

# עטרת זקנים

Divrei Torah and Derashos of  
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## PREFACE

On the night of 27 Cheshvan 5748, November 18, 1987, our Zaydei, Harav Yaakov Meir Kohn Zt'l, Rav Yaakov Meir ben R' Yosef Yitzchok, arrived home from a meeting of the United Jewish Council of the Lower East Side. He opened a few sefarim and resumed his never-ending Torah study.

Thinking he heard a knock at the door, he went to answer it. At that moment, he had a massive heart attack and collapsed near the door. He was rushed to the hospital by Hatzalah but his holy neshamah had already departed, his Gemara still open awaiting his return.

Zaydei left his Gemara open symbolically for us, his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We see it as our charge and holy mission from him to keep learning and teaching the Word of Hashem.

During Zaydei's shiva, Rebbetzin Sima Feinstein a"h (Rav Moshe's wife) remarked that they had lost "*unzere Reb Yankel* - OUR Reb Yankel".

Everyone who knew him loved him, including non-Jews he encountered on the street. He exuded pleasantness and warmth. The painful lonely years of his youth were completely hidden beneath his charismatic smile and warm sense of humor. Wherever he went, he always had a sefer in hand. He learned Torah and he lived Torah, and his greatest nachas was teaching Torah to others.

We continue to miss him and be inspired by him.

May his neshamah have an aliyah and may he be a מליץ יושר for all of us.

The following collection is but a small sampling of his derashos that were always witty and insightful.

## A MATTER OF PERCEPTION

What you think of a certain situation depends on how you look at it. Two people can observe the exact same occurrence and yet come away with different impressions. For instance, a store might not have a customer for a whole week. Suddenly, on Friday morning a customer walks in. An average person will think nothing of it. A business has good days and bad days, good weeks and bad weeks. A religious person, however, will say G-d sent in this customer on Erev Shabbos so that the storeowner will be able to afford provisions for Shabbos.

A story is told of a drunken Jew in a little town in Europe, who once met the priest of the town passing on the street. The priest didn't understand Yiddish and the drunken Jew didn't speak Russian. They began communicating in a mysterious sign language.

The priest held up three fingers and the Jew responded by holding up one finger. Then the priest held up his hand with all five fingers separated. The Jew promptly showed the priest a clenched fist. Finally, the priest took out a bottle of wine and the drunken Jew produced a piece of white cheese. Upon the conclusion of their exchange the priest hugged the drunken Jew and exclaimed that he was a great man. Then they went their separate ways.

Afterwards the priest was asked to explain the strange exchange. He priest replied that when he first saw the drunken Jew looking so happy, he wondered how he could be so content if he didn't believe in the trinity. I showed him three fingers to symbolize the trinity. Ther Jew replied by holding up one finger, symbolizing that they believe in only the one true G-d. I then asked the drunk how the Jews could be so confident in their beliefs when there is so much disunity among them, symbolized by my five separate fingers. He replied by holding up a clenched fist, indicating that win times of urgency the Jewish people bind together. I asked him how the Jews will be redeemed if they are as red with sin as red wine. He replied that although the Jews sin, they repent and become pure white like cheese. When I heard his poignant replies, I embraced him and realized how wise he was.

Later on, the drunken Jew was also asked to explain his puzzling conversation with the priest. The Jew replied that he had been walking through the streets happily, minding his own business, when this priest asked him why he was so happy because he could kill me with his three fingers. I replied that I could overcome him with just one finger. The priest then told me that his five fingers would put an end to me. I replied that my clenched fist could do a lot more damage to him. When he saw that I wasn't afraid of him he decided to make peace with me, and he presented me with a bottle of wine. When I saw that he had backed down I took out a piece of cheese and he hugged me, and we became friends.

The same event was witnessed by two people. To the drunk their exchange was an everyday occurrence while to the priest it was a theological debate.

The same is true of shul. To one person shul is a meeting place where people gather together socially. But to another person the shul is a place of holiness and prayer, a place that unifies and purifies us.

Sometimes we're separated like five fingers, but the shul unifies us. Even if we are sinful like red wine, we come to shul to purify our souls. The shul is a vital part of Judaism and without it we are unable to properly exist as Jews.

## SADNESS AND MOURNING

According to the Jewish law, the ceremony of *keriah*, cutting our garments when our closest relatives pass away, is to be performed while the mourner is standing. This teaches us that we have to meet all sorrow while standing upright. The future may be dark, veiled from the view of mortals, but not the manner in which we meet the future. To rail at life, to rebel against our destiny that has cast our lives in unpleasant places is of little avail. We cannot lay down the terms of life. Life must be accepted on its own terms. But as hard as life's terms are we must accept them.

