**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas vayechi 5776**

Volume 7, Issue 17 14 Teveth 5776/ December 26, 2015

**Printed L’illuy nishmas Nechama bas R’ Noach, a”h**

For a free subscription, please forward your request to [***keren18@juno.com***](mailto:keren18@juno.com)

**Story #942**

**The USA Presidential Decision in 1948**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

[**editor@ascentofsafed.com**](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/21?folder=Inbox&msgNum=00012jW0:001MSKKA000011N_&count=1450274591&randid=1176485253&attachId=0&isUnDisplayableMail=yes&blockImages=0&randid=1176485253)

I [Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz] would now like to record the fascinating remarks made by the American President, Mr. Harry Truman, who was the prime motivator in influencing the world's nations to accord the State of Israel recognition in 5708/1948.

On one of my visits to the United States, I met Mr. Truman in the city where he lived, [in Independence, Missouri near Kansas City], together with Rabbi Solomon, one of the local rabbis.

President Truman said to me, "I am glad of the opportunity to explain to you, Rabbi, why I recognized the State of Israel. My decision in favor of six hundred and fifty thousand Jews wanting a state of their own, while surrounded by tens of millions of Arabs firmly opposed to the State's emergence, ran counter to America's political interests. Opposition in America to this policy was so fierce that one of the newspapers in the city here where I live ran a headline, 'Truman the Traitor.' [There was also the strong opposition of his Secretary of State and a number of other high officials in the State Department. -ed.]

"As a child," he continued, "I grew up as the neighbor of several Jewish families whom I highly esteemed. On their Sabbath I would switch the light on and off in the home of one of the families, in return for which they gave me a slice of Sabbath *challah*.

"It was my father's custom to read from the Bible every Sunday. When we read about Cyrus, King of Persia, who granted the Jews permission to return to the Land of Judea and rebuild the Temple, I thought to myself. 'The day will come when I'll be President of the United States ("the dream of every American boy," he added) and I, too, shall do what Cyrus did in his day.'

"My dream became reality, and when your president, Chaim Weizmann, visited me bringing a Torah scroll as a gift and asking me to instruct the American ambassador to the United Nations to support the establishment of the State of Israel, I remembered my childhood dreams.

"Obviously, on its own, a sentimental feeling like this would not have outweighed my responsibility to the interests of the United States. Why, then, did I nevertheless decide to recognize your state?"

He then spoke of the frightful dangers facing the world due to the atomic bomb:

"This terrible threat of atomic warfare will continue to threaten the world with destruction and with worse still: leaving all the world's inhabitants in a state worse than simple death! And if, despite this, the will to continue living persists within me, it was only because I believe that just as you Jews saved humanity - a barbarous species - three thousand years ago with your Torah, today too, the Jewish People will manage to enlighten and heal the cruel hearts of our age and rescue the world from total destruction!"

When I returned home, I relayed President Truman's words from the Knesset podium, so that the country's chosen leaders might know what the world leaders expect from the Jewish People. This ought to teach us that the better elements among the gentile savants are well aware that the Jewish People's role is to serve as a "light unto the nations" and that through the Torah we can save the world from destruction and make it a better place. If we don't live up to these expectations, our friends will also turn their backs on us and act in accordance with their own interests, preferring hundreds of millions of Arabs and a billion Muslims over a handful of Jews.

Our duty is to ensure that "the Great name should be magnified and sanctified" (*Kaddish*).

[Rabbi Lorincz is referring to the obligation of every Jew to sanctify the Divine Name through one's words and deeds. He concluded by mentioning that through our doing so, we will merit the arrival of Elijah the Prophet, the forerunner of the Messiah. -editor.]

*Source*: Edited by Yerachmiel Tilles (and by submitter Yosef Ben-Shlomo HaKohen o.b.m. in 2010) from the account in volume 2 of the English edition of Rabbi Lorincz's book, *In Their Shadow*.

