aaron and Moses. Together with Miriam, she worked as a midwife for the Jewish women and they were referred to as "Shifra" and "Puah." Yocheved as also called Yevudia in the book of Chronicles. Rabbi Judah Hanassi said: "There was a Jewish woman who was the mother of 600,000 children." He explained that this was Yocheved, who gave birth to Moses who was equal to the 600,000 men who left of Egypt.

*Reprinted from last week’s edition of “L’Chaim”*

**Letter from Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller to Her Talmidot Around the World on the Recent Passing of Her Husband**



**Rabbi Dovid Heller, zt”l**

Dear, dear friends,

So many of you have been so real, so kind, so much with me at this time.
Things happened very suddenly. In general (as many of you know), we spent Shabbos at home. The reason was that my husband had to be on call at the yeshiva in case he was needed on Shabbos.

The week after Succot was still yeshiva vacation, so we went to Beitar where my sons Aharoni and Yehudah and my daughter Rachel live. It was a marvelous Shabbos; everything was perfect. Aharoni's two-year-old captured my husband's heart.Â She even got him to read her favorite book, "Minny Mouse at the Beauty Parlor", which (as those of you who knew him realize) was quite a stretch.

**Without Any Warning He**

**Slid of the Edge of the Bed**

When we got home, he turned in for the night and I went out to walk. I returned, and to my surprise he was still up. We got to talking, and without any warning, he slid off the edge of the bed where he was sitting. When he couldn't get up, I realized that something was really wrong.

The Hatzalah (which is called Chovesh in Har Nof) came immediately. The volunteer called an ambulance which arrived within moments. The paramedic asked him if he felt any pain, and he said that he didn't. These turned out to be his last words.

The emergency room was ready for us, the neurologist on call was there, and ordered a C.T. scan. It showed massive bleeding, which precluded any real intervention. We called my son Yitzchak who lives in Monsey -- it was still Shabbos there, so all we could do was leave a message.

Miraculously he listened to it as soon as Shabbos was out. He grabbed his passport, jumped in the car and called the travel agent who told him that there was a flight leaving for Israel that night. She told him that he had to be there by ten, and if there were any empty seats, she could see that he got one. There was ONE!

He arrived at about four on Sunday. "Yitzchak came!" I told my husband, and everyone in the room saw the numbers on the various instruments (oxygen, blood pressure etc.) jump around in an unspoken message of love and awareness. I went to the Kotel at five with most of the family and some good friends. They told me that you, my dear friends all over, were also davening. There were tefillot in Kever Rachel, all over the States, in England and in Australia, in Uman and in Mearat HaMachpeilah.

The next morning we had an appointment with Dr. Chasan-Cohen, one of Israel's top neurologists.Â He told us that they were trying to stop the bleeding, but even if they were to fully succeed there would be swelling, and that once that receded the body would reabsorb the blood, and then it would be possible to assess the situation fully. He told us frankly that he had every reason to view the reality as bleak and desperate, but that in medicine there is no time that a prognosis is absolutely certain. He cautioned us that the real enemy was infection, and urged us to pray.

**Diagnosed with a Raging**

**Acute Pneumonia**

At a little after four, we noticed that numbers seemed to be moving downward. A doctor came, and took a sample of fluids, and came back and told us that he had raging, acute pneumonia. Dr, David Speigel, a former student from my husband's Ohr Somayach days as a teacher, spent the entire day helping us. When he heard this he turned to the attending physician and asked her why she was giving the antibiotic that was in the IV -- he felt that there were other, stronger possible responses. He asked for Dovid to be transferred back to the emergency room where dopamine could be administered. The doctor was taken aback. "Who are you?" she demanded. "I'm a doctor of internal medicine, and this is my father", he answered. That tells you the whole story....

No one could have a better departure from this world. I was there with the children and older grandchildren. My son read the confession, and we then recited the Song of Songs. As the vital signs that the instruments displayed grew fainter, they began to sing songs of dveikus, inner joy, the ones that he would sing every Shabbos at the third meal. They sang Ani Maamin, Ohm Ani Choma, and the Baal HaTanya's niggun.

My son-in-law arrived with the prayers that are said at the very end of the journey. This includes Adon Olam, Yigdal, a few psalms and the prayers from the end of the Yom Kippur service. With the final repetition of "Hashem Hu HaElokim" (The L-rd is G-d, which is repeated seven times at Yom Kippur's conclusion), the paramedic who was watching the instruments told us to move away from the bed, that his soul has left his body.

