

The 5780/2019 Jewish New Year Anthology

Compiled by Daniel Keren



SHANAH TOVAH

May this coming Jewish Year of 5780 be one of overflowing blessings to you and your family and all of Klal Yisroel. With our special Rosh Hashana issue of Shabbos Stories, we will have concluded a decade of trying to spread both enjoyable and inspirational stories to Yidden/Yehudim around the world.

It was with our Rosh Hashanah email of 5769/2009 that we first began our project. At that time we were emailing to about 40 people mostly in the Tri-State Metropolitan area. Over the years mostly by word of mouth, our subscription list has grown with the help of G-d A-mighty to more than 1,000 individual s around the world on every inhabitable continent on the planet Earth. May these stories increase the kavod (glory) of Hashem and contribute in a small part to the coming of Moshiach Tzidkenu speedily in our days.

To mark the start of our 11th year of email publication, and in response to many requests of recent subscribers for back issues, we have in the last half year began working on a new website in which to date we have posted about 70% of past Shabbos Stories for the Parsha and Yom Tov emails. We invite you to take advantage of this free new website (which does not require one to register to use) by simply clicking **ShabbosStories.com** Please let your family, friends and neighbors know about this opportunity to read thousands of inspirational stories about other Jews around the globe.

We must also thank The Jewish Heritage for the Blind for including our stories during the past four and a half years in their email Large Print Magazine – Lekavod Shabbos edited by Sruli Toiv. Special hakoras hatov is also extended to the Parshasheets.com website that emails our stories along with other distinguished parsha sheets simultaneously to thousands of their subscribers around the world.

Finally I would like to dedicate this year's Jewish New Year anthology to the memory of my dear parents – **Sigi (Simcha) ben Chaim Baruch**, a”h and **Chana (Helen) bas Meyer** (nee Aronoff), a”h. This year marks the 100th birth anniversary of my dear father who was born on August 19, 1919 (the 23rd or 24th of Menachem Av 5679). And my dear mother's yarhtzeit falls on 28 Tishre. May your reading of the stories in this anthology serve as a zechus for their beloved memories.

Regards – Daniel Keren

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The Privilege of Speaking to Hashem



The Pnei Menachem zt'l said that once he saw a book written by a non-Jew, about someone who had a strong desire to meet with the president of the United States.

When he saw an opportunity, he jumped over two blockades, and spoke with the president for a couple of minutes. He was arrested and had to sit a half-year in jail, but he wrote in his book that he considers it worthwhile, because he had the privilege to speak with the president.

Let us learn from this episode the immense joy we should have on Rosh Hashanah when Hashem will study our deeds, and we will stand before Him in judgment. The fear is great, the books of life and death are opened, but the joy is also very great, because we have the privilege of standing in Hashem's presence.

Reprinted from the Rosh Hashanah 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings

A Broken Heart



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Rebbe Wolf Kitzes zy'a would blow the shofar in the Baal Shem Tov's minyan. One year, before Rosh Hashanah, the Baal Shem Tov taught Reb Wolf the kabbalistic and chassidic intentions he should concentrate on when he blows the shofar, in order to annul harsh decrees.

Reb Wolf wrote down all the concentrations so he could remember them when he blows the shofar on Rosh Hashanah... but he lost that paper.

That Rosh Hashanah, he blew the shofar with a very broken heart. He cried the entire time, for he feared that because he lost the paper with the kabalistic thoughts, the decrees weren't annulled.

After the tefillah, he told the Baal Shem Tov that he didn't have any of the lofty intentions in mind, and he feared that perhaps the tekiyos didn't accomplish what they needed to accomplish...

The Baal Shem Tov replied that he caused him to lose the paper, because he wanted Reb Wolf to blow the shofar with a broken heart. The Baal Shem Tov explained, "The kabbalistic intentions (called kavanos) are keys that open up the locks of heaven. Each meditation opens up another lock.

"But a broken heart is like an ax that breaks down all doors. Your tekiyos, blown with a broken heart, went straight up to heaven and accomplished everything."

Reprinted from the Rosh Hashanah 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings

OPINION

“Please Blow the Shofar Quietly”

By David Olivestone



I sometimes wish I had kept notes during my childhood. The shul in which I grew up was brimful with colorful characters. But today, when I look at photos from those days, I am hard-pressed even to remember most of their names.

Who were they? What were their backgrounds? How did they come to live in our very genteel London suburb? And, I often wonder, were any of them survivors of the Shoah? (Back in the 1950s and 1960s, which is the era we are talking about, the Shoah was never mentioned, certainly not in front of the children. Today, I feel a sort of strange embarrassment that I was a teenager before I even knew that it had occurred.)

Perhaps if I had kept notes I could tell you more about these people who populated my youth and now my memories.

There was the man whom we called “The Voice.” If I had to classify his vocal instrument, I’d have to say he was a bass. But it wasn’t any particular talent for singing that earned him his title; it was sheer volume. Any time the shul joined together in song—and we had some fine *chazzanim* and loved to sing—his voice would hugely dominate, bringing smiles to some faces and, I suspect, annoyance to some less generous personalities.

Then there was Mr. A., one of the most volatile people you’d never want to meet. There are some shul-goers, usually men, whose chief delight seems to be finding fault with everything. Mr. A. would blow up at the slightest provocation. One Shabbat, the rabbi said something during his sermon which Mr. A. found

highly offensive. Making a great play of it, he stormed out of the shul, yelling as he went, “I’ll come back when you stop this nonsense!”

But one of my favorites was Mendel Gamse (pronounced “Gams”), who was a genuine *kanna’i*, a stickler for observing the halachah the way he had been taught growing up.

He had come to our shul in its early years, but not because he was so attracted to anything it offered. Apparently, the shul in which he had previously *davened* had dedicated a memorial plaque with the figure of a lion embossed on it. He denounced it as a *pesel* (graven image) and never stepped foot in the building again.

I remember very clearly that Mr. Gamse spoke with a Polish accent, which made me think (recently, that is) that perhaps he was a survivor. But with a little research I found out that he had come to England in the early years of the twentieth century. He was born in 1875, so he was already in his seventies and eighties during the time that I remember him.

Mr. Gamse was one of our regular *ba’alei keriah*, expertly reading the Torah with a heavily Polish-accented Hebrew pronunciation. “*Oooo-ooo-mei-yin*,” he would begin each *aliyah*. This was very different from the proper English tones of our other *lehnners*, and I loved it.

But he was also our *ba’al tekiah*, and since I was developing my own skills with the shofar, I would watch him very closely. As he grew more elderly, I began to suspect that his *teruah*, the nine-note staccato sound, was achieved not so much by what he did with his mouth, but rather by a fierce shaking of his hand, but otherwise he was excellent.

On the Rosh Hashanah before he was to pass away, he was quite ill and was unable to come to shul. I was asked to go and blow shofar for him at home.

Several members of his family were there when I got to his house. “Please blow the shofar quietly,” they cautioned me, as soon as I stepped in. “He hasn’t been very responsive in the last few days, and you mustn’t startle him.”

Armed with that admonition, but not quite knowing what to do with it, I entered his bedroom, trailed by the family. “Good *yom tov*, Mr. Gamse,” I said, in a loud whisper. “I’ve come to blow shofar for you.” His eyes were open, but I couldn’t tell how much he comprehended.

I said the *berachot* for him and began to blow, trying as best as I could to muffle the sound. Now his eyes were glued on me. As I continued, I noticed that he was beginning to move himself up on his pillow. I blew more loudly. He struggled to get himself erect and his children helped him into a sitting position. I gave it full blast.

When I was done, he looked directly at his wife and demanded in a weak but clear voice, “Wine, *lekach*, for *kiddush*.” And then Mr. Gamse, who had been

almost comatose for several days, made Kiddush in his Polish accent, and as he sipped his wine and nibbled at his cake, I murmured to myself “Oooo-ooo-mei-yin.”

Reprinted from the Fall 2018 issue of Jewish Action, the Magazine of the Orthodox Union. David Olivestone, formerly senior communications officer of the OU, now lives in Jerusalem and is a member of the Editorial Committee of Jewish Action.

Rav Yitzchok Tuvia Weiss Blowing the Shofar of the Satmar Rov zt”l



Reprinted from the September 27, 2016 website of Matzav.com

Blowing the Shofar



The Baal Shem Tov would tell the following analogy to explain תקיעת שופר – the blowing of the shofar: A king had an only son, whom he decided to send to a far country, to increase his knowledge and let him experience different cultures. Loaded with lots of gold and silver, the son left for the distant lands, but on the way, he spent all of it.

Arriving there penniless, the people laughed off his claims, not believing that he is a prince, for they had never heard of his father the king. Unable to bear the suffering any longer, the son decided to return to his father's land. The prince arrived in his homeland, but having been away for so long, he had forgotten the local language. He tried motioning to the people that he was the son of their king, but they mocked him and beat him, not believing that this tattered fellow was son of their mighty king.

Arriving at the palace gates, the son tried again but was ignored, until in utter despair, he began to cry aloud so that his father would hear him. Recognizing

his son's voice, the king's love was aroused for his son, and he came out to welcome him home.

Similarly, the King, Hashem, sends a neshama, his prince, down to the world to benefit itself through fulfilling Torah and mitzvos. However, when seeking pleasures, the neshama loses all its wealth and arrives in a place where his father, Hashem, is unknown. Moreover, the neshama forgets the way it was above, and in the long galus, even forgets its 'language'.

In desperation, it cries out by blowing the shofar, expressing regret for the past and determination for the future. This cry arouses Hashem's mercy, and He shows his love for His only son and forgives him.

Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev would tell the following mashal: A king once lost his way in the forest and was unable to find his way, until he met a man who directed him out of the forest and back to his palace. The king greatly rewarded him and appointed him as a high minister.

A while later, the minister acted rebelliously and was sentenced to death, but before being executed, the king gave him one last wish. The minister asked that both he and the king put on the clothing they had worn when he had rescued the king from the forest. Doing this, reminded the king of his indebtedness to this man, and he called off the execution.

Similarly, we have willingly accepted the Torah from the King, Hashem, when all the other nations refused. Yet, like the minister, we have then done aveiros, an act of rebellion and are therefore fearful on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment. We blow the shofar to remind Hashem of Mattan Torah, when we had accepted the Torah and made Hashem our king, and express our interest to crown Hashem once again. This zechus stands by us, and Hashem forgives all our aveiros and inscribes us immediately for a good life.

The chassid and gaon Reb Yossel (uncle of the Tzemach Tzeddek) was once in a distant city for Rosh Hashanah, and later complained, "Their davening distracts me. All their tefillos are only for physical needs."

One of the elder chassidim recounted: "When I was in Russia, the authorities were once after me, and I was forced to flee and wander through the country. My wanderings continued for several years, and I had the opportunity to daven on the Yomim Noraim in different shuls. I noticed an interesting difference: In most shuls, they would cry out with most feeling by the words, 'But Repentance, Prayer and Charity avert the severity of the decree,' being concerned for their welfare for the upcoming year; however, in the chassidishe shuls they would cry louder by the words 'But You are the King', recognizing and accepting Hashem's kingship."

Our focus on Rosh HaShana is to crown Hashem as King. You can see the essence of a holiday from the kiddush. On Rosh HaShana the blessing of the kiddush is, “Blessed are You Lord, King over all the earth, who sanctifies Israel and the Day of Remembrance.” The focus is less on our own personal judgement and more on our relationship with Hashem; that we want Hashem to be our King and we want to do His Will. This is the cry of the shofar, the cry from deep within our heart that exclaims, Hashem, all I want is You! This is the essence of the day. And this will bring a good and sweet new year.



The [Lubavitcher] Rebbe teaches that our trust (bitachon) in Hashem to provide a good and sweet new year, has a tremendous effect in bringing about a good and sweet new year. Everything that comes from Hashem is good – at times the good is revealed and at times less so. However, bitachon, trust that Hashem will bestow revealed good, is extremely influential in causing Hashem’s goodness to be revealed.

As a young boy, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, asked his father, the Rebbe Rashab, what he was supposed to be doing on the day before Rosh Hashana. "We recite Psalms the whole day long and feel remorse for our misdeeds of the past year, so that by the time evening falls and the new year begins, we are free of all our bad habits," his father replied. (The Book of Chabad Customs)

Reprinted from the Parshas Nitzavim 5776 email of Chabad of the Cardo (Yerushalayim.)

Why the Chozeh of Lublin Was Late for Tekiyas Shofar



The Kever of Burial Place of the Chozeh (or Seer) of Lublin

The Chozeh of Lublin zt'l came late to his beis medresh for tekiyas shofar [the Rosh Hashanah blowing of the shofar]. He explained that he didn't want to do the mitzvah before he found some good in himself, but (due to his humility) he only found faults.

But then he remembered one good deed he performed. One day, he asked his gabai to awaken him early in the morning, as he wanted to do a certain mitzvah. The gabai overslept. By the time the Chozeh awoke on his own, it was too late to do that mitzvah.

The Chozeh wanted to rebuke his gabai harshly for his negligence, but then the Chozeh reconsidered. He said, "Why did I want to wake early? It's because I wanted to do Hashem's will. Now it's Hashem's will that I shouldn't become angry."

When the gabai came in, the Chozeh spoke calmly, as always, and didn't show any signs of anger. With this merit, he felt ready to come to tekiyas shofar. One factor we see in this story is the Chozeh's broken heart when he came to the tekiyas. He felt that he doesn't have any merits – aside from that one good deed. We should approach the tekiyas with humility. We don't expect Hashem to grant us a good year because we deserve it, only because of Hashem's endless compassion and love. As the Gemara writes, "Every year that the Jewish nation feels poor at the beginning, will be successful in the end" (Rosh Hashanah 16:). *Reprinted from the Rosh Hashanah 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings*

How to Choose a Shofar

A Few Tips to Keep in Mind From a Judaica Store Owner

By Menachem Posner



Finding the right shofar takes time, but it can be an educational (and even entertaining) challenge. Here, some tips on how to go about the search as the High Holidays approach. (Photo: Abir Sultan/Flash90)

Throughout the Jewish month of Elul, the sound of the shofar can be heard every morning coming from synagogues and homes in Jewish neighborhoods around the world. On Rosh Hashanah, the shofar will be blown by experts trained

not only in producing a moving sound, but in the complex *halachot* (Jewish laws) of the shofar. During the month of Elul, it is customary to blow the shofar every morning after prayers (after morning services, besides for Shabbat and the day before Rosh Hashana) and many also practice in anticipation of Rosh Hashanah. As such, shofar sales soar.



Yossi Gurevitch examines a shofar in his Judaica shop on Long Island, N.Y. and shows a customer how it should be blown.

Standing behind the counter in his bright and airy Judaica store on Long Island, Yossi Gurevitch clearly knows his customers. They banter pleasantly as he guides them through towering displays of honey dishes, Jewish books, mezuzahs, High Holiday items and more.

With Rosh Hashanah around the corner, there is a prominent presentation of shofars—expertly crafted ram’s horns—to be blown in celebration of the New Year. Between customers, in English sprinkled with Hebrew and Yiddish, the native of Kfar Chabad, Israel, shared some insider tips on how to select the best shofar.

Q: What’s the most important thing to look for when purchasing a shofar?

A: First and foremost, make sure that the shofar you get is certified kosher. It should be sold in a reputable store, bearing a label from a reliable rabbinic organization. In recent years, there has been talk of people producing authentic-looking shofars from synthetic material or covering over significant blemishes in ways that render the shofar unkosher.

Now even if a shofar started out kosher, you want to make sure it is still OK. You want the sound to be produced by air coming in through the narrow end and whooshing out the wider end. If there are cracks or other holes, discard the shofar—and please let me know about it, so I can remove it from the display—and keep on looking for the one that’s right for you.



Buyers should get the feel of a shofar, with its various sizes, shapes and colors.

You also want to make sure it is at least a *tefach* (handbreadth) long, but you will rarely see such a small shofar on the market that you need to really worry about that.

Q: Assuming kosher authenticity, there are still so many shofars to choose from. How do I know which one is right for me?

A: Every shofar gets sold eventually; there is no right or wrong one. The most important thing to check is the narrow opening. Make sure that it is not sharp since you will be pressing it against your lips. Also make sure that it has a nice shape that feels good to your mouth. The shofar is not blown from the center of the mouth (like a trombone), but from the right side.

The shofar should naturally curl upward when you have it in blowing position. Generally speaking, a bigger shofar is easier to blow with less strain on your lips. It will probably produce a deeper sound as well. But some people like the higher pitch, so get what works for you.

Those really big shofars on the market are made from kudu horns. While they are valid according to many *halachic* authorities, they are not ideal (and invalid, according to some).

You want to get a shofar from a ram's horn, which serves to recall how G-d provided Abraham with a ram to sacrifice instead of his son Isaac.



A selection of shofars in Gurevitch's store.

Q: Does the color matter?

A: No. It is simply a result of the color of the ram. Black, brown, white or any combination is equally kosher.

Q: How much do you think I should be paying?

A: A decent shofar may cost you between \$45 and \$100, with larger ones costing more. If you want to invest in a shofar you will use for the rest of your life, it is probably best to disregard the price tag if you can, and concentrate on finding one that you can blow easily again and again.

Q: Do you mind if I try out a shofar right here in the store?

A: By all means! We understand that you cannot be expected to purchase a shofar without first giving it a "test drive." So feel free to toot away. Try different shofars and find one that feels right for you.

Even if a shofar produces an initial blast that feels right, try to blow a full sequence of 30 blasts, and see how that works. Note that there is a minimum length for the blasts, with the long *tekia* lasting as long as the *shevarim* (three blasts), *terua* (nine staccato blasts) or *shevarim-terua* that it frames, and you may not always pause for breaths.

Can you get the whole thing out with ease? If yes, you've probably found your shofar. If not, keep on digging.



Q: Any final thoughts before I complete my purchase?

A: Even if you have a great shofar and are confident that you can produce the proper tones, don't miss out on praying with the community in a synagogue. First of all, this will avail you to the spiritual advantages of communal prayer. Secondly, there are many laws surrounding the proper sequencing and pace of the shofar blasts.

If you do need to blow for someone who cannot get to synagogue, make sure to study the laws and practice blowing, so that you are up to the task.

Oh, and let me wish you and your readers a *shanah tovah*—a happy, healthy and sweet new year!

Reprinted from the Parshas Nitzavim 5776 email of Chabad.Org Magazine.

10 Reasons for Blowing the Shofar

This list was compiled by Rav Saadia Gaon:



1. The Shofar is like the trumpet which announces the coronation of a king. That is why it is used on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the universe. At that time we accept Hashem's Rulership. Our tefilos and shofar blasts are like the coronation ceremony in which Klal Yisroel crowns Hashem as Sovereign.

2. The Shofar calls us to examine our deeds and return to Hashem, who will always accept us if we are sincere. This is why we blow the Shofar on Rosh Hashana which is the first of the Aseres Yimei Tshuva.

3. The Shofar reminds us of the Shofar which blew when the Torah was given at Har Sinai; thus we are reminded to study and cherish Hashem's Word.

4. The Shofar reminds us of the voice of the Nevi'im, whose voices rang out like a Shofar blast in calling the people to do justice and mercy and follow Holy ways.

5. The Shofar sounds like crying, which reminds us of the destruction of the Bais HaMikdash, and thus calls upon us to work for and daven for the Geula.

6. The Shofar, since it is a ram's horn, reminds us of the binding of Yitzchok, when Hashem provided a ram to be sacrificed instead. Thus we are called upon to be as faithful to Hashem as Avraham, and be inspired by his example of sacrifice and love of Hashem.

7. The Shofar calls us to be humble- its mighty blast reminds us of the mightiness of Hashem and the fact that Hashem is everywhere at all times.

8. On the Day of Judgment, a Shofar will be blown to announce Hashem's Rulership- our Shofar blasts remind us to prepare for Hashem's examination of our deeds.

9. The Shofar foreshadows the jubilant return to freedom and peace when we all end up in Yerushalayim in the time of Moshiach- it reminds us to have hope and faith in Hashem's saving power.

10. The Shofar will be blown in Messianic times to announce the redemption of the whole world, when all nations will recognize that Hashem is One.

Reprinted from the October 2, 2016 website of Matzav.com (Revach.net)

Setting the Date

Rabi Pinchas and Rabi Chilkayahu said in the name of Rabi Shimon: "At this time of the year all the *malachim* gather before Hashem and ask Him, '*Ribbono Shel Olam*, when is Rosh Hashanah?' Hashem replies, 'Let us ask the earthly court and we will abide by their decision.'"

Rabi Hoshaya taught: If the earthly court decreed that today is Rosh Hashanah, Hashem commands the angels to call the heavenly court into session. He orders the prosecutor and the defendant to be ready to start trial. "For my children on earth have decreed that this day is Rosh Hashanah," says Hashem.

If the earthly court has decided Rosh Hashanah should be postponed to the following day because of a leap year, then Hashem orders the heavenly court to postpone its sessions to the following day. Why? Because a "decree issued by Israel is considered as law by the G-d of Yaakov."

Never Frighten the People

Chazal relate the following incident (*Gemara Yoma*): Once on Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* remained a long time in the *Kodesh HaKedoshim* praying fervently for the welfare of *Bnei Yisrael*.

The people became frightened thinking that something might have happened to him. His fellow priests asked him when he came out. “Why were you so long in the *Kodesh HaKedoshim*?”

“You should be glad,” he answered, “that I remained so long. I was *davening* that *Bnei Yisrael* should have a good year and the *Beit HaMikdash* should not be destroyed. Don’t you appreciate my efforts on your behalf?”

“While we appreciate your efforts on our behalf,” they replied, “we ask that you abide by the edict of *Chazal* who said that the *Kohen Gadol* should not take too long in the *Kodesh HaKedoshim*, because *Bnei Yisrael* might begin to worry that something might have happened to him. You must have consideration for their feelings.”

The Blowing Of The Shofar

Rabi Yitzchak said, “Why do we blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, once while standing and then again while seated? To confuse the *Satan*.”

Rabi Abuhu said, “Why do we blow *shofar* with the horn of a ram? Hashem announces: ‘Blow before me on the horn of a ram so that I may remember the sacrifice of Yitzchak, the son of Avraham, and I will consider it as if you performed their deed and it was you who were sacrificed.’”

Reprinted from the archives of The Jewish Press.

The Rosh Hashanah Choir

The Brisker Rav, O”BM, related an incident that occurred in Brisk during his tenure as Rav. One year, shortly before Rosh Hashanah, the gabbai (director of shul operations) of the large shul decided to change the location in which the choir would stand when they accompanied the chazzan (services leader) during the service.

They had always stood on his side. Now, consistent with so many of the progressive synagogues, the gabbai had them placed in the gallery. The Brisker Rav was not made aware of this change until after the fact. Otherwise, he would have summoned the gabbaim, and vetoed their suggestion.

While there was nothing forbidden about this change, the mere fact that they were emulating the temple of the “free thinkers” was sufficient reason to prohibit it. The Rav entered the shul, went upstairs to the gallery and instructed the choir to return to their previous position in the shul.

As soon as they had returned to their original place, the gabbaim instructed them to ascend to the gallery. The Brisker Rav once again went up the stairs and

told them to return. After they had returned, the gabbaim insolently instructed them to go back to the gallery. This scene repeated itself a number of times. It became increasingly difficult for the Rav to ascend the stairs to the balcony. Yet, he continued.



As he was about to go up one last time, the windows of the women's section were flung open, and the women, including the wives of the gabbaim, began to yell down to the choir, "How dare you not listen to the Rav! What chutzpah!"

Those words rectified the matter instantly.

The Brisker Rav added, "That which I could not personally accomplish, the righteous women of my shul achieved for me."

Looking at his listeners, he said, "Now you certainly would have given up hope for success. After all, what more was there to do? The people were not listening. I went up to the gallery a number of times. What would one more time accomplish? I did it because the Sages teach us never to despair, never to give up hope.

"As long as the final decree has not been carried out, as long as the execution has not been performed, one can and should hope for mercy. Salvation can come supernaturally. Hashem is not bound by nature. What I continued to do was not destined to succeed, but since I sensed an obligation to fulfill Chazal's dictum, I merited Divine assistance. One must continue to believe and do. Hashem will do the rest. We are not permitted to give up for Him."

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SHABBOS STORIES FOR PARSHAS VAYELECH 5780

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Results of a Kind Gesture



Reb M. Y. Horowitz Shlita, av beis din of Linsk, Boro Park, took out his cell phone, chose the "contacts feature" and pressed on one of the 23 names. Immediately he realized he made a mistake.

He accidentally called someone else with the same last name as the person he was trying to call. He decided he should let the call go through, just so he could hear how this man was doing.

The person whom he accidentally called davens in his beis medresh. He was divorced, and at the time of this phone call, he was in Europe for the summer vacation.

Reb Horowitz greeted him warmly and asked how he was. The man was startled.

"It can't be that you called just to ask me how I am."

Reb Horowitz insisted that he just wanted to hear how he was.

The next time they met in Boro Park, the man said to Reb Horowitz, “You can’t imagine how much you helped me with your phone call. You know that I’m alone in the world, and you know I’m at a low level, spiritual-wise. When you called, I was in a hotel in Italy, at the gateway to Gehinom, ready to commit the worst.

“And then you called, just to ask how I am. I felt you blew life into me. I felt someone cares about me. This protected me from sinning...”

This story happened three years ago. Today, this man has remarried and is building a bayis ne’eman beYisrael. Let us learn from this story the following points:

(1) Those who are involved in kiruv shouldn’t feel they aren’t succeeding. Sometimes, even a simple phone call can save a person’s life. Remember: One can be accomplishing a lot even when he isn’t aware of it.

(2) Learn from this story how much Hashem strives to save those who have fallen to low levels. Even at the gateway of Gehinom, Hashem seeks to save him.

(3) A timely phone call was just what this man needed. This is a reminder that Hakadosh Baruch Hu leads the world with hashgachah pratis. Everything is perfectly arranged.

(4) And this story is a reminder of the power of a kind word. How far it goes. How much it does for a person. Encouragement People can reach very high levels, but they need support. They need to hear that they are on the right path and that they can succeed. They need to hear an encouraging word, and then they will reach their potential.

Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Thoughts from Rabbi Elimelech Bidernan

The Money Benefits of Guarding One’s Eyes

A poor Yid from Yerushalim came to Monsey, New York, and collected money for his family. Before returning back to Yerushalayim, he called up one of his friends from Boro Park, and told him that he would be soon returning to Yerushalayim.

The friend told him, “Prolong your ticket for four days and I will go with you to wealthy baalei tzedakah in Boro Park.”

The Yerushalmi Yid wasn’t sure he wanted to prolong his trip. His family wanted him back home.

“How much money do you think we can make in four days?”

“Five thousand dollars, at least.”

“For five thousand dollars, it's worth to prolong the ticket.”

They made up that to meet Sunday morning in Boro Park. Over Shabbos, this Yerushalmi yungerman read a booklet that discusses the importance of guarding the eyes. He read that for being cautious, one gets parnassah easily and abundantly. And if one isn’t cautious, he loses the bounty of parnassah that was destined for him.



The Yerushalmi Yid thought, “It wasn’t by chance that I read this. It is a sign that I must be cautious with my eyes. In this merit I will earn my parnassah easily...”

On Sunday morning as he got ready to take the bus to Boro Park, he remembered that the bus passes through Manhattan. He knew he would be tempted to look out the window to see the magnificent buildings and the busy streets. But he was resolved to guard his eyes. So he put his eyeglasses into his suitcase and put the suitcase in the baggage compartment under the bus.

He arrived in Boro Park, hopeful that having passed the test, Hashem will grant him parnassah easily. His friend met him at the bus stop and said, “I was thinking about it. I decided you don’t have to come with me to collect money. Why

should you belittle yourself? I will collect for you. I promise, I will send you \$25,000.”

The hashgachah pratis was evident. As he was guarding his eyes on the bus, his friend decided to help him earn his parnassah in an easier and more honorable way! Because when one is cautious with his kedushah, he will earn his parnassah in an easier way, and with a greater abundance.

Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Thoughts from Rabbi Elimelech Bidernan

The Man Who Trusted in Hashem

This happened on my wedding day, moments before they were bringing me under the chuppah. My father zt”l took me to the side and wanted to tell me a story but not before he made me promise not to repeat it to anyone especially since it happened to him.



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After I gave him my word, this is what he told me: This was during the early years of the establishment of the State of Israel (1949-1950) when there was a famine in Yerushalayim, and the tormentors of Israel closed the approaches to Yerushalayim and there wasn't enough commerce and food.

My father was one of the milkmen in Yerushalayim and despite having the resources to buy food, since supplies were not reaching the city, there was nothing to eat. My father utilized every moment to learn Torah and even in the house he was bent over his studies.

Mother turned to him and said that the children are very hungry. He lifted his eyes from the holy Gemara and kindly told her to say Tehillim. The righteous mother did as she was asked, but a short time later she told him that the children are hungry, and they can't sleep because of the hunger!!!

When he heard that they could not sleep because of hunger he said, "I will go up to shul to say Tehillim." He went up to the floor above the apartment where there was a small shul and he began to say Tehillim with warmth and feeling. This was at about midnight.

Not long after, two men came and knocked on the door by my mother. Mother was scared and asked through the trellis, 'Who's there and what do you want at this late hour in the middle of the night?'

Because of her fear, she sent them up to the shul. They asked Father to come with them. Father went down with them and saw two large crates. They said they were sent by family members overseas to bring these crates. He pushed the two heavy crates into the house, and he turned to thank them, but they were already gone.

The two crates were filled with canned food and all types of goodies. There was enough to sustain the family for many months!!! Father tried to locate the relatives that sent the crates of food, but no relative, near or far, knew what he was talking about.

Father finished the story and said: "I am telling you the story to teach you one thing: If you trust in Hashem, you will not lose a thing!!! Now you are entering the chuppah, it is important to me to tell you this to strengthen bitachon in Hashem and He will bless you abundantly!!!

Reprinted from the Parshas Eikev 5779 email of Tiv Hakehila.

Beautiful Blue Eyes

By Rabbi Yechiel Spero



Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg zt”l was once approached by a woman whose husband had hepatitis. While he wasn’t deathly ill, he was significantly struggling. The woman as well was having a particularly difficult time, given the amount of work she needed to take on to attend to the family’s needs nearly single-handedly.

As she began detailing her predicament to Rav Scheinberg, it became evident that not only was she having a hard time due to her husband’s condition and the resulting increase in housework, but because one of her children was slowly becoming less and less religious. It was a sure cause of distress and anxiety for her, and the woman did not know what to do.

Rav Scheinberg did not hesitate to tell the woman that he would like to come and visit her husband. The woman tried convincing Rav Scheinberg out of it, as she knew he was very busy and juggling many responsibilities, yet he did not take no for an answer.

When Rav Scheinberg arrived at the house, the woman made a special effort to ensure that all of her children were home to greet the renowned gadol. The woman introduced her children, as Rav Scheinberg went from one to another greeting them and sharing some pleasant words.

Yet when Rav Scheinberg came to greet the boy who was evidently having difficulty and was becoming more and more irreligious, he took hold of his hands, looked him in the eyes and said, “Has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful blue eyes”?

“My son’s return to Yiddishkeit didn’t happen overnight,” the woman related, “but what did happen overnight was my own acceptance of who he was, no matter what he would choose to do.

“From that moment on, irrelevant of his decision to keep a life of Torah and mitzvos, all I could see was his beautiful blue eyes and continue to understand him, accept him and believe in him.”

Reprinted from the Parashat Eikev 5779 email of Torah Anytime Newsletter.

Not His Brother

Chaim grew up in a tiny bungalow in Netanya. His father, who worked as a cashier and floor-sweeper in a small grocery store, barely made enough to keep a roof over his family’s head. At 17 Chaim left home, went to work, and eventually saved enough to buy a ticket to America.

There the hard-working young man began to find opportunities. By the time he was 23, he owned his own small business. By his 30th birthday he was living in a beautiful house set back on a sprawling green lawn. Every month, he sent his father \$200 and a letter. However, he tried to put his old life behind him.

Meanwhile, Chaim’s younger brother Rafi was still stuck in the old neighborhood.

“Go find Chaim,” urged his father. “I’m sure he’ll take you in and get you set up in business.”

Rafi began saving money for his trip. He even began holding out his hand for donations. After more than a year of scrimping, he bought an airline ticket to America. Relying on the generosity of Jews he met in New York, he finally located Chaim in an exclusive neighborhood on Long Island.

Filled with anticipation, he made his way up the grand walkway to the heavy, carved front doors. He rang the bell and waited. A maid opened the door to find a shabbily-dressed Jew with a thick accent, asking for Chaim.

“I’m sorry. He sees charity cases only between 9 and 11 in the evening,” the maid explained.

Rafi smiled. “Tell him please that his brother Rafi is here.”

The maid looked skeptically at the man at the door, but turned to do his bidding. A few long moments later, she came back and stared sternly into the face of the apparent impostor. “He says he has no brother,” the maid stated as she shut the door in Rafi’s face.