*Biographical note:* **Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz** (1918-2009), a leading activist within the Agudath Israel organization in Israel, was a member of the Knesset from 1951 until 1984. During his tenure, he served as chairman of the Knesset Finance Committee for more than a decade. After his retirement from the Knesset, he was appointed as chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Bank of Israel--his signature appeared on all Israeli currency until the early 2000's.

*Connection:* Weekly Reading-Pharaoh appreciated Yosef so he helped his people.

Reprinted from last week’s (Parshas Vayigash 5776) email of KabbalaOnline.com, a project of Ascent of Safed.

**The Longevity of the**

**Sha’agas Aryeh**

The Sha’agas Aryeh became the Rav of the community of Metz. He was an outstanding genius and became the Rav at 70 years old. One can imagine the reaction of the community, the first time the Sha’agas Aryeh spoke and gave a Torah lesson. The listeners were amazed.

On his way out, he overheard two of the community members talking. The first said to the second, "It’s a shame. He is such a wonderful scholar, such a wonderful Rabbi, such a wonderful asset to our community. But how long will he be with us? (Life expectancy then was not what it was now.) It’s too bad that we could not have gotten him when he was 40 or 50 years olds!"

The Sha’agas Aryeh, upon hearing this comment quoted an insight from the dialogue between Pharaoh and Yaakov. When Yaakov arrived in Egypt, even though they were in the midst of a famine, the famine stopped in his merit! Pharaoh was thrilled with having Yaakov in Egypt. But he looked at him and saw that he was an old man and asked how old Yaakov was.

Pharaoh’s implicit question was, “how many more years of boom can we expect?" Yaakov Avinu told Pharaoh not to worry: "I'm only 130 years old. The reason why I look so old is because I had a difficult life, but in fact, I am not nearly as old as the life expectancy in my family. My father and grandfather lived until way past 130!"

The Sha’agas Aryeh told his congregants: "I am 70 years old, but don't worry, I will be your Rabbi for the next 20 years."

Comment: R’ Chaim Soloveitchik (who tells the story) adds that the Sha’agas Aryeh indeed remained the Rav in Metz for 20 more years and passed when he was 90! We cannot judge anybody, and especially by appearances.

*Reprinted from last week’s email of Torah’s Sweets Weekly for Parshas Vayigash 5776.*

**The Terminally Ill Child’s Help Will Come from Far and from Near**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

The following story is from (Sipuri Chabad vol. 16, page 59)

Rabbi Mordechai Liepli was a devoted follower of the second Rebbe of Chabad Rabbi Dov Ber some two hundred years ago.

In those days it was not common for the Chassidim to go to the Rebbe with every problem as it is today. The Rebbe was considered a purely spiritual person for spiritual direction and inspiration not to be bothered with mundane problems.

So it wasn't surprising that when Reb Mordechai's son became ill that he didn't write to the Rebbe about it.

Rather he went from doctor to doctor and when they said they couldn't help he took the boy to the best doctors and professors available in Russia.

But when they too said the boy was affected with a rare incurable ailment that had worked its way into his bones, he considered bothering the Rebbe.

The boy was too sick to travel and he couldn't leave the boy alone to travel to the Rebbe himself so he wrote a letter and prayed.

In the letter he poured out his heart, told the depressing course of events; how the doctors gave his son most a month to live, and begged the Rebbe for a blessing or advice.

He reckoned that it would take five days for his letter to reach the Rebbe and five more for the answer to arrive so after ten days he stood near his window on the lookout for the mailman. Then on the thirteenth day the mailman arrived!! But he was in a tremendous hurry.

He yelled to him, but he didn't stop, only motioned with his hand that he had no time.

But Reb Mordechai wanted to see for himself. He ran after the mailman and begged him to stop for a moment. "Are you sure there is no letter for me?" maybe if I gave you a tip?"

The mailman was obviously agitated in no mood for talking, and certainly none for stopping but when Rav Mordechi gave him a half a ruble he stopped.

"The truth is that there is a letter here for you" The mailman said nervously, "but is it so urgent? Can't it wait? I'll have to look for it. Can't I give it to you tomorrow? Now I'm in a hurry!! There is a very important visitor at the Czar's palace and I have to find him a carriage."