Sorrow is as much a part of life as joy. To live is to suffer as well as to rejoice. Sorrow cannot be avoided; it can only be conquered.

A hungry fox was eyeing some luscious fruits in a garden. But to his dismay he could find no way to squeeze past the tall, thick fence that surrounded the vineyard on all sides. As the fox circled around the fence, he found a small hole in the fence, barely large enough for him to push his head through. The fox could see the luscious grapes growing in the vineyard, and his mouth began to water. But the hole was too small for him. So, the fox fasted for three days, until he became thin enough to slip through the hole. Inside the vineyard, the fox began to eat to his heart's content. He grew bigger and fatter than ever before. Then he wanted to get out of the vineyard. But alas! The hole was too small again. So, what did he do? He fasted for three days again, and then just about managed to slip through the hole and out again.

Turning his head towards the vineyard, the poor fox said: "Vineyard, O vineyard! How lovely you look, and how lovely are your fruits and vines. But what good are you to me? just as I came to you, so I leave you."

And so, our sages say, it is also with this world. It is a beautiful world, but—in the words of King Solomon, the wisest of all men—just as man comes into this world emptyhanded, so he leaves it. Naked he entered the world and naked he leaves. After all his toil therein, he carries nothing away with him except the good deeds he leaves behind.

(Koheles Rabbah 5:14)

We must face grief without any expectation of miraculous healing but with the knowledge that we are courageous and resolute. We can live as our loved ones would wish us to live, not empty, morose, self-centered and self-pitying, but as brave and undismayed servants.

Rabbinic wisdom (Bava Basra 60b) teaches this approach to grief in the following passage:

When the second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, many Jews began to withdraw from life and sank into a depressed mourning for the sons and daughters of Israel that had perished and also for the Temple that had gone

up in smoke. They refused to eat and drink. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them, "My sons, I know that it is impossible not to mourn, but to mourn excessively is forbidden." Why? Because that great Jewish sage felt that we human beings must think not only for the past but also for the future.

We are commanded by our religion to serve faithfully as long as we are alive.

All of life is but a loan to us. When the lender asks for the return of the jewel, He will care for it better than we have.

## Marriage

The relationship between the Almighty and Israel is often pictured as that of a marital relationship. The Prophet Hosea foresees the day when the Almighty will take Israel unto Himself and effect a perfect union.

We repeat what G-d said to us every morning when we don our tefillin:

וארשתיך לי לעולם - "I shall betroth thee unto Me forever"

The first idea that is expressed is that the union will be a permanent one. Too many young people enter the marriage relationship with mental reservations that they will dissolve the union when living together will be difficult. That is not the right attitude. Trial marriages are never successful, for they begin with the wrong idea, namely, that the marriage may be dissolved. One must begin with the idea that come what may, for better or worse, the marriage will continue.

In this week's Torah portion when Yaakov left the home of his father Yitzchak to build a home for himself, he had a dream –

והנה סולם מוצב ארצה וראשו מגיע השמימה

A ladder was set up on earth and the top of it reached to heaven. Life is like a ladder. It is not always smooth -- it is not always like a bed of roses. You do not always go up the rungs of the ladder. Some- times you must go down. However, you must always remember that G-d is always above you and will guide you forever.

והנה מלאכי אלקים עלים ויורדים בו

Angels of G-d are always ascending and descending the ladder. Through the vicissitudes of life remember that your position on the rungs of the ladder may fluctuate. There are times when you have to submit to the opinions of others and take the advice of others, that will insure an everlasting marital relationship.

וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים

"I shall betroth thee to Me with justice and righteousness, with kindness and mercy."

The union must be characterized by fair play, by proper consideration for one another, by justice and kindness. Neither one must take advantage of the other but be fair, ready to share the burdens as well as the joys that life holds out.

וארשתיך לי באמונה וידעת את ה' - "And I shall betroth thee unto Me with faith and thou shalt know the Lord"

Faith and knowledge of G-d are the third element that must enter. Faith in one another and knowledge of G-d are most essential because they give an

ideal which two people hold in common and which brings idealism unto their lives. The more things in common two young people have, the greater is their chance for cooperation and collaboration. In order to achieve any goal in life, it must be accomplished step by step -- rung by rung on the ladder of success. Life is not always smooth, but if you will base it on harmony, mutual conscientious concern, understanding, compassion for another, character, and love, then your marriage will indeed be a success.

May you be guided by these ideals and may the union you form be permanent and lasting. May the Divine Presence ever be in your midst and bless your home with happiness and joy.