Rafi gathered himself up and, realizing that he had nowhere to turn, found his way back to Israel, where he managed to pull together a modest livelihood for himself.

It wasn't long before Chaim received word from Rafi that their father was ill. "If you want to see him while he is still in this world, come soon," he wrote.

Suddenly, Chaim was filled with longing for his father. He put aside his affairs and booked the next flight to Israel. He took a cab from the airport straight to Netanya and was soon looking incredulously at the hovel that had once been his home.

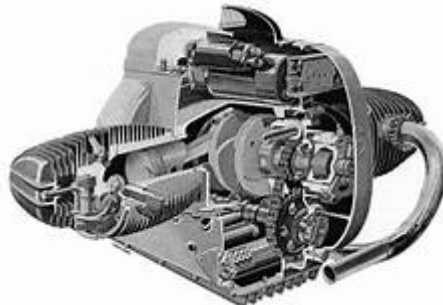
He knocked on the door and waited. Someone was coming, progressing along in a slow shuffle. At last the door opened and there stood his father, weathered, wilted, and gray.

"Abba!" Chaim said, choked with emotion. "It's me, your son. I'm here."

The father looked coldly into Chaim's face. "I have a son named Rafi," he said. "If he has no brother, then you cannot be my son."

Reprinted from the parashat Re'eh 5779 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, United Kingdom) Originally published by the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation.

Doctor, Doctor...



A mechanic was removing a cylinder-head from the motor of a Harley motorcycle when he spotted his cardiologist – Dr. Simon Goldstein in his shop. Dr. Goldstein was there waiting for the service manager to come take a look at his bike when the mechanic shouted across the garage

"Hey Doc, want to take a look at this?"

Goldstein, a bit surprised, walked over to where the mechanic was working on the motorcycle.

The mechanic straightened up, wiped his hands on a rag and asked, "So Doc, look at this engine. I open its heart, take the valves out, repair any damage, and then put them back in, and when I finish, it works just like new."

"So how come I make such a small salary - and you get the really big bucks? You and I are doing basically the same work!"

Dr. Goldstein paused, smiled and leaned over, then whispered to the mechanic, "Try doing it with the engine running."

Reprinted from the Parshat Re'ei 5779 email of Lekavod Shabbos.

The Big ‘I’

By Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks



In 1968 I met the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, for the first time. While I was there, the Chassidim told me the following story.

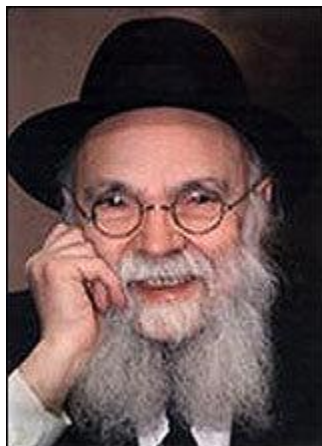
A man had written to the Rebbe in roughly these terms: “I am depressed. I am lonely. I feel that life is meaningless. I try to pray, but the words do not come. I keep mitzvot but find no peace of mind. I need the Rebbe’s help.”

The Rebbe sent a brilliant reply without using a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence and sent it back to the man.

Reprinted from the Parashat Shoftim 5779 email of Shabbat Shalom fromCyberspace.

Meeting Rav Avrohom Pam

By Tzvi Yaakovson



I had visited Rav Avrohom Pam's home together with Aryeh Deri, in his [Mr. Deri's] first stint as [Israeli] Minister of the Interior, when he visited America in the year 1990. Deri met with *gedolei Yisroelin* America and was a guest of the Lakewood Yeshiva, where we traveled by helicopter from Manhattan.

He was also the speaker at the dinner of the Mir Yeshiva and met with the directors of Merrill Lynch, to whom he presented a revolutionary proposal involving the local governments in Israel. At the time, it sounded like a farfetched idea and was not implemented. However, the same idea was adopted 25 years later. But that is not my point.

As the most junior member of Deri's delegation, I was sent to Rav Pam's door to find out if the group could come in. Everyone waited in the convoy of cars (which included a security vehicle that had been sent by the Israeli consulate) outside the *rosh yeshiva's* home, as I approached the door and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a man whom I took to be Rav Pam's *gabbai* or *chavrusah*, or something of the sort. I explained the reason for my arrival, and he told me to invite the delegation inside.

I delicately asked if he could receive permission from the *rov* himself, to which he replied, "I am Avrohom Pam."

I nearly fainted on the spot. I had never imagined that Rav Pam would answer the door, or that he would be wearing an ordinary-looking jacket and would radiate such an unassuming air. For me, that was the most memorable moment of the entire visit.

Years later, I met one of Rav Pam's sons in a store, and I was struck by his modesty and his mannerisms, which were incredibly reminiscent of his father.

In any event, I consider it an enormous privilege to have met and spoken with Rav Pam.-- *Reprinted from the August 28, 2019 email of the Yated Ne'eman*

Judging Favorably #52

The New Watch



I needed a new watch and decided to buy it from my neighbor, Avi Baum, who has a small jewelry store. The next day after work I drove over. After a long day, I'm really exhausted, but my schedule is full and there was no other time.

Avi was helpful and in no time I found exactly what I was looking for. I was eager to pay and get home. But when I asked Avi for the price, he told me he'd be with me in a minute – he just wanted to finish up with another customer.

I really wanted to get home, so I walked over and asked him how much I owed for the watch. He smiled and said he'd be with me in a few more minutes, and continued with the customer.

What's the big deal? I almost said out loud. Tell me the price and let's just finish this up. Instead, I said, "I'll give you a check if you don't have time to take cash, okay?" Then I said more emphatically and impatiently, "Okay, Avi?"

I didn't hear an "Okay, a check is fine," as I had hoped to hear, but I saw the other man was finished and Avi was taking his check. Hey, wasn't I here first? The man left, and Avi turned to me.

"Sorry, Moish, I'd like to give you a twenty-percent discount – but I didn't want to say it in front of the other customer." (The Other Side of the Story by Yehudit Samet)

Reprinted from the Parshas Shoftim 5779 email of The Weekly Vort.

SAGES THROUGH THE AGES

Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz

Cracow, Poland 1690 – Altona, Holstein (Denmark-Norway) 1764

By Dr Benji Schreiber



Reb Yonasan Eibeshitz was born in Cracow. His father, Rav Nosson Nota, was Rov in Eibeshitz and died when Reb Yonasan was 15. He was famous as a child prodigy. He learnt in Prossnitz and then in Holleschau. He married Elkele Spira, daughter of Rabbi Isaac Spira, and they lived in Hamburg for two years with Mordecai ha-Kohen, Elkele's maternal grandfather.

He settled in Prague in 1710 and became rosh yeshiva. The Christians allowed him to reprint the Talmud, omitting any criticism of Christianity and not using the word 'Talmud'.

He published some volumes including 'Hilchos Brachos'. After the French conquered Prague he became Rov of Metz in Northeast France in 1741. In 1750, he was elected rabbi of the Three Communities: Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek.

Stories relate his great genius and quick wit. Here's an example: Young Yonason was given a few pennies by his father to buy himself a treat on the way home from cheder. As Reb Yonason was walking, the evil non-Jew Ivan walked over to him and slapped him across the face.

Surprisingly Reb Yonasan took the coins from his pocket and presented them to Ivan. The surprised Ivan immediately asked “is this in return for the slap?!” and he burst out laughing. Without blinking Reb Yonasan replied “why yes of course! Don’t you know that today is a Jewish holiday which requires us to reward every gentile who harms us with all of our money?!”

Evan just couldn’t believe his ears... this is his lucky day! Quickly he strode over to the famous Jewish rich man and with all due respect handed him a ringing slap. But instead of money the rich person sounded the alarm and Ivan was presented with the beating of his life!

Shabbetai Zvi controversy

Shabbatai Zvi (1626-1676) was a Sefardi Jew who lived in Turkey and claimed to be Mashiach. He was put into prison and eventually converted to Islam rather than being put to death.

Rav Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) – son of Rav Zvi Ashkenazi, the Chacham Zvi - lived in Altona (now Germany) and worked as a printer of seforim. In his Megilat Sefer he publicly accused Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz of being a secret follower of the deceased Shabbatai Zvi, citing amulets that Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz had written.

In 1752 the battle raged and the Gedolim of the generation all got involved. The Nodah BeYehuda, Rav Yechezkel Landau (1713-1797) tried to mediate between the two. The Vilna Gaon (1720-1797) sent his blessings to Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz, and thus attracted sharp criticism from Rav Yaakov Emden.

Rav Yaakov Yehoshua Falk, the Pnei Yehoshua (1680-1756) was opposed to Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz and as a result eventually was forced to leave Frankfurt. Most of the community sided with Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz and even forbade people from attending the shul of Rav Yaakov Emden and he was ordered to leave Altona.

However, the court of Frederick V of Denmark sided with Rav Yaakov Emden, allowing him to return and fining the council of the three communities one hundred thalers (from which ‘dollars’ get their name).

Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz’s younger son, Wolf Jonas Eybeschütz, did declare himself a Shabbatean prophet! However, there is a tradition from the Chasam Sofer (1762-1839) that Wolf did Teshuva later in his life following a dream in which his father appeared to him.

Writings

Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz wrote 98 sefarim, many of which have not been published. Published works include thirty seforim on halacha, including כרתי ופלתי on Shulchan Aruch (the only one published in his lifetime), seforim on Mishne

Torah, Shem Olam on Kabbalah and Luchos Edus in which he describes the whole Shabbetai Zvi affair.

In his commentary on Bereishis he has a long technical description of Migdal Bavel as an attempt to get above the clouds and fly to the moon!

Reprinted from the parashat Re'eh 5779 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, United Kingdom)

The “Rabbi’s” Hat



A group arrived at the door of **Rav Tzi Pesach Frank**, O'BM, the Rav of Jerusalem. They were collecting funds to assist an important Rav who had just immigrated to Israel and couldn't afford to purchase Rabbinic garb.

Rav Frank went to the closet and handed the men a hat recently purchased for special occasions. The man was embarrassed to take the Rav's hat, but Rav Frank insisted

He smiled and said, “Everyone knows that I am the Rav here, even if I don't wear a Rabbinic hat. However, this poor rabbi needs to impress others and secure some type of position. He needs the hat more than I do, and I am happy to give it to him!” (Story from *More Power Points*).

Reprinted from the Parshas Re'ei 5779 email of Torah Sweets Weekly edited by Mendel Berlin.

SHABBOS STORIES FOR YOM KIPPUR 5780

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The Klausenberger's Erev Yom Kippur Preparations



Rav Yissocher Frand, Shlit"a, said that he heard a very poignant story from a student of the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, zt"l, which involves his Rebbe.

One year, right after the Holocaust, the Klausenberger Rebbe was preparing himself on Erev Yom Kippur, and there was a knock on his door. When he opened

the door, a young girl was standing there and said, “Rebbe, I do not have a father anymore. No one will be able to Bentch me before Yom Kippur.”

The Rebbe smiled at her and said, “I will Bentch you”, and he took a cloth, placed it on her head, and Bentched her the way a father Bentches his daughter on Erev Yom Kippur.

The girl happily thanked the Rebbe and left.

Five minutes later there was another knock on the Rebbe’s door. It was another young girl, again someone without a father with no one to Bentch her before Yom Kippur, and she had the same request.

The Rebbe smiled and went through the same routine. He took the cloth, he placed it on her head, and he Bentched her the way a father Bentches his daughter.

This repeated itself over and over that day, and that is what the Rebbe did the entire Erev Yom Kippur, until he Bentched over eighty orphaned girls.

The Klausenberger Rebbe commented that for him, this was the best possible preparation he could do on Erev Yom Kippur. He said, “What could be a greater preparation for the holiest day of the year than to help another Jew?”

Reprinted from the Yom Kippur 5779 email of Torah U’Tefilah: A Collection of Inspiring Insights compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.

A Lesson Can Be Learned From:

The Chozeh’s Post Yom Kippur Prediction

After Yom Kippur, some followers of the Chozeh from Lublin would ask him what he “saw” as being in store for them, during the coming year.

When R’ Bunim (later to become a Rebbe in his own right) from Pshischa asked, the Chozeh told him that he would lose all his money that year. R’ Bunim, a successful merchant, kept this news to himself, and when his wife and children became ill, he spared no expense, hiring the best doctors to heal them, knowing that his fortune was destined for loss. After their recovery, he was penniless.

With no capital to invest with, he made his way to Warsaw and lodged at the same expensive hotel that he usually stayed at, hoping for an opportunity. After a few weeks, he had a hefty hotel bill, with no prospects. His depression mounted until one afternoon, he returned to his room and cried to the Ribono Shel Olam, begging for rachamim (mercy) in his Tefilos.

Soon, a knock and a job offer presented themselves at his door. R' Bunim, convinced that this was Hashem's guaranteed vguah, declined the job, holding out for a partnership, which he got. His bills were paid and the business venture was a success,

On the following Rosh HaShana, when R' Bunim came to visit his Rebbe, the Chozeh smiled when he saw him, remarking, "We never discussed the option of shedding tears from a broken heart !"

Reprinted from the Parshas Vayeilech-shabbos Shuvu 5779 email of the Pleasant Ridge (Spring Valley, NY) Newsletter.

Eating on Yom Kippur

During a plague (cholera), R' Yisrael Salanter (1810- 1883) ruled that the people eat on Yom Kippur. Not only did he rule this way but he actually made Kidush in shul and ate so that everyone should follow his lead! This wasn't done because he was lenient in Yom Kippur rather because he was stringent in Pikuach Nefesh!

In regard to one who is supposed to eat on Yom Kippur due to his circumstances, the שו"ת בנין ציון החדשות says that not only is he exempt for eating on Yom Kippur but also .fulfills לנפשתיכם מאד (the mitzvah of guarding his soul/body).

R' Menachem Mendel of Viznitz was once dangerously sick prior to Yom Kippur to the extent that the doctors forbade him to fast. Being that the Chassidim were afraid the Rebbe wouldn't listen to the orders of the doctors, they approached R' Yehoshua Belzer to influence him not to fast.

As a result, R' Yehoshua Belzer wrote the following letter: "I remember when my father- the Sar Shalom of Belz- was dangerously ill and we were concerned as maybe he would refrain from eating on Yom Kippur. However, he was quick to the matter and immediately after Kol Nidrei he asked for food to eat according to what he needed.

In fact he declared "Behold, I am prepared and ready to fulfill the commandment of my creator according to Chazal." He then ate with such Simcha which we never saw except when he ate Matza and performed the Mitzva of the four species."

Reprinted from 5779 email of Fascinating Insights on Parshas Vayeilech-Yom Kippur 5779.

The Beauty of Humility

The Chassidim (followers) of Rebbe Bunim of Peshischa, O"BM, would come to their Rebbe on Erev Yom Kippur to receive blessings from him. One of his elite Chassidim, Rebbe Henschel of Alexander, O"BM, made a spiritual calculation (Cheshbon Hanefesh) on Erev Yom Kippur, and found himself very guilty/sinful, to the extent that he was embarrassed to face the Rebbe.

He wanted the Rebbe's blessings, so he decided to go into the Rebbe together with several other Chassidim and leave right after receiving his blessing. He tried to take leave of the Rebbe inconspicuously, but the Rebbe called him back.

The Rebbe wanted something from him. Reb Henschel felt better when the Rebbe called for him. He thought, "I'm not so bad after all. The Rebbe wants to speak with me."

When he approached the Rebbe, the Rebbe said that he doesn't need anything anymore. He didn't even want to look at Reb Henschel. He wanted Reb Henschel when he was humble, but when Reb Henschel felt proud of himself, he lost the Rebbe's admiration.

Comment: Rav Elimelech Biderman, who tells this story, makes an important observation regarding Yom Kippur. When it comes to reflecting on our mistakes over the last year, it's not enough just to say the words, "I am sorry." We need to approach our Teshuva with a broken heart. Broken heart bespeaks sincerity and is the ticket to our forgiveness. A G'mar Chasimah Tovah to all!

Reprinted from the Yom Kippur 5779 email of Torah Sweets Weekly edited by Mendel Berlin.

Rav Levi Yitzchak And the Goy's Fancy Dog

One Yom Kippur night, there was a large crowd assembled in the Berditchever Shul where Rav Levi Yitzchak, zt"l, was preparing to begin Davening Kol Nidrei.

However, Rav Levi Yitzchak motioned to the Chazan to wait a while, and not begin Kol Nidrei. The minutes passed by and people began to wonder what could be holding up their Rebbe?

Soon, Rav Levi Yitzchak turned to his Shammes and asked, “Is Reb Mottel here?” The Shammes looked around, and after noticing Reb Mottel, told the Rebbe that he was indeed in Shul.

The Rav said, “Please ask him to come here.”

When Mottel came over, Rav Levi Yitzchak asked him, “Do you live on a certain land that is owned by a landlord who is not Jewish?”

Surprised at the question, Mottel responded, “Yes, I do.”

Rav Levi Yitzchak asked, “Does he own a dog?”



Mottel replied, “Yes, Rebbe, he owns a dog.” Mottel didn’t have any idea why Rav Levi Yitzchak would be asking such questions just before Kol Nidrei.

The Rebbe asked, “Do you know how much he paid for this dog?” Mottel said, “I do know. He said it was a special dog with a distinguished pedigree, and he had paid four hundred rubles for it.”

This was a huge sum to pay for anything in those days, and certainly for a dog. Hearing that amount, Rav Levi Yitzchak was thrilled! He exclaimed, “Four

hundred rubles! That's fantastic!" He quickly motioned for the Chazan to begin Kol Nidrei.

Everyone was bewildered at this episode. Why did the Rebbe care about a dog? What difference did it make how much it cost? After Maariv, some students approached the Rebbe and asked him to please explain what had happened.

The Rebbe told them the following story: "A Melamed, a teacher, came to our town this past year to earn enough money to support his family and pay his many debts which he had accumulated at home. After he had earned enough money and he was on his way home, he stopped overnight at an inn, and his bag with all the money he earned was stolen from him while he was sleeping.

"When he woke up in the morning and saw what had happened, he was crushed and upset. Mottel's landlord was staying at the inn that night, and when he heard the Melamed's crying, he inquired about the commotion. The Melamed's story broke his heart, and when he heard how much money had been lost, the landlord took out four hundred rubles and gave it to the Melamed."

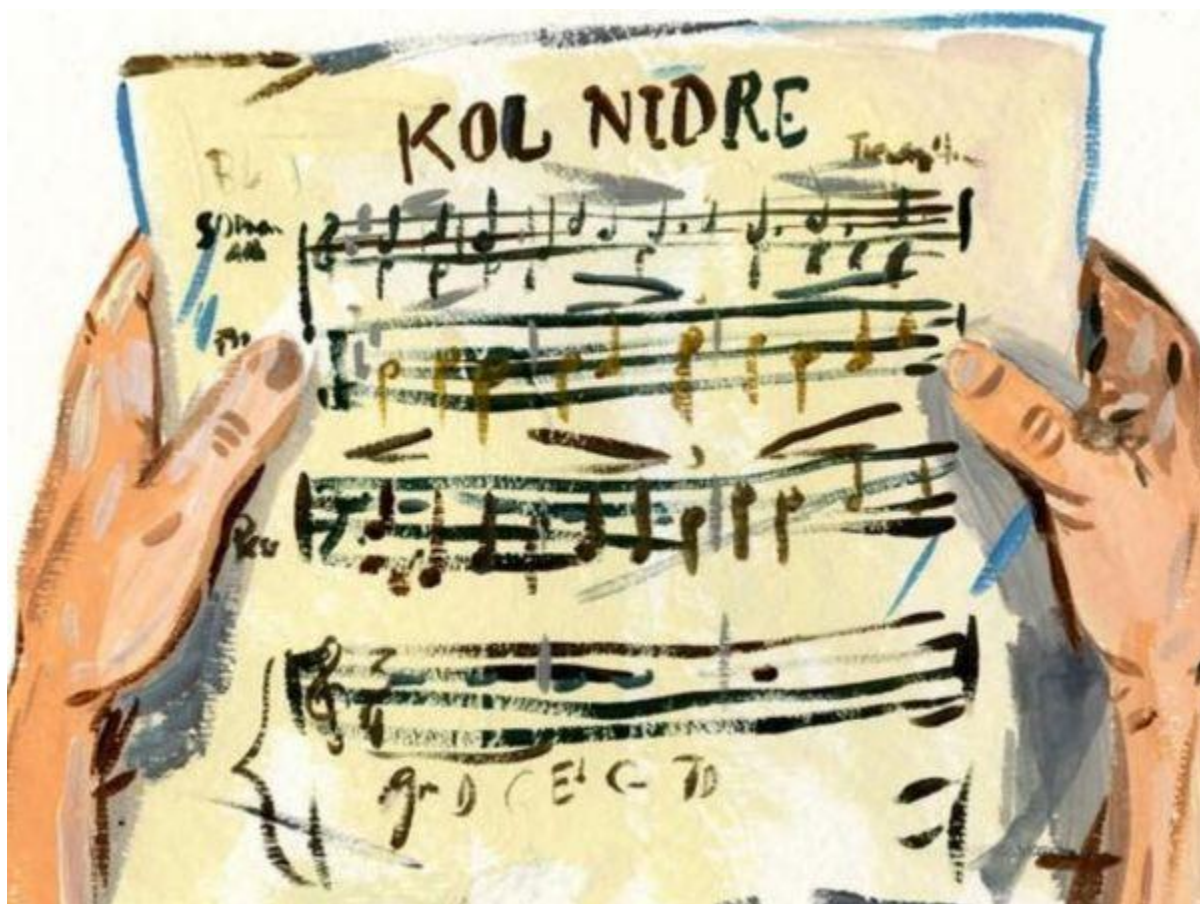
The Rebbe continued, "As we were about to begin Kol Nidrei, I became concerned about this story and if what the goy did would have any effect on us as we stand in judgement before Hashem. Do we deserve that Hashem should look at us favorably? Did any of us do an unusual act of Chesed that would stand on our behalf? If a goy could act in this way, we, Hashem's nation should do no less. But can we say that we did?

"I then remembered the dog, and when I heard that he spent four hundred rubles for a dog, a simple pet, it showed me that this rich goy does not really value money very highly. Therefore, while the act of giving the Melamed four hundred rubles was a remarkable act of Chesed, it was surely not an act of sacrifice by the goy. A man who can spend so much money on a dog does not truly appreciate the value of money! I know that when we do Chesed, it almost always takes some self-sacrifice to do, no matter how small, and I knew we could now start Kol Nidrei and enter Yom Kippur!"

Reprinted from the Yom Kippur 5778 email of Torah U'Tefillah compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.

A Kol Nidrei Story

By Yochanan Gordon



The first night of Selichot has always been a significant event. It arrives almost suddenly at the tail end of a more relaxed summer atmosphere, and while many have seemed to figure out the right game face to put on for this particular event, the internal feelings are difficult to access in contrast with the summer season with which it coincides.

I'm old enough to recall the stories retold this time of year in yeshiva about the *vekker* who would walk the streets of town, calling in an elevated voice: "*Rabbosai, Shtei oif la'avodas haBorei!*" In his inimitable fashion, he would make his way through town waking up the townspeople and putting them in the Selichot state of mind.

Well, let's just say that was then, and now it's a little bit different. While still significant, it's the type of event for which I might mistakenly browse SeatGeek or Ticketmaster to get tickets. While this seems to be the frum version of

a Saturday matinee, it is nevertheless regarded importantly, which itself is an indication that people are thirsting to taste from the reservoirs of repentance, which is the call of the hour.

I spent the Shabbos of Selichot in Monsey with my wife's family. I had planned to go to the Atrium where Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Jacobson was having a pre-Selichot *melaveh malkah* with Yoeli Leibowitz, followed by a choice between a musical Selichot or a more traditional one depending on one's comfort zone as far as these things go.

Over 1,000 men, women, and young adults packed the Atrium for the *melaveh malkah*, which consisted of intermittent singing and speaking. And while a lot of Torah was shared throughout the two-plus hours that we sat there, there's a story that Rabbi Jacobson retold at the end that is appropriate going into Kol Nidrei.

Some of you may have heard this story, which has made its rounds on WhatsApp and other social-media platforms. However, I have reviewed this story tens of times, so even if you have heard it before it won't hurt to review it now, in the vicinity of Kol Nidrei.

The story is about a *chassidic* Jew from Antwerp named Reb Feivel Shapiro. Feivel had called Rabbi Jacobson from Belgium that *motzei Shabbos* of Selichos at 9:45. The event was called for 10 p.m., but only got underway closer to 10:30, presumably delayed due to the phone call that Rabbi Jacobson had received.

Reb Feivel relayed that the story he wanted to share took place in the late 1970s around Purim time when he was in New York for business and decided to check out the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *farbrengen* being held that night.

But first, a word on his background. The Shapiros are a *chassidic* family, but not followers of the Chabad movement. Reb Feivel's father, Reb Naftoli Hertz, was a close disciple of the Damesek Eliezer from Vizhnitz. His mother, Rachel, hailed from a Satmar family from prewar Europe, and he had *davened* in Belz all his life, the closest style of *davening* and Yiddishkeit in Antwerp that they, as a family, were accustomed to.

You're probably wondering what compelled Feivel Shapiro to visit the Lubavitcher Rebbe that Purim night.

From Feivel's standpoint, it was a decision fueled by curiosity from having heard so much about this *tzaddik*, and also the fact that his trip coincided with this important *farbrengen*.

Reb Feivel told Rabbi Jacobson that the Rebbe had spoken over many hours and the gathering had carried on into the early morning. At one point, a path was cleared for the Rebbe to walk through to his office and then back home for what was left of the night. Coming from a *chassidic* background, Reb Feivel began to extend his arm to wish the Rebbe shalom as he made his way past him. Before he

could fully extend his arm, a couple of *gabbaim* who were there gave him a quick look, signaling that it was not the time and place for that, and he quickly withdrew his arm.

However, the Rebbe noticed his half-extended gesture and he grabbed Reb Feivel's arm. He wouldn't let go and began walking with him towards his office. Reb Feivel tried to figure out what was going on because this was far from what he had intended. All he had wanted was to wish the Rebbe *shalom aleichem* and move on with the night.

The Rebbe took him into his room. At that point, there was nothing the *gabbaim* could do. Inside, Reb Feivel said, the Rebbe grabbed a chair, put it alongside his desk, and asked him to take a seat. Meanwhile, the Rebbe went over to a filing cabinet and removed a letter. He handed it to Reb Feivel and asked him to read it.

Reb Feivel tells Reb Yossi that he sat there reading a letter about a 36-year-old woman who was battling a bout of breast cancer that had spread, and the doctors had given a very grim prognosis. She writes that she has 12 children; the oldest is 14 and the youngest is 1. She continues that she has lived her life and that she is ready to meet her Maker in heaven and she has no complaints. But there's one thing that worries her more than anything else and that is the wellbeing, both physical and spiritual, of her children. So there, in the letter, with all that she was enduring, she asked the Rebbe to daven for the wellbeing of her children.

Reb Feivel reaches the end of the letter and is winded when he sees that it was signed by a woman named Rachel Shapiro, his own mother, who passed away when he was but 12 years old.

Reb Feivel told Reb YY that he sat in the chair and began sobbing. He said, "I cried and cried until I regained my composure and then I turned to the Rebbe and asked, 'Rebbe, I have one question to ask you. Can I take this letter with me? I lost my mother when I was still very young and I have very few memories of her.'"

Reb Feivel added to Reb YY that in the letter, his mother writes about herself, where she came from, her children, and her concerns, and it was extremely sentimental.

The Rebbe replied, "No, you can't take this with you."

Reb Feivel couldn't figure out why he wouldn't let. He gets tens of thousands of letters from people with similar situations; what was it about this particular letter that he needed it?

The Rebbe then turned to Reb Feivel and said, "I cannot enter into Kol Nidrei on any given year before reading your mother's letter."

Reb Feivel said that he understood that, and he got up and walked out of the office.

That's where Reb Feivel's personal encounter with the Rebbe ended. But there were so many variables about this story that needed to be clarified. The first mystifying aspect of this story is how the Rebbe knew that the person extending his hand to him had any connection to this Rachel Shapiro that he would bring him to his room and show him this letter?

Rabbi YY asked this of Reb Feivel, who answered, "Until this day I can't forgive myself for not asking him how he knew who I was. But I was so overtaken by the emotion that pervaded me at the moment that it didn't dawn upon me to ask. I recall leaving the room and a minute or two later realizing that I should have asked and bemoaning the fact that it was too late."

Rabbi YY continued, "How, *takeh*, did he know? Why did your mother, coming from where she came from, write to the Lubavitcher Rebbe of all people?"

Reb Feivel answered, "I can't tell you how he knew; obviously he saw things that regular people couldn't see. But this is why she wrote to the Lubavitcher Rebbe: My father, Naftoli Hertz, was a very successful businessman who was involved in Macy's and other business ventures and would travel often to New York and visit the Satmar Rebbe, Reb Yoilish.

He was extremely impressed with the great genius of the Satmar Rebbe and he could sit with him for hours on end discussing various different things. On one such visit, after a few hours with the Rebbe, the conversation turned to Chabad, and the Satmar Rebbe said, 'Reb Naftoli, let me tell you the truth: whenever someone comes to me with a situation that I feel is beyond my capacity to undertake I send them to the Lubavitcher Rebbe.'

On his return trip back home, Reb Naftoli said to his wife, Rachel, "Do you want to hear something interesting? The Rebbe told me that he would refer all difficult cases that he could not deal with to the Lubavitcher Rebbe."

So Reb Feivel said that when his mother got sick and the situation turned bleak, she wrote to the Rebbe on her own, without telling anyone. This was the letter that the Rebbe showed him on that Purim night, which he would read as a preparation before Yom Kippur.

There's a postscript to the story, which I witnessed in the immediate aftermath of the *melavah malkah*. I was standing around, waiting to wish Reb YY a *yasher koach*, when a young *chassidishe* man told him that his mother was this Rachel Shapiro's youngest daughter and he was aware of this story.

The lesson that Reb YY conveyed was that we need to be our own micro-manhigim at this late stage in history. We have to open our hearts and start to focus on the things that bind us rather than the things that divide us.

What is a *manhig*? The head is a *manhig*. The brain sends signals to the rest of the body to carry out its capacities. But one thing about the head that the other limbs don't possess is the ability to feel the rest of the body. A head that declares

“I don’t care about toenails” is not a head. What made the Rebbe a leader was his ability to feel the pain of every Jew, even those he seemingly didn’t know.

This is the message of Yom Kippur, and really the message of all the holidays of Tishrei—and that is that we are all the Eibershter’s kids, and we are all equal and need to see each other in that light. That is why we say on this holy day, “*Anu matirin l’hisparallel im ha’avaryanim.*” This is the message in the *ketores* of Yom Kippur which manifests itself as the *schach* atop the sukkah, which has a *gematria* of 100, corresponding to the 100 blasts of the shofar.

We should pray this Yom Kippur with a healthy and wholesome sense of inclusiveness and make our way into the sukkah, which needs to be one in which all Jews feel comfortable sitting. May we all merit to be sealed in the books of life, health, and wealth, and to be redeemed from this dark exile today!

Reprinted from the September 16, 2018 website of the Five Towns Jewish Times.

Yom Kippur in the ER

By Jody Berkel



G-d puts us exactly where we need to be.

It was 5:30 pm Erev Yom Kippur, my husband and I were in the emergency room after 10 hours of blood tests, ultrasounds, IV and antibiotics. The ER doctor

walked past us and said, “We finally found out what’s going on – you need your appendix out. The surgeon will be down shortly to speak to you.”

I called him back and I said in shock, “I need my appendix out?!”

“Yes, unless you want it to rupture and cause a much bigger problem for yourself. The surgeon will be down to see you shortly.” And just like that, he was gone.

We sat there stunned, confused and frightened. “I’m going to have surgery on Yom Kippur?” I said to my husband, tears rolling down my face. “I don’t have any abdominal pain, how can it be my appendix?” Thoughts flooded my mind: who will stay with me, who will be with our three children at home?

After calls to Bikkur Cholim and our parents, we decided that my husband would go home and with the help of my mother-in-law stay with our children while my mother would come and stay with me at the hospital. As candle lightening time approached, my husband rushed home, both of us not knowing if I will have surgery or not.

Two doctors came to see me, asking me a myriad of questions and feeling my belly, pushing down hard where my appendix is. “Does this hurt?” “No.”

They pushed down in another area. “Does this hurt?”. “No”. The surgeons weren’t convinced that it was my appendix and recommended a CT scan to know for sure.

So there I was in the ER on Yom Kippur. I saw a familiar face, a nurse who was there as long as I was, and asked her, “Do you by any chance have any prayer books?”

“Anything in particular?”

“A Jewish one?”

Looking back this was undoubtedly my holiest Yom Kippur to date.