"A carriage?" asked Reb Mordechai, stalling for time as he looked through the letters. "What kind of carriage?" Aha!! He found the letter! It was from the city Lubavitch!! From the Rebbe!

"One of the royal family members got sick." The postman continued not noticing that Reb Mordechi wasn't really listening. "I think it was the son of one of the princes.

So they called a doctor from Austria, supposed to be the king of Austria's personal doctor. Now he has to go back, I guess he finished his job, and I was given the job of finding horses and a carriage. So I'm going. Okay?"

Rabbi Mordechai hardly heard what the mailman was talking about. He was busy opening the envelope and taking out the letter. "Well, good luck!" the mailman called out as he ran off into the distance in to resume his search for a carriage.

Reb Mordechai thanked G-d and read. The Rebbe wrote:

"I received your letter and I paced back and forth in my room. I saw that your salvation will arrive soon; from far and from near." And in the margin was written, "Don't spare any money".

He read the letter a few times but couldn't figure what the Rebbe was getting at. What did he mean by 'far and near?" Was he supposed to do something or perhaps it would come to him? If the Rebbe said not to spare money it must mean he had to act. But what? Where?

Rav Mordechai paced back and forth in the street until after a while the postman returned again. This time he seemed to be calmer. Probably he found the carriage. Suddenly it dawned on Rab Mordechi that perhaps the doctor from Austria was the answer from 'afar'! He asked the postman where exactly this doctor was to be found and when he got the answer he ran there as fast as possible.

From a distance he could already see that a large group of people were gathered around the door of the house. As he got closer he understood why; they all wanted the doctor to treat either them or one of their loved ones. And despite the fact that the doctor sent word that he would not treat anyone they still were waiting…perhaps he would change his mind.

Reb Mordechai was well known and respected and it was also a matter of life and death. He was determined to get in.

With great difficulty he pushed his way into the house and finally was standing face to face with the doctor. He begged and pleaded but to no avail. The Doctor straightened himself, looked into the distance and, in a tone that was the paradigm of earnestness and loyalty, declared that he was faithful to The King of Austria, was under oath to return to his country immediately upon finishing his work in Petersburg and would never betray his orders. He ordered Reb Mordechi to leave the premises immediately.

Any normal person would understand that the situation was hopeless, but the Rebbe's letter gave Reb Mordechi chutzpa beyond reason. He looked the doctor in the eyes, took a wad of neatly folded bills from his pocket and said calmly. "I'll give you one thousand rubles for one visit to my son."

One thousand rubles was a veritable fortune in those days… perhaps a hundred thousand dollars.

The doctor suddenly became a different person, filled with concern and asked. "Where is the boy? We have no time to waste. Show me the way." They left the house via a back door and in moments the doctor was examining the child.

"The disease is severe indeed it has entered the lad's bones." He said, "Just as the other doctors said. But contrary to what they said, there is a cure. There is one medicine that can heal this which, unfortunately, is not found in Russia. Your only chance is if I happen to have this medicine in my case."

The doctor sent a messenger back to his hotel room to bring the large chest that held his myriads of pills, ointments, oils and balms and, sure enough… miracle of miracles… he found the medicine he was looking for!!

It was a jar of ointment which, a few moments after he applied it to the boy's chest and other places, opened a small aperture in the boy's side from which began flowing large amounts of puss.

"The disease", he explained as they watched the remarkable effects of the treatment, "originated in an infection of the teeth and from there it spread to the rest of the body till it permeated the boy's bones.

"Now", he said assuredly, "I will instruct another doctor, a friend of mine in Petersburg, how to continue the treatment and I am sure that in a week or so your son will be completely healed."

The story circulated like wildfire and everyone marveled at the exactness of the Rebbe's prophesy: The salvation came soon; along with the mailman, from far; from the doctor from Austria, and from near; namely the ointment that just 'happened' to be in his suitcase. And the catalyst to it all was the money that, at the Rebbe's behest, Reb Mordechi did not spare.

It was obvious to all that the Rebbe had not only the power to tell the future but also to change it for the better.