They continued singing until the men from the chevra kadisha (burial society) came. They took us to the Shamgar funeral home where the taharah (ritual purification before burial) was done. The woman who greeted us there was extremely refined and sensitive. She told us to wait, and then to say our final farewells, and to use the opportunity and privacy to say whatever we had to say individually. We were there both to comfort each other, and to join together in unrestrained grief.

The service took place at Yeshiva Pachad Yitzchak, where my husband worked doing everything that needed doing other than teaching for the last 24 years. For the first time, the Rosh Yeshiva spoke at a funeral. Rav Aharon Feldman came directly from a grandchild's sheva brachot. There were only two hours between the time that he passed and the funeral, so none of the eulogies were "rehearsed" or even really written. All four speakers were real, eloquent, and shared a common theme.

**A Man of Deeds, Not Words**

My husband was a man of deeds, not words. He was a man of profound humility, not because he had no ideas of his own, or no passions, but because he lived in absolute submission to the Torah and love of Torah and those who learn Torah. He brought this love of Torah to the real world. His integrity was the stuff that stories are made of.

He was a living embodiment of the ladder that Yaakov saw in his dream; his feet were on this earth, but his head was in the heavens. He helped me organize my trips, teach, write, and do everything else that brought Torah to others. The honor that he ran away from during his lifetime caught up with him at his death. The funeral was enormous, the sort of funeral that is usually reserved for people who are far more well known. It was a great comfort to us to hear how clearly other people saw what we thought we were the only ones to glimpse.

You, my friends, were here for me and the entire family at this time. You wrote, called, sent enormous amounts of food, and supported us with your silent presence or with your words. We will never forget you.

Love,

Tziporah

*Reprinted from a recent email sent by Rebbetzin Heller.*

**The Golden Column**

**Rabbi Shelomoh Iliyon zs"l**

 Three hundred years ago, there were two communities in Amsterdam, Holland. Leading the Sephardic, Portuguese community was Rabbi Shelomoh Iliyon zs"l, while the Hacham Ssevi zs"l (who was given the title "Hacham" after having studied under leading Sephardic scholars in Italy) sat at the head of the Ashkenazic community.

 One day, the Hacham Ssevi went to the Sephardic rabbi's house to discuss issues relating to the community and was shocked at the glorious sight which his eyes beheld. A festive tablecloth was spread over the table, an elaborate array of flowers adorned the room, filling the air with a magnificent fragrance, and the house was enveloped with the holiday spirit. This was his first visit to his counterpart's home, and he asked, "Is this the way of the Torah?"

**Privileged by the Visit of the King!**

 Rabbi Shelomoh answered quietly, "We are privileged by the visit of the king!"

 Well, then, things now become clear. If, indeed, the house is being prepared for a royal visit, then it must be decorated appropriately. "When is the king expected?" asked the Hacham Ssevi.

 "I hope he has already arrived," answered Rabbi Shelomoh.

 "Where is he?" shuddered the Hacham Ssevi. The visit of a king is no small matter!

 "His Majesty fills the world," answered the rabbi. "Hazal say that if a man and his wife are meritorious - the Shechinah resides among them. If peace and tranquillity govern the home, then the Almighty Himself lives with them. So, if I have merited such a blessing, and my home has thus become an abode for the Shechinah, is it not appropriate to decorate my house? Hazal further comment that when a Jew studies Torah the Shechinah stands opposite him, as the pasuk states, 'In every place where I mention My name, I will come to you and bless you.' Is it therefore not wholly appropriate that I greet the presence of the Almighty with honor and dignity?"

 "Indeed, it is most appropriate!" answered the Hacham Ssevi, startled and awed. "If these are the intentions of the rabbi - fortunate is the community which has him as their leader!"

*Reprinted from the Parshas Toldos 5774 edition of the Aram Soba Newsletter.*

**It Once Happened**

**Tipping the Scales**

**Of G-d’s Mercy**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

December 1700. It was a cold winter in Poland, and a blanket of snow covered the entire country. The city streets were filled with people bundled up in fur coats, and the countryside peasants were busy warming their homes with wood, and themselves with vodka.

But in the Jewish section of Krakow, gloom and fear filled the air; the children were dying of smallpox. It was the beginning of an epidemic. The doctors were helpless to stop it, and the various home remedies did nothing. Everyday the town was visited with more heartbreaking tragedies. Whom could they rely on? No one but their Father in Heaven.

**A Fast Day is Declared**

The rabbi of the community had declared a fast day, then another, then three days of prayer and self-examination. But nothing seemed to work. A week of supplication was announced, but before it began, the elders of the community decided they had to make a "Sha'alat Chalom" (a request for a dream in which they would be given an answer to their problem).