A few minutes later she returned with an Artscroll Siddur. I quickly looked through the table of contents and to my amazement I found the *Al Cheit* prayer and sitting in the ER, I began striking my chest, asking G-d to please let me not have surgery.

After two days in the ER, blood tests, IV, ultrasounds, antibiotics and a CT scan that was canceled and then re-scheduled, it turned out, thank G-d, that I did not need to have my appendix removed. (After being bed-ridden with a fever for five days prior to going to the hospital, I had a nasty intestinal/gastro-bug.) Looking back this was undoubtedly my holiest Yom Kippur to date. Not only did I feel G-d protecting me in the ER, I discovered that the ER provided countless opportunities to emulate G-d, the primary way to draw close to Him.

During my many walks up and down the ER halls, thanks to a walking IV, bed-ridden patients would see me and ask me to get them a blanket or some water. Another patient was brought in and placed beside me, a 91-year-old, woman accompanied in the ambulance by her granddaughter. I sat and listened as the doctor

came to her and subtly tried to encourage the granddaughter to sign a “do not resuscitate” should her grandmother go into cardiac arrest. I asked the granddaughter if she understood what the doctor was asking, and she answered, “No, not really.”

After chatting for a while, she told me that her family is refugees from Kosovo and the many struggles she had to deal with. She explained that she cannot stay with her grandmother and must go home to her four kids. “Do you have anyone to call who can help you with your kids?” I asked her.

“No, everyone is busy with their own lives.”

My heart broke as I watched an impossible situation unfold in front of my eyes. This granddaughter had no choice but to leave her 91 year old, blind grandmother who didn’t speak a word of English alone in the Emergency room. Before she left, she asked me if it was possible for me to watch over her grandmother, perhaps bring her some water if she needed, and make sure the nurse is checking in on her.

“I’ll do what I can to help,” I replied. I watched the grandmother struggle to open a package of crackers, waiting to see if she could manage. A minute later I gently opened the crackers for her and then placed her hand on the cup of water at the side of her bed. I made sure she was covered with the blanket. And when the nurse finally came by, I explained that she needs insulin.

A few hours later, another woman standing by her elderly husband in the bed to my right approached me. “Excuse me, I have to leave for about half an hour. Would you please watch over my husband?”

My mouth agape, I answered, half laughing, half in disbelief, “Ask the nurse, I already have one patient!” I silently plead to G-d to send a *Refuah Sheleima* to all these people!

Before I was moved into my room, I asked my husband, who was now with me after Yom Kippur, for a piece of paper and a pen. I wrote a note for the granddaughter, telling her that I did what I could to help and that her grandmother was taken care of by the nurses. I blessed them both with good health and placed it in the grandmother’s bag.

A few things became clear to me during my ER experience. I realized the value of having a community and people to count on. I am so grateful to be part of such an incredible Jewish community who stepped up to help my family while I was in the hospital.

When we’re experiencing times of challenge, we all need family, friends and a relationship with G-d to help carry us through. Although I would rather have not spent Yom Kippur in the ER, G-d puts us where we need to be. And being there made me acutely aware of a teaching I’ve shared many times: we can’t control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond. I really tried to live these words.

The emergency room is the great equalizer where on the one hand we all feel so helpless, and on the other we can experience the power of helping one another.

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Sam, the Catholic Girl and the Rebbe

By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton



The Lubavitcher Rebbe, zt"l (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson)

Sam (fictitious name) was a Jew. True he wasn't very careful about the Jewish commandments but he knew he was a Jew, did some commandments and it was important to him at least subconsciously.

Being a young upcoming businessman he met a lot of attractive young women but he didn't give them much notice. Until, when he had a project that lasted several months in the same town, he met one that was different. At first their only connection was business, but eventually they discovered they had a lot in common. Except religion.

She was a Catholic. Devout, church-going, it was simply unthinkable that she would marry out. Her parents would never agree. It meant eternal damnation! Unless he would convert.

But Sam wouldn't hear of it. He was a proud Jew. For sure he would never think about denying that. And marrying a gentile would mean the children wouldn't be Jewish, the house wouldn't be Jewish and his parents would be heartbroken. So they agreed to part and blessed one another that G-d would provide them with proper partners.

A Year Later They Met Again

But because they were in the same general line of work, as 'fate' would have it, a year later they again met. But this time things were different. First of all it was in New York, Sam's home ground, and second, Sam was much more focused and to the point.

He told her firmly and finally that, despite his positive feelings only if she were to convert could they have any connection. If not, this would be their last conversation.

The girl was torn, she really liked him but conversion was out of the question. She explained her dilemma but he was final and blunt. They exchanged phone numbers and again parted.

A few weeks later her phone rang. It was Sam. He had thought it over and decided that it was unfair for him to expect her to convert when she knew nothing about Judaism. He made her an offer. In another few days there would be a festive Jewish holiday called Simchat Torah. If she wanted, she could experience it. He had spoken to a religious family in the Crown Heights area of Brooklyn who agreed to take her as a guest. Then she could ask questions, learn, see what real Judaism was and decide for herself.

She Enjoyed it from the Moment She Arrived

She agreed, went and from the moment she arrived she enjoyed it. The two days of the Holiday were wonderful. The family, the Chassidim, the joy but there was something really out of the ordinary, she saw the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As soon as she looked down from the women's section and saw him, she was certain that if anyone could solve her dilemma it was him. And she told this to the family that was hosting her.

A week later, after the holiday they made a few phone calls arranged her an appointment for a private audience with the Rebbe (called 'Yechidut') and a few days after that she entered the Rebbe's office and poured out her heart.

She explained how she was born and bred a Catholic, Sam was Jewish. He wanted her to convert. But her parents would never agree to her converting and she

also had big doubts. She had been taught that it was a sin to leave the Church, but she didn't want to lose him.

She was really confused. Should she leave him? Or should she convert with such doubts plaguing her?

The Rebbe answered matter-of-factly, "You can get married without converting. There is no need for you to convert."

“A Jew Can Marry a Gentile?”

She was startled and blurted out, "a Jew can marry a gentile? Really? But everyone told me..."

The Rebbe replied "You are not a gentile. You are a Jew."

She couldn't believe her ears, this was crazy. She? A Jew? "But you don't know me." She blurted out again. "I've been in this room only two minutes. I'm Catholic! I was born baptized and raised a Catholic. My parents are Catholics I go to church with them every Sunday. I'm not adopted or anything, I'm sure. Rebbe, for SURE I am not Jewish!"

The Rebbe just looked at her, smiled and said. "Go to your mother and ask her if you're Jewish or not."

She backed out of the Rebbe's office, returned to the house where she was a guest and called her mother long distance and asked "Mother, am I Jewish?"

She figured that her mother would simply answer say certainly not, or 'that's silly' and that would be the end of it but her mother slammed the phone down and didn't pick up when she called again.

Two Days Later She Flew Home to See Her Mother

'Strange' she thought to herself. Two days later she flew home and at the first opportunity took her mother aside and again asked.

"Shhhhh" Her mother whispered. "Don't talk about this when your father is at home. Tomorrow we will take a walk in the park and I'll explain."

The next day after her father left for work, they went for a walk in the park and when her mother was sure no one was around, she turned to her and said. "My dear daughter, it's true. You are Jewish. And so is your father, and so am I and so were our parents and their parents before them.

But the Nazis changed all that. We met after the war. In the war we both spent years in the extermination camps. Death and suffering were everywhere. Our families and friends were all killed, some of them before our eyes. Maybe you read the stories but it's nothing like living it. And it was all because we were Jews.

Well, before we married your father said he didn't want his children to go suffer as he suffered and I agreed. So we changed our religion, we became

Catholics, moved to France and thought that would be the end of it. We would be like everyone else. That's why we never told you."

The next day the girl returned to the Rebbe to give him the good news and the Rebbe replied. "Because you entered a Church you must immerse yourself in a Mikvah not for conversion but to remove the defilement of idolatry. Then you must learn the laws of Judaism."

Today she and Sam are married, live in Haifa and have a Chassidic family with children and grandchildren making the world a better place. (Adapted from "Sipurim M'Cheder HaRebbe (page 128)

Reprinted from the Parashat Shoftim 5779 email of Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel.

A Mother's Insistence

By Tzvi Yaakovson



Within every Sephardic Jew there is a very special connection to *Yiddishkeit*. Appreciation and esteem for the Torah seem to run within their blood, even among the less religious members of their community. This week, I witnessed an incident that illustrated this universal Sephardic trait. It began when a woman entered Olam HaTzitzis, a store on Rechov Alkabetz in Givat Shaul, and asked to purchase a *tefillin* bag for her son. His previous bag, she said, had become torn and was no longer respectable enough to be used.

"Certainly," the young salesman replied.

"But I want you to embroider his name on the bag," the customer added.

“Of course,” said the salesman.

And then came the catch: “I need you to do it today.”

“I can’t do that,” the salesman said apologetically. “I have eleven other orders to handle first.”

“Sir,” the mother said vehemently, in a thick Moroccan accent, “my son is going to *yeshiva* in Bnei Brak in two hours. He won’t go without his *tefillin* bag. Do you want him to wait until tomorrow to leave? Do you take responsibility for his *bittul Torah*?”

The salesman thought for a moment and then instructed the woman to wait. He took down the exact spelling of the young man’s name and quickly fed the information into a computerized embroidery machine. Within six minutes, the job was done.

The owner of the store is a righteous man named Rav Aryeh Natan; the worker who served this customer is a charming young man. Both are immigrants from France, Sephardic Jews who are suffused with abiding respect for the Torah.

Reprinted from the Parshas Ki Seitzei 5779 email of the Yated Ne’eman.

Rabbi’s Kidney Donation Inspires Community

Judgment day is approaching. On Rosh Hashana, Hashem “takes stock” of His creation. He examines every Jew in the world and judges their actions. There is plenty of time to do Teshuvah - to repent, to make up for misdeeds throughout the past year.

Teshuvah means confessing to Hashem the wrongdoing, feeling remorse about and accepting upon one’s self not to repeat the bad deed. For example, someone tells Hashem, “Father in Heaven, I ate non-kosher food. I am sorry. I feel bad about it and I promise not to do it again.”

Let us all be inspired by the following story to all do Teshuvah - to return to the proper path in life.

When the opportunity arose for Chabad-Lubavitch Rabbi Ephraim Simon [co-director of Friends of Lubavitch of Bergen County in Teaneck, New Jersey] to potentially risk his life in the preservation of another’s, he paused. He wanted to give one of his kidneys to a suffering man; the problem was that he had to think about how he would communicate that decision to his nine children.

So in July, Simon, co-director of Friends of Lubavitch of Bergen County in Teaneck, N.J., gathered his family around him.

“As emissaries of the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” he told them, referring to Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory, “we dedicate our lives to helping other people.”

He went on to describe the terminally-ill man he had met earlier, a father of a large family just like theirs.

“By *tatte* giving him a new kidney, he will live, G-d willing. This is our gift to him and you are all a part of it.”

Waiting for News

Simon’s journey from community leader to organ donor began last year when the 41-year-old rabbi opened a mass e-mail from a woman trying to arrange a kidney donation for a potential recipient. A 12-year-old Jewish girl with the same blood type as Simon’s was succumbing to a terrible disease, and desperately needed a new kidney. The rabbi decided to respond.



Rabbi Ephraim Simon told his nine children that his kidney donation would be their gift to a critically ill man.

“I have a 12-year-old daughter, too,” explains Simon from his home, where he’s in the midst of a two-week recovery period. Having never considered donating an organ in the past, “I was moved to consider testing for her.”

“Let’s see what it entails, and then make a decision,” came the reply from his wife, Nechamy Simon, when he brought it up.

After a few days of intense research, and a careful risk-benefit analysis together, the Simons reached out to the sender of the e-mail, a Jewish woman by the name of Chaya Lipschutz, offering one of the rabbi’s kidneys if he matched as a candidate.

“I cannot let a young girl die, and not do anything,” Simon told Lipschutz.

But the woman informed him that “a donor has already been found.”

Many people would have understandably felt relief at the realization that they wouldn’t be called upon to undergo major surgery. Simon, however, saw things differently.

“I felt like I didn’t act fast enough,” he recalls. “I knew right then and there that if somebody else was in need, I was going to be the one to save their life.”

According to the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, more than 80,000 people nationwide are waiting for a healthy kidney. But last year, more than 4,500 lost their fight for life while waiting.

Simon told Lipschutz, a former kidney donor herself, to keep his name on file and to contact him if another person was in need.

Two months later, the woman called back with news that a 35-year-old mother of two needed a kidney. Simon immediately agreed to undergo tests at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, N.Y., where the woman was being treated. He wasn’t a match.

Then in February, Lipschutz called yet again to ask Simon if he would give his kidney to a single Israeli man in his 30s.

“It wasn’t for a young girl, or for a mother of two,” says Simon, “but one cannot weigh one life over another.”

The rabbi underwent his third series of tests at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. In the weeks that followed, Lipschutz informed him that should he not be a match for the Israeli man, another person on her list was in dire need of a kidney.

As it turned out, Simon was not a match, but he immediately went to another hospital to undergo tests for the other man, a Satmar Chasid from the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn and a father of 10.

A Meeting of Two Souls

At the kidney clinic of Cornell University, as the rabbi was on his way to have his blood tested, the critically ill man came down the hallway, heading in the opposite direction.

“Excuse me,” said the man, who had heard that a Chabad-Lubavitch emissary had volunteered to donate his kidney. “Are you the one testing for me?”

The two chatted briefly. The man showed Simon pictures of his family and told him a little about the genetic disease that had killed several of his relatives and was destroying his kidneys. Simon assured him that if he were a match, he would go through with the procedure.

A few hours before Passover, both men received the news they had been waiting for. Simon was busy preparing for the communal Seder at his Chabad House when the hospital called.

“Rabbi,” a voice on the other line began, “you are a match.”

Although he and his wife kept it between themselves, their Seder for more than 100 people took on new meaning for them both.

Immediately following the holiday, Simon called the transplant coordinator at the hospital to set up a series of examinations to assess his fitness physically, emotionally, and mentally as an organ donor.

On May 18, he received the go-ahead. In consultation with the recipient, Simon opted to schedule the surgery immediately following the conclusion of his Camp Gan Israel preschool summer camp.

At Shabbat services that week, he broke the news to his congregation. Seeing his community members as his own family, he wanted to explain to them why he was taking the risk.

Every single person is important, he told them. If an individual is lacking, it is everyone’s job to help him or her. So “in a few weeks, a critically ill Jew in need of a healthy kidney in order to survive will receive one of mine.”

Tears welled up in some of the worshippers’ eyes. One man rushed to the front of the synagogue to embrace his rabbi.

One woman says that because of the rabbi’s sacrifice, she doesn’t feel uneasy anymore when surprise Shabbat guests show up. She now happily prepares extra food.

“I initially had a mother’s natural reaction,” reveals Judy Simon, 61, who at first was very concerned about her son’s long-term health. “But after doing research, I realized that there is no reason to be.”

After a “heart-warming” meeting with the recipient’s family at the hospital during the procedure, the mother says that it’s “incredible to have a child do this altruistic thing. I feel so honored and blessed to be part of it and to say he is my son!”

Simon went to Cornell University Medical Center the day of the surgery carrying letters and pictures from his nine children. When the anesthesia wore off and he awoke in the recovery room, his wife read the letters to him.

In another room, the recipient was doing so well, that a doctor remarked that if he didn’t know better, he “would have said this kidney came from a brother.”

“I told my children that G-d could have easily made me ill, and I would have been the recipient,” he says. “Thank G-d, I was blessed with a healthy family.

What better way to thank Him than to use my own health to help somebody else?”

Simon’s eldest daughter, 14-year-old Chaya, says her father’s deed reminds her of a parable she once learned.

“Saving one life is like saving a starfish,” she says. “Even though you cannot save every single starfish, each one that you pick up from the sand and throw back into the sea is a life saved.”

Looking back at the ordeal, Simon – who is quick to emphasize that his wife had as much a hand in donating “their” kidney as he did – hopes that more people will step up and give the gift of life.

“My sacrifice is just a few days of discomfort,” he says. “The reward of saving a man’s life, giving a father his life back, giving a family their father and husband back, outweighs all the risks.

“Not everyone can donate a kidney,” continues the rabbi. “But everyone can reach out to help another person.”

Reprinted from the Parshas Ki Seitzei 5779 email of Good Shabbos Everyone

Gratitude to a Non-Jew



Rav Nissin Karelitz

A certain Jew was in a far-flung town during the terrible years of the Holocaust. He knew that he had no chance alone, so he begged a non-Jewish friend to hide him. His friend did not let him down despite the danger of hiding a Jew, and that could lead to an immediate death sentence for interfering with the Nazi war effort.

After the war, this Jew went to Israel and was very successful in business. He always sent a large amount of money back to Europe to help his non-Jewish friend, who was not very well off.

After some time, this man passed away, and the Jew wondered whether he should continue sending money to the man's children. After all, although they hadn't really helped him, they were the progeny of the man who had saved his life.

Don't we find in the Torah that the descendants of Amon and Moav should have given Yisrael bread and water as an expression of kindness to Avraham through whose merits Lot's life was saved? Yet, in general, it is forbidden to give a free gift due [to a non-Jew] to the prohibition of (לא תחנם) the specifics of this are beyond the scope of this article).

It was not as though the children would have a claim against him, since he had always helped their father and would certainly be appreciative of that. Yet he wished to continue giving to them if he could.

When this question reached Rav Nissin Karelitz, shlit"a, he ruled decisively. "When a person feels gratitude to someone—or his descendants—there is no problem of lo sechaneim; it is only if he wished to give a gift not due to hakaras hatov that this prohibition applies."

Reprinted from the Parashat Ki Sisa 5779 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, United Kingdom)

It's No Game

By Rabbi Binyamin Pruzansky

Rabbi Cohen's* phone rarely stopped ringing. As the director of Camp Ruach*, he fielded a non-stop flow of calls from parents, staff members, suppliers and pretty much anyone who had anything to do with the camp.

On this day, the phone brought him a particularly disturbing call. "Our son came home from first trip and he seemed quieter than usual," a mother reported to Rabbi Cohen. "We finally got him to admit that something was bothering him, but he was afraid that telling us would be loshon hora. I told him that not only was he allowed to tell us, but that he should. So he did.

"What he told us was that there was a boy in his bunk who was playing with a video game on Shabbos. I asked him if he was sure, and he said he was. He said the boy hides the game under his shirt, but my son saw him playing with it when he thought no one was looking."

"I don't want to get a child in trouble," the mother concluded, "but I'm sure this is something you would want to know. The boy's name is Duvi Fliger."

Rabbi Cohen was shocked. Duvi seemed like such a sweet, sincere boy. When the call ended, Rabbi Cohen began pacing his office, trying to decide what to do. He repeated the boy's name over and over again.

“It couldn’t be!” he thought. “I learn with that boy every Friday night. He’s good as gold!”

As he paced and pondered, he decided that there had to be some good explanation. At last, he stopped in his tracks.

“Duvi is diabetic! I’ll bet this boy must have thought his insulin pump was a video game!”

When Rabbi Cohen realised what had happened, he called back the mother to clear up the misconception and reassure her son that his bunkmate was a good, sincere boy. Then he thought for a few minutes about what almost happened. What if he hadn’t known Duvi so well and been so convinced of his innocence? Would he still have taken the time to think more deeply into this mother’s report?

Clearly, he had just averted a disaster for Duvi. He thanked Hashem for the flash of wisdom that told him, “Wait!”

*All names have been changed. Adapted from Stories that Unite Our Hearts, Rabbi Binyamin Pruzansky, with permission from Mesorah Publications.

Reprinted from the Parashat Ki Seitzei 5779 email of Oneg Shabbos (London, United Kingdom).

Your Loving Father

By Rabbi David Ashear



I saw a parable about a man named Isaac who came from a wealthy family. He was the youngest of three boys, and he was rebellious. The only thing that kept him close to his father was his father's money.

One day at the age of 21, he got fed up with abiding by his father's rules, and he told his father that he is going out on his own. He said, "I don't need your money anymore. I will become wealthy by myself."

He traveled to a distant city with a desire to make it big. The first day there, he was unsuccessful finding a job, and he did not even have money for lodgings. He was forced to sleep on a park bench.

The next day was the same story. He was tired. He was hungry. He had second thoughts about leaving his family, but his pride would not allow him to return.

The third day in the morning, somebody was passing through the park, and asked Isaac why he was sleeping there on a bench. Isaac told him that he did not have money or a job. The man said, "Don't worry. I have work for you. You could walk my dog every day for a half hour. In exchange, you can have a room in my house, and I will provide for you three meals a day."

Isaac was so thankful for the opportunity. Now, with less pressure, he was able to search for a job with a clear head. Eventually, he found a position in a bakery, and they paid him a very high salary for the small job he was doing. After a year there, he had enough money to rent his own apartment, and he opened up his own bakery. He took a place that had cheap rent, but it was in a terrible location.

The first month there, he actually lost money. Then one day, a man walked into the store, bought something, tasted it and said, "Wow, this is delicious! If your store was in a good location, you would make a fortune."

Isaac said, "I wish, but I don't have the money."

The man said, "I believe in your product. I'll go partners with you. I will put up all of the money to buy you a store in a prime location, and we'll be partners," and that is what happened.

The store did so well there that Isaac was able to buy another store, and another store. After just two years, he had five stores and was very successful. At that point, he decided to write a letter to his father. This is what he wrote:

"My dear father, I wanted to tell you that after three years of being away from you, I've made my own fortune without any help from you, or my brothers. You are welcome to come see my bakeries whenever you want. It just goes to show you that hard work and perseverance are the keys to success. You don't need a rich father to succeed."

A few days later, Isaac received a letter back from his father and this is what it said:

"My precious son, I am very happy to hear that you are doing well. But for your ultimate benefit, it is my obligation to tell you what really happened. Did you ever wonder why a total stranger would let you stay in his house for just walking his dog for a half hour? I sent that man to you to get you off the streets, and I paid your rent there for the whole year.

"Did you ever wonder why you were given such a high salary in the bakery for such a simple job you were doing? I got you the job, and I paid your salary.

Also, that man who walked into your store, and offered out of the blue to be your partner? I sent him there, and he was using my money. When you were in the new location, I paid off the customers to come to you to make you successful.

"You see, son, it is not your hard work that made you your money. It is your loving father, who will always love you. Love, Dad."

This parable speaks to us so much. So many times we work hard, we see success, and naturally we feel good about our hard work. We think, "Look how my hard work paid off. Look at what I can do when I focus on something!"

Hashem would tell us, "Who do you think put the money in your pocket to be able to do what you did? Who sent you the customers? Who gave you the ideas? Who gave you your health? How is it that everything always works out so perfectly?"

It is not only in business. Our loving father is behind everything. He is the One sending us the messengers that we need to meet, and the messages that we need to hear. He has so much to give, and He loves to give to us. We have to recognize, however, how much we need Him. We are nothing without Hashem. Hashem is involved in every part of our day, and every second of our lives. There is no better place for us to be than close to Him, and we should constantly seek His help.

Reprinted from the January 12, 2017 email of Daily Emunah

The Unexpected Reward

By Rabbi Reuven Semah

A true story is told in the book of the life of the Hafess Hayim. Once, the grandson of the Rabbi came to tell him about something the whole town was buzzing about.

That day a very wealthy Jew came from America to their town. This man was born in this town but he became an orphan as a young boy. There was no one to care for him. However, one person allowed him to eat at his table. Another person allowed him to sit with his children's teacher to study. Another allowed him to sleep in his store at night. Another gave him his children's worn out clothing.

Eventually this boy went to America and struck it rich. Today he returned to pay back the favors that were done to him years ago. Those people today were old and poor. Now they became fabulously wealthy, and they were the talk of the town. People now were jealous of them and how they were paid back for their relatively small acts of kindness.

s The Hafess Hayim told his grandson, now we can grasp how it will be in the future when Hashem will reward each and every Jew. For we live in a time when the Shechinah (the Presence of Hashem in this world) is in exile, and the nations deny His existence.

Where can Hashem go to today and be welcomed? In the homes of the Jews, where they observe misvot and pray to Him. Hashem is very wealthy, and He can reward each one with so much blessing. Can we imagine how much He will reward us for each misvah, for each act of kindness and for each prayer?

Reprinted from the archives of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin (Parashat Behukotai 5771)

Bump in the Night...

Father John had a strange phobia. After a while he felt compelled to visit a psychiatrist, “I dunno Doc, every time I get into bed, I think there’s somebody under it.”

“Come to me three times a week for a couple of years, and I’ll cure your fears,” says the shrink.

“How much do you charge Doc?” asks Father John. “My discount rate is only \$200 a visit.”

Father John says he’ll think about it. Six months later, he runs into the psychiatrist, who asks why he never came back.

“You know that Jewish butcher at Izzy’s Deli?” says Father John. “He cured me for \$10.”

“Is that so! How?” asks the psychiatrist.

“He told me to cut the legs off the bed.”

Reprinted from the Parshas Pinchas 5779 email of Lekavod Shabbos.

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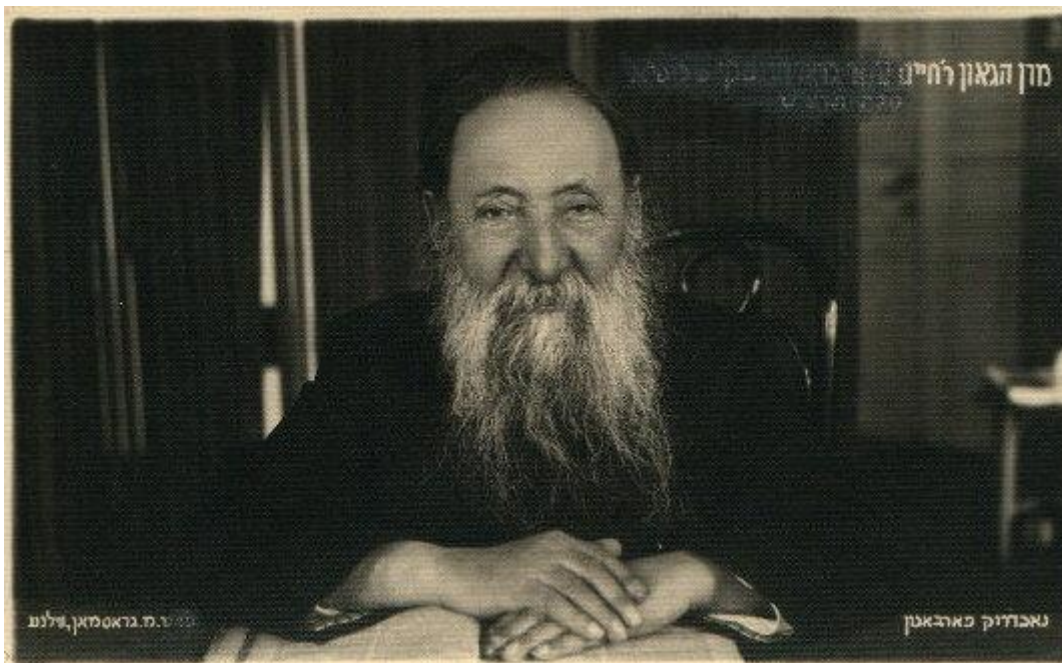
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Too Cold to Sit In the Sukkah?



One year, it was a very cold Succos in Vilna. A guest had come to the home of Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, zt"l, the Rav of Vilna, and Rav Chaim Ozer directed him to his Sukkah, to enjoy a meal and get refreshed.

Rav Chaim Ozer apologized to him, and explained that he was truly ill at the time, and he was therefore exempt from the Mitzvah of living in the Sukkah, and he excused himself from joining his guest there to keep him company.

The guest made himself comfortable in Rav Chaim Ozer's Sukkah, and Rav Chaim Ozer remained upstairs in his apartment. After a few minutes, suddenly, the

door to the Sukkah opened, and to the guest's surprise, Rav Chaim Ozer walked in and joined his guest at the table!

Rav Chaim Ozer explained to him, "While it is true that someone in my condition is exempt from being in a Sukkah, it does not exempt me from the Mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim! We know this from Avraham Avinu, who ran to do this Mitzvah even when he was in pain from his Bris Milah."

Reprinted from the Succos 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Insights of Rabbi Eli Biderman.

In the Rebbe's Sukkah

By M. Shafir



It was in Paris in the 1930s. Hitler had already risen to power in Germany. I was a student in the "City of Light," and I was not having an easy time. As a foreigner, I didn't have a work permit, or a penny to my name, and I was ready to take on any work I could get. At the time, many foreign Jewish students found themselves in the same predicament. It was Paris in the 1930s. We worked as waiters, we washed dishes, we gave lessons, and we even wrote addresses on envelopes...

I was strict about observing Torah and mitzvahs at the time, though I'm not sure why. Here I was, in Paris, a young student, free as a bird, with no one criticizing my behavior. I could easily have chosen not to stick to the Torah path.

Whom was I trying to please? I think I was showing myself that even the most difficult conditions wouldn't make me lose my mind or my faith.

Then the month of Tishrei arrived, and I wanted to keep the mitzvah of eating in a sukkah. As the days passed, I understood that finding a sukkah in Paris wouldn't be as simple as I thought. I didn't have enough money to eat at the local restaurant's sukkah, so I looked around for a public one. Not far from the hotel where I lived, in the Latin Quarter, there was a synagogue for Jews from Eastern Europe, with an adjacent sukkah.

I was happy with the meal I brought to the sukkah. The menu was bread, cheese and radishes. The poor selection of food didn't bother me at all. But something else did! I always loved the beauty of the sukkah, but this sukkah was far from being beautiful. Its walls were bare of decorations. Instead of beauty, there was dirt! The tablecloth was stained with colors and smells that testified to what had been eaten on it, and there were remains of food all over the floor. Dreadful!

All I wanted to do was run away from there as soon as I could. I couldn't imagine continuing to observe the mitzvah of Sukkot like that. I was ready to leave it all and free myself from misery, recalling that the holiday of Sukkot was called the Holiday of Joy. But then I realized that there was something else that was upsetting me as well.

As much as the mitzvahs were important to me, even dearer were the customs I grew up with. One of these customs was eating in the sukkah on the holiday of "Shemini Atzeret." Some people use the sukkah for seven days, as instructed by the Torah, and on Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day, they no longer sit in the sukkah. In keeping with the my chassidic custom, I do sit in the sukkah on Shemini Atzeret. However, this sukkah in Paris was closed on Shemini Atzeret, even though I begged to be able to use it. Even the restaurant didn't have a sukkah for me to use as a paying guest.

As the possibility of sitting in a sukkah on Shemini Atzeret seemed more and more remote, my desire became more and more intense. As Shemini Atzeret drew closer and no solution came up, I began to feel very dejected, and walked around in a gloomy and sad mood. That's when I suddenly met Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who would later become the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe. And ever since that day, I believe in divine providence.

Rabbi Schneerson was also a student in Paris. He was unique and quite extraordinary. I doubt if there was ever, in any university in Paris or anywhere else, a student such as he. He was the son-in-law of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe.

Rabbi Schneerson had a strong personality. He didn't abandon his principles, even while studying in such an unfamiliar environment. His thirst for

knowledge didn't come from a lack of faith. He was a pious erudite Jew, an expert in the Talmud, the Zohar, the Tanya, etc., and his whole life was dedicated to fulfilling G-d's will. Just like the Rambam (Maimonides), Rabbi Schneerson believed that secular studies would deepen his connection to G-d. It took time, and he passed through several cities on the way, but he was persistent and eventually made it to Paris, where he studied engineering and physics. I'm sure this choice was somehow motivated by religious considerations too.

Paris, with all it had to offer, didn't appeal to Rabbi Schneerson. He was there for his studies. He never entered a theater, cinema or club. None of them interested him. He studied Torah day and night, even though he was busy with his secular studies. I remember him being handsome and distinguished. His face was delicate and pale and his beard had never been touched by a pair of scissors. He never entered a theater, cinema or club

At the time, I used to say (and I have repeated this over and over again since then) that the life of Rabbi Schneerson was a life of kiddush Hashem (sanctifying G-d's name). When living in the presence of a rebbe, a son or son-in-law of the rebbe would be doing what's expected of him in living a holy life, and he wouldn't even consider acting out of line. However, a rebbe's son-in-law, a married student living the life of a tzadik, a righteous person, in the Latin quarter of Paris, awakens respect, admiration and sheer wonder. A person like that is a "light to the Jewish nation." That's how I see it. He's a symbol and a model, tangible proof that living a full, elevated Jewish life has nothing to do with one's environment; it can be done even in Paris.

I first met Rabbi Schneerson at my friends' house, and after that we often met there or stopped to chat on the street. We never became friends. There was an aura of holiness and nobility about him that prevented familiarity, though he always acted simply and modestly.

When I met him on that day during Sukkot, he asked me how I was doing. He was astonished at how depressed I was when I told him about my worries. He pondered for a while and said, "I've built a small sukkah, I'll be glad to have you as my guest on Shemini Atzeret."