Reprinted from last week’s email from Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel.

**L’Maaseh… A Tale to Remember**

**When Chacham Ezra Attiya Volunteered to Pinch Hit as a Delivery Boy In Place of a Prized Student**

Rabbi Chaim Levy relates a story that took place in Eretz Yisroel in the 1930’s. One day, in the Porat Yosef Yeshivah, a young student suddenly stopped coming to Yeshivah, for no apparent reason. The boys in the Yeshivah had no ideas where this boy had gone, and none of the Rebbeim knew either.

The Rosh Yeshivah, Chacham Rav Ezra Attiya, one of the greatest Torah scholars in the 20th in the Sephardic world, became very concerned and decided to pay a visit to the student’s home.

When the Rosh Yeshivah spoke to the boy’s father and asked where his son was, the father explained that their family business was a small grocery store and he needed the help of his son to be their delivery boy. The father explained that the business needed his son right now, and Yeshivah would have to wait.

The Chacham attempted to convince the father of the importance of Torah study, and tried to find a solution to the issue they were facing in the store, but it was to no avail. The father would not budge and allow his son to return to Yeshivah.

The next morning when the father went to the store, he was shocked to find Chacham Ezra Attiya, the Rosh Yeshivah himself, standing outside the grocery store in work clothes. When questioned by the father, Chacham Attiya replied, “Your son’s learning is unquestionably more important than mine, and by not allowing him to go to Yeshivah, you are murdering the Gadol of the next generation! Therefore, I will be your delivery boy in his place. Just send your son back to Yeshivah, and I will do his work!”

The words hit the father like lightening, and he understood the seriousness of what the Rosh Yeshivah was saying. He agreed and sent his son back to Yeshivah, and told the Chacham that he would work out getting a different delivery boy, and the Rosh Yeshivah should go back to learning as well.

This boy was very successful in his learning, and turned out to be Chacham Rebbe Ovadia Yosef!

*Reprinted from last week’s (Parshas Vayigash 5776) email of Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Stories compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*

**Lessons Learned from Orthodoxy’s Dramatic Growth**

**By Steven M. Cohen**

Since 1990, Orthodoxy in America has departed in dramatic fashion from patterns displayed by the other religious denominations. In fact, since 1990, the number of Orthodox Jewish congregants in the U.S. has at least doubled, the Jewish engagement indicators have moved higher, and their average age has declined.

These striking trends emerge from comparing the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey with the 2013 [Pew Research Center](http://www.pewresearch.org/) Since the two studies used different survey methodologies, they should be viewed with some caution. Nevertheless, the numerical details are stunning: The sheer number of American Jewish adult congregants who identify as Orthodox (be it charedi, Modern Orthodox, or other) leapt from 220,000 to 448,000.

The surge in Orthodox adults is surpassed by the even steeper growth in the number of their children. While Orthodox children up to age 17 amounted to 85,000 in 1990, the comparable population more than quadrupled, reaching about 350,000 in 2013.

Should there be any doubt, we need only recall similar patterns in the New York area (the five boroughs plus Westchester and Long Island). In 2011, Orthodox households contained 61 percent of all Jewish children in the area. For the five boroughs alone, 74 percent of Jewish children were Orthodox. In both the national and New York surveys, the charedi growth certainly led the way, but the Modern Orthodox also grew in number.

Consistent with the high birthrates and population explosion among the Orthodox, since 1990 the average age of adult congregants in Orthodox shuls in America declined from 51 to 44. The trend sharply contrasts with the aging of congregants in the other movements. In 1990, among the three major movements, the average age of adult congregants was almost the same. By 2013, about 10 years of age separated the more youthful Orthodox from the older and aging Conservative and Reform congregants.

While Orthodox numbers grew from 1990, so too did their Jewish engagement. Among Orthodox congregants, we find more live in homes where Shabbat candles are usually lit (98 percent compared to 64 percent among non-Orthodox congregants), more attend services weekly (66 percent compared to 50 percent), more belong to Jewish organizations of some sort (60 percent compared to 35 percent), and more make donations to a Jewish charity (98 percent compared to 82 percent).