## Succos & Hoshanah Rabbah<sup>1</sup>

We are blessed to have in this month of Tishrei three Yomim Tovim – Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the present Yom Tov of Succos.

בר"ה יכתבון וביום צום כיפור יחתמון – On Rosh Hashanah our fate for the coming year is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. At the conclusion of Succos, Hoshanah Rabbah, we receive the פיתקא טבא, the good verdict.

This shows that although the holidays are separate, they contain a common theme.

Let us begin by analyzing all of these Yomim Tovim.

What is the reason for the Yom Tov of Succos? The Torah hakedosha says כי בסוכות הושבתי את בני ישראל בהוציא אותם מארץ מצרים – In Succos I caused the B'nei Yisroel to dwell when I took them out of Mitzrayim.

If this is the only reason we celebrate Succos, then it is hard to understand why we celebrate. We had many miracles when we were in the desert, including the miracle of the manna and the well of water that accompanied us. We traveled through 42 encampments in relative security. Why are we not making any remembrances of those miracles? Maybe we should have a Yom Tov of jogging to remember that they traveled in the desert for 40 years?

Regarding Yom Kippur, the gemara states, כל האוכל כאילו התענה תשיעי ועשירי, כל האוכל כאילו התענה תשיעי ועשירי – Anyone who eats on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei (Erev Yom Kippur), it is as if he fasted on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei. There is such great significance to eating before Yom Kippur that it has the same importance as fasting on Yom Kippur. This is very difficult to understand. Why should that be?

On Rosh Hashanah the main mitzvah is תקיעת שופר – blowing Shofar. The gemara explains that a shofar is made from קרן איל – the horn of a ram. The question is that a horn is a symbol of destruction. The gemara (Bava Kamma) discusses the four main categories of damages – ארבעה אבות נזיקין – There the gemara says that קרן is the worst. It is defined by the animal intending to do damage כונתו להזיק. If so, why on Rosh Hashanah, when we pray for chesed and rachamim, do we use an instrument of destruction?

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<sup>1</sup> These are two derashos with similar and connected themes that I found in the files of my Zaydei, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn zt"l, Rav of Anshe Slonim on the Lower East Side. It is unclear when and where this lecture was delivered.

This teaches us that our obligation and duty is to convert objects of destruction to holiness, to convert רע לטוב, to convert the יצר הרע into יצר הטוב. This is what then gemara means when it says that the pasuk ואהבת את ה' אלקיך means that we must love Hashem with both of our inclinations, בשני יצריך.

The same idea is conveyed to eating. We must convert the action that even an animal does – eating – into קדושת יום הכיפורים. We need to make the eating of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei as holy as the fasting of the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei.

This same idea applies to Succos as well. The Chernobyler Rebbe would say, "I love the succah because one enters the succah even with my muddy boots." On succos even the mud on our boots becomes holy.

And this is my message to you. You all have secular positions in the everyday workplace. But you are all capable of converting all your secular endeavors into קדושה.

*I want to thank the rabbi for giving me the privilege of addressing you. It was truly enjoyable to listen to the sermons of your distinguished rabbi, and they are always full of טעם וריח as we say in Succos terminology. However, we should note that the ד' מינים also include an item with no טעם or ריח and for that reason I'm probably speaking to you now.*

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we said: בראש השנה יכתוב וביום צום כיפור יחתמו. We have a tradition that on Hoshanah Rabbah we receive the פיתקא טובא – good decision.

It always amazed me – why we must wait until the end of Succos for the final decision, rather than receiving it immediately? In our world, delays are understandable – union problems, strikes, etc. However, this is not the case in heaven. So, why is the edict not sent to this world for another two weeks after it is sealed on Yom Kippur?

The answer, I believe, is as follows:

We have two Torahs – תורה שבעל פה. They are both important. However, תורה שבעל פה is more important, for it explains and illuminates תורה שבכתב. On the pasuk (Shemos 34:27) “כי על פי הדברים האלה כרתי אתך ברית” – For upon these words I have made a covenant with you”, the gemara (Gittin 60b) says that the covenant was founded based upon and because of תורה שבעל פה.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are easily understood based on the pesukim of תורה שבכתב – blow a shofar on Rosh Hashanah and fast on Yom Kippur. But every aspect of Succos cannot be understood without תורה שבעל פה. What can be used for walls of a succah? What can be used for Schach? What are the Four Species that the Torah commands us to take?<sup>2</sup>

G-d waits until after Succos to see if we have done complete teshuvah, demonstrating our complete faith and obedience to תורה שבעל פה and תורה שבכתב. פיתקא טובא and then we can receive the טובא.