I thanked him for the warm invitation, but wasn't sure I should accept, knowing that he and his wife had modest means and that a guest could be a problem. But Rabbi Schneerson wouldn't take no for an answer. In his polite and kind way, he made the invitation sound like he was commanding me to accept it, so I did, and I've never regretted it since.

I arrived at Rabbi Schneerson's hotel room in high spirits. I spotted his sukkah easily in the courtyard right outside his window. It was tiny, just big enough to seat two people. I realized that by inviting me to join him, he would be having lunch with me instead of with his wife. I felt embarrassed and didn't try to

hide it, but he managed to dispel my discomfort using words that made me feel loved, and speaking words of Torah, which reminded me of my dear family back home.

I was instantly joyful again. I can see Rabbi Schneerson standing there as though it were yesterday. He was dressed in a knee-length silk tail-coat, the kind that was fashionable in the early 1900s. He once explained that on Shabbat and on Jewish holidays one should wear silk but that the style of the garment is not important.

We sat in the sukkah, his eyes shining with a special light that filled the small, spotless sukkah. I was sure I could see the walls expanding, turning the sukkah into a beautiful palace. Rabbi Schneerson was sitting opposite me, speaking pearls of wisdom, and above his head floated the seven holy guests, the “*ushpizin*” who visit every sukkah. I was sure I could see the walls expanding during Sukkot—one tzadik a day. On this day, the eighth day, it seemed as if they had all gathered together to visit Rabbi Schneerson’s sukkah and enjoy his holy presence.

We both sat there for a long time. I can't remember all that was said, but I will never forget the uplifting atmosphere, the deep pleasure, the joy that accompanied us on that Shemini Atzeret in Rabbi Schneerson’s sukkah in the Latin quarter of Paris.

Repeated from the website of Rebbe.Org

Following the Old Men

By Rabbi Reuven Semah

“On the eighth day shall be Aseret.” (Bemidbar 29:35)

I know it’s not *Shemini Aseret (Simhat Torah)*, but I would love to share this story with you as told by Rabbi Dovid Kaplan.

There was no sign of religion on Kibbutz Ein Chaim (name changed). Quite the contrary, they were virulently opposed to anything even remotely Jewish. Pork on Yom Kippur, barbecue on Tish’ah B’Ab, soft rolls on Passover, it was all fine.

It was a mystery to the younger members why a handful of the old-timers would sneak off to some unknown location for some unknown reason one day a year. Maybe it was some sort of gambling night that they didn’t want anyone else to know about, or perhaps they got together to reminisce about something or other.

Any time one of the participants was asked about it, he’d say, “It’s nothing too important and it’s clearly nothing that would interest you. It’s just something

for a bunch of old guys.” For some reason, no one ever made any further attempts to find out what it was all about.

Well, one year, Yigal ben Efess (name changed) could contain his curiosity no longer, so he decided to follow the group and see what they were up to. He watched from a distance as they headed all the way out to the farthest corner of the kibbutz, where all the old, rusty equipment lay in disuse, and then entered an old abandoned shed.

He waited a few minutes and then followed them in. There was a decrepit, stone staircase that led downstairs and ended in front of a heavily reinforced metal door. He pushed the door open a crack...and saw something that froze him in place and sent shivers up his spine. It was a sight he knew he'd never ever forget.

The men were in a well-lit cellar which they'd equipped with bright lights. But it wasn't the light that he was focused on. The men were holding a Sefer Torah and dancing round and round with undisguised emotion, most of them with tears rolling down their cheeks.

You see, it was *Shemini Aseret* night. These men had all been in Europe before the war, and had all learned in *cheder*. The *simhah* (joy) they had experienced as small children on that special day had never left them, and they relived it once a year in a clandestine cellar on an anti-religious kibbutz.

You can run but you can't hide. The flame will always find you.

Reprinted from the Parashat Pinhas 5775 email of the Jersey Shore Torah Bulletin.

The Most Beautiful Esrog

Rav Yechiel Spero writes a great story. Rav Meir Chasman was a close friend of the Rav, Rav Shimshon Polinsky. One year before Succos, Rav Meir was very excited because he was able to get the most beautiful Esrog to be able to give to the Rav as a gift.

Shortly after he got this magnificent Esrog, Rav Meir had a baby boy. He went to visit the Rav to give the Esrog to him, and he also asked the Rav to be the Sandek at the Bris, which would be on the first day of Succos.

Succos morning came and everyone at Shul was happy for the Simchah and so excited to see the most beautiful Esrog that they all heard about. However, before Hallel the Rav asked Rav Meir if it would be possible to use his Esrog.

Rav Meir was very surprised, but he gave his Esrog to the Rav. The Rav used it and gave it back. When it came time to say Hallel, the Rav took out a very ordinary Esrog that looked bruised and had a broken Pitum. Everyone was shocked, because they heard this was the most beautiful Esrog in the world, but the

Rav used it with such Kavanah, and sincerity, it was as if it really was beautiful.

After Davening, Rav Meir came over to the Rav and asked what had happened to the beautiful Esrog he gave. The Rav said, “I really have the most beautiful Esrog”.

The Rav explained that when he woke up in the morning, he was so excited to shake the gorgeous Esrog. He took it to the Sukkah and saw his neighbor’s little daughter playing with her father’s Esrog, which fell out of her hands and rolled on the floor.

She picked it up and tears fell down her cheeks because she was afraid of how her father would react. The Rav said, “I went to her and said, ‘Please tell your father that the Rav found something on his Esrog that made it Pasul and he can’t use it on Succos, but that the Rav had an extra one’.

I gave the girl the beautiful Esrog and sent her home, and I kept the Pasul one for myself.” The Rav said, “In the morning, I thought I had the most beautiful Esrog, but I was wrong. I am now using an even more beautiful Esrog than before.”

He looked at the bruised Esrog and said, “This is the most beautiful Esrog in the world, because it used to do a Chesed and also to pursue Shalom, peace!”

Reprinted from the Succos 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Insights of Rabbi Eli Biderman.

The Steipler Gaon’s Lulav



The Steipler Gaon was extremely humble, yet, he knew that his actions were carefully watched by others, and he kept this in mind at all times. Before Succos one year, he went to a certain store looking to buy a Lulav which met his high standards of Kashrus.

However, he could not find one that he liked, and he left the store without buying anything. After taking a few steps down the street, he suddenly turned around, went back into the store, and came out again with a Lulav that he had just bought.

Later, someone asked him to explain why he did that, and he said, “The truth is, I did not find a Lulav that I liked. But after leaving the store it dawned on me that if someone would see me leaving the store empty-handed, they might say that the Steipler was in that store and could not find a single Kosher Lulav! This would cause a loss of business and be a great source of distress to the owner of the store. That is why I went to buy a Lulav. It certainly is Kosher, but I do not plan to use it!”

Reprinted from the Succos 5779 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Insights of Rabbi Eli Biderman.

Celebrating Sukkos Outside the GPU Office

By Rabbi Sholom DovBer Avtzon

Many details of the following story are well-known from the book Subbota, by Reb Leizer Naness. I am nevertheless posting it, as my father Reb Meir a”h — the other person in the story — related it as well.

I was arrested together with a number of other chassidim on the 13th of Elul, 5695 (1935). Around two months later, we all were sentenced to exile for “counter-revolutionary” activities. The train transit took many days, until we arrived at the first destination. There the prisoners were sent to various locations, such as the Ural Mountains, Siberia and Uzbekistan. We were sent to Turkestan.

From there we were sent to Alma Alta, the capital of Kazakhstan. Once there, we were told to travel to Chimkent, where the local GPU (the precursor of the KGB) office would inform us where to go. Reb Itche and I were sent to Turkestan, while the others were ordered to go to the city of Lenger.

We arrived in Turkestan in the month of Teves, 5696 (1936). Around a half a year later, Reb Leizer Naness joined us. A year later, Reb Itche developed an

illness and the doctors ordered that he relocate to city in a warmer climate, so only I and Reb Leizer remained there.

Before Tishrei of the year 5698 (1937), Reb Itche—who was a *shochet*—sent us two chickens he had *shechted*. We decided to use one for Rosh Hashanah and *erev* Yom Kippur, and the second one we salted and put away to be used for Sukkos.



Our apartment was a mere thirty meters or so from the offices of the local GPU, and our neighbor was the official in charge of the prisons. His name was Karim, and he was the brother-in-law of our landlord, a Muslim named Ibrahim. So if we sang or said anything out loud, it was heard by them.

We made a small *sukkah* and ate in it in complete silence, as we didn't want to bring any additional attention to ourselves. We were well aware of the precarious situation in which we were found. There was a certain Bucharian Jew who worked as a driver and assistant to the reigning officer. He quietly passed on to us that every week, accusations were being received that we were trying to influence others to rebel against the government, and he told us that we should be careful with whom we talk. Thanks to him, we were spared from the many traps that the GPU set up to ensnare us.

Despite this, on Hoshana Rabba, I asked Reb Leizer to pick up a half-liter of *mashke* (112 proof whiskey) in honor of Simchas Torah. (I asked him to do this

because my place of work was in another town which was an industrial center, while his was close to the stores.) But Reb Leizer replied that since we use a large goblet to make *kiddush*, he doesn't want to make *kiddush* on *mashke*,¹ especially as we were just meters away from the notorious offices of the GPU.

"I will make *kiddush* for the two of us," I replied. "Furthermore, we will do it late in the evening, when the offices are generally closed. We will be careful to be quiet, as we were the entire week when we were in the *sukkah*." Reb Leizer agreed.

We came to the *sukkah* after eight in the evening of Shemini Atzeres. I made *kiddush*, drinking most of the goblet, and he sipped a small amount. Then we began eating the meal in complete silence. However, after a half hour or so, I took some more *mashke* and he also drank a little more, and we began singing extremely quietly.

As it is known, whiskey doesn't always hit you immediately; sometimes it takes some time. So without realizing it, the song we were singing became louder and livelier, until we began dancing. Evidently we completely forgot where we were, and we danced and sang for a while.

We then sat down to rest and conclude the meal. Suddenly, we heard footsteps in the courtyard. The *Gemara* states that the powerful effects of wine become dissipated by fear.² This is what occurred to us: the fear of being discovered erased all the effects of the *mashke*. We waited with trepidation to see who was coming to us and what the consequences would be.

A moment later, our landlord Ibrahim entered and wished us a joyous holiday. He then said: "My brother-in-law Karim told me to pass on his best wishes to you in honor of your holiday."

Hearing this, our faces became pale and showed signs of fright. Ibrahim noticed our fear and immediately said in a comforting tone:

"Karim was visiting me when you two were singing and dancing. He said, 'Ibrahim, listen to what I have to tell you. I truly envy those two Jews.'

"When I heard him say this, I feared for your well-being. I asked Karim, 'What is there to be jealous of?'

"Although they are your tenants,' he replied, 'I know much more about them than you. I can just tell you the following: If the GPU would investigate and believe even one percent of the accusations that we receive against them, no

¹ Compiler's note: The *halachah* is that one must only drink a majority of a *revi'is* of wine for *kiddush*. (According to Reb Chaim Noeh, based on a statement of the Alter Rebbe, a *revi'is* is slightly less than 3 ounces, so a majority of that is only one-and-a-half ounces). However, many follow the stricter opinion that one should drink most of the cup. So if the goblet is, say, sixteen ounces, to follow the stricter opinion, you would need to drink at least a bit more than eight ounces.

² See *Bava Basra* 10a. there is says the opposite – פחד קשה יין מפיגו, but there's a story with the Tzemach Tzedek where he said the opposite) – יין קשה פחד מפיגו. The Rebbe talks about this in *likkutei sichos* vol. 25 p. 499

remnant would remain of them. And don't think for a moment that they are not aware of their precarious situation. When I walk past their apartment on my way to the prisons, I notice that they sit with their backs to each other. So I know that the accusations brought against them — that they try to influence others to speak against the government — are completely false, as they barely speak to each other, fearing what the consequences may be.

““They were sentenced not only as counter-revolutionaries, but also as ones who recruit others to do the same. So their sentence will last for many years, and they have no chance of being pardoned. They know that this is their situation, and I tell you that they fear even the slightest movement of a leaf, thinking someone is preparing an accusation against them. So tell me, why are they happy? What do they have to celebrate about? The only reason they are rejoicing is because it is their holiday!

““Tell me the truth: Do you or I ever have a joyous occasion such as this in our lives? We also have holidays, but we are not truly joyous then. When do we experience happiness? Only when we get even or take revenge against someone who has crossed our path. So there really is something to be envious of them, of their intrinsic happiness which neither of us have.

““The truth is that I would like to personally wish them a joyous holiday, but I fear that my presence will disturb their rejoicing, so I have decided not to visit them personally. But you should definitely go and wish them a joyous holiday. Just remind them not to dance and sing throughout the night. And after you wish them well, give over my best wishes to them as well.”

Two months later, on Yud Tes Kislev, Reb Leizer was arrested. Ibrahim told me shortly afterwards that Karim had told him the following:

“When I come into my office every day, I sign the pile of papers lying on my desk automatically, without giving it any thought. The majority of them are death sentences.

“That day, I came into the office and for some reason, I glanced at the papers in front of me. Leizer's document was on top; he, too, was sentenced to death. Reading the accusations against him, I knew they were false and fabricated, and I remembered being envious of his joy. So I crossed out that sentence and exchanged it with a number of years of exile.”

Ibrahim added that this is why Karim personally threw Reb Leizer into the wagon that took him to Siberia, as it was the only way he could save him. Otherwise, he would have been shot.

Years later, after both of us were able to escape or leave Russia, I met Reb Leizer one Tishrei, as we both came to celebrate it with the [Lubavithcer] Rebbe. At that time he related to me the following:

“When I was arrested, I was waiting for interrogation by the GPU. As Karim was making his rounds, he came to my cell, and I said to him: ‘Comrade Karim, this is the third day I am here without anything to eat. I didn’t do anything to be arrested; the accusations against me are false. I am not healthy, and I can’t endure the pain of starvation.’

“In a loud and angry voice he replied, ‘You are a counter-revolutionary, and you deserve to be put to death. Suffering is good for you; it will teach you how to behave!’ Saying that, he stormed out of my cell, and I was shattered. But less than five minutes later he walked in again with a pita bread under his garment, which he tossed in my direction.

“He then said: ‘Eat it up without leaving a crumb, so that even if you die, no one will know that you had something to eat. If someone sees you eating it, don’t dare say that I gave it to you, because then I personally will shoot you. Say you were starving and stole it from another prisoner. Stealing is considered a minor infraction, and you will get a lighter punishment.’”

Karim was known to be a cruel person. The only explanation why he assisted us is that the joy of Simchas Torah sweetened all judgements.

Oros Ba’afeilah pp. 48–51. This story will be included *b’ezer Hashem* in the upcoming book *Sippurei Meir: Stories of a Chossid*.

May it indeed be a sweet and healthy year for all, full of happiness.

Reprinted from the Succos 5779 email of Rabbi Avtzon’s Weekly Story. Rabbi Avtzon is a veteran mechanech and the author of numerous books on the Rebbeim and their chassidim. He is available to farbreng or speak in your community, and can be contacted at avtzonbooks@gmail.com

A Vilna Gaon Succos Story

One Succos, the students of the Gra were not able to find an Esrog for their saintly Rebbe. They finally found a very wealthy man who had one, and it was quite a beautiful Esrog as well.

The students offered to buy it from him at a very high price, but he would not sell it for any money. Instead, he offered to make a deal. He would allow the Gra to have the Esrog at no cost, however, the Gra must agree to give away all the reward he would get in Olam Haba for the Mitzvah he would be performing with that Esrog. It would only be on those terms, otherwise the man would not agree.

The students deliberated amongst themselves about whether they should

agree to such a bargain on behalf of their Rav, and they finally decided to accept the terms of the deal.

With a certain amount of trepidation, they approached their Rebbe, the Gra, with the Esrog, and told him of the deal they had made in order to acquire it for him, that he give away his share in Olam Haba for the Mitzvah.



When the Gra heard the arrangement, he was ecstatic and full of great joy! “Finally,” he said, “I will be able to do a Mitzvah without any ulterior motive, even that of gaining a spiritual reward in the World to Come! I can perform the Mitzvah solely for the sake of the Mitzvah!”

That year, the Gra took the Lulav and Esrog with a particular joy that was not felt in previous years!

Reprinted from the Parshas Tzav 5779 email of Torah U'Tefilah as compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Winzelberg.

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AT WAR

These Jewish World War II Veterans Would Be Legends, If People Knew Their Stories

By Aron Heller



Left: Mickey Heller's World War II service photo. Right: Heller (far left) with his fellow aviators. Credit via Aron Heller

In April 1943, the Halifax bomber that Wilfred Canter co-piloted was shot down on the way back from a mission over Stuttgart. Canter parachuted out into occupied France, breaking a leg when he landed. The only member of the six-man crew to evade capture, he was given food and clothing by a local family, then passed to members of the Resistance, who smuggled him to Paris, then Bordeaux, then over the Pyrenees by foot into Spain. From there he made his way to Gibraltar and then England. King George VI personally awarded Canter a Distinguished Flying Medal at Buckingham Palace, where he was cited for displaying “courage and tenacity of a high order.”

After less than a month of home leave in Toronto, Canter — one of about 17,000 Jewish Canadians who fought in World War II — deemed himself fit for duty and returned to England to resume his bombing missions, including one in which his plane took fire but returned safely to base.

In April 1944, Canter was shot down again, on a bombing run over Düsseldorf, and was captured by the Germans. After a lengthy Gestapo interrogation, he was detained for nine months in Stalag Luft III, a German prisoner-of-war camp made famous in the 1963 film “The Great Escape,” which recounted how 76 British and Allied aviators tunneled to freedom. All but three of the prisoners were caught, and 50 were executed. Records and chronology indicate that Canter arrived at that camp at least a month after the escape.

As the Allies were closing in on Germany, the camp’s remaining war prisoners were marched west, away from the advancing Soviet Army. Canter escaped and managed to connect with a British unit. Family lore adds that he was briefly recaptured by a German officer, but resistance forces shot the German dead, freeing Canter again and handing him the officer’s Luger pistol, which he kept as a memento.

I didn’t know Canter, but my grandfather, Mickey Heller, did. *Zaidy*— I’ve always called him by the Yiddish word for “grandpa” — speaks fondly of his friend Wilf, the fellow Jewish veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force who survived three near-death experiences and almost a year as a prisoner of war. Canter would be legendary, if only more people knew the legend.

Unlike their celebrated American and British comrades, Canadian veterans of World War II are rarely remembered in triumphant narratives because there were far fewer of them. Jewish Canadians even less so, but they should be.

Though he steadfastly refuses to share his personal war experiences, my grandfather notes with pride that about 40 percent of the military-age Jewish male population of Canada enrolled for active service, most of them volunteers who were dispatched overseas. Roughly 44,000 Canadian service members died in the Second World War, and more than a third of those were in the Air Force, including many of the men with whom my grandfather served.

Only in 2011, after years of rebuffing inquiries into his wartime experiences, did my grandfather finally start opening up to me, asking me to help research Canter for a Toronto war memorial for Jewish vets. In the years since, unraveling Canter's story has helped me understand my grandfather's past — as well as his reluctance to speak about it — and opened a window into the often-overlooked contribution of Jewish-Canadian airmen in World War II.

My widowed grandfather remains relatively vibrant at age 97, with four children, nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren as his lasting legacy. While he points to Canter as an example of Jewish Canadians' service, his own World War II ordeal remains a mystery. All I know for sure is that he was a navigator in the Lancaster and Vickers Wellington bombers, and he flew missions over Europe from his base in England between 1942 and 1944.



Wilfred Canter. Credit via Wayne Gershon

My grandfather's biography is almost a cliché of what has become known as the greatest generation: Born into poverty, he went off to war and then came back to marry his sweetheart. He had a family, and he started a clothing business in Toronto. After retiring, he spent his winters in Florida, playing golf and bridge and regaling his grandchildren with jokes and Yiddish sayings.

But there was one chapter of his life that remained perpetually sealed: He would never tell us, or anyone else, what he endured during the war. “You don’t like talking about the war that much, do you?” I asked him during a 2011 summer visit to Toronto. “What’s there to talk about?” he replied. “A lot of guys went over, not a lot came back.”

When given the chance, my grandfather would talk about almost anything besides himself or deflect with a joke. “I didn’t do much,” he told me in 2015, in his typical modest fashion.

Although two of his sons, nearly all his grandsons and a great-grandson have served in the military, the only advice my grandfather ever dispensed to us was: “Never volunteer” and “Keep your feet clean and dry.” But eventually he began to talk about Canter.

According to Canter’s military records, he embarked from Canada on Aug. 21, 1942, and arrived in Britain on Sept. 1. The vessel that carried him across the Atlantic was the Queen Elizabeth, then the largest passenger ship in the world. It was during this journey to war, on a luxury liner converted into a packed troop transport, that my grandfather and Canter met and bonded. “There were thousands of guys on that boat,” he told me, “and we did most of the talking while waiting in line for hours to get a meal.”

Canter and my grandfather were each born in 1921 and grew up in downtown Toronto, each graduating from high school before enlisting, earning their wings in training and heading off to battle. They exchanged letters throughout their time in combat. Canter invited my grandfather to the ceremony in London where he received his Distinguished Flying Medal, but my grandfather couldn’t go. His last letter to Canter, sent in 1944, was returned with a military stamp on the envelope noting “present location not known” and a handwritten note that read: “Missing.” By then, Canter had already been taken prisoner.

The paths they followed after the war diverged significantly. My grandfather, the youngest of seven children, returned home and never looked back. Canter eventually made it to Toronto, but he never reconnected with my grandfather, and he struggled to find his way after the war, I learned from his family.

He had energy and drive, but he had trouble finding a job in which he could apply it. He worked for a while as a draftsman, but he must have longed to fly again, and when he heard, through word of mouth in the Jewish community, that there were aviation opportunities in the new state of Israel, he went.

In 1948, as Israel prepared to declare itself a sovereign nation, it sought foreign assistance to fight the Arab nations moving against it. Thousands of mostly Jewish volunteers from around the world with combat experience made their way

to Israel — often in clandestine fashion, to avoid running into trouble with their own governments.

Canter left behind a girlfriend in Toronto for the chance to fly again, I learned from Wayne Gershon, one of Canter's nephews, who was born after Canter's death. "I think it was personal for Wilf to double down and go to Israel," he told me. "He recognized the cause. I don't have the impression that he relished battle just for its own sake."



Canadian World War II veterans attending a memorial ceremony at the Holten Canadian War Cemetery in the Netherlands, May 2015. Credit Vincent Jannink/Associated Press

Canter arrived in Israel on Aug. 5, 1948, one of just five Jewish-Canadian World War II veteran pilots in a newly minted Air Force that had few aviators with any significant operational experience.

Late on the night of Oct. 24, Canter and four other crewmen, two of them Canadian, took off in their rickety Douglas C-47 Dakota transport from Tel Aviv's Sde Dov airport to deliver supplies to the isolated Negev outpost of Sdom, which was encircled by Egyptian forces.

Just minutes after takeoff, the right engine began to overheat and spit out flames. Canter redirected for an emergency landing, but the engine exploded

within sight of the airfield, breaking off a wing and sending the Dakota spiraling to the ground. It exploded on impact, killing everyone onboard, in one of the first fatal aerial transport accidents in Israel's history. Canter was 27 when he died.

By that time, my grandfather was already a struggling young salesman and father in Toronto. He learned of Canter's death only years later and didn't delve into the details until enlisting my help to tell his friend's story. "He had quite a life," my grandfather recalled. "The funniest thing about this guy was that he was a crier. He had balls, but he cried at the drop of a hat."

It's impossible to gauge what World War II did to many of the veterans who served — particularly those like my grandfather who flew in bombers. About 45 percent of the flight personnel in Canada's wartime Bomber Command perished — approximately 10,250 in all. Between March 1943 and February 1944, the period when my grandfather was deployed, members of crews that ran a full tour of 30 bombing operations had a grim 16 percent survival rate, according to the Bomber Command Museum of Canada.

Unlike their American counterparts, the Canadians and the Royal Air Force flew their missions at night. Their aircraft had no belly gunners and were at the mercy of Luftwaffe fighters that attacked from below. Whenever they lifted off on a mission, they departed with the knowledge that this sortie could easily be their last.

"The Germans used to come up from the bottom, and boom, that was it," my grandfather told me in a rare revelation. In addition to flying in daytime, American crews flew en masse, and "they had five or six gunners in each plane, and lots of firepower, so the Germans couldn't get close to them," he said. The Royal Air Force and Canadian forces, by contrast, "had a terrible time."

Even before he opened up about Canter, my grandfather's scant stories of the war revolved around other men's exploits. He told me about his second cousin, Alfred Brenner, a Canadian pilot whose three-man crew met a convoy of 12 German merchant ships accompanied by five destroyers and took one of the freighters out with torpedoes before being shot down. Brenner's bomber settled into the waves, and the men escaped on a dinghy. They were picked up after drifting for two days in the North Sea near the English coast. Brenner was honored with the Distinguished Flying Cross.

My grandfather also told me about his friend Somer James, with whom he went to synagogue services when they were teenagers. James was a pacifist who avoided the army because he abhorred violence. "So he went to the merchant marine instead, which was even worse," my grandfather said with a laugh.

James found himself on a ship in Italy loaded with high explosives and moored next to a munitions depot when German bombers attacked. With fires raging on the dock, he jumped ashore and wrestled the ship free from its moorings

so it could move to safety. For his actions, James received a British Empire Medal and the Lloyd's War Medal for Bravery at Sea. "He was the only one who got those two medals for one deed," my grandfather said.

And then there was Canter. During his months in captivity, Canter kept a prisoner-of-war log in which he took notes, drew sketches and preserved mementos. The diary — which his nephew Wayne shared with me — contains no reference to the escape, nor does it chronicle his Jewish faith, details that might have proved fatal if discovered by Nazi troops.



**Mickey and Eunice Heller on their wedding day,
Sept. 30, 1944. Credit via Aron Heller**

Instead, he described the daily routines, the food they ate, barley and jam, and the locker-room conversations among the prisoners, or *kriegies*, as they called themselves. He listed the 102 books he read in captivity and the major events he witnessed, especially as the end of the war was approaching. "V2 rocket flew over the camp," he wrote on April 4, 1945. "Plenty of excitement the last few days as our armies close in on this area."

He wrote how the *kriegies* lived off the surrounding land, where they found “countless chicken, geese, turkeys, lambs and pigs.” He noted the dates on which he received parcels from the Red Cross and listed the diseases contracted in the camp. “I would be blessed to have been able to commiserate with my Uncle Wilfred if he had survived,” Wayne Gershon said. “I can only try to imagine the perspective of someone who lived a life as he did.”

Perhaps my grandfather’s stubborn compartmentalization of World War II is what helped him avoid the seductions of war that appear to have lured Canter back. My grandfather kept quiet and moved on to live a long, fulfilling life. Canter was seemingly sucked back to fight for Israel and ended up buried in a foreign land, thousands of miles from home.

One day in the summer of 2012, I decided to go visit him. The resting ground in Rehovot in central Israel is a typical Israeli military cemetery: rows upon rows of simple, uniform, rectangular plots covered by tiny manicured garden beds and headstones engraved with each soldier’s basic information. It was empty, and I found Canter’s grave site easily.

Against an eerie silence, I placed a small pebble on his headstone. “Zaidy says hi,” I said aloud.

I wondered if anyone else had paid a visit to his grave in the past 64 years. It made me question how many other anonymous men like him were out there — even in just this cemetery — who had lived short, dramatic lives, but left little behind.

In 2002, the Israeli government announced plans to build an official museum for the Jewish soldiers who served in World War II. But the museum has yet to open, mired in bureaucratic wrangling, as the few Jewish war veterans still alive continue to die off.

And, as my grandfather has proved, not all the veterans want that part of their lives memorialized. When I told him that I had filled out his profile on the prospective museum’s website and that I hoped his story would one day be featured in its halls alongside Wilf Canter’s, he demurred, as usual.

“I’m just happy if they leave me alone,” he said.

Some 1.5 million Jewish soldiers fought for the Allies in World War II; more than 250,000 of them were killed, including some 450 Canadians. Most of their stories are lost to history, and my grandfather’s is probably going to join that long list. That’s the way he wants it.

Reprinted on the May 8, 2019 website of The New York Times. Aron Heller is a Jerusalem-based correspondent for The Associated Press.

Bob Dylan and Me

By Rabbi Shraga Simmons and with Martin Grossman



What happens when your best friend from childhood becomes a global superstar? In his newly-released memoir, *Dylan & Me – 50 Years of Adventures*, Louie Kemp chronicles how two Jewish boys from rural Minnesota met at Jewish summer camp in 1953. "Bobby Zimmerman was 12 years old and had a guitar," writes Kemp. "He would go around telling everybody that he was going to be a rock-and-roll star. I was 11 and I believed him."

The two remained close buddies, and at age 19 Bobby Zimmerman headed off to New York to become folk hero Bob Dylan, while Kemp took over his father's highly-successful seafood company.

Over the course of 50 years, Kemp enjoyed an "all-access pass" to Dylan's life as a trusted ally and friend, sharing together their hopes and disappointments, triumphs and difficulties. Kemp produced Dylan's epic 1974 tour, "Rolling

Thunder Revue," and Dylan served as "best man" at Kemp's wedding (coaxed into a tuxedo at the groom's request).

"We remained true to those young boys from northern Minnesota," says Kemp of their lifelong camaraderie. "We laughed at the same jokes, and confided our deepest thoughts and fears. We never needed anything from each other, but have always been there for each other... We always felt safe with each other in the way that only the closest of friends can. When one of us has needed a dose of truth, we've always known who to turn to."



1957, at Jewish summer camp: Bobby Zimmerman with guitar. Louie Kemp to his right.

Spiritual Search

Beyond the sold-out concerts and private jets, *Dylan & Me* takes readers inside the songwriter's spiritual journey. "Bobby always felt a strong connection to spirituality," says Kemp. "He described people as 'spirits dressed up in a suit of skin'," and he told Rolling Stone magazine: "I've always thought there's a superior power, that this is not the real world and that there's a world to come."

In the late 1970s, a friend invited Dylan to a series of Bible classes which took a decidedly Christian turn, pushing Dylan deep into the New Testament. Meanwhile, Kemp had become a Shabbat-observant Jew. "Nearly every day,

Bobby and I would engage in intense discussions of theology,” Kemp recalls. “But I soon realized I didn’t have a deep enough knowledge of my faith to counter Bobby’s arguments.”



Bob Dylan (L) and Louie Kemp, 1972

Kemp phoned Rabbi Manis Friedman, a Chabad educator in Minnesota, and asked him to fly to Los Angeles to teach Dylan “the Jewish version of the meaning of life.”

Kemp’s mission was to help Dylan find the spiritual fulfillment his soul was yearning for.

“It had become my mission to help Bobby find the spiritual fulfillment his soul was yearning for in Judaism – the religion of his ancestors,” Kemp writes. “I would introduce many more rabbis and observant Jews to Bobby, each bringing with him a brick to strengthen the foundation of his faith.”

Beyond these reflections, Kemp’s memoir includes some zany tidbits – like the time in summer camp the two pals raided a rival cabin with shaving cream, then “escaped” by taking a counselor’s car for a joy-ride. Or the time that Dylan traded an old sofa for an original Andy Warhol painting now valued at \$60 million.

Then there’s the time that Kemp arranged for film legend Marlon Brando to join Dylan at a Passover Seder. At one point, the person leading the Seder asked

Brando, who is not Jewish, to read a passage from the Haggadah. As Kemp describes, Brando obligingly delivered the passage "as if he were performing Shakespeare on Broadway." After the Seder, Brando told Kemp how inspired he was to see people that gathered together every year, all over the world, to thank God and celebrate an event that took place more than 3,000 years ago.

Rolling Thunder Revue

In 1974, at the height of Dylan's superstardom, he called Kemp with an original idea for a concert tour: Instead of flying in private jets and playing giant stadiums, why not travel by bus from town to town, playing in small, intimate venues – maintaining spontaneity by announcing the performances just a few days in advance.

Kemp liked the idea, and then Dylan dropped the bomb – asking Kemp to produce the tour. "Louie, you're a successful businessman," Dylan said. "If anybody can pull this together, it's you."

The subsequent "Rolling Thunder Revue" became the stuff of legends, with dozens of artists including Ringo Starr, Joan Baez, and Joni Mitchell joining in the experiential four-hour shows. All the while, as Kemp criss-crossed America with the tour, he managed to juggle his "day job" at the seafood company. (A documentary about the tour, directed by Martin Scorsese, was released in June 2019.)

Bob's drive to write songs that mattered was born in part from his roots as a Jew.