While just 2 percent of Orthodox congregants intermarried in 1990, by 2013 none of the Orthodox congregants interviewed in the Pew reported marriage to a non-Jewish spouse. In the same period, the proportion of Orthodox Jews with mostly Jewish friends rose from 76 percent to 91 percent.

In other words, in a process stretching back many years, the Orthodox population has largely shed those who may be considered, “nominally Orthodox,” as Samuel C. Heilman and I termed such Jews back in the 1980s — that is, those who are Orthodox in name, but not so much in terms of Orthodoxy’s rising levels of expected practice.

The shedding of the non-observant on the one hand speaks to the more intensive patterns of Jewish education and rising normative expectations within Orthodoxy. At the same time, they are also consistent with the sectarian and separationist tendencies within Orthodoxy — vis a vis the larger Jewish community — as well as the dispute between more traditional and modern wings over issues of women’s leadership roles, both rabbinic and lay, as well as the extent to which Orthodoxy should be “open” or “closed.”

The high rates of in-group cohesion among the Orthodox and their considerable social separation from the larger society resemble those of Mormons and evangelical Christians in America. In contrast, non-Orthodox Jews may refer to such policies as “ghettoization” or “anti-American.”

As Charles Liebman, the esteemed social scientist of contemporary Jewry, wrote in 1973, “The American Jew is torn between two sets of values — those of integration and acceptance into American society and those of Jewish group survival. These values appear to me to be incompatible. But most American Jews do not view them in this way.”

Indeed, as Liebman may well have correctly intimated, some resistance to integration may be required to assure numerical sustenance and qualitative enhancement. Today’s Orthodox Jewry in America certainly seems to be proving Liebman insightful, if not prophetic. While other movements certainly make their own distinctive contributions to Jewish society and civilization in America, the sustainability of Orthodoxy contains important implications for non-Orthodox Jews. The “secret” of Orthodox retention and expansion can be summarized by a five-letter acronym: PRICE.

That is, they exhibit extraordinary **Passion** about Jewish norms and purpose. They perform numerous religious **Rituals**. They maintain high rates of **Informal** association (more spouses, friends and neighbors who are Jewish). They engaged in **Community** — be it in synagogues, organizations, charities or political-like activity. And they undertake **Educational** activities, be it learning groups for themselves or sending their children to day school, overnight camps or to Israel for a very influential gap year.

Similarly, non-Orthodox Jews who follow the same path exhibit extraordinary success in raising their children as committed and active Jews.

The Orthodox have shown that the price of intensive Jewish living has its rewards. The question is how many others will be willing to pay the PRICE to assure a rich Jewish life for themselves, their children and their grandchildren.

*Steven M. Cohen is research professor of Jewish social policy at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion and director of the Berman Jewish Policy Archive at Stanford University.*

*Reprinted from the December 8, 2015 website of The Jewish Week (New York).*

**Pearls of Wisdom… A Word for the Ages**

Once, Rav Yisroel Salanter was staying at an inn in Kovna. He was up late at night learning Torah, when he overhead the conversation of two paupers who were lodging in a side room.

One asked the other to accompany him to the well, as he was afraid to go out alone so late at night, and he really wanted to get a drink.

The other drowsily mumbled that he was sleeping and would not go out. Immediately, Rav Yisroel Salanter interrupted his studies and went out to the well to get water for the pauper!

*Reprinted from last week’s (Parshas Vayigash 5776) email of Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Stories compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.*

**It Once Happened**

**When Only the Rav of Yanov Knew What Day Shabbos Was**

The Rav of Yanov was a great scholar. As a young man he had been the friend of Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg, and their friendship had endured in spite of the young man's terrible obstinacy and inability to concede the correctness of anyone else's viewpoint.

Once, the Rav of Yanov was traveling to his son's wedding together with an impressive party of illustrious well-wishers. The Rav and his party stopped at a lovely site on the outskirts of a forest to say the afternoon prayers. The Rav chose a secluded spot under the trees some distance away from the others, and he lingered over his devotions.