It was a drastic move, but they had no other choice. They purified themselves, fasted, recited Psalms continuously, immersed in a mikva (ritual pool), and then requested from G-d, according to ancient Kabalistic formulas, that He send them some sort of sign that night in their sleep.

That night, every single one of the community elders had the identical dream. An old man in a white robe appeared and said, "Shlomo the Butcher must lead the prayers for the congregation!!"

Early the next morning they met in the synagogue and compared notes. It was clear what they had to do. The 20 of them solemnly walked to Shlomo's home and knocked on the door. When the butcher's wife opened the door, she almost fainted. "How can I help you?" she stammered.

"We want to speak to your husband. Is he home?"

Shlomo came to the door and invited them all in. When everyone was seated, one person began:

"Shlomo, we made a Sha'alat Chalom yesterday. We asked G-d to tell us what to do about the epidemic, and last night we all had the same dream. We dreamed that you have to lead the prayers today."

Shlomo was dumb-founded. If it weren't such a serious matter he would have thought that it was a joke. "I...should lead the prayers? Why I....I can't even read properly. I can't. I mean, what good will it possibly do?"

The elders looked at poor Shlomo and they took turns trying to convince him. "Listen Shlomo, just come and do what you can. You don't have to really lead, just pray in front of everyone. Maybe there will be a miracle, maybe you will begin to read. Just come and give it a try. Everyone is in the synagogue waiting for you to begin the prayers."

**Suddenly Broke Away and Ran Outside**

So Shlomo, with no other choice, left his house and accompanied them. But no sooner had they entered the crowded synagogue and closed the door behind them then Shlomo suddenly broke away, ran back outside and down the street, out of sight.

What could they do? He disappeared. They didn't even know where to look. They had no choice other than to wait.

About half an hour later the door opened and in came Shlomo pushing a wheelbarrow covered with a cloth. All eyes were on him as he went up to the podium, pulled off the cloth, and lifted an old set of scales out of the barrow. He had brought his butchers' scales into the synagogue!

They were pretty heavy but he lifted them over his head and although his face was contorted with the effort, it was obvious that he was crying too.

"Here" he yelled out. "Here, G-d! Take them! Take the scales! This must be why you want me to lead the prayers, right? So take the scales and heal the children! Just heal the children. Okay?!!"

**Crying Pretty Loudly**

He was crying pretty loudly by then and the whole place was dead silent. A few men rushed over, helped him put the scales on a table in the front of the room, and the congregation began the prayers.

The next day all the children got better. You can imagine the joy and festivities that followed. A craftsman even created a nice case for the scales, which were left permanently in the front of the synagogue for all to see.

After a few days when the excitement died down, the community elders had to admit that they couldn't figure it out. After all, there were tens of shops that used scales in their town and all of them were owned by G-d fearing Jews. What could be so special about these scales?

The answer was soon in coming. When they went around checking all the other scales, they discovered that without exception each one was a bit off. It was a minute amount, never enough to constitute bad business, but inaccurate nevertheless. It seems that Shlomo used to check his scales twice every day, "That's what G-d wants" he explained. "I just check and don't ask questions," while others checked only occasionally.

Legend has it that these scales remained proudly displayed in that Shul for over 200 years until the Germans destroyed everything in WWII.

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**Thoughts that Count**

Surely G-d is present in this place and I did not know it (Gen. 28:16)

When does man feel the presence of G-d? When "I did not know it"- when the I is ignored and the person works on negating his own ego. *(Panim Yafot)*

Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Charan (Gen. 28:10)

Rabbi Pinchas said, in the name of Rabbi Abahu: Whomever a person marries is predestined by G-d. Some people must go out to meet their mate; others have their mate come to them. Isaac's wife, Rebecca, came to him: "And Isaac went out to meditate in the field...and he lifted up his eyes and saw, behold, there were camels coming. And Rebecca lifted up her eyes, and she saw Isaac." Jacob, however, had to travel to Charan to meet his future wives. *(Breishit Rabba)*

Whatever You will give me I will give a tenth to You (Gen. 28:22)

Queen Victoria of England asked famed Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore the extent of his wealth. "It will take me a few days to make an accounting," he replied. Several days later he gave her his answer. "You insult me," the Queen replied. "Everyone knows you are worth much more than that." "Not really," Sir Moses explained. "I consider my wealth only that which I have given to charity. Everything else I have is only temporary and may be confiscated or lost." *(Jewish Legends)*

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