Through it all, a Jewish element always remained. Reflecting on Dylan's lyrical themes, Kemp observes: "Supporting the underdog is virtually second nature to Jews because we have so often been in that position ourselves. We seem to have a sixth sense when it comes to persecution, discrimination, and injustice... There's no question in my mind that Bob's drive to write songs that mattered was born at least in part from his roots as a Jew."

Indeed, Dylan's songs from the 1960s such as "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are a-Changin'," and "Like a Rolling Stone" became anthems of the civil rights and anti-war movements. His much-heralded "Neighborhood Bully" was written in defense of Israel:

The neighborhood bully just lives to survive,
He's criticized and condemned for being alive...
He's always on trial for just being born.

Patron of Discovery

In the book's acknowledgements, Kemp thanks the founder of Aish HaTorah, Rabbi Noah Weinberg zt"l. Though it does not involve Bob Dylan and

thus is not in the book, Kemp shared with Aish.com details of how he became one of Rabbi Weinberg's beloved partners.

"In December 1985, I was home in Duluth, Minnesota, and got a phone call from Aish's Yona Yaffe to say that Rabbi Weinberg would like to come spend Shabbos with me. I had not met Rabbi Weinberg but I'd heard a lot of amazing stories about him.

"I laughed and said that Rabbi Weinberg was welcome for Shabbos, but that it was minus-20 degrees with an even-colder wind-chill factor, and lots of snow piled high." (Mark Twain famously said, "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in Duluth.")

Though Kemp offered to meet in balmy Los Angeles, Rabbi Weinberg preferred coming to Duluth. "He seemed like my type of person," Kemp says. "He was not afraid of the elements, and was a man on a mission not easily deterred."

Rabbi Weinberg was enthralled with the white mist as Lake Superior froze over.

Rabbi Weinberg arrived at Kemp's mansion on the shores of Lake Superior, the largest lake in the world, which was in the process of freezing over. A white mist emanated from the lake, along with the crackling sound of ice being formed. Rabbi Weinberg was enthralled and asked Kemp to borrow outdoor gear: long underwear, sweater, hat, gloves, and boots. With Kemp watching from his warm home, Rabbi Weinberg walked down to the lakeshore, then climbed atop a gazebo to survey the lake's mystical vision.

"Seeing Rabbi Weinberg's spiritual depth and appreciation of nature was the first of many insights I would learn from him over the coming years of our friendship," says Kemp.

Toward the end of Shabbos, in which Rabbi Weinberg generously shared his vast Torah knowledge, Kemp's curiosity finally got the best of him and he blurted out: "Rabbi, I'm thrilled you're here – but why Duluth in December?!"

Rabbi Weinberg smiled and said, "I have a plan to save the Jewish people and I need your help." He went on to explain that Aish had developed the Discovery seminar, exploring the rational basis for belief in Judaism. A team in Jerusalem, headed by Rabbi Motty Berger, was ready to present the inaugural seminar – a 3-day Discovery weekend for 150 people at a Palm Springs resort hotel. All that was needed was funding.

After Shabbos, Kemp wrote a check to cover full cost of the weekend seminar, and promised to bring along a few friends to Palm Springs. Kemp told Rabbi Weinberg: "If it's half as good as you say, we'll fund the rest of it."

At the Palm Springs weekend, Kemp witnessed how Discovery succeeded in changing participants' attitudes – breaking their misconceptions and inspiring them

to study Torah wisdom. Convinced, Kemp wrote a check for \$150,000 to expand Discovery to 15 U.S. cities.



1983: Bob Dylan (left) as the best man at Lou Kemp's wedding

Since then, over 100,000 people worldwide have participated in Discovery, influencing untold numbers to become more Jewishly committed. Says Kemp: “Sponsoring Discovery was one of the best choices I ever made.”

Over the years, Rabbi Weinberg would fondly refer to Kemp as “the father of Discovery.” On one visit to Rabbi Weinberg’s office overlooking the Western Wall, he told Kemp: “The merit of all those who’ve attended the Discovery Seminar is credited to your heavenly account.” Rabbi Weinberg then grasped Kemp’s hands, and together they danced in joyous celebration over this great eternal reward.

And it all started at a wintry Shabbos in Duluth.

The Homeless Jew

Kemp, now 77, reflects on what made his friend Bob Dylan so successful, including his unprecedented receipt of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature:

"Some wonder why the Jews have been so successful in so many areas, including the arts. I believe it's at least in part because the quest for knowledge, meaning, and truth are ingrained in Jewish culture. We have a passion to seek out meaning and give it new expression, both morally and artistically. That drive –

along with another Jewish trait known as chutzpah – have always been strong in Bobby, and his gifts have made his expression worthy of the ages.”

In one amusing story, Kemp recalls the time he and Dylan attended Yom Kippur services in Santa Monica, California:

We had been there before, and the rabbi recognized Bobby right away. But few if any of his fellow worshippers – all somberly dressed – realized he was standing at the back of the room. Having, as usual, missed the memo regarding the dress code, Bobby was wearing cowboy boots, torn jeans, a hoodie, a black leather jacket, and what looked like a long-lost pair of Jackie Kennedy's sunglasses.

Specifically, he was attending the closing service of the day, Neilah... The Ark housing the holy scrolls of the Torah remains open for the entire service, and it is considered a great honor to be chosen by the rabbi to open it. This carries with it many blessings for the new year. The honor customarily goes to the temple's most generous donor – but not this time.

With his ancient eyes, Rabbi Levitansky scoured the congregation. At last, his gaze came to rest upon a solitary figure standing in the back of the room. He motioned the casually dressed fellow up to the pulpit, and up he came. Bob Dylan opened the Ark on Yom Kippur.

Afterward, when the last echo of the shofar had diminished to silence and most of the congregants had trickled away, the synagogue's biggest donor pulled the rabbi aside. "I want you to know, Rabbi," said the man, "that when you didn't call me up to open the Ark, I was quite hurt. Then I saw whom you chose and I realized you were even wiser and kinder than I'd imagined. So I'm going to double my contribution for the coming year. It takes a great and generous heart to give the honor of opening the Ark for Neilah to a homeless Jew."

In the end, *Dylan & Me* is not a biography, nor an analysis of Dylan's songs and their impact. What sets it apart from the endless other books about Dylan is that it's not based on third-party interpretations, speculations, or unconfirmed rumors. Rather, it is an eyewitness account by someone who knows Dylan... better than anyone else who has tried to explain Dylan to the rest of us.

Kemp says: "My friend has always been Bobby Zimmerman, not the legend 'Bob Dylan'. We're just two regular friends who would talk for hours like other friends... except that to the rest of the world, one of us happened to be Bob Dylan."

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Life after Life: The Transformational Message Of Near Death Experiences

By Nomi Freeman

Liba was only 20 when she climbed onto a diving ladder at a swimming pool. As the very heavy person ahead of her dove into the pool, the structure collapsed.

Liba fell ten feet to the cement below, cracked her head open and died. She found herself floating above her body and the swimming pool, watching the scene below. She saw people running and screaming, calling for an ambulance.

Liba herself was relaxed, just observing the scene. She felt herself rising higher and higher, as the body on the ground and the pool were becoming smaller and smaller. She traveled through a tunnel toward a point of light and emerged into a world of Light.

Liba found herself in front of a court. She was being judged to determine whether she would stay in the Spiritual World or be sent back to her body. The entities on the right side of the tribunal were advocating for her to go back to her life, while the entities on the left were saying, “No, she’s dead; let her stay here.”

They debated back and forth, and then a powerful Light entity in the center came to a decision. Liba understood that she was staying where she was, and she was okay with that.

“At that point,” Liba recalls, “Somebody came in—another light—very powerful, more brilliant than the sun, but I was able to distinguish it was my grandmother. She had acquired an incredible spiritual light and power through the many acts of kindness that she had performed throughout her life.

“She had lived in America during the Holocaust, and had tirelessly helped the refugees coming in from Europe. She entered the court, pleading and crying, requesting that they allow me to go back to my life. The tribunal paused and considered her opinion.

The Light entity then pronounced a verdict. I was immediately pulled downwards—as if I was being sucked down by a vacuum cleaner—through

the tunnel, into my body. I opened my eyes in the hospital as the doctors were sewing up my head.”

Near Death Experience (NDE) is the term used to describe the experience of a person who was clinically dead and found himself out of his body. NDEers typically describe finding themselves hovering above their bodies, traveling through a tunnel toward a point of light, entering a World of Light and love, meeting dead relatives and friends, and witnessing their life review. Most people who have experienced an NDE are transformed by it, becoming much kinder, and more loving and compassionate people.

Eli was 17 years old when he died suddenly. He found himself in a darkness so thick that it was tangible, like the plague of darkness in Egypt. Eli describes how he felt as his soul left his body—“The darkness was solid, and I became afraid.” (This is an exception in his experience, as the great majority of people feel joy, freedom, calm, love, and peace.)

He continues, “When I went to yeshiva, in second grade, I had a rebbi who told us if we were ever in trouble, we should say, ‘Baruch Shem kevod malchuso l’olam va’ed.’

“In my spirit form, I started repeating these words over and over again, then suddenly, in the darkness, I saw a pinpoint of light in the distance. I zoomed toward that light, and as I approached, the light grew larger and larger—it was the entrance to the World of Light.

“I found myself in the presence of the Loving, Living Light...Intuitively, I knew that I was in the presence of the Shechinah, my Creator. If you want to have an understanding—a glimpse of what it feels like to be in the presence of the Shechinah—make a bundle of joy with all the happy experiences you’ve ever had in your entire life, then multiply it by a million.

“I was then transported to another area of the spiritual dimension, where I met a group of souls. Even though I had never seen them in my entire life, I knew who they were. They were my grandparents who were killed in the Holocaust. I had not even seen pictures of them, but my soul recognized their souls and we exchanged love.

“Then, once again, I was transported to a third location and found myself in front of the Beis Din Shel Maalah (Heavenly Tribunal). There was no fear in their kindly presence; they made me feel comfortable. In front of the tribunal, I saw my Life Review. [The Life Review is a very powerful and transformational part of the Near Death Experience.]

“I saw my entire life—17 years—and it was a good life; the tribunal was happy with me. Certain events were highlighted as my greatest accomplishments: In my school, there were bullies who I stood up to, to protect younger and weaker children.

“When my Life Review was over, I started screaming, ‘What about my parents?! What about my sisters?! There was so much I wanted to do with my life!’ As I finished saying these words, I opened my eyes and found myself back in my body.”

Eli kept his NDE a secret. He increased his observance of Torah and mitzvos. Today, 40 years later, he is a very successful professional, but he tells me, “My friends laugh at me. They say, ‘You know, if you put in a few more hours at your office, you do a little more business, you will have more money. Why are you always running to help people?’

“I laugh back at them. I tell them I know that every mitzvah I do is a diamond that belongs to me forever. They don’t know of my experience, but I know the value of a mitzvah because I witnessed it when I was up in the Spiritual World.”

Rabbi Yoseph Y. Geisinsky is a Chabad Shliach in Great Neck, New York. In 2013, he suffered cardiac arrest that left him clinically dead for 40 minutes. Doctors do not usually continue resuscitation efforts after 20 minutes, but in this case, one of the physicians present was a friend of the family, who kept up resuscitation efforts for much longer than the norm.

Rabbi Geisinsky’s experience was very unusual. As he tells it himself:

“After I fell unconscious, I felt myself rising to the Supernal Worlds, as I’ve heard happening to other people. My father, of blessed memory, and other deceased family members came to greet me. At a certain point, I was greeted by an entity who introduced himself as the Angel Michoel. He took me to the chambers of various tzaddikim. I saw that each tzaddik sat in his own chamber and taught Torah.

“I asked the Angel to take me to the chambers of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe. He agreed, and I stood facing Reb Yisroel Baal Shem Tov and then the Alter Rebbe.

“The Angel then said to me, ‘We must return to the Heavenly Court where your trial is taking place. They have not yet made a decision.’ The Angel explained that when the court hasn’t arrived at a clear decision, they leave some life-force within the body so that techiyas hameisim (resurrection of the dead) won’t be necessary if they decide a person should remain alive.

“We went to the Beis Din where the judges were discussing my case. They turned to me and asked me what I had to say. ‘Should you return down to the world or remain here?’ Trembling, I responded, ‘I am a chossid—a chossid of the Rebbe. Whatever he says, I’ll accept.’

“They said, ‘If so, let the Lubavitcher Rebbe come and state his opinion about the fate of Yosef Yitzchok ben Chaya Luba.’ I stood there, waiting for my sentence. Then I saw the Rebbe, in all his glory, with all those present according him the greatest honor.

“The Rebbe said, ‘I am working so that Moshiach comes and brings the complete Geulah. I sent my Shluchim all over the world to finish the job. I need my chassidim at their posts. Yosef Yitzchok ben Chaya Luba needs to return to his physical body to complete his work.’ It was then that I heard the announcement, ‘Yosef Yitzchok ben Chaya Luba – to life’, and I awoke from my coma, after the 72 hours of being unconscious.”

Raymond Moody was the first to publish research on NDEs, in his book *Life After Life*. He interviewed 100 people who experienced NDEs and found common patterns. In the 1990’s, two cardiologists interviewed patients who had survived cardiac arrest. Of the 300 patients whom Dr. Pim van Lommel of Holland interviewed, 42 reported an NDE that included most of the same experiences. A couple of years later, Dr. Michael Sabom of Georgia did the same research, and out of his 250 patients, 50 reported an NDE. The research results of both doctors were very similar.

Another life suddenly transformed by an NDE is Gordon Allen. Gordon was an outstanding entrepreneur who appeared on the cover of financial magazines. He was sometimes ruthless in pursuit of financial success. Gordon came down with pneumonia and died immediately upon reaching the hospital.

He describes his NDE : “The very first thing that came over me was this absolutely profound sensation of love—a love so totally unconditional that it overwhelmed me. It was beautiful and wonderfully accepting. This very profound love was followed by a sense of purposefulness that whatever’s happening has a point to it.”

He was met by 3 entities of Light, who told him he was wasting his outstanding talent and drive on the wrong things. Then he was sent back to his body. As soon as he came out of the hospital, he called the business associates he had dealt with somewhat harshly. He asked their forgiveness for not acting lovingly towards them. They couldn’t believe their ears! He left his business, adopted a simpler lifestyle, and became a therapist so he could help others.

Why did Gordon change his lifestyle so radically?

Many NDEers describe, that during their Life Review, they feel every emotion they ever caused another person to feel. One woman who had an NDE said, “I saw my entire life, and one thing was highlighted, as if to say, ‘This was your greatest achievement’:

One time, I was in a shopping center, and I heard a little girl crying because she had lost her mother. I picked her up and set her on a counter. I told her, ‘Don’t worry, sweetie, we are going to call your mom, and she will come and take you home. Everything is going to be okay—you’ll see.’ The little girl stopped crying, and her mother soon came and took her home. It didn’t cost me a penny. It took but a few minutes. And yet, this showed in my Life Review as an amazing accomplishment.”

Many people are unsettled thinking about their Life Review. However, one woman had an experience that showed teshuva can even change your past. This woman got very sick and died. When she reached Shamayim, she was met by a man with a long white beard, holding a book. She instinctively knew it was the story of her life.

When she looked inside the book, it had white pages with gold ink written inside. She noticed there were entire paragraphs missing from the book, as if they had been erased. She looked up and asked the man, ‘Why are some paragraphs missing from my life story?’ He smiled and said, ‘Those were things you did wrong, but you took steps to correct them, so they were erased.’

Some NDEers speak with tears in their eyes about their moving experience, especially those who were fortunate enough to be in the presence of the Loving, Living Light. While in this Presence, a few of them were asked the question, “What did you do with the life I gave you?”, and this question is still resonating.

May I suggest we also live our lives with this question—What did you do with the life I gave you?

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What It's Like to Be Jewish in Ghana

By Menachem Posner

Oxford MBA talks about combining business and spiritual development in sub-Saharan Africa



Zachary Bucheister, right, describes what it's like to be part of Ghana's tight-knit, but chronically transient Jewish community, anchored by Rabbi Noach Majesky.

Known for its steamy jungles, raw beaches and bustling markets, the West African nation of Ghana is home to 28 million people, perhaps 500 of them Jewish. Since 2015, the Ghana Jewish community has found a home at the Chabad-Lubavitch Center of Ghana in Accra, directed by Rabbi Noach and Altie Majesky. In this interview, Zachary Bucheister, a native of Westchester, N.Y., describes what

it's like to be part of Ghana's tight-knit, but chronically transient Jewish community.

QUESTION: The first thing I am wondering is how a nice Jewish boy from Westchester ended up in Ghana ...

ANSWER: I came to Accra in February of 2016 from Oxford, England, where I had just finished my MBA. I set out to help build a business advisory and market-research firm that a classmate of mine had founded—a company focused on promoting private sector growth in sub-Saharan Africa.

I showed up at Kotoka International, literally bag in hand, in the middle of a torrential downpour and blackout. I had never been to Ghana before, and that first night in a flooded, dark apartment was quite the experience. Up to that point, I had limited exposure to Ghanaian (or West African) culture, and over the next few days I was reeling from the colorful, intense and powerful reality playing itself out all around me. My family is affiliated with Chabad of Briarcliff, and I occasionally had attended the Chabad House in Oxford, so it was natural for me to ask my dad, somewhat wistfully, if something similar existed in Accra.

I remember sitting in Vida Cafe in an area called Cantonments when literally 45 minutes later, I got a call from Rabbi Majesky inviting me over for that Shabbat. He gave me exact directions to the Beit Chabad, as it is known here.

Q: What is the Chabad House like?

A: Located on a pothole-ridden dirt road behind a security wall lined with large palm trees, the Chabad House is a spacious home on an expansive property. Inside are classrooms for the Hebrew school and summer camp, as well as a large rec room for prayers, which is also used for meals when the crowd is too big to fit around the dining-room table.

The layout is open and inviting, which reflects the mood very well. Everyone who walks in is invited to have a cold drink, join the prayers and meals, and definitely encouraged to make a *l'chaim*.

It doesn't matter what your prior level of observance may be; every Jew in Ghana is welcome at Chabad. Some join for holidays, some for every Shabbat, and some for other programs or events. But the Majeskys do all they can to make everyone feel at home.

Q: Who are the community members, and where do they come from?

A: There is no historic Jewish presence in Ghana. When Rabbi Noach and Altie showed up, they literally created something from nothing. I am sure folks had been gathering for holidays and special celebrations—and there is the Israeli embassy—but to the best of my knowledge, there was no communal place for Jews in Ghana to call home.

The core of the community is formed by Israeli businesspeople and their families. They are mostly here for the “traditional” Israeli export industries: construction, security, infrastructure.



Bucheister arrived in Accra in February of 2016 from Oxford, England, where he had just finished his MBA.

Some Israeli families join regularly, and their kids run around with Yankee, Hillie and the rest of the Chabad children who are always brightening the house. But I think the BeitChabad was especially important for those of us without family in Ghana.

That was my anchor, my community—the one thing I could rely on amidst the uncertainty. It didn't matter if they were building businesses, working in natural resources, staffing the Israeli or American embassies, Peace Corps Volunteers, New York University students coming through for a semester as exchange students.

Whatever they were doing in Ghana, on Friday night they would be eating Altie's spicy fish and *matbucha* salad, and having a drink poured for them by Rabbi Noach.



Ghana is a country of extraordinary natural beauty.

In the past two years, things have really grown. When I arrived, we generally had a *minyan* on Friday nights and sometimes on Shabbat morning. Now

there is always a *minyan* on Fridays, and more often than not, on Shabbat and Sunday mornings as well.

It's a heady experience and hard to imagine if you haven't experienced it. People come to Ghana to work very hard and are under a lot of pressure during the week. Ghana is a lovely country, but the work stresses, the outrageous traffic jams and hectic bazaar of life in Accra can wear your nerves down to frays. As soon as people arrive at Chabad for Shabbat, that pressure melts away. They are greeted by the Majesky kids, they sit with their friends, and everyone just feels at home and at peace.



On arriving, Bucheister found that the Majekys had established a thriving Jewish community, including a summer camp.

Q. With a mix of Americans and Israelis, what's the common language spoken at the Chabad House?

A: Exactly as you would imagine: It's a mix of English and Hebrew. In typical Chabad fashion, Rabbi Noach is always encouraging everyone to do a bit more, be it come up for an *aliyah* or prepare a short talk on the

weekly Torah portion. Those can be in either language and sometimes a mix, based on the crowd.

I guess it's best expressed by the five Majesky kids, who know everyone and greet them like best friends, which they are. The kids speak Yiddish, Hebrew, English, French and a bit of Twi, which is a local language in Accra. On Sunday mornings after eating Israeli-style *shakshuka* (tomato and eggs), the kids would beg for motorcycle rides in every language they knew how. Actually, on that note, Ghana was the first (well, only) place I ever taught a rabbi to ride a motorcycle. Not sure if it's every day in other Jewish communities that you see a black-tie Chassid trying to ride a Boxer motorbike.



The Westchester, N.Y., native was made to feel right at home in equatorial Africa, as here with some of the Majesky children.

Granted, there were no motorcycle rides on Shabbat, but people come early to socialize, join the services and then linger over the meal way past midnight.

Everyone feels welcomed, knowing that there are even beds available to sleep in overnight if they want.

Q: What are the logistical challenges of maintaining Jewish life in Ghana?

A: I remember before one Passover, the rabbi commented that there is not a single Passover product that could be gotten locally. Everything needs to be shipped from abroad, which can be complex. But even with all the logistical challenges, before Passover there were boxes of matzah handed out for everyone, *Chanukiyot* and candles for every house on Chanukah, and gift baskets on Purim. The hurdles just don't seem to matter. The Majeskys get it done.



Atli Majesky at the Hebrew-school graduation ceremony.

The rabbi is a trained *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), so he supplies whoever needs with fresh kosher poultry and invites anyone interested to join for his farm visits on Wednesday mornings. Beef, on the other hand, is brought from elsewhere and is carefully stockpiled.

Noach and Altie Majesky are a team. Everything they do for the community is a joint effort. They share the burden of preparing events, teaching, guiding and

everything else. Together, they are the spark and the lightning rod; they know every Jewish person, and every Jew knows them.

There is a very strong communal spirit here, so if anyone is coming into the country and can bring an additional suitcase, they'll see if they can bring something for others, including kosher food and other supplies for the Chabad House.



A sub-Saharan bar mitzvah.

Q: What are Jewish holidays like?

A: On holidays, everyone showed up for the Beit Chabad parties. You *have* to show up, if only for the food. There is usually Chanukah menorah-lighting in some hotel lobby (a lot of events happen at hotels here), but there is no question that the Beit Chabad is the center of the action, where everyone comes together and feels like they belong.

Rabbi Noach and Altie brought down a Jewish cover band for Chanukah one year, and that's a surreal experience. You know you are in West Africa (the palm trees and intense humidity make it impossible to forget), but there you are eating *sufganiyot* and listening to Israeli musicians belt out a mix of Chassidic music and Led Zeppelin.

Simchat Torah and Purim here are just unbelievable; the joy is palpable and contagious. I can share some pictures, but of course, the best stuff happens on Shabbat and holidays when photos are not allowed, so you'll have to use your imagination or come yourself to experience it.

When you live in a place where Judaism is more accessible, you may or you may not decide to take advantage. But here on the holidays, on Shabbat, you just need that sense of family. You know that all that's expected is for you to show up, and that's exactly what makes Judaism here so special.

Shall We Have Another? Why Having Another Child is a Good Idea

By Sarah Rinder
Illustration by Esty Raskin



The Upper East Side of Manhattan, one of the wealthiest ZIP codes in the United States, is known for its highly-regarded schools, and its sidewalks and

playgrounds are filled with children. Mothers don't always work full-time, and nannies and household help abound. Still, quiet assumptions related to childrearing govern life in this privileged enclave. One or two children per family is normal and expected, a third "status child" is not unheard of for some, and with four you are most likely a little weird, or a religious Jew (or both).



Chani Krasnianski is the director of Chabad of the Upper East Side and she's rather confident that with nine children she has the largest family in the neighborhood. A Chabad family further south is a close second with eight children. Krasnianski acknowledges that it often feels like almost nothing in her community, including apartment sizes or tuition price tags, is designed for a family like her own.

In 2017, the birth rate in the United States dropped to an historic low average of 1.76 children for each woman in her childbearing years. The figure tends to fluctuate over time—but various studies estimate that current fertility rates are unlikely to return to a replacement ratio of two children anytime soon. This is an old story in Europe, where birth rates have been in decline for decades, and a rapidly aging population casts doubt on the future economic sustainability of the continent.

Historically, events such as war or famine may have been the primary causes for a dropping birth rate. However, the situation is rather different in the modern

Western world. Ours is physically the healthiest and most affluent society that has ever existed, and, in some ways, raising children is also more convenient than it has ever been. Yet, children are increasingly perceived as a burden.

Differences in the nature of modern life, changing expectations regarding marriage and gender roles, and perhaps some deeper social and religious trends are just some of the factors that are motivating many couples to opt out of having more than one or two children. And that's if they have any at all.

This, in turn, creates a kind of negative feedback loop in terms of the way that society views children, the amount of children one encounters in public spaces, and of course, on the average person's motivation to organize their life around having them in the first place.

Among Chasidic or Orthodox Jews, families of seven or more children are not unique. But Chabad representatives like Chani largely do not live in sheltered religious enclaves, but rather in communities which harbor very different assumptions about having children. With this exposure comes an inevitable sense of disjunct, but also an opportunity.

Large families which emphasize the joy, and the immense opportunity of bringing children into the world, may even present a kind of "counter culture" wherein commonly held truisms about the burdens of parenting might be re-evaluated or even overturned.

In his 2011 book *How Civilizations Die*, opinion writer **David Goldman** makes a powerful argument that links Western population decline with, among other matters, a crisis of faith. As Goldman has it, "If we do not see ourselves as continuing the lives of those who preceded us, nor preparing the lives of those who will follow us, then we are defined by our physical existence and nothing more. In that case we will seek to maximize our pleasure."

Economist **Bryan Caplan**, the author of *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*, takes a more pragmatic line. Western parents "over-parent" to such a degree, he argues, that is intimidating and financially draining for them to continue to expand their families even if they would like to do so.

In another 2012 book, *The Case for Children*, Chabad Rabbi **Simcha Weinstein** of Brooklyn's Pratt Institute considers how Biblical wisdom regarding this matter is perhaps more relevant today than in the past, when fertility was hardly something one had much choice in:

Some might ask why G-d needs to command people to do something that not only guarantees the continued survival of the human race but also comes so naturally. However, I sometimes wonder if that long ago command to be fruitful and multiply was actually meant for us modern people, thousands of years in the

future—a kind of message in a (baby) bottle that would wash ashore in our postmodern, post-parenting era. (p. 330)

Weinstein is a campus rabbi, and one major place where these questions inevitably play out is on the college campus. Indeed, in addition to its other functions, a university might be characterized as a place where individuals in their prime reproductive years put off starting a family. This is not a quirk of the university environment, rather it is a feature of it.

Miri Birk is the program director at the Chabad Center of Cornell University. Parenting, she says, tends to be far from the minds of the intelligent and idealistic students she encounters. When an undergraduate comes to college intending to become a doctor, he or she has a clear path: take certain courses, find relevant internships, apply by a certain time frame, etc.



But for a student with distant dreams of starting a Jewish family, there is no path, no suggestions for when to date, whom to date, or places to consider career opportunities where such a goal might be more feasible. For an Ivy League undergraduate with hopes of changing the world, there may even be a sense that it is wrong—or selfish—to take children and family into account when dreaming big dreams.

Herself a mother of five, Birk tells students that the most concrete positive impact one can have on the world is through having children: “It’s worth it for you,

for your family, and it's worth it for the world. All major scientific and moral advances have come from human beings, and if you think you're a good and moral person, you're exactly the kind of person who *should* be having kids."

To be sure, having more children can take a toll on one's career—in most cases, the mother's. And children are expensive. Estimates vary, but economists guess that children can cost parents anywhere from \$200,000 to \$1 million in expenses and lost income potential over a lifetime.

Yet despite the high upfront costs of having a child, proponents of larger families say that the long term benefits pay off over decades: in the long run, your children give much more to you than you give to them. Perhaps these sorts of calculations don't even capture the fullness of it. In Birk's words, "We all have the sense that to bring a child into the world is to touch infinity—is to touch G-d. You never have that chance in anything else you do."

In *The Case for Children*, Weinstein addresses the limits of economic arguments against child rearing, even if he is rather skeptical that having children needs to cost as much as we think it does: "Let me play devil's advocate: let's agree that a baby does in fact cost you \$1 million. Congratulations: you now have an asset worth \$1 million. You're a millionaire!"

Weinstein makes the case for moving away from thinking of children as liabilities and instead seeing them as assets: "Yes, in purely material terms, children are expensive. Yet they're also a priceless blessing and the best investment you can make in terms of your—and society's—future." What's necessary, in other words, is to move away from the conception that children are burdens and move toward thinking of them as precious gifts.

Oftentimes a couple will agree, in principle, that raising children represents a wonderful opportunity, but this agreement itself can influence their decision-making. The value a modern couple places on having children can also lead some to overthink parenting and its attendant responsibilities, concluding that having fewer children means that they can invest more in each one.

This is a difficult matter, heavily influenced of course by one's context and conception of what is normal. And there are always factors like fertility, health and fortune that are beyond our control. There is no right "number," and every family's situation is unique and comes with particular considerations. But is it possible from time to time to subtly encourage, or even merely suggest, that a family expand its sense of what is possible and ideal for them?

That's what Rabbi **Yitzchak Shochet**, the rabbi of the Mill Hill Synagogue in London, tries to do in his own dynamic community. His remarkably young congregation counts more than 1,800 members and enjoys the distinction of having the largest proportion of children under the age of twenty of any individual community in the U.K. (and likely, by extension, in Europe). Rabbi Schochet

attributes this in part to the opportunities he senses for children in the community, with two Jewish primary schools within walking distance of the residential district and to the cohesive community spirit.

Here too, financial concerns likely impede family growth. And so may increasing anxiety about anti-Semitism in England and uncertainty surrounding Jewish life in Europe. Nevertheless, Rabbi Shochet believes that it's possible to challenge congregants to reconsider some of their assumptions about family size, whether individually or from the pulpit: "I have often made the argument to many a couple that however many children they have decided upon, they should go for one more."



It's unrealistic and unfair to ask your average Western family to start repopulating their society in a fashion that would put them at odds with their surrounding culture. But to ask a family to consider expanding their sense of what is possible for them just a little bit may be something they would be grateful for in the long run. It's not uncommon for women and men just past their childbearing years to regret not having had more children. It's practically unheard of for adults to regret the birth of a child who is now a treasured part of their family.

For Rabbi Schochet, the challenges that stand in the way of having more children are real, and in many ways, children are "a harder sell than ever before."

Rather than getting mired in pragmatic arguments, he suggests that “the key is to bypass reason and appeal to the heart in the hope that people will appreciate that kids are the most prized possession of all.”

Goldman’s *Why Civilizations Die*, echoes this sentiment, recognizing the limits of purely rational arguments: “When children become a cost rather than an asset, prospective parents must identify with something beyond their own needs in order to sustain child rearing.” Goldman writes, “there is no answer to the question ‘Why have children?’” Or at least, this answer is not something that scientists, philosophers, or the general culture is going to provide.

Ultimately, while the Western world has a very real and documented problem with population decline, within our own communities, this question should not come down to numbers. It should come down to our values and perspectives. Making a case for children means taking a religiously influenced stance on how we define human beings more broadly: as individuals with infinite worth and infinite potential. Pragmatic arguments have their place, but there are limits to them.

What is needed more than anything is a shift in sensibility. This shift involves understanding that children are assets and not liabilities, and it involves expanding one’s sense of how much it’s possible for a parent to give, and how much love a human heart can hold. You can embrace these shifts whether you have twelve children or no children, and the result will be a more vibrant future for all of us.

When Krasnianski’s ninth child was born, she looked at her newborn daughter and understood that her world was about to change. Her daughter had Down syndrome, and while emotionally she was bursting with love for her baby, intellectually it was hard not to feel like this was something of a disaster.

She was reminded of a talk the **Lubavitcher Rebbe** gave when she was in high school. In a series of talks that focused on family, the Rebbe spoke about the obstacles, particularly financial ones, that keep people from having more children. He reminded his audience that each child born into the world creates a new “channel of blessing,” be it material or otherwise.

As time passed, and Krasnianski began to see the blessings that her daughter **Bracha** (aptly named “blessing”) brought to her own life, that of her family, and their community around them, she began to appreciate the wisdom of the idea that she had heard the Rebbe speak about decades earlier. It has not always been an easy road, but for Krasnianski and her family, welcoming this additional child opened up new vistas of joy and spiritual awareness that they might not have perceived earlier.