The members of his traveling party waited patiently for him in the carriage, but when darkness descended, they began searching for him in the surrounding groves of trees. Their search proved unsuccessful and though they were a bit concerned, they assumed that he had accepted a ride from one of the many other carriages in the wedding party.

Their anxiety was borne out when they arrived at the site of the wedding and the Rav was nowhere to seen. There were all kinds of speculation, but there was nothing to do other than to proceed with the wedding without him. The sad group returned to Yanov without the Rav and in fact, without a clue of what might have happened to him.

Meanwhile, the Rav was wandering around in the depths of the forest unable to find a way out. He had unwittingly lost his way in the forest. As hours became days the Rav became more despondent and disoriented. He lost track of time and set about preparing for Shabbat a day early.

Finally, with G-d's help, the Rav found his way home and rejoined his jubilant family which had begun to fear the worst. When Thursday arrived the Rav busily set about preparing for Shabbat. When his family explained that it was Thursday and not Friday, he argued hotly that they were all mistaken. They tried patiently to explain that in the course of his wanderings he had somehow lost a day in his reckoning, but he just became more and more infuriated.

His family invited many acquaintances to try to convince the Rav, but to no avail. What could they do, other than to allow him to celebrate the holy Shabbat on Friday. He celebrated with all the traditional foods and prayed the Shabbat prayers, and when Shabbat actually arrived he donned weekday garb and set about his usual weekday activities while his horrified family helplessly looked on.

Many weeks passed while he persisted in his mistaken behavior in spite of the steady stream of visitors all endeavoring to convince him otherwise. One day word of his strange fixation reached his childhood friend, Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg. Reb Shmelke set off at once for Yanov, making sure that he would arrive on Thursday. The Rav was thrilled to see him, and hastened to invite him for Shabbat. Reb Shmelke accepted enthusiastically, eager to implement the plan he had devised.

Reb Shmelke quietly gathered the Rav's family and outlined his plan to them. Needless to say they were anxious to do anything to bring the Rav back to reason, and so, in addition to the usual bountiful Shabbat fare, they also prepared some bottles of strong aged wine and set them on the table. The masquerade was carried out as the whole family and their many guests gathered to celebrate a festive Shabbat meal.

After each delicious course Reb Shmelke poured a generous cup of old wine into the Rav's cup. Now, this was a heavy, red wine known to induce a deep slumber in the drinker, and Reb Shmelke didn't stint on the "L'chaims." Toward the end of the meal, the Rav fell into a deep sleep. Reb Shmelke sat back and relaxed with his pipe, telling his fellow diners that they could now return to their normal activities without worry, for the situation was under control. He took a soft cushion and placed it under the head of the sleeping man and settled down to guard the Rav throughout the night and into the following day.

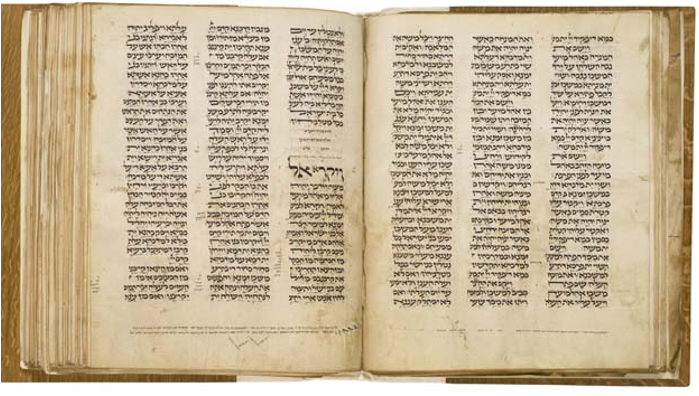
On the next night, which was truly the Shabbat, the same guests returned and sat down at the table to enjoy the real Shabbat repast. When it was time to say the Blessings After the Meal, Reb Shmelke gently roused the Rav, who sat up and remarked, "It seems as if I've been sleeping for a long time." He then joined in saying the prayers and everything continued in the usual manner through to the conclusion of the Shabbat. The family and townspeople were overcome with happiness at the result of Reb Shmelke's visit and thanked him profusely. For his part, Reb Shmelke made them promise that they would never reveal the true happenings of that Shabbat.