In the poem “The Possibilities of Language” the poet **Yehoshua November** describes the disparaging attitude toward children displayed by a

distinguished poet he once met in a hotel lobby: “She was a great writer,” she said, “until she had children.” He contrasts this perspective with that of his own teacher:

A child is infinity,
My Rabbi said when we met
In the worn-down yeshiva coat room
After my wife had given birth.
A child is infinity, he repeated,
Without explaining.

Reprinted from the Summer 2019 edition of Lubavitch International. Sarah Rindner teaches English literature at Lander College for Women in New York. Her writing on Jewish and literary topics has appeared in the Jewish Review of Books, Mosaic Magazine and other publications.

Selma's Only Synagogue Has 4 Members and is Fighting for its Life

By Ben Sales



The exterior of Temple Mishkan Israel in Selma, Ala. The synagogue has four members but wants to transform into a museum. (Amy Milligan)

(JTA) — Whenever the lone synagogue in Selma, Alabama, needs dusting, new lighting or vacuuming, Ronnie Leet is the one who does it.

It's tiring work — especially since the 120-year-old Temple Mishkan Israel hasn't held regular services in years, hasn't had a rabbi in nearly half a century and isn't even close to having enough Jews for a minyan, a prayer quorum of 10 people.

In fact, the temple has only four members. At 68, Leet is the youngest. There are two or three other Jews in the city of 20,000 known for its role in the civil rights movement, but they're not involved with the synagogue.

“The congregation gets smaller and smaller, and we’re getting older,” Leet said. “With a 120-year-old roof, we see issues every day with it. As every year goes by, and as it gets older and older, something is going to happen.”

Other small towns in America with dying synagogues have simply pulled the plug. Buildings are vacated, prayer books and Torah scrolls are sent elsewhere, and the dwindling membership finds other places to go or just stops going to synagogue.

It would probably be easier for Selma’s temple to follow suit. But it’s doubling down on the continued life of the synagogue.

Mishkan Israel wants to raise \$800,000 through GoFundMe for renovations. A Virginia professor is trying to turn the synagogue into a cause celebre. And last year it got an email address.

“Temple Mishkan Israel is one of those stories that’s so easy for people in the United States to overlook,” said Amy Milligan, a Jewish studies professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk who is writing a book about Selma’s Jewish life and has taken an active role in helping the congregation with fundraising and publicity. “It’s a story about an early community of Jews that continues to survive in 2019.”

There are no illusions of becoming a regularly functioning synagogue in the near future. But Mishkan Israel members and Milligan believe it still has something to say to the 81,000 tourists who filter through Selma every year visiting places like the National Museum of Voting Rights, which is just across the Edmund Pettus Bridge from the synagogue.

They plan for the synagogue to become a museum, one more dot in the city’s constellation of spaces commemorating a formative era in the Deep South. The synagogue would host exhibits on Southern Jewish history and the Jews’ role in the civil rights movement, as well as events.

In 2017, some 125 people prayed at the synagogue during a Jewish mission to Selma over Martin Luther King Day weekend. Two years earlier, 205 attended a commemoration at the synagogue of the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when Alabama state troopers beat nonviolent civil rights marchers on the bridge and shot tear gas at them.

“We want it there for people to tour the building and hear our story of the past,” Leet said. “It’s more than just fixing the building and letting it sit there.”

Decades ago, Selma had a thriving Jewish community of as many as 500 members. Leet said that as recently as the early 1950s, half of the businesses in the city’s downtown were owned by Jews. In the 1920s and ’30s, Milligan said, Jewish businesses used to take out ads in the local paper notifying their customers that they would be closed for the High Holidays. Stores owned by non-Jews would

likewise buy ads wishing Jews a happy holiday and reminding them to come by after it ended.

Jews came to Selma around the early 1830s, and the first organized services took place in 1867. Mishkan Israel moved into its current building in 1899, and it still has the original electricity system. Leet said the building is still in remarkably good condition for its age.

But as Jews became more successful, Milligan said, younger generations moved away.

“It very much is a fulfillment of the American dream,” she said. “People came into Selma, they had their businesses, and they built that as a community for their children. And then they sent their kids away to college. The parents said, ‘Go have a career. I want you to prosper.’”



The members of Temple Mishkan Israel — from left, Hanna Berger, Ronnie Leet, Joanie Gibian Looney and Charles Pollack — stand in front of the Torah ark. The synagogue has not held weekly services for decades. (Amy Milligan)

Despite the famous image of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Leet said the local Jewish community was not active in the civil rights movement. Other Southern synagogues were attacked, and Mishkan Israel received a bomb threat.

While Jews were comfortable in the community, Leet said they still felt uneasy about their relations with elements of the white Christian majority and did not speak out publicly for racial equality.

Milligan said a museum exhibit could provide an unvarnished portrayal of that attitude and era.

“We knew that where everybody was on Sunday morning was where we were not,” Leet said. “I think the congregation as a whole really didn’t play a part in the national movement of civil rights here in Selma. They didn’t know where it was going to fall on them.”

So far, the synagogue has raised only \$6,500 online. But Leet hopes the synagogue’s diaspora will come through. In 1997, some 220 relatives of current and former synagogue members came back for a reunion.

“There’s a love across this country from people raised in Selma,” he said. “We want the country and world to know there was a wonderful congregation here in Selma, Alabama.”

Reprinted from the July 5, 2019 dispatch of the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)

A Museum on Southern Jews Moves its Eclectic 4,000-Item Collection Across State Lines

By Josefin Dolsten



The museum’s project coordinator, Anna Tucker, measures shelves used to store artifacts ahead of the move last month. (Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience)

(JTA) — A prosthetic leg that belonged to a Russian Jewish immigrant to Lake Providence, Louisiana. An 8-foot neon sign from a hotel that advertised itself as the only establishment with an “up to date kosher kitchen” in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Two synagogue organs from the now shuttered Temple B’nai Israel in Canton, Mississippi.

These items made the trip from Mississippi to Louisiana last month — along with the rest of the more than 4,000 artifacts that make up the collection of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience.

Movers had to build custom crates and transport the items in climate-controlled trucks due to the size and number of unusual artifacts.

The museum is the only one in the world wholly dedicated to telling the history of Jews in the American South. And when it reopens next year in New Orleans, it will be easily accessible to the general public for the first time.



A sign for the Knickerbocker Hotel, which advertised itself as the only establishment with an “up to date kosher kitchen” in Hot Springs, Ark. (Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience)

Founded in 1986, the museum was located previously at the Union for Reform Judaism’s Jacobs Camp in the remote town of Utica, Mississippi. It did not always have a full-time staff and there were times visitors had to make an appointment. The museum closed in 2012 and put its collection in storage in Jackson, Mississippi, as leadership contemplated a move.

New Orleans was chosen as the new location because of its vibrant Jewish population, tourism industry and the fact that it didn’t already have a Jewish-themed attraction. Museum officials predict that some 40,000 people will visit every year.

With the reopening, the museum will shift its focus, according to its executive director, Kenneth Hoffman.

“The [original] idea was to collect artifacts from congregations and families that were quickly disappearing from these small towns and put them on display and

preserve the artifacts, which is a great mission to have,” Hoffman, a Houston native who grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in a phone interview from New Orleans.

“But now what we’re doing in New Orleans is we are going beyond that and we are really attempting to tell a larger story about Jewish life in the South.”

In 2017, the museum launched a \$10 million fundraising campaign for the move and redesign. It has raised \$6 million through donations from individuals and family foundations.

Jews have lived in the South since before the Revolutionary War, but the bulk arrived as immigrants during the 19th century. Many settled in small towns, where they worked as merchants. However, by the 20th century, young Jews were leaving those towns to study and work in larger cities in the South. Though some Jews remain in small towns today, many synagogues have closed or are on the verge of shutting down.

The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience is the only physical space wholly dedicated to the study of the experience of Jews in the region. Atlanta’s Breman Museum has a gallery dedicated to Southern Jewish history and exhibits about other topics, but it focuses on Atlanta. The exhibit at The Jewish Museum of Florida is local, too. Dallas and Houston have Holocaust museums. Other organizations — including the Southern Jewish Historical Society and the Institute for Southern Jewish Life, to which the museum belonged until it separated in 2017 as part of the relaunch — hold events but do not have permanent exhibits.

Few people associate the American Jewish experience with the South, despite the region’s rich history, said Gary Zola, the executive director of the Jacob Rader Center of the American Jewish Archives and a professor at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. But its story includes slaveholders and civil rights activists, high-ranking Confederate politicians like Judah Benjamin and society women like the Atlanta memoirist Helen Jacobus Apte.

“The Southern Jewish experience constitutes the most distinctive and arguably the most significant regional saga because the South envisioned itself as a separate, independent nation during the Civil War,” Zola wrote to JTA in an email. “Thankfully, this new Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience will soon provide the American public with an opportunity to learn more about this vitally important facet of our collective past.”

The museum has been working with Gallagher & Associates, a firm that has designed exhibits for the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia and the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C.

Interactive exhibits will address topics such as anti-Semitism in the South, how Jews reacted to the civil rights movement, Southern Jews in popular culture and the religious customs of the region's Jews.



Postcards show Jewish-owned department stores throughout the South. (Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience)

“If we wanted to get Jews and non-Jews to get through the door to experience the museum, then we had to be relevant,” Hoffman said. “So we had to talk not just to the relatives or the ancestors or descendants of small-town Southern Jews, we had to expand our mission and talk about how Jews across the South made an impact or were impacted by their communities.”

Ultimately, Hoffman wants the museum to challenge the way visitors think about their own identities.

“One of our goals is to expand people’s understanding of what it means to be a Southerner,” he said, “and what it means to be a Jew.”

Reprinted from the July 9, 2019 dispatch of the JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency.)

Berel Raskin, 84, Chassidic Fishmonger Who Became A Crown Heights Icon

By Dovid Margolin



Sholom Ber (Berel) Raskin, an iconic Crown Heights fishmonger for the last six decades, passed away on Shabbat, May 25, at the age of 84. (Photo: Israel Bardugo)

Sholom Ber (Berel) Raskin, the kosher fishmonger who, glinting cleaver in hand, welcomed generations of customers, visitors and journalists into his pungent Crown Heights fish store and the Chassidic neighborhood he called home, passed away suddenly on Shabbat morning, May 25. He was 84, having spent 65 years living in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., to which he arrived as an orphaned survivor of Soviet tyranny and Nazi terror, and where he eventually became an area icon.

A big, brawny, bearded man, the smiling Raskin was the picture-perfect Chassidic shopkeeper, happily living up to the role. Even years after his eponymous store had grown to include a full staff and massive wholesale division—becoming famous for its gefilte fish and seemingly endless flavors of herring—the elderly Raskin could regularly be seen through the windows behind the counter, sleeves rolled up and hands glistening, bringing a massive knife down upon an assortment of (kosher) fish.



Raskin, seen in 2013, continued working long after his business had grown to a full staff and included a big wholesale division.

To his regular customers—and there were many—the scene was just a decades-old slice of neighborhood life, but to visitors and guests from around the world it was an image of the Old World they could only read about in books or see on television. Journalists, too, could not get enough of the sight of the pious, Russian-accented Chabad-Lubavitch fishmonger “wiping his thick hands on his apron,” as The New York Times noted in a 1991 pre-Rosh Hashanah story, “and motioning to the streets outside.”

Raskin’s appeal lay in the fact that he was not a Hollywood invention but the real thing, the Chassidic embodiment of the American dream. Having survived the worst the 20th century had to offer, he arrived penniless in New York, where he settled near the Rebbe—Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. With

simple faith and the Rebbe's blessings, he went into a business he knew next to nothing about, toiled to make a living for his family and eventually built a successful business, all while remaining faithful to his Chassidic roots and education.



In a private audience with the Rebbe, Raskin asked him to officiate at his wedding. The Rebbe, who had requested of Raskin that he grow a beard, replied: “If you do what I ask of you, I’ll do what you ask of me.” He agreed, and the Rebbe (on left, holding wine) officiated on Feb. 9, 1959.

“I used to work very hard,” Raskin explained in a 2013 interview. Working himself in those early days, he would often wrap up his store orders at midnight before heading in his truck to the fish market to be there when it opened in the wee hours of the morning. He’d buy what he needed, return to Crown Heights and start the next day anew. “I had such strength back then . . . ,” he said.

But his biggest pride was his family—many of his children and grandchildren serve as Chabad emissaries around the world—and the fact that he supplied fish to the Rebbe and his wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, including for Passover.

“On erev Pesach [the eve of Passover] I used to call up the Rebbetzin ... and tell [her] that I had new knives and a special machine, only for the Rebbe,” Raskin recalled, explaining the lengths to which he went in order to ensure the highest grade of kosher for Passover for the Rebbe. “You know what she used to tell me? ‘Mr. Raskin, mein man farlozt af eich. Why do you have to tell me? [My husband] relies on you.’”

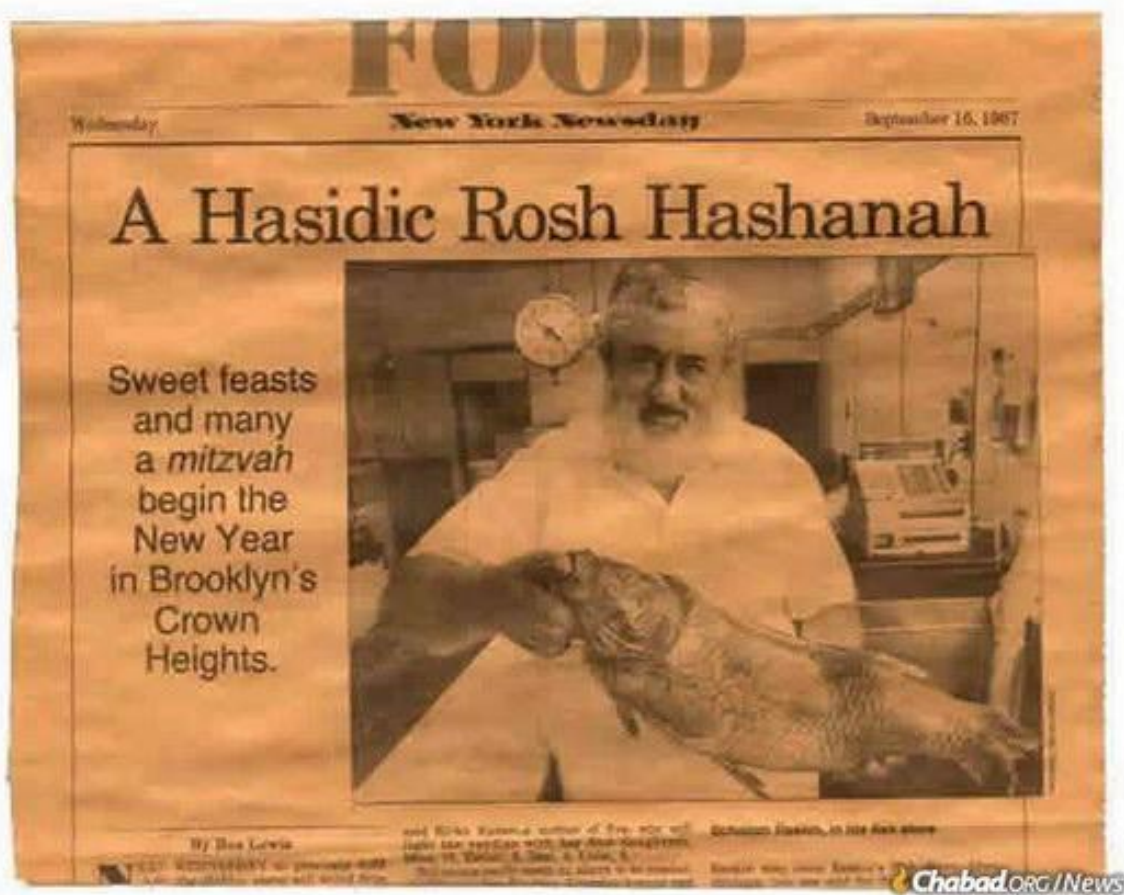


On the cover of the metro section of The New York Times, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, Sept. 7, 1991.

In the Bloodlands

Sholom Ber Raskin was born on June 28, 1934 (16 Tammuz, 5694), in the city of Leningrad (today St. Petersburg), the Soviet Union, the second of R' Aaron Leib and Doba Raiza Laine's four sons. His parents both stemmed from Chabad Chassidic stock, his father being a descendent of the renowned R' Peretz Chein (1797-1883).

By the time Raskin was born, Communist authorities had done a thorough job decimating Jewish life and learning throughout the Soviet Union—an era when synagogues, yeshivahs and mikvahs were forcibly confiscated and destroyed. Stalin's purge of the Communist Party and widespread middle-of-the-night arrests began when Raskin was three. Despite the suffocating atmosphere of terror, Raskin's father remained a faithful Jew and Chassid, maintaining his beard throughout. R' Aaron Leib, who had a melodious voice and often served as chazzan and Torah reader in Leningrad's underground minyanim [prayer quorums], was also a gifted mechanic who used his skills to assist his fellow Chassidim in their work.



Raskin strikes his familiar pose in Newsday, pre-Rosh Hashanah 1987.

At the age of six, just before the outbreak of World War II on the eastern Soviet front, Raskin and his brothers left Leningrad with their mother for the city of Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod), where they remained once Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in violation of his treaty with Stalin. His father died from hunger during the German siege of Leningrad.

“He was buried in a mass grave,” Raskin said. “My dream now is to go back to say kaddish.”



Raskin, seen here in his store circa 1972, was born in the Soviet Union and his father died in the Nazi siege of Leningrad during World War II.

In Gorky, the family lived with their maternal grandfather, a devout Lubavitcher Chassid. With no choice of a Jewish school, legal or illegal, the boys were sent to a Soviet state school, which Raskin attended for four grades.

“I had an uncle; he told my mother, you’re sending your children to shkola [school], what will be with them? They’ll become non-Jews,” recalled Raskin. “You need to send them away to yeshivah.”

His mother listened and sent her young boys to Samarkand, Soviet Uzbekistan, where a Chabad refugee community had formed and established

synagogues for themselves and makeshift schools and yeshivahs for their children. Raskin recalled that his melamed in Samarkand was R' Berke Chein. Later, he studied at the yeshivah in Tashkent (which had a similar refugee community) under R' Chaim Meir Garelik.

With the conclusion of World War II, Chassidic community members in Uzbekistan found themselves wondering whether they should attempt to make a break for it and flee, or remain in the Soviet Union. That's when, as Raskin recalled it, a rumor spread that the sixth Rebbe—Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, of righteous memory, who had escaped from Europe and settled in New York in 1940—had said *ich vil zeh'n meine einiklach*—"I'd like to see my grandchildren."



Although it's grown, not much has changed about Raskin's Fish.

Largely for this reason, a huge portion of the Chabad community in the USSR decided to seek ways to leave. At the time, 1946, the Soviet Union made an allowance for Polish citizens who had ended up in its territory during the war to be repatriated back to Poland. Taking advantage of this momentary loophole, about 1,000 Lubavitcher men, women and children escaped the country using forged or illegally purchased Polish identity papers.

The family spent three months in Lemberg (Lvov, the Ukrainian gateway city to the West) before obtaining Polish papers made out to their mother's maiden name, which Raskin continued to use for the rest of his life. They left the USSR by train, making it first to Czechoslovakia and then on to a Displaced Persons' camp in Wegscheid, on the outskirts of Linz, Austria.

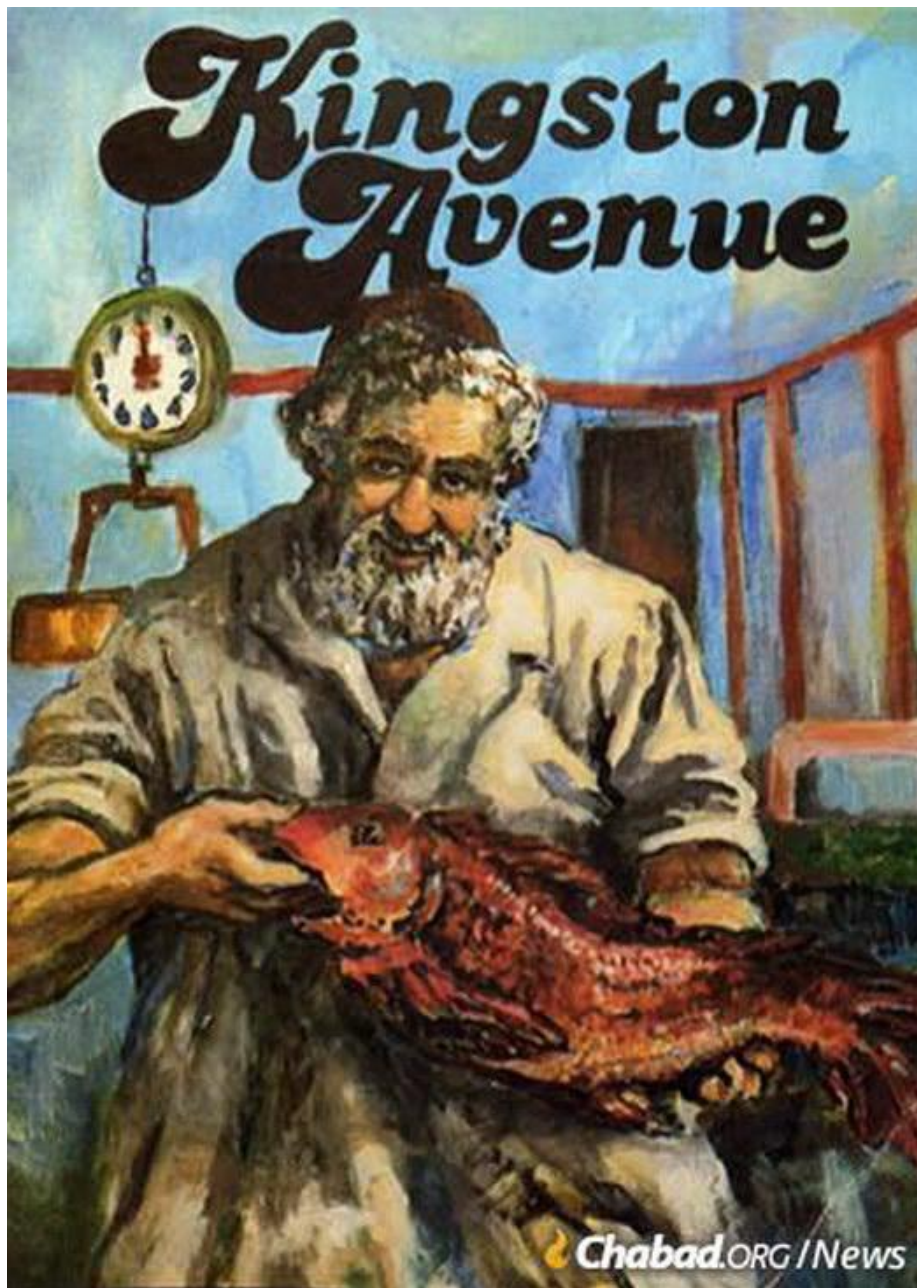
The Wegscheid DP camp was known for being overcrowded, with poor food quality and supplies; nevertheless, a semblance of Jewish community life bloomed. The Raskin family spent a year and a half languishing in the camp, where the boys attended a cheder. Raskin would later recall walking an hour on Shabbat mornings to immerse in the mikvah in Linz. From there they moved to France, living in the Parisian suburb of Brunoy, where Raskin and his brothers attended the newly founded Lubavitcher yeshivah.



When he started “I didn’t know anything about fish. It went very hard.”

In 1949, the sixth Rebbe established the Chassidic village of Kfar Chabad in Israel, and the majority of Russian Lubavitcher Chassidim in Europe were directed to settle there. Raskin's widowed mother wrote to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak asking where she should go, and he responded that their place was in America. For the

next five years, they struggled to obtain the visas to the United States before finally sailing for New York in 1954.



Raskin became a neighborhood figure, seen here on a brochure about the Crown Heights neighborhood.

Land of Opportunity

The Raskins first lived in Brownsville before settling in Crown Heights. The fatherless Raskin boys received special care and attention from the new Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, who assumed leadership of the Chabad

movement following the passing of his father-in-law, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, in 1950.

In July 1958, Raskin had a private audience with the Rebbe for his birthday, during which he sought a blessing for his engagement to Esther Lipskier. The Rebbe concurred with the marriage prospect before making a request:

“I’d like to ask you something,” the Rebbe told him in Yiddish. “It would be a good thing if you would allow your beard to grow. Your father had a beard, your grandfather had a beard, your ancestors had beards. Not because I want it, but because G-d wants it.”

When Raskin asked for the Rebbe to officiate at his wedding, as he had done earlier for his older brother, the Rebbe told him: “If you do what I ask of you, I’ll do what you ask of me.” Raskin agreed, and seven months later, the Rebbe officiated at the chuppah ceremony in the courtyard of the Rebbe’s synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights.

Back in France, Raskin and his older brother, Michel, had worked to support their family, renting machines with which they knitted sweaters. After his marriage, Raskin worked in a factory before deciding he wanted to go into business on his own. He didn’t have the money for knitting machinery, so he looked around for another idea.

“Then is araingefalen a meshugas [a wild idea popped up] that I want to have a fish market,” he recalled.

There were many Jews in the fish business—Crown Heights alone had three besides for him—and Raskin credited fellow Jewish fish-store owners for allowing him to hang around their stores and learn the business.

Raskin recalled how when he went to the Rebbe to ask for a blessing, the Rebbe laughed and asked him Vos veistu fun fish?—“What do you know about fish?” before giving him a blessing for success.

Raskin’s Fish Market opened in 1961.

“I didn’t know anything about fish,” he later acknowledged. “It went very hard.”

The 1960s were a time of sweeping change in Crown Heights, as many of its Jewish residents began to flee due to rising crime and plunging property values. By the end of the decade, Crown Heights, which had been 70 percent Jewish in 1960, was majority African-American/Caribbean American. Even as Jews continued to close up shop, sell their homes and leave, the Rebbe insisted that his community stay, saying that those who did would not only survive but thrive.

Raskin’s Fish has operated from its location on Kingston Avenue, the main thoroughfare in the Jewish section of Crown Heights, throughout the ebb and flow

of neighborhood tides. From just a simple storefront, it has grown to become a major kosher fish wholesaler with business around the world.

“Thank G-d, we have a big business,” Raskin reflected, “but it grew from the ground up.”

In doing what he did with diligence, perseverance and, above all, faith, Raskin became a Brooklyn legend. Images of his store started showing up on murals in the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, his face appeared the cover of brochures, and his store became a mandatory stop on any political campaign or cultural discovery trail.

“From this business, thank G-d, we married off our children; we made a beautiful open home with guests; we have a big sukkah where we make a big kiddush for hundreds of people,” he reflected in 2013 in between fulfilling orders. “Most importantly, all the grandchildren, thank G-d, go in the Torah’s ways.”

Raskin is survived by his wife, Esther; brothers Michel Raskin, Dovid Laine and Benzion Raskin; and children R’ Aaron Leib Raskin, Brocha Richler, Bassie Komar, Chanie Greene, Yossi Raskin, Doba Rimler, Shloime Raskin and Shaina Moss, in addition to many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

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Israeli Prisoner Of War in Syria

By Adam Ross



Noah Hertz was shot down during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. His agonizing eight-month imprisonment sparked his journey back to Judaism.

Born in 1947 in the Israeli city of Afula, Noah Hertz grew up with a love of Israel and desire to fight for his country. But Judaism wasn't something he ever seriously considered. The Yom Kippur War would change all of that.

Newly married with a two year-old daughter and another on the way, Hertz was discharged in August 1973, a month before the Yom Kippur War broke out.

The pilot was called for reserve duty, leaving behind his pioneering family in their kibbutz in the Negev.

On Yom Kippur, October 6 1973, Syria and Egypt mounted a massive surprise attack on Israel's north and southern borders, trying to catch the country off guard when most soldiers were on leave, fasting and spending the day in synagogue. Hertz recalled, "Within two hours of receiving the call, I was sitting in my airplane in my best clothes ready to go." The serenity of Yom Kippur was shattered with the harsh reality of a war that threatened Israel's very existence.



Noah Hertz in the air force before the Yom Kippur War

"I heard through my earpiece that hundreds of our planes had been scrambled in the air," Hertz said, "and that many had already been shot down."

Flying his Skyhawk Mirage, his orders were to head towards the Golan Heights where thousands of Syrian tanks, supported by airplanes and anti-aircraft batteries, had succeeded in breaking through to the southern Golan Heights. Israeli forces were bravely fighting waiting for reserve troops to arrive. "In the opening days of the war," Hertz said, "I flew several missions. On the fourth day of the war, I was shot down."

Flying low over Damascus

"It was a Thursday," Hertz recalled. "The air force had been given orders to fight the Syrians." Along with another pilot, his mission was to attack a base on the periphery of Damascus.

“We had to fly very low in order to avoid being picked up by radar.”

Flying at a height of 4,500 meters, around 700 km per hour, his plane took a direct hit by a Soviet made Sa6 surface-to-air missile. “The plane began to nosedive,” he says calmly, recalling how the combination of the strike and the sudden loss of altitude caused him to lose consciousness. “I came to ten seconds before my plane would have hit the ground. I immediately hit the eject button and my parachute opened.”



The newly married couple

The next thing Hertz remembers is opening his eyes in a Syrian hospital, weak, bruised and in incredible pain, realizing that one of his legs had been amputated.

“When I woke up, I thought of three things: I was alive, I was in enormous pain and all I wanted was to go home, back to Israel, to my wife and to my family.”

He stayed in hospital for five days, receiving minimal medical attention following the amputation, which he reckoned was carried out following a bad break on landing. “I had one visit from a doctor who was just walking passed me,” Hertz said. “I was given pain relief and that was it. They did the bare minimum to keep me alive.”

Dashed hopes

A few days later, Noah’s hopes were briefly raised that he was going home when he was taken from his hospital bed and loaded onto a truck. “I was sure the IDF had won the war. The pain on that journey was unimaginable but what kept me going was the belief that I was going home to my wife and my family.”

But instead Hertz went to a prison where he'd spend the next four and half months in solitary confinement. He was one of 20 IDF pilots and soldiers captured by the Syrians in that prison, each held in a tiny cell with no contact between them.

Ignoring the Geneva conventions, the Syrians treated the Israeli POWs horrifically. As the IDF advanced they found the bodies of 28 Israeli soldiers who had been blindfolded and summarily executed. The vast majority of soldiers taken prisoner by Syria had been tortured, subject to burns, electric shocks and an array of brutal punishments.



Noah Hertz waking up in Syrian hospital

During his first week in prison, Hertz recalled how the majority of Israeli POWs were taken for interrogations. He was spared. "I was a reservist and also severely wounded. Perhaps that's why they left me alone. What the others went through is unimaginable. Two soldiers were killed in the process."

The first medical treatment Hertz received was to stop his bleeding after being punched in the mouth. "The medic didn't even look at my leg," Hertz said. "I had to take care of it myself." Before the medic left, Hertz asked him for some basic supplies which, thankfully he was given. "I poured alcohol on the wound, tied a tourniquet and wrapped it in a bandage."

Several days later, a medic came to his cell to check on his condition, returning every four days to change the dressing. "It was a miracle I didn't die of an infection."

Solitary confinement

"Despite the crushing fear of being tortured or killed," Hertz said, "the worst thing was the loneliness and not knowing when it was going to end." For days and nights on end, he lived with barely any human contact, just alone with the thoughts of the life he had left behind in Israel.



Noah Hertz with his daughter

"There were very hard moments that I'll never forget, where you feel that you just can't go on anymore." One such moment hit him during the cold of a freezing winter when he developed an infection. "I was weak, in severe pain, with a high fever and bleeding from my wound. I was shivering and without a blanket. I was saying over and over, 'I just can't, I just can't.' I was afraid to go to sleep thinking that I wouldn't wake up.

"I began thinking of my home, my wife and my family, everything I used to have in my life and then I burst out in tears. I left behind my wife who was about to give birth. I cried and cried and cried."

From somewhere deep inside, he began to fight back. "G-d gives you certain strength when you need it. The words of '*Shema Yisrael*' came from the pit

of my stomach. Those were my first words of prayer. '*Shema Yisrael*, God help me, help me!' I cried over and over."

Hertz fell asleep saying these words, waking up to see two Arab guards entering his cell with a mattress, blanket and a shirt. Reflecting back he quotes a line from Psalms, "When you call out to God and you really mean it, he hears."

"I thought about so many different things," he said. "Once, one of the guards, an Arab who had fled from Israel to Syria, told me Jews had no right to the land that he said was his." This brief exchange would eat away at him during his long hours alone.



Speaking to Israeli soldiers

"You start to think, *what is my connection to the Land of Israel?* Who am I? Who are we? What is my right to the Land? My family had come from Russia, from Poland, but this Arab was saying he had been here before us. It shook me to my core. I didn't have the answers."

That proved to be a pivotal moment. "From my small cell I started to look for answers. I began to think about history beyond my parents' generation and about Abraham being told to leave the place of his birth and being promised a homeland. The more I thought, the more I realized that the education I had received fell short. I was like an orphan in history."

Jewish awakening

After four and a half months, Noah Hertz was brought together with the other Israeli POWs. “It was hard but it was so much easier than being alone.” Among the group were several other pilots who had ejected from their planes including another three amputees.

“There had been a Jewish awakening among many of us,” Hertz said. Many had prayed for the first times in their lives and were experiencing gratitude for being saved. The soldiers united, trying to give strength to each other.

“We managed to light candles from the fat from the soup,” he said, recalling how around that time they were finally allowed visits from the Red Cross. “As Seder night approached, we requested matzah and to our surprise we received some.”



Noah Hertz

With the Red Cross doing their best to ensure prisoners religious rights, the soldiers were also given a number of prayer books. “We prayed two prayer services a day with a minyan, in the morning and the afternoon. Although some of us had come from traditional families, none of us had been religious.”

“Once you take off the rank, the uniforms and you’re there in your pajamas,” Hertz said, “the soul starts to speak. There are tiny sparks inside that know the address and when these sparks grow stronger, they manage to get out.”

A week before being released, the soldiers' conditions started to improve. Hertz received new clothes and even a basic prosthetic leg from a hospital.

The wounded POWs were released first. “It was Shabbat,” Hertz recalled. “I felt huge feeling of joy. I was reunited with my wife and I met the baby who had been born while I was in captivity. It's hard to put into words.”

After the elation of coming home, Hertz and his wife continued the journey that began in his prison cell. “We started to ask these questions: Who are we? What values do we want to give our children? We started thinking and asking the big questions, why things happen, wars, the Holocaust, searching for answers.”

Hertz rejoined the army as an engineer and returned to the skies as a co-pilot. He and his wife started attending classes about Judaism. One of the first was a course in Jewish philosophy based on *The Kuzari* that explores fundamental Jewish beliefs. “It had such great depth,” Hertz said with a smile. “I yearned to know what was written in all of these other books on the shelves.”

It has been 45 years since Hertz was released. “Being a part of the Jewish People is incredible. What’s really inside is a breath-taking heritage.” Having spent decades addressing soldiers, students and communities throughout Israel, Hertz was recently awarded with an award of distinction for his service to Israel and the IDF.

“The more I think about my story,” Hertz said, “the more I see how -od gave me two gifts of life, one when I was born and the second when I was taken captive. Remarkably, that was another kind of birthday.”

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Mount Everest And Mount Sinai

By Rabbi Benjamin Blech



It is not the mountain that we conquer but it is ourselves.

The holiday of Shavuot is different than any other on the Hebrew calendar.

Shavuot, commemorating the date on which we received the Torah, is the only festival preceded by a lengthy count down. For 49 days we take note of how far we have already come to reenacting the most momentous event of our history. Just as for our ancestors of old, the journey from Passover to Mount Sinai takes seven weeks of seven days, the holy number of seven representing sanctity squared.

And the significance of that count has a fascinating contemporary parallel.

Newspaper accounts in the past few weeks record the remarkable phenomenon of thousands of adventurers from around the globe taking part in the grueling attempt to scale the top of Mount Everest, highest mountain in the world. While once a feat achieved by only the heartiest and rarest few, the top of

Everest's tip has now been described as being "like a zoo." Climbers push and shove each other to take selfies. People by the dozens wait hours in line – with temperatures where even an extra hour or two can mean the difference between life or death – to reach the summit. And indeed, for the unlucky ones, this has been one of the deadliest climbing seasons on Everest with at least 10 deaths.

Yet the dedicated thrill seekers remain undeterred. "I was not prepared to see sick climbers being dragged down the mountain by Sherpas or the surreal experience of finding dead bodies," one of the successful conquerors of Everest was quoted as reminiscing. But all the difficulties were, in retrospect, insignificant. He had read about explorers as a boy and said he had always "wanted to get to the one spot where you can stand higher than any place else on earth."

What is it about climbing mountains that can inspire such devotion?

Mountaineer Greg Child movingly said that "Somewhere between the bottom of the climb and the summit is the answer to the mystery of why we climb." It is the climb that tests our resolve, it is the climb that is the challenge, it is the climb that provides the answer to the limits of our potential and possibilities. As Sir Edmund Hillary put it, "It is not the mountain that we conquer but it is ourselves."

Mountain tops are geographic locations. In a more profound sense they are visual representations of life's ongoing trials. Even children are able to grasp this in the words of the simple wisdom of Dr. Seuss: "Today is your day, your mountain is waiting. So get on your way." And who is not familiar with the way Martin Luther King put it, in his most famous sermon delivered shortly before his death:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do G-d's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the L-rd.

King almost certainly was referencing the line in the book of Psalms with its allusion to the mountaintop: "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his Holy Place?" (Psalms 24:3).

Climbing mountains as a symbol for scaling the heights of spirituality is an ancient biblical idea. Commentators offer beautiful insights into the comparison's deeper meaning.

Every mountaintop is within reach – if you just keep climbing.

There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.

The experienced mountain climber is not intimidated by the mountain – he is inspired by it.

The best view comes after the hardest climb.

And if you think you've peaked, find a new mountain

Of course G-d could have given us the Torah in a valley. But the spot He chose was Mount Sinai. Why not Mount Everest? Perhaps G-d also wanted to reassure us that the climb is not really that difficult.

And for the Jewish people who continue to rule their lives by the revelation on Mount Sinai we know of a certainty that the truths of Torah taught on that spot allow us “to stand higher than any place else on earth.”



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Story #1120

The American Author and Two Lubavitcher Rebbes

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles

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Herman Wouk sitting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe at a Chassidic gathering in April 1972, on the Rebbe's 70th birthday. (Photo: JEM)

The great American novelist **Herman Wouk**, who passed away this month on May 17 (12 Iyar 5779), just 10 days shy of his 104th birthday,[1] was a man who went against the grain.

In a life and career that spanned the modern era, from World War I to iPhones, he stood out for his personal Orthodox Jewish observance, for the sense

of mission he felt carrying the title "Jewish writer" and for the optimistic lens through which he saw the Jewish future. In all this and more, Wouk drew deeply from his intense, decades-long relationship with the **seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson**, of righteous memory, and the Chabad movement.

In his life and art, Wouk was an unabashedly proud practicing Jew. He started his day studying Jewish texts and closed it with a regimen of Talmud. In his work, including his earliest novels, he allowed his Jewish characters to struggle with faith-not by mocking it, but by taking seriously the intricacies of observance, and in certain cases to allow its transcendent beauty to touch and move them. When fellow novelists and critics took unkindly to this, he simply brushed off their critique.

He would remain "one of the few living novelists concerned with virtue," his biographer, Arnold Bleichman, told the Palm Springs Desert Sun when Wouk turned 100.

Wouk was already a popular and successful novelist when he became a playwright, adapting his best-selling *The Caine Mutiny* into a Broadway play and later a movie. But even amid the nonstop world of Broadway, Wouk would disappear as Shabbat approached, "leaving the gloomy theatre, the littered coffee cups, the jumbled scarred-up scripts, the haggard actors, the shouting stagehands, the bedeviled director, the knuckle-gnawing producer € and the dense tobacco smoke and backstage dust" for home.

There, he would join his family at "a splendid dinner, at a table graced with flowers and the old Sabbath symbols: the burning candles, the twisted loaves, the stuffed fish, and my grandfather's silver goblet brimming with wine."

Wouk wrote these words in another book, *This Is My G-d*, which he composed in response to an offhand question by a Jewish friend asking him if he knew of any educational Jewish reading material. *This Is My G-d*, with the later added subtitle of *The Jewish Way of Life*, became an invaluable resource for non-Jews seeking to understand Judaism and had a revolutionary impact on Jews from all backgrounds.

In it, the writer turned his pen to explaining the Jewish faith in a relatable, down-to-earth way. It proved unexpectedly popular, was reprinted numerous times and translated into many languages, becoming a basic guide and reference book for anyone interested in authentic Jewish practice.

In the Soviet Union, where decades of state-sponsored oppression had rendered its millions of Jews lacking basic Jewish knowledge, it became a wildly popular manual for the spiritually thirsty population, offering them a foundational Jewish education.

Wouk dedicated *This Is My G-d* to his grandfather, Mendel-Leib Levine, who had served as a rabbi in Minsk, and later New York and Tel Aviv.

"From my [maternal] grandfather I caught an enthusiasm for learning, and a simple unashamed love of our faith," Wouk wrote in a 1967 letter. "[He] was a Lubavitcher who studied in the Chabad tradition of knowledge joined with piety. When my grandfather came he brought a whole different attitude into our lives. What he said was in his action. There is nothing more important than being a Jew. Nothing."

"This steadfast enthusiasm and love, as well as the moral backbone that it implied, never left him. In a career that saw him write nearly two-dozen books (he maintained a steady work regimen until the end of his life, publishing his latest book, *Sailor and Fiddler: Reflections of a 100-Year Old Author*, in 2015), he candidly invoked the moral choices facing humankind, spoke with clarity on the existence of good and evil, and emphasized that an individual's thoughts, words and actions do indeed matter.

Wouk's own steadfast Orthodox Jewish observance combined with his stature served as an example for his brethren and brought Jewish practice into the public eye. Like the time in 1955 when Wouk made an appearance in the New York Post's "Lyon's Den" gossip column-not for scandal, but because the governor of Maryland had made sure the full dinner served at a state function attended by Wouk would be kosher.

Later, throughout the decades that Wouk lived in Palm Springs, California, he gave a weekly Shabbat morning Chumash (bible) class at the Chabad House-where he was known as "Reb Chaim-Zelig"-and taught Mishnah on Shabbat afternoon. He also maintained numerous regular Talmud study partners, and when weakness forced his classes to relocate to his home, continued his study sessions via Skype.

"His Torah study, his Jewish practice, that's who he was," explains Rabbi Yonason Denebeim, director of Chabad-Lubavitch of Palm Springs and Wouk's longtime rabbi and friend of many decades, who officiated at Wouk's modest funeral. "He was a gifted storyteller through his words, but that was ancillary to who he was, he was a Jew. The medium was the writing. He was the young vibrant one teaching 'old men' as he called them, who were twenty years younger than him."

City Boy and the Zeide

Chaim Aviezer Zelig ('Herman') Wouk was born on May 27, 1915 [14 Sivan 5675], to Abraham Isaac and Esther Shaina Wouk. He and his siblings grew up in a Bronx fourth-floor walk-up, and as their parents hailed from White Russia, the family prayed at the neighborhood's Minsker *shul*, where Wouk's *bar*

mitzvah was held. His parents were Orthodox Jews, religious but working hard to fit in with American life.

Wouk attended Columbia University, majoring in comparative literature and philosophy, and beginning his literary career by writing a campus humor column and editing a college humor magazine. For a short few years around and after college, he tested the waters of secular life, before returning to Jewish practice. After graduating, he got a job as a radio gag writer before landing a position in 1936 as a staff writer for the then-popular radio comedian Fred Allen.

Wouk enlisted in the Navy after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and was eventually posted in the Pacific on the USS Zane, an old World War I minesweeper that would serve as a base for his fictional USS Caine.

His mother, Esther, told her midshipman son that there was no way he was going off to war without first receiving a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. This was 1943, and his recently widowed mother took him by subway all the way down to the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, where the two had a private audience with the **sixth Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn**, of righteous memory.



Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, zt"l

"The [sixth] Rebbe told him he should be especially careful with *tefillin*," recalls Denebeim, who together with his wife, Sussie, befriended the Wouks when

the author and his wife settled in Palm Springs and began attending Chabad on a daily basis. "The Rebbe told him that even though during times of emergency and war one was allowed to be more lenient doing practical mitzvahs, Wouk should nevertheless be careful with *tefillin*."

Wouk would recount the details of the audience in *The Will to Live On*, describing Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak as a "gentle personage of imposing presence, recently escaped from Nazi-ruled Europe after a harrowing ordeal of Soviet imprisonment," remembering how he "received us with grace, and we conversed in Yiddish, his voice weakened by asthma to a near-whisper. As I left, he gave me a blessing and with it a dime "

Wouk held onto Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's dime throughout his years in the South Pacific and donned *tefillin* daily. He spent most of the war on the *Zane* doing the hazardous work of clearing mines before being transferred, in January of 1945, to the USS *Southard*, where he became the executive officer. Aboard the *Southard*, which had earlier survived a kamikaze attack, Wouk became the "bad cop" rule enforcer to the captain's "good cop," earning the enmity of those reporting to him.

The Pacific war ended in August. A month later, on Sept. 17, just as Wouk was about to become captain of the *Southard* and command the ship back to Brooklyn, they were hit by a typhoon at Okinawa. Somehow-"miraculously," Wouk would emphasize on numerous occasions-they managed to save everyone aboard. The ship was later declared lost.

Once ashore the next morning, everyone started "showing great deference to him and he felt really strange about it" since he hadn't been very popular with the men previously, says Denebeim. "He went to his chief petty officer and asked him what's going on?

"You saved everyone on the boat," came the reply.

"What?

"Not you. The black boxes you wore on the bridge every day!"

Wouk recalled the day clearly because it was also Yom Kippur, and he hadn't eaten a thing. When the *Southard* was struck, Wouk rescued two things: the precious *tefillin* that Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak had asked him to wear daily and the draft of his first book, *Aurora Dawn*.

For the duration of his life Wouk had a special affinity for the biblical 'Book of Jonah,' the *haftorah* read on Yom Kippur. It tells the tale of a man nearly lost at sea and the doomed city he helped save.

What Makes a Jewish Writer?

Wouk married Betty (Sarah) Brown in 1945, with the couple having three children and remaining married for more than six decades until her passing in 2011. His debut novel, *Aurora Dawn*, published two years later, and was followed

by *City Boy*. It was his third book, however, *The Caine Mutiny*, that brought him fame, fortune and a Pulitzer Prize. Yet Wouk bucked the popular trend; instead of abandoning tradition, he held steadfastly to the Jewish practices and beliefs of his parents, grandparents and ancestors.

Two decades later saw the publication of his epic war novels, *The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978), which tell the tales of the non-Jewish Henry clan and the Jewish Jastrow family. The combined nearly 2,000 pages, which Wouk saw as his life's "main task," paint an intricate picture of a world at war and brought the horrors of the persecution of the Jews in the Holocaust home to generations of readers. *The Winds of War* ends off with Natalie Jastrow, a young American Jewish woman stuck in Europe with a newborn baby in tow, blocked from escaping by German Nazis, Italian fascists and American bureaucrats.

One of the novel's countless readers was Vivi Deren, then a young Chabad emissary on campus in Amherst, Massachusetts. Wouk was practically mishpachah, or family, with Deren's parents (and Denebeim's in-laws), Rabbi Zalman and Risya Posner, the Chabad emissaries in Nashville, Tennessee.

He would stay at the Posner home during his frequent visits to the city, where his nephew and family lived. One afternoon on the eve of Shavuot during the gap years before *War and Remembrance* came out, Deren was on the phone with her mother, who told her that Wouk was staying with them for the holiday.

"I said, 'Please ask him what happens to Natalie?'" Deren remembers.

"Say *tehillim* (psalms)," came Wouk's reply. It would seem that he still did not know whether his protagonists would perish together with their brethren.

When *War and Remembrance* finally came out, Wouk revealed that Natalie and her baby boy do indeed survive. Yet her uncle, Dr. Aaron Jastrow, a professor and writer who had become an apostate years earlier, does not. In the Nazis' hands, the elder Jastrow returns to the faith of his fathers, begins donning *tefillin*, teaching Talmud and documenting his path to repentance in a manuscript he titles *A Jew's Journey*. The elderly man dies in the gas chambers with the hallowed and holy words "Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel," on his lips.

"I have experienced a strange bitter happiness in Theresienstadt that I missed as an American professor and as a fashionable author living in a Tuscan villa. I have been myself," Jastrow writes in his final entry. "I was born to carry that flame."

This Jewish flame, this light, permeated Wouk's work. When Natalie Jastrow is finally reunited with her young son, Louis, she rocks him back and forth and begins singing to him in Yiddish:

"Dos vet zein dein baruf. Rozhinkes mit mandlen. Slof-zhe, Yidele, shlof" ("This will be your calling, too. [Trading in] raisins and almonds. Sleep, Yidele, sleep.")

"Almost at the same moment," writes Wouk describing the scene, "Byron and Rabinovitz each put a hand over his eyes, as though dazzled by an unbearable sudden light."

Wouk's inner need to communicate the "sudden light" of a Jewish mother singing "raisins and almonds" in Yiddish, or a Talmud class in Theresienstadt, made him stand out.

Faith

"Faith," Wouk once explained, "is belief in what cannot rationally be justified. It's a knowledge that goes beyond logic."

Wouk exuded this faith. While audiences scooped up his books and made him popular, critics launched attacks, citing his popularity as proof that he was a second-rate writer. Worse, in their eyes, was what they saw as his simplistic, old-fashioned morals.

"He writes out of a strong sense that Jewish life can only disintegrate and wither away if it ventures beyond the moral and spiritual confines of a Judaic bourgeois style," wrote one critical reviewer of Marjorie Morningstar [the character's original family name was Morgenstern].

And yet, Wouk held his ground. "Among Jewish writers of the day I remain odd man out in point of view, of that I am well aware," he wrote. "In some of them I think I discern rueful second thoughts about religion, but any relevance of eschewing lobsters to the grand question of man's fate [as Wouk pondered in Marjorie Morningstar], in a vast baffling universe, may well seem to them a persisting petty absurdity. On that I have had my say in This Is My G-d, where I lay out my cards face up."

Mission

Wouk maintained a lengthy correspondence with the Rebbe [Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, zt"l] and visited him numerous times for private audiences, receiving his guidance, direction and encouragement. He cherished the advice he got from the Rebbe about his literary work (they discussed his books in detail).

Nevertheless, it was the Rebbe's positive outlook on the Jewish condition and his urgent work to make it so that he would recount most often, recalling how during one of those audiences the Rebbe had negated the nay-sayers predicting doom. "The American Jewish community is wonderful," the Rebbe told Wouk. "While you cannot tell them to do anything, you can teach them to do everything."

The Rebbe didn't miss an opportunity to encourage the author to keep writing in ever more consequential ways, to keep impacting and to keep doing more for the good of the Jewish people.

1972, on the occasion of the Rebbe's 70th birthday, Wouk came to the Rebbe's farbrengen gathering in Brooklyn as the personal representative of U.S. President Richard Nixon. Bearing a letter of greeting from the president, he had a private audience with the Rebbe (forcing then-Israeli ambassador to the United States Yitzchak Rabin to wait his turn). Then, in a period of just a few days, Wouk flew to both Minnesota and Los Angeles to speak at local gatherings celebrating the same event.

In a brief interlude during a 1975 farbrengen Wouk attended in Brooklyn, during which the author vigorously sang and clapped in rhythm with the crowd [I was there and I remember this clearly--YT], Wouk joyfully reported to the Rebbe (in Yiddish) that his Israeli publisher had translated and published not just a novel of his, but a serious book on Judaism, *This Is My G-d*, and added that a special low-priced edition had been printed for the benefit of the soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces as well.

The Rebbe was happy to hear this, but then reminded Wouk that his work was not done. "It's needed in America as well," the Rebbe added. "Don't forget the Jews in the United States!"

(*This Is My G-d* was also translated into Russian by Professor Herman Branover, a Lubavitcher Chassid and scientist who directed the Shamir organization, which worked on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the USSR and abroad. Branover's translation of Wouk's book made its way clandestinely into the Soviet Union, where it had a revolutionary impact, becoming a popular manual for the spiritually thirsty Jewish population, offering them a foundational religious education.)

In a 1985 letter Wouk addressed to the "Revered Rebbe," he concluded by saying "it remains for me to thank you for your too kind words about my very modest acts in [the] field [of Jewish education], and to welcome your blessings with profoundest gratitude."

The Rebbe would not hear of it. "I must challenge this self-assessment," the Rebbe wrote back, "on the ground that the record speaks for itself. Moreover, in wide segments of Jewry, especially among American Jews, the impact of your 'modest acts' strikes deeper and wider than similar acts of a Rabbi or Rebbe (myself included) could attain, for obvious reasons.

"For the sake of a mutual consensus, I am prepared to accept your claim of 'very modest acts'-in a relative sense, in terms of your potential and future acts, which will dwarf your past accomplishments by comparison"

Jewish Survival

Wouk shared the overwhelming concerns of Jewish leaders about intermarriage, assimilation and basic lack of Jewish knowledge affecting American and world Jewry in a modern, post-Holocaust world. "Leaders fear threat to Jewish survival in today's 'crisis of freedom,' " reads the subtitle of a 1964 Look magazine cover story ominously titled 'The Vanishing American Jew.'

Wouk agreed: "I think the Jewish people is in danger-in mortal danger," he said. From where, Wouk asked his audience in a talk in Minnesota as much as himself, could one derive faith in the Jewish people's apparently bleak future?

"The Lubavitch Rebbe has that faith [in a bright Jewish future]," Wouk said in reply to his own query. "I think that the Rebbe is an inspired Jew, perhaps the inspired Jew among us," he explained. The Rebbe "looked me in the eye and said it was so and so it is the truth."

The Lubavitch movement, Wouk said, is the "red ember on the underside of the smoldering log of Judaism in our century," and the Rebbe "is the flame." Moved in this way by what he saw as the Rebbe's vital role in the very survival of the Jewish people in the modern era, Wouk spoke passionately to audiences large and small, from Washington, D.C., to Philadelphia to London, about Lubavitch's dynamic standing on the Jewish landscape.

"In the thundering footsteps of the young Chabad Chassidim I did not hear the voice of the past," Wouk told a Los Angeles audience in late 1972. "This is the life of Judaism and this is the future of Judaism. It was the voice of the future."

Wouk prayed at Chabad of Palm Springs, supported it, gave classes and lectures there, and considered its rabbi, Rabbi Yonason Denebeim, his own. They were friends, and Wouk on occasion wrote about Denebeim and his admiration for him. Denebeim, in turn, regularly spent hours in study and conversation with his famous congregant, whom he described as his "surrogate father for 40 years," while fiercely guarding the writer's privacy on his behalf. Wouk regarded Denebeim's children, who continued to visit and study with him at his home until the end of his life, as if his own.

"Mr. Wouk was a special human being," says Rabbi Denebeim. "Where many artists become defined and thus limited by their art, he shined beyond those limitations, a quiet lamplighter."

Wouk often reflected on the Rebbe's vision for world Jewry and the effect it continued to have even after the Rebbe's passing in 1994, expressing a measure of this in a short note he wrote to author Joseph Telushkin following publication of the latter's best-selling biography, *Rebbe: The Life and Teachings of Menachem M. Schneerson, the Most Influential Rabbi in Modern History*.

Telushkin's book, Wouk wrote, was "the truth, simply and ably told, about a great man, a Jewish 20th century teacher and leader. The man emerges as himself,

in all his simplicity and majesty. He will live on, I think, as his work lives on, and steadily grows in impact."

What Makes a Lubavitcher?

In 1978, Wouk sent the Rebbe a copy of his then-new book, *War and Remembrance*. The book was dedicated to his eldest son, Abraham Isaac ("Abe"), who had tragically passed away years earlier in a childhood accident, and Wouk inscribed on the title page the prophet Isaiah's words, *Bila Ha'Moves Lo'Netzach*, or "He will destroy death forever." The Rebbe replied by thanking him for the book, noting the beautiful dedication and stating that he hoped to have the chance to go through the 1,039-page book at a later date.

At the conclusion of the letter the Rebbe did, however, take issue with Wouk's oft-repeated description of himself as an admirer, but not an actual member of, Lubavitch. "In the estimate of many, myself included, you have been a Lubavitcher for quite some time," the Rebbe wrote. "For as you surely know, being a Lubavitcher does not come by virtue of a formal membership card, or membership dues or anything like this, but to do what a Lubavitcher does: to spread Judaism with *Ahavat Yisrael*."

Herman Wouk was a successful man, winning awards, selling many millions of books and the movie rights to his creations, all the while holding strong in his convictions. He studied and taught Torah not as a layman, but as a scholar, once calling himself "a Jew of the Talmud." And he was, above all else, a lover of the Jewish people.

But he was not transient; he did not rest on his laurels. Wouk spent his nearly 104 years on earth on an upward journey, both personal and professional, taking him from skeptic to optimist, from defender of the faith to forward-looking emissary. Recognizing the slumbering embers deep in the log of American Jewry, he sought the flame, to warm himself and draw energy from it. Then he marshalled his immense talents in its service to help it grow into a roaring fire.

Footnotes

[1] One month shy on the Jewish calendar.

[2] This very popular lullaby was part of a song composed in 1880 for the Yiddish theater opera "Shulamis."

Source: Excerpted (80%) and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the excellent, lengthy (4500+ words) article by Dovid Margolin for [//chabad.org/4393510](http://chabad.org/4393510), which is accompanied by a number of notable photos.

Connection: Prepared during the Week of Shiva for Mr. Herman Wouk

Reprinted from the Parashat Behar 5779 email of KabbalaOnline.org (**based on [//chabad.org/4393510](http://chabad.org/4393510)**)

Tel Aviv's Restaurant Scene Goes Kosher

By Flora Tsapovsky

Israel's leading chefs are taking the city's food in a new direction

Tel Aviv has always been considered a “bubble” within Israel—voting differently, partying differently, snagging the upcoming Eurovision celebrations from the country's capital due to its liberal, cosmopolitan nature. The food scene has always been a part of the appeal—particularly Tel Aviv's non-kosher food scene; from the bacon-selling supermarket chain Tiv Taam, to myriad seafood and sushi restaurants, Tel Aviv is, without a doubt, Israel's capital of non-kosher food.

Over the past couple of years, however, the city's culinary landscape has seen an increase in kosher establishments, making a dent in its deliciously sinful image. What's most surprising, perhaps, is the fact that behind Tel Aviv's kosher movement are chefs previously associated with some of the most decadent, decidedly nonkosher establishments in town.

Kashrut, in Israel and beyond, is a complex concept, and an even more complicated institution when it comes to *kashrut* certificates, permits, and laws. In Israel, *kashrut* is largely supervised by the Chief Rabbinate, an official governing body that offers a course for anyone who wants to become a *kashrut* supervisor on its behalf.

On supermarket shelves, products are equipped with its stamp, or with the stamp of Badatz, an ultra-Orthodox organization considered to be even more strict. In the food industry, if a business chooses to declare itself kosher and available to *kashrut*-observant customers, a paper from the Rabbinate needs to be present on the premises.

A kosher establishment qualifies not only by avoiding the well-known forbidden items (pork, shellfish, dishes mixing dairy and meat), but also by using only kosher cooking techniques and products from kosher purveyors. Entering the kosher game is a costly, heavily bureaucratic process that many Tel Avivian businesses have opted to avoid over the years, listing ideological as well as

logistical reasons for their choice. These days, however, the powers of the market are shifting, and new norms edge out old prejudice.

Take Yoram Nitzan, for example. Up until 2015, the experienced chef's name was synonymous with luxurious oysters, octopus, and shrimp, which starred on the menu of Mul-Yam (In Front of the Sea, in Hebrew), the now-shuttered iconic restaurant in the Tel Avivian port where he served as head chef. Considered extravagantly priced compared to other Tel Aviv restaurants, Mul-Yam was, in its 20-year run, the ultimate hall of hedonism.

This past December, four years after a dramatic fire at the restaurant led to its permanent closure, and following a short stint with an Italian restaurant in 2017, Nitzan can be found watching the waves again, as the head chef of Nomi, a new kosher restaurant at the David Intercontinental Hotel on the Tel Aviv beachfront.



David InterContinental Hotel in Tel Aviv is home to NOMI

“After all my culinary life I’ve been cooking decidedly non-kosher,” he said. “I was looking for a challenge, a new audience, something I haven’t done before.” He was approached by the hotel management and accepted the offer, which came, he said, “with a great space, all the facilities, and total freedom—within the restrictions of *kashrut*, of course.”

With the right approach, Nitzan said, food restrictions turned out to be “not such a big deal.” On the menu, there’s vegetarian risotto (made creamy with the help of mashed sunchokes in lieu of butter and cream), a juicy short-rib hamburger

with smoked goose crumble, and an elaborate (but pareve) chocolate dessert. The overall experience is fine dining, minus the forbidden ingredients Nitzan is so familiar with from his previous restaurants.



Outdoor seating at Blue Sky atop the Carlton Hotel

In addition to giving up seafood, the main challenge, according to Nitzan, appeared on the vegetable side of things, which he didn't expect. "Apparently, you can only use white asparagus, and if you want to use the green one, you must cut the tops off," he said. "It sounds dramatic, and I know many chefs in the city that would jump on the opportunity to use premium asparagus tops, but I told myself, I'm able to overcome this, I don't want to give asparagus up."

Another challenge is cauliflower: "Only certain growers grow cauliflower in a kosher way that doesn't allow insects to penetrate it," he said, "so I get this gorgeous little cauliflower but it costs four times the price of cauliflower here in Tel Aviv." In general, Nitzan isn't aiming to be a rebel. "If I hear something isn't allowed, I don't ask why, I don't argue, I just want to know what *can* I use," he said.

Nitzan is not the only one tempted by a prime location and smooth sailing: Meir Adoni, the Israeli mega-star chef and TV persona behind past Tel

Avivian hits like Catit and Mizlala, made waves in the Israeli media when, a few years ago, he changed course and went all-in on kosher dining.



Blue Sky restaurant in Tel Aviv

Under his ownership, the Catit Group operates two restaurants in Tel Aviv within the Carlton hotel chain: Lumina and Blue Sky. Dunya, his chain of kosher street food eateries, launched in late 2018 and currently has three locations: two in Tel Aviv and one in Kiryat Bialik, with full intention to expand further.

“At some point we reached a conclusion that the kosher market wasn’t living up to its full potential,” said Lilach Sapir, the group’s CEO. “There’s always been a hunger for good kosher food, but there weren’t any choices. With modern-day technology and excellent ingredients, there’s no reason not to offer premium kosher food anymore”

Eyal Lavi, another chef whose name, for years, elicited thoughts of steamy bouillabaisse, recently opened Balkan, a kosher casual eatery in the center of Tel Aviv. Falling under the category of “kosher fish and dairy,” the meat-free restaurant is inspired by the cuisines of Croatia, Turkey, Greece, and other countries in the Balkan region. “Which is funny, because when you think of the Balkans, your first association is meat,” said Lavi.

In the past, he owned Rokach 73, a fine-dining establishment famous for its seafood soup and other bistro-inspired, utterly nonkosher dishes. For the past few years, Lavi has been operating a consulting firm, and Balkan is one of his clients, with his name at the forefront.

“I won’t say this isn’t challenging,” he said. “All the ingredients are more expensive, I can’t import cheeses, but I manage.” The payoff? Being exposed to a new clientele that may have heard of him, but wasn’t able, until now, to try his dishes. One major advantage from a marketing standpoint, he said, is that “if one person in a group keeps kosher, you must accommodate them. This used to be a constant compromise, but now everyone’s happy to go to a good, delicious restaurant like Balkan.”

In addition to Balkan, Lavi is currently working on another project: a chain of kosher hamburger eateries, commencing in Tel Aviv. Until a few years ago, the idea would have been more at home in a city like Jerusalem, but in 2019 no one in Tel Aviv raises an eyebrow.

Even Eyal Shani, the unofficial “bad boy” of Tel Aviv cuisine and the man behind the international sensation of Miznon, recently opened Malka, a kosher Tel Aviv restaurant on a quiet side street near Ha-Kirya, the city’s famous army base.

Why the change in Tel Aviv’s restaurant scene? Nitzan, Sapir, and Lavi all point to a demand in the market that, in turn, leads to more places like theirs. “There’s a new sector of religious clients who all of sudden view dining out as a cultural foodie experience,” Nitzan said. Lavi added: “In the past, the religious customer used to be more conservative, but people evolve. No one wants to keep living in the stone age.”

According to Sapir, exposure to cooking shows, social media, and international travel have led the Israeli traditional sector to stop viewing dining as a necessity, but instead to expect an experience that matches everything nonkosher eaters get to enjoy on a night out. “We give them the whole thing—the atmosphere, the great food, nothing is missing,” Sapir said. This new audience is present in Tel Aviv more than ever, since the city is already considered a culinary destination among Israelis.

“Tel Aviv is a great, pluralistic city that accepts all extremities,” Lavi said. “The fact there are more kosher spots to eat at doesn’t hurt anyone. The problem is on a larger scale, as the country keeps leaning right and more and more religious parties aim to take over our lives, be it in schools, in public transportation, and maybe, in the future, in the restaurant world, too. But that’s the problem of whole Israel, not just Tel Aviv.”

Reprinted from the May 15, 2019 email of Tablet Magazine.