The Rav never had an inkling of what had transpired. In fact, he was very proud that everyone else had come to the enlightened conclusion that his calculations had been correct. He was however, careful to credit his old friend Reb Shmelke of Nikolsburg for helping lead his mistaken congregants and family to the right conclusion, saying, "Thanks to my friend from Nikolsburg, they were able to comprehend the truth. Isn't it amazing how impossibly stubborn some people can be!"

*Reprinted from the Archives of “L’Chaim Weekly” (Issue #193 – Parshas Vayigash 5752/1991), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization.*

**World’s Largest Collection of Judaica Broken Up and Sold – Against Owner’s Wishes**

**By Brita Lokting**



A Hebrew Bible that was once part of the Lunzer collection.

The world’s most important private collection of Jewish books and manuscripts will be broken up soon, contrary to the original wishes of its founder, at an upcoming auction at Sotheby’s.

On December 22, 12 selected pieces from the Valmadonna Trust Library — an unrivalled library of some 300 handwritten Hebrew documents and 13,000 rare printed Hebrew books, with some dating as far back as 1,000 years — will go on sale in New York.

The collection was assembled by Jack Lunzer, an industrial diamond merchant from Britain, who previously sought to sell it, but with stipulations that the library only be sold as a whole and kept available for scholars. Lunzer also stipulated that the buyer must himself agree not to break up the collection through subsequent sales.

But Lunzer is now 91 and suffers from dementia. And over several years the library’s trustees, who now control the collection, were unable to obtain the price they sought for it while maintaining Lunzer’s stipulations. They are consequently moving to sell off some of the rarest and highest-priced books individually.



Photo of Jack Lunzer in his better days as a Bibliophile.

Scholars had earlier taken reassurance from Lunzer’s original conditions, which guaranteed them and those who rely on their research continued access to the collection. It’s been available to scholars since it has been at Sotheby’s. Now, some are deeply saddened.

“It would be a terrible loss to the Hebrew book lore to have the rest of the printed book collection dispersed,” said Brad Sabin Hill, the curator at the I. Edward Kiev Judaica Collection at George Washington University. “I would consider that to be unfortunate.”

The Library’s trustees defend their decision to sell some individual books and manuscripts and override Lunzer’s stipulations as an effort to make the rest of the Library more affordable to sell as a whole. Though there has been great interest over the years, the collection as a whole proved too expensive and expansive for both private buyers and institutions. Margaret Rothem, Lunzer’s oldest daughter, said that Lunzer had been informed of the trustees’ decision, though he was now unable to meaningfully participate in it.

David Redden, the chairman of Sotheby’s book and manuscripts department, said all the money made from the auction will go to the trust. But he didn’t know how the trustees would spend or allocate the funds once the library was sold off, or whether the trust owned other collections toward which the funds might go. Efforts to reach members of the trust’s board were unsuccessful.

Lunzer amassed the rare artifacts over a span of 50 years. He traveled to the far corners of such countries as Italy, Spain, Turkey, Portugal, and to cities such as Amsterdam, where ancient printing presses secured works on vellum and silk paper from the 1400s through the 1700s.

“I love these books with my heart and soul,” said Rothem, who explained that she had often accompanied her father to towns so remote that she still doesn’t know the exact names of some. She said this lifelong hobby filled a void for Lunzer after his wife passed away at 52 in 1978. He often sat alone in his library into the wee hours of the morning, poring over research books to decipher the details about manuscripts he had his eye on.

“He was thrilled,” she said, to travel and study. “It was a life’s work.”

The Library is considered a collection of vast yet meticulous beauty and scholarly intellect. Many manuscripts are dressed in gold leaf, painted with picturesque 18th-century scenes or adorned with intricate borders and illustrations.

Several years ago, when Lunzer resolved to sell the Library, Sotheby’s brought the works to New York from Lunzer’s house in London, where they had been organized by region — 16th-century Italian books in the study, volumes from India in a house in the garden. The empty shelves were then filled with faux wood books to appease the hollow feeling their removal left behind.

In 2009, prior to the auction, Sotheby’s opened the collection to the public. Lines of 3,000 visitors a day wound around the block. At the time, some lamented the possible loss of these rare treasures.

“While we do not yet know what will happen to the library, its possible disappearance as an integral collection would be a colossal loss to Jewish culture,” wrote David Stern, a professor of Classic Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, in a December 2010 opinion piece for the Forward.

Shortly before the collection went on the block, Rothem asked Redden, the Sotheby’s official, to open up the library privately for her so she could say goodbye. She reached into the glass cases and stroked the leather spines while inhaling their scent.

In 2010, the collection was sold to an anonymous bidder who met or exceeded the base asking price of $25 million. But when the bidder balked at the stipulations accompanying the sale, the offer was rescinded.

Since then, Sotheby’s has struggled to secure a new owner for the collection, and tried, without success, to sell it in its entirety. The auction house’s difficulty in doing so was due in no small part to the collection’s exceedingly high valuation of $30 to $40 million.

Redden said he received “endless” calls from institutions, but none could afford to pay the price in full. He declined to reveal the names of the institutions, but said, “I think it’s well-known that the Library of Congress has had an interest in the collection.” An article in the Forward from 2011 said the Library of Congress offered the trust $20 million in 2002, which then was the closest an organization had come to the asking price. The Library of Congress has not returned calls for comment.

Hill, the Judaica curator at George Washington University, called this failed sale attempt to the nation’s preeminent public library a “terrible tragedy.”

Redden also spoke with numerous private collectors, but none wanted to acquire upward of 11,000 books and manuscripts. Many of them were only interested in individual pieces.

“It wasn’t going to happen in a timely fashion,” he said about selling the Library. “I think people respect the fact that we tried to sell the collection as a unit.”

Sharon Liberman Mintz, a senior Judaica consultant at Sotheby’s, said the Library’s sheer size posed the biggest challenge over the years.

“It has made it difficult for any one person to absorb,” she said. “And for the institutions, it was a big sum of money.”

Rothem, who is not a trustee and said she played no role in the choice to sell the items, supported Sotheby’s move to auction off the 12 pieces individually, calling it “a good decision.” The 12 books can be purchased together or alone.

The December 22 sale, which Sotheby’s is calling Sale I in anticipation of future auctions, contains two of its most prized items: a copy of the Bomberg Talmud and a handwritten Pentateuch from 1189. Redden said the auction house wanted to build excitement by offering these two treasures in the first round.

The Talmud, originally printed by Daniel Bomberg, a Venice-based Christian, from 1519 to 1539, is considered to be one of the most important documents in the history of Hebrew printing.

“It changed and revolutionized the way Jews studied this book,” said Mintz. The particular copy in the Valmadonna collection, estimated at $5.7 million, is one of 14 sets in the world and for centuries resided at Westminster Abbey in London. With the same dedication Lunzer gave to his other acquisitions, he chased the Talmud after becoming aware of its existence in 1956. He secured it 25 years later when he acquired a 900-year-old copy of Westminster’s charter and offered it in exchange for the Talmud.

The Pentateuch, estimated to sell at $2–4 million, is the only Hebrew text to survive after King Edward I ordered the expulsion of Jews from the British Isles in 1290.

Other items for auction include a 1737 Viennese miniature manuscript of Grace After Meals, a Samaritan Torah scroll from Israel from the 12th century and a 1401 Italian Hebrew Book of Psalms.

The collection will be open to the public December 16–21. The hope that by auctioning off these first 12 items, the rest of the collection will be more affordable as a whole remains to be tested.

“I think they belong to the Jewish people and kept intact,” said Stern about the printed books in an interview with the Forward.

Mintz echoed that sentiment and clarified, “To be able to sell the monumental manuscripts doesn’t take away from the uniqueness of the collection.”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) UPDATE. The article originally appeared in the December 10, 2015 edition of The Forward.*