Wanted In Prison: Volunteers to Visit Inmates

By Mussi Sharfstein



Prison inmates are allotted a limited amount of visiting hours from family and friends. But for too many, visitors are rare. For some prisoners, years can pass before they receive a personal visit—whether it’s because they’re too far from family and friends for regular visitation or because their relationships have frayed. Contact with the world beyond the prison bars is often critical in the reintegration of prisoners into society once they’ve been released.

Rabbi Aaron Lipskar, executive director of the Aleph Institute, Chabad’s humanitarian organization for prisoners and their families, founded the Aleph Visitation Circle (AVC) to address this concern. Working with and approved by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, AVC gives inmates meaningful opportunities to interact with the outside world. Without using up their precious visiting hours, inmates get thirty minute one-on-one visits with volunteers. Typically, visitors are

only approved if they knew the prisoner before his or her incarceration, but AVC's visiting track secures clearance for visitors who don't.

Rabbi Yanky Majesky, director of Chabad of Orlando and member of the AVC board, says "These Jewish men and women in prison are looking to connect with someone to receive moral support, encouragement, and spiritual guidance. This is a unique opportunity for community members to volunteer and enhance the lives of those incarcerated."

The program can be transformative for inmates. "I haven't had a visit from anyone in over five years," one federal prisoner wrote to Aleph. "It's heartwarming to feel considered and valued when everything we know in prison attempts to convince us of the opposite. Your loving kindness shines like the sun in this bleak place."

Sixty volunteers have joined the program to date. Shimon Lobel, a resident of Israel who commutes almost weekly to New York, dedicates his Sundays to visiting inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution in Otisville, New York. He deems it the "most fulfilling part of my life, and it's become somewhat of a calling for me." He says he goes to lift the spirits of those incarcerated, "but I find that they uplift me significantly."

Lobel spends around six hours with inmates. And his list keeps growing as more people request a visit. He meets people who have gone years without a single visitor. "Even if, in your eyes, they may deserve whatever they are going through, you can still bring them joy." He says he can't think of any better way to spend his Sundays.

As the program expands, volunteers are needed in every city and state—especially Brooklyn, Miami, Los Angeles, and Chicago. To date, over seventy prisoners have received visitors thanks to the program. The goal, Aleph says, "is to reach every Jewish prisoner and remind them that even in prison they are never alone or forgotten."

To volunteer for the Aleph Visiting Circle, visit their **website** or contact Sara Schmukler at sara@aleph-institute.org, 310-598-2142 ext. 231.

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The Rothschild Family

The Secret of a Fortune

By Nissan Mindel

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You have all heard of the famous Rothschild family of bankers, who were as much famous for their great wealth as for their great charitableness. The founder of this world-famous banking firm was Mayer Amschel Rothschild, who was born in Frankfort 214 years ago, in a very religious family, several members of which were rabbis. His father Amschel Moses Rothschild, who died a year after Mayer Amschel became Bar Mitzvah, had hoped that his son would be a rabbi. Instead, he became one of the world's greatest financiers, yet remained strictly religious and humble, and Jews everywhere could speak with great pride of him.

How did this young orphan, born in the judengasse (Jewish Quarter). in Frankfort become so successful and so wealthy? Well, there is a story current among Chassidim that reveals the secret of his unusual success. It's a heartwarming, story and you will be glad to read it here. The hero of our story, however, is his father Anschel Moses.

In a small town in Galicia, called Tschortkow, the Jewish community appointed a rabbi, who was known for his great scholarship and piety. His name was Zevi Hurwitz, and he was affectionately called Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower. He was known as a saintly man, and many came to him for advice, or for a blessing. He tried to help everybody, and most of all the poor orphans and widows, for whom he collected special funds. In addition, moneys left in trust for orphans and widows were placed in his hands for safe-keeping.

Now, a rabbi with such responsibilities required a *Shamash* (a beadle). His duties included the running of errands for the Rabbi, accompanying him on his way, handing him a *sepher* (holy book) when the Rabbi was studying, taking care of the visitors who came to the Rabbi, and so on.

This was not a well-paid job, but Anschel Moses was a young man in his teens, whose personal needs were small. Not much of a scholar himself, Ansehel Moses was anxious to serve such a great scholar and rabbi as Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower, and when the opportunity presented itself, he was very happy to become the *Shamash*, and he was treated as one of the Rabbi's family, enjoying their fullest confidence.

Soon, the time came when Anshel Moses had to think of getting married and raising a family. He married into a modest Jewish family in the nearby town of Sniatyn, where he went to live. His father-in-law helped him to open a small store there.

Several weeks, or perhaps several months, after Anshel Moses left the service of Rabbi Hershelle in Tschortkow, the Rabbi discovered a theft in his house, which upset him very much. In the drawer of his personal desk he had kept a purse with five hundred gulden. This substantial amount of money belonged to orphans, widows and other people whose savings had been left in trust with the Rabbi.

He discovered that it was missing on the night of *Bedikas Chometz*, the night before Pesach. For it was his custom to personally check in case some *Chometz* might have slipped in there. When he opened this drawer, all the way, he was shocked to see that the purse was not there. This was quite a fortune, which the Rabbi could not hope to replace.

He thought of the poor people who had entrusted all their possessions in his care, and his heart was filled with pain. It pained him even more to think that there was someone in his own home who had stolen the money. The only other person who knew about it, or might have known that the Rabbi kept a large sum of money in that drawer, was Anshel Moses.

The Rabbi had trusted him fully, and would never have suspected him of such a mean thing. Yet, there could be no other explanation. No doubt Anshel only wanted to borrow the money in connection with his marriage last winter, which he must have hoped to repay as soon as he was able to do so.

Having come to this conclusion, the Rabbi decided to tell no one about it, so as not to create a panic in the community, nor stamp anyone as a thief. He would have a talk with Anshel Moses and clear up the matter, and no one would know anything about it.

So, on the first day of *Chol-Hamoed* he rented a carriage and went to Sniatyn to see his former Shamash. His trip aroused no surprise in the community, as it was not unusual, but it certainly surprised Anshel Moses to see his Rabbi in his humble store so unexpectedly.

When the Rabbi remained alone with Anshel, he carefully told him why he had come to see him. He told Anshel of the missing money, but assured him that he did not suspect him of theft, G-d forbid, but thought that perhaps he merely wanted to borrow it for a little while.

Although this is also against the Din (Jewish Law), a human being sometimes gives way to temptation, and as long as he makes good the wrong, G-d will forgive him. The Rabbi also assured him that he personally would also forgive him, and that no one would ever know about it. Had it been his own money, the

Rabbi concluded, he would have done nothing about it at all, but as this money belonged to orphans and widows and poor people, whose whole existence depended on it, he had no choice but to come to see him about it.

As the Rabbi was talking to him, Anshel grew pale and frightened, and his eyes filled with tears. The Rabbi thought that Anshel was filled with remorse, and thought all the more of him that he did not attempt to deny the whole thing. Indeed, Anshel said not a word in self-defense. He merely opened his money-till and emptied all its contents. He counted it and gave it to the Rabbi. Then he begged the Rabbi to excuse him, while he went to get the rest of the money to make up the missing amount.

After a considerable while, Anshel returned. Still looking quite distressed, he told the Rabbi that all he managed to raise now was half of the amount, but he promised faithfully to make up the balance by installments.

The Rabbi was very happy at the way things had turned out. He had always thought that Anshel Moses was a good and honest soul, and now he was convinced of it. Happier still was he at the thought that those poor orphans and widows would not suffer any loss, for he was certain that Anshel would keep his word.

True to his word, Anshel regularly sent small amounts on account, until the whole five hundred gulden were fully paid. The Rabbi now could dismiss and forget the whole unpleasant affair. If he ever thought about it at all, it was only to admire the decency and goodness of the Jewish heart of a simple young man such as Anshel Moses, who so eagerly made amends for a mistake he committed in a moment of unusual temptation.

One day, as Rabbi Hershelle was bent over a *sepher*, deep in study, a special messenger arrived from the Police Chief of the town. The messenger told him that the Chief begged to be excused for troubling him, but he wished to see him urgently, and had sent a carriage for him, which was waiting outside.

The Rabbi had no idea what the matter could be, but he put his trust in G-d that it was not connected with any danger to the community, and he hastened to go with the messenger.

The Police Chief greeted him in a friendly manner, and asked him if anything had been stolen from his house recently.

The Rabbi replied that if the Police Chief was referring to a certain sum of money which was discovered missing in his house, it had already been recovered. The Police Chief looked rather surprised and wished to know the whole story, and how the Rabbi came by such a large sum of money.

"If you will promise not to take action against an innocent man, who has made good his mistake, I will tell you everything," the Rabbi said. The Police Chief promised, and the Rabbi told him the whole story about the missing money.

"You Jews are wonderful people," the Police Chief said admiringly. "I have never in my life heard anything like it!" Thereupon he opened a drawer and pulled out a purse, saying, "Do you recognize it?"

Now it was the turn of the Rabbi to be surprised, for this was the very purse that had been missing.

After enjoying the Rabbi's surprise for a while, the Police Chief rang a bell, and when an orderly appeared, he gave the order, "Bring them in!"

The next moment a country yokel and his wife were brought in, handcuffed together.

"Do you recognize either of them?" the Chief asked the Rabbi.

"I am afraid I do not," the Rabbi answered, still mystified by the whole thing.

"Well, I suppose you are busy with your books, and do not notice the cleaning woman that comes to clean your house. It does not matter. A full confession has been obtained," and after ordering the two prisoners out, the Chief began to unfold what had happened:

The woman had been cleaning the Rabbi's house before Passover, when she chanced upon the purse with the money in the Rabbi's desk. She stole the purse and brought it to her husband. Afraid to use the money at once, they buried it in their barn. A drunkard, however, will out, and so the yokel could not resist using the money to buy himself a drink. He went to the buried treasure, and took out one gulden, and went to the inn.

When the innkeeper asked him where he got a silver gulden, the yokel told him he had found it. The next day he came back with another silver gulden, and the third again. This made the innkeeper quite suspicious, and he reported it to the police. The yokel was arrested, and, after several lashes, confessed the theft. The purse with the money was recovered, except for the three gulden which the yokel had spent on drink.

"Take it, it's yours," the Police Chief said with a smile, still unable to make out that Jew Anshel, who not only failed to clear himself of a suspicion, but even paid for a theft committed by someone else.

The Rabbi's heart was now filled with happiness to overflowing. He lost no time in making another trip to Anshel Moses.

"Reb Anshel, please forgive me," were the Rabbi's first words after greeting his former Shamash, with tears in his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me that you had not taken the money?" he demanded to know.

Anshel told the Rabbi that the plight of the poor orphans and the Rabbi's own distress had touched his heart. If he had denied that he had taken the money, and offered to help, the Rabbi would not have accepted his sacrifice, for truth to tell, he had to pawn everything he possessed to raise what he could, and then saved

every penny to make up the rest, knowing that the Rabbi could not otherwise raise the money. The Rabbi embraced Anshel, and blessed him with great riches that he might always help the poor and needy of his people.

"Here is the money you so kindly paid out of your pocket. Go back to Frankfort where you will have better opportunities to do business, as well as to do good works. May G-d be with you and with your children for generations to come."

The blessing of Rabbi Hershelle Tschortkower came true. Anshel Moses Rothschild became a successful merchant and money-changer in Frankfort. His son Mayer Anshel Rothschild succeeded even on a larger scale. He had five sons, each of whom settled in a different financial capital of Europe, and their wealth increased from generation to generation.

A grandson of Mayer Anshel, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, head of the House of Rothschild, who lived in France, especially did much to help his brethren in various colonizing enterprises, which earned him the name of *Hanadiv Hayadua*, the Famous Benefactor. He lived to a very ripe old age, and died in 1934 in Paris, at the age of ninety.

Why is This Luxury Developer Building ‘Kosher’ Condos On the Upper West Side?

By Avital Chizhik-Goldschmidt

Walk west along 87th street in Manhattan, between Broadway and West End Avenue, just a few steps past Brooks Brothers, a block from the famed Barney Greengrass deli and from the progressive synagogue B’nai Jeshurun, and you’ll find yourself looking up to yet another luxury condominium building in its final stage of construction.



Simon Baron Development A rendering of a sample kitchen in the Chamberlain, that can be customized to allow for double the appliances.

But this one, the Chamberlain, is different.

The kitchens are all outfitted with Sub-Zero appliances that have a Sabbath mode, which means automatic lights are turned off and functions are set on timers. No more taping refrigerator light switches so that they stay on for the entire Sabbath, when turning on electricity is forbidden.



Simon Baron Development An interior rendering of a Chamberlain residence.

One cabinet may be removed and replaced with a second dishwasher so that dairy and meat dishes won't mix, in strict observance of kashrut laws. The laundry closet has room for a second washer and dryer — a necessity for large families and a luxury on this crowded island.

Downstairs, the automatic doors will be shut down from Friday sundown to Saturday nightfall, so no one must transgress Jewish law by triggering them to open. Each week, at the onset of the Sabbath, the elevator will stop at every floor — no need to press the button.



Simon Baron Development Illustration of the Chamberlain building.

A playroom and courtyard garden offer “Sabbath-adaptable” spaces for children to gather. And when you purchase an apartment here you receive a free “private school consultation,” which will “advise and guide families through the extensive private school, Jewish day school and yeshiva processes,” the sales team promises.

“We understood there is a large Orthodox population in the neighborhood,” Andrew Till, chief operating officer of Simon Baron Development, told me as we stood outside the construction site on a breezy Wednesday morning.

All this comes at a very steep cost. In the Chamberlain, a 39-unit condominium building including two townhouses and three penthouses, apartments are priced at between \$2.4 million for a two-bedroom and \$10.5 million (to start) for five bedrooms, and developers are aiming for a \$189 million sellout, according to The Real Deal.

The architects at FXCollaborative designed the building to fit in seamlessly in the neighborhood — an exterior that might evoke the Art Deco period, with its straight geometric lines “inspired by classic prewar construction,” according to its press releases. Sprawling apartments with grand foyers are a modern take on the Weissmans’ abode in “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,” if you will.

Here on the Upper West Side, in the bastion of liberal Judaism, a small tightly knit “yeshivish” Orthodox community is building its own world alongside the rainbow-tallit-wearers of Romemu, the egalitarian leaders of Hadar, and the throngs of young Jewish singles looking for love.

Here, in the capital of progressive Judaism and left-wing political activism, a quiet evolution is taking place, and the Chamberlain is just the latest attempt to capitalize on the growing presence and power of observant, identifiable Orthodox Jews playing a leadership role in the future of American Jewry.

If you walk just two blocks north of the Chamberlain, on West 89th street, young yeshiva boys in velvet yarmulkes are starting their Mishnah shiur, their Talmud lesson.

Up another two blocks, around the corner from Equinox, a few young men enter a five-story building where daily Torah classes are given at the West Side Kollel.

Over on 93rd there’s a group of young mothers in long skirts and wigs gathering for brunch at the kosher Sunflower Cafe with a caravan of strollers.

And on Saturdays, walk down West End Avenue and you’ll see families in their Sabbath best, going to synagogue and visiting friends. (You may note that many will not be pushing strollers. While around Manhattan’s Upper West Side

there is an eruv, which allows one to carry on the Sabbath by creating a quasi-private boundary around a neighborhood, many Orthodox Jews believe that such a boundary cannot be erected properly in Manhattan.)



Suri Teller The view from a residence in the Chamberlain building.

Only 3% of Manhattan Jews identify as “yeshivish,” a term that is used interchangeably with “ultra-Orthodox” yet is a looser description of the Lithuanian

Orthodox community that prizes prolonged yeshiva study for men and is colloquially called “black hat.”

This is what Pearl Beck, lead author of the New York UJA-Federation 2011 Jewish Community Study of New York: Geographic Profile, told me, cautioning me that the error rate on this estimate may be substantial. “On the Upper West Side, in ZIP codes 10023, 10024 and 10025, only about 840 Jews identify as ‘yeshivish,’ and factoring in the average family size, that’s only about 140–180 households, approximately,” she said. “Most of New York City’s yeshivish and Hasidic households are in Brooklyn and are facing vast economic challenges.”

(Of those who report affiliation, Orthodox Jews number 64,000, the largest group of Manhattan Jews, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives’ 2010 study. That contrasts with an estimated 24,5536 Reform Jews and 9,079 Conservative Jews, though these numbers do not reflect the growing number of “nones,” unaffiliated Jews.)

Yet though still small in number, those black-hat-wearing Jews on the Upper West Side are far from the destitute families of Brooklyn. These are white-collar professionals, financiers and real estate developers who happen to wear black hats to synagogue, who have studied in Haredi yeshivas, whose wives wear wigs and whose sons go to the Yeshiva Ketana, on Riverside Drive.

And developers are working hard to attract those wealthy Orthodox families to Manhattan.

To customize the Chamberlain’s offerings, Simon Baron hired Susie Fishbein, kosher chef and author of the bestselling “Kosher by Design,” as a consultant. “I was their Jewish life consultant,” she told me. “I told them: ‘It would be awesome to have a closet to store all the folding chairs.’ And they asked, ‘Well why would you have folding chairs?’ And I told them, we tend to have Thanksgiving every Friday night and have 10–20 people around the table. On the first floor, is there space to leave baby carriages? Are there no electric sensors on toilets or doors? No automatic lights or doors?”

The communal culture cultivated by a building was integral to her vision, Fishbein said. The shared play spaces for children are particularly helpful for those families who won’t use a stroller on the Sabbath. “It very much speaks to an Orthodox sensibility, an Orthodox lifestyle, that we are really home all weekend,” Fishbein said.

Some residents are skeptical as to whether many new Orthodox families will move into this part of the city, largely because of the cost.

“It’s just so exorbitantly expensive here,” one longtime black-hat-wearing resident of the West Side said. “The only people who can afford to stay long term are the people whose grandparents own the buildings.”

Suri Scharf, who just purchased an apartment in the Chamberlain for her children, agrees. “There’s definitely a trend of from people who would like these amenities,” she said. “This just happens to be a very expensive neighborhood, not one that many young people can afford.”

But the marketing seems to be working, for some.



Suri Teller A customer at the Upper West Side’s Kosher Marketplace.

For Scharf, the Shabbat elevator was a major selling point. “You could buy on a high floor and get a great view and not have to worry about Shabbos,” she

said. The other selling point? Her son-in-law was most excited about the Peloton exercise machine in the building's gym. "It's interesting what's important to people," she noted.

The elevator is, in fact, important. While some Orthodox Jews will allow a doorman to push a button for them on Shabbat, those who are more stringent require the specially equipped elevator. "There is a whole 'shtibl world' that needs a Shabbos elevator," said Michael Landau, a businessman and chairman/founder of the Council of Orthodox Jewish Organizations of the West Side.

While Simon Baron is selling this apartment building as a novelty, softly targeting the Orthodox Jewish community — within the Fair Housing Act's regulations, which require that homes be marketed to a general population — it is not the first developer to do this on the Upper West Side.

There are Orthodox-friendly residences at 441 and 535 West End Avenue, both buildings owned and developed by Orthodox Jewish developers, offering Shabbat elevators, large chef's kitchens and many bedrooms — and there's another kosher-friendly development in the works on 91st and Broadway, by Adam America. In fact, the Upper West Side has a long tradition of Jews in real estate developing buildings suited to their own communities. "In the early 20th century, much of the speculative building in New York was done by Jewish developers, some small scale, some larger," said Andrew Dolkart, a professor of architecture at Columbia who is working on a book about the Upper West Side.

And, as Jane Margolies of The New York Times noted, marketing residences to specific communities is increasingly popular in New York City's crowded housing market. In the Flushing section of Queens, one developer appealed to Asian buyers with a "park designed according to the principles of feng shui and brokers who speak fluent Mandarin," while in Long Island City another condominium targeted South American buyers with a building design inspired by Buenos Aires architecture.

Yet the concept of offering an optional kosher kitchen altogether isn't such a novelty. After all, the construction of a kosher kitchen isn't so complicated. When you're spending \$5 million on an apartment, what's an extra dishwasher? It's all about marketing, one source in real estate development told me. It's less about the small details and it's more telling of real estate developers targeting a community that has more capital, more buying power, than ever before.

In the fervently Orthodox community, there are two notable social trends — and the Chamberlain, in all of its 17-story glory, stands at that very intersection. For one — capital.

For decades, Manhattan was unaffordable for most religious Jews with large families, and it wasn't the safest place to live, either. First-generation American Jews escaped the Lower East Side for greener pastures in Brooklyn and the Bronx,

and then for Monsey and New Jersey, where enclaves could flourish, where space could accommodate larger families and where crime rates were low.

Yet now, Manhattan has changed — and Orthodox Jewry has changed, too.

In the city, crime is low and, in the Orthodox shtetl, wealth (for some) has grown. While lower-income families, mostly in the Haredi community, rely on government assistance and low-cost yeshivas, and while middle-class Orthodox Jews pour their entire income into their Judaism, into yeshiva education and into homes within walking distance of their synagogues, others find themselves in a different economic class, a Haredi bourgeoisie that is growing more and more visible.

Perhaps the most telling shift is the material aspirations of the community, as displayed on the street. Living standards have risen sharply, and it seems like nothing is unattainable for the observant Jew — from high-end kosher food to exotic travel programs to extravagant weddings. Flip through the advertisements or satirical cartoons in an Orthodox weekly, or join a frum women's WhatsApp group, and you'll hear the strains of high-roller life, complaints about the ever-climbing social expectations. Some even argue that the high cost of living may impede the future of Orthodox continuity altogether.

For many young families, buying a home in most metro-area Orthodox communities is unaffordable, as gentrification sweeps across Brooklyn and as yuppie Park Slope residents move into Flatbush — so new Orthodox bedroom communities have cropped up in New Jersey's Jersey City and Toms River, as well as in Staten Island.

Meanwhile, those who have acquired wealth are seeking to move to Manhattan, where a traditional communal infrastructure has long been in place and can accommodate migrants from the Five Towns and Monsey who may be seeking the status of a Manhattan address — or the privacy of city life. The “shift to the right” is happening across American Orthodoxy, and for those still seeking religious moderation, and who can afford it, Manhattan might be the answer.

“There's more anonymity in the city,” Landau told me. “I always say about the Upper West Side, as a frum Jew, it's a very ‘live and let live’ environment.”

This is true, community members tell me, throughout the robust network of the West Side's “black hat” Orthodox synagogues and schools: the Vorhand Shul and the Koznitz Shteebel, both on West 91st Street; Congregation Ahavath Chesed, known by locals as the Ridniker Shteibel, on West 89th Street, and the Boyaner Shteibel, on West End Avenue.

At the community's heart, on West End Avenue, stands the West Side Kollel, a center of Torah study for men that has about a dozen regulars studying Torah there full time; in the evenings, after work, it hosts popular Torah classes for

men. On West 89th Street, Yeshiva Ketana, a boys' yeshiva with over 100 young students, has been operating since 1946.



Suri Teller A customer at West Side Judaica

“When I was growing up, the West Side was a very small community, and it was always pretty much to the right,” Scharf said. “The Bikur Cholim [society for aiding the ill] existed in my grandmother’s time. There’s a *gemach* [a free loan fund], a food bank [Tomchei Shabbos], a Hatzolah [ambulance]. A lot of this was

started generations ago. But now we do have new families moving in — families who move here from the East Side, from London, from Lawrence. I don't think it's gotten more right-wing since I've come here; there are just bigger groups of people now, because families have grown."

It has perhaps never been easier for a devout Orthodox Jew to lead a successful professional life, one that can finance a Manhattan lifestyle, thanks largely to a shift in corporate American policies on accommodating religious employees.

"Up until the '60s, white-shoe law firms wouldn't accommodate Shabbat and taking off yom tov," said Rebecca Kobrin, associate professor of American Jewish history at Columbia University. "Certain high-paying jobs demanded a lifestyle in which you couldn't be observant. Today, it has become more normative, as the New York business world is accepting of different lifestyles in a way that it never was before."

But perhaps it isn't just wealth that's grown in the Orthodox community. It's also, interestingly, religious observance — and consequentially, there's a shift in identity. Those who once went to Ivy League universities have become more religiously stringent and are now steering their children toward "Ivy League yeshivas," the elite Haredi Torah institutions of Beth Medrash Govoha, in Lakewood, New Jersey, and Jerusalem's Mir Yeshiva.

"There is a general shift to the right, people who are becoming more observant, families who were once Modern Orthodox 'Young Israel style,' who are now moving to the right," Kobrin said. "This shift to the right is largely dependent upon the 'year in Israel.' It's a subtle shift. In the '50s and '60s, the thought that your child would devote their life to learning would never have been a dream of a parent."

Meanwhile, today, that is indeed a dream for many community members — and it's an attainable one, too. After all, the ultimate sign of prosperity, in any community, is the ability to support one's child so they never have to work in their lives — from Borough Park's kollel students to Fifth Avenue's trust fund kids.

Privacy, on the West Side, is central to the culture — and why I struggled getting people to speak to me on the record. It's the anonymity that allows community members to compartmentalize and go from mornings in the boardroom to evenings in Hasidic rebbes' courts.

"Many people here who straddle different worlds, they like how the West Side just lets you 'be,'" one resident told me.

"It's an island of black hats, within the larger black hat community," another community member said. That is, members of this community don't quite fit into the mold of the Orthodox shtetl, so they choose Manhattan.

And it is here that the Orthodox community's movers and shakers live, making the neighborhood arguably more influential than the meccas of Lakewood and Brooklyn. The chairman of Agudath Israel, the umbrella organization and advocacy group representing American Haredi Orthodox Jewry, is David Diamond, an active community member of the West Side.

Lakewood's yeshiva Beth Medrash Govoha — considered the most influential yeshiva outside Israel — recently hosted a weekend retreat for its board of governors on the Upper West Side. Every week, a regular stream of Israeli Haredi politicians and rabbis travel through the doors of these shtibls, hoping to attract the attention of Orthodoxy's movers and shakers.

Few, even among the Orthodox community, know that those constructing 1,000-seat yeshivas in Israel are themselves sitting in tiny 20-seat shtibls in Manhattan.

“In Orthodox Haredi institutions, the Upper West Side black hat community plays a central leadership role,” one local leader told me. “And it's not just because they're affluent. The average Jews on the West Side are a different breed. One of the things we pride ourselves in on the Upper West Side is that because our kids grow up in the city, they're much better adjusted to the wider world, because they grow up with non-Jewish neighbors. They don't grow up narrow-minded. When you're open-minded, you can think big, about the community's needs.”

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Looking for Ourselves

By Rabbi Berel Wein



There is a natural curiosity within each of us as to our origins and ancestry. There are even many organizations, professional, educational and commercial enterprises as well that are solely devoted to ancestral and genealogical searches. Building family trees is a very popular avocation in our world.

All of this is very true in general society, but it is also a frequent occurrence in Jewish society particularly. I have had requests lately from Jewish people that I do not personally know but that, somehow, have asked me to help them with their research. I have been asked for information on the life story and the main accomplishments of certain great scholars and rabbis who lived in Eastern Europe in the 1800s.

They believe that they are somehow descended from one of these great scholars and want to understand what that heritage may truly mean for them. Most of the requests that I have had are from Jews living in the United States who have little or no actual daily contact with Judaism or traditional Jewish life.

Nevertheless, there is a voice within them that makes them curious, even to the point of discomfort, as to who their ancestors were and why those ancestors are so well known in Orthodox and yeshiva circles even until today.

There is much to be said for being able to know who one's ancestors were. This is certainly true when the memory of that ancestor is somehow kept alive, if not within that person's family but within the general community of Jewish scholarship and traditional behavior.

On the other hand, I have always found it ironic, if not even tragic, that such great ancestors should possess generations that are completely unaware of them, of their great accomplishments and traditional way of life. I am intrigued that somehow later generations, far removed from the world of their ancestors in time, place, behavior and spiritual belief nevertheless have a hunger to know about their past.

This is part of the great search that all of us undergo in life, of looking for ourselves. We know ourselves physically but in terms of spirit and self-worth, we are at a loss to truly identify ourselves. Being aware of the history of one's family and of understanding our antecedents many times offers us the key to unlock the mystery of self-awareness and pride. In Jewish life we all trace ourselves back to our ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. That is the beginning of our family tree and every year in our Torah readings, we review the story of their lives, challenges and accomplishments. It is in those stories that we find ourselves as well.

Sometimes knowing about our family's past is enough to shake us out of lethargy and to awaken a new interest that can lead to changes in belief and lifestyle. I have also found that sometimes knowing about the past frightens and inhibits. I have also had the experience that knowing about past ancestors most of the time is not strong enough by itself to bring about self-knowledge or any sort of analytic thought about one's life and one's purpose.

This is just one of the many facts that flood our consciousness day in and day out. Yet, we must remember that we are the heirs of queens and princes, of priests and of a holy people. By remembering this we automatically shape our lives differently and more positively. We are given goals to achieve and heroic figures to emulate.

Remembering family lines was always an integral part of the Jewish home and of Jewish life. Even in the darkest of circumstances, Jews could feel themselves special in terms of their relationship with G-d and human society. It did not make life easier in any physical sense, but it made it more glorious in a spiritual and eternal sense. It emphasized immortality over the temporary and the spirit over the flesh.

Reprinted from the weekly blog of Rabbi Berel Wein's Parashat Shoftim 5779 website.

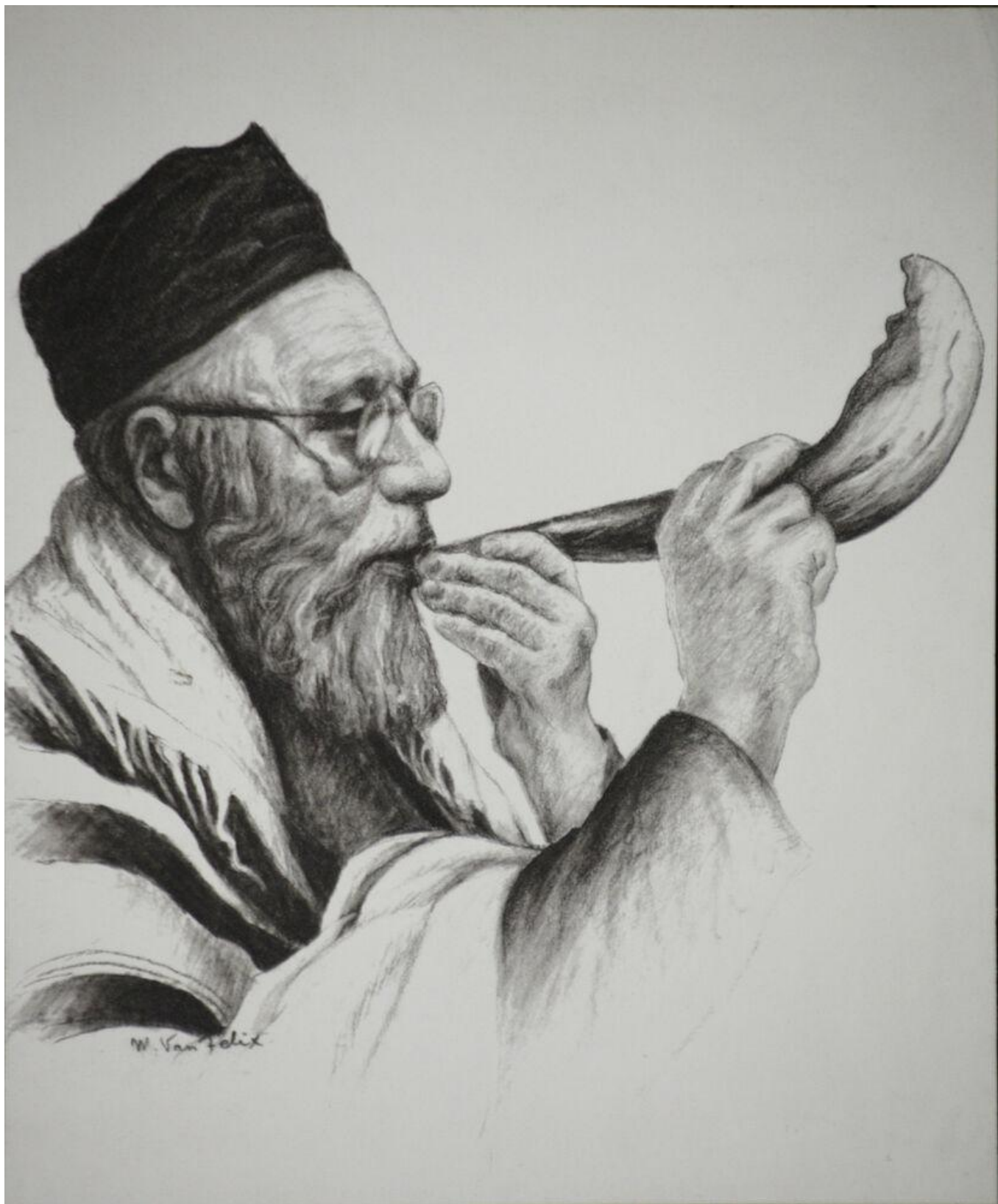


Illustration by Maurice Van Felix (circa 1960s)