Also, the greatness of a Jew is that he must convert earthly items into holiness. In parshas Balak, the Torah says that Bila'am declared, “מי מנה עפר” – who can count the dust of Yaakov? Rashi comments אין חשבון במצות שמקיימין בעפר, there are numerous mitzvos that are connected to the earth, such as proper planting, etc. Even dirt can be converted into holiness. In addition, even the seed of the conjugal act can become holy. It is for that reason that at a wedding seven blessings are recited under the chuppah and during the week afterwards. One beracha does not suffice to bring out the

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<sup>2</sup> It should also be added that ניסוך המים which according to Rashi is the source of the great celebration of שמחת תורה שבעל פה is completely learned from תורה שבעל פה.

sanctity of the event. We must ensure that marriage is not merely a physical act of pleasure, but rather one full of kedusha.

The pasuk in Tehillim (128:2) says "יגיע כפריך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך" – The toil of your hands when you shall eat it, you are praiseworthy, and it is good for you." It does not say the fruits of your mind – your plans and ideas, but the toil of your hands; what you actually create and make holy.

The pasuk also says "השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם" – The heavens, the heavens are for Hashem, and the earth is for people." The Kotzker Rebbe quipped that Hashem gave us the earth and our task is to elevate the earth and make it heavenly.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur represent true, inherent kedushah. But on Succos, man converts earthy items into mitzvos – the schach, the boards, the 4 species, etc. If a Jew reaches this level then he is assured of a פיתקא טבא.

In addition, the mitzvos are divided into מצות בין אדם למקום and מצות בין אדם לחבירו. Both must be adhered to.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur stress בין אדם למקום. We do teshuvah and say selichos and extra tefillos to Hashem. If one sins לחבירו Yom Kippur cannot atone for that, unless the person he hurt forgives him.

On Succos however, we not only rejoice ourselves, but we have the responsibility to ensure that others rejoice as well – ושמת בכל הטוב אשר נתן – לך ה' אלקיך ולביתך אתה והלוי והגר אשר בקרבך.

After the week of Succos when we have focused on bringing joy to others and elevating our carefulness with לחבירו, then we can merit a פיתקא טבא.

Thus, the message is to believe in תורה שבכתב and תורה שבעל פה, to live for others, and to convert all our deeds into holy acts.

In that merit, we will all have a פיתקא טבא.

## Speech from Yehuda Kohn's Bar Mitzvah

My dear oldest grandson Yehuda Yosef –

We are all thankful to Hashem that we are able to be here and to take part in this simcha. This simcha is called bar mitzvah, a son of mitzvoh, which means from now on, you are obligated to perform, obey, observe the taryag mitzvos.

I would like to explain why we refer to a thirteen-year-old as bar mitzvah, a son of mitzvoh and not a ba'al mitzvah, a man of mitzvoh. We refer to a generous person as a ba'al chessed, a person with a good character we call ba'al midos, a man with good character. If so, why do we refer to a thirteen-year-old boy not as ba'al mitzvoh but as a bar mitzvoh, a son of mitzvoh?

When a boy reaches the age of thirteen and he becomes a full recognized member of Klal Yisroel and he is able to choose his way to life, he should always remember his roots, whose son he is and he should follow his parents' footsteps, that people should be proud to say that this boy is a bar, a truly son on his parents.

And now Yehuda, I would like to tell you a little bit about your parents and your family. Although we live in a time of equal rights when men are equal to the woman, but I am from the old school who say ladies first. Even when Hashem yisborach gave the Torah he told Moshe to first speak to the woman and then to the men.

I will start with your mother. When Miriam invited your mother for a Shabbos to our home when they were students at Stern college, we liked her from the very beginning. Your mother is intelligent and very bright. She was the editor in chief of Stern's college magazine. She has a PhD. Your grandfather, Mr. Cherick, is one of the builders of yiddishkeit in America. He is one of the organizers of Young Israel movement. Thanks to him, St. Louis is a town of torah, tzedakah and yiddishkeit. Your grandmother is very smart, bright and intelligent. She is the Hebrew principal of the talmud torah. Your grandmother's mother is well known for her charity for yeshivas here and in Israel and for the state of Eretz Yisrael. Your grandmother's father was a great lamdun, gaon a mechaber for a sefer.

Now I will turn the page to your father. He is in his way a genius. At a young age he received his smicha and also his PhD. This achievement he obtained by winning scholarships and fellowships. He studied very hard and even took sleep away from me in order to study with him. When your father reviews a blatt gemorah he reviews it in its depths....

## LIFE OF KEDUSHA

The Gemora (92a) Sanhedrin asks להיכן אזל, after חנניה מישאל ועזריה came out alive from the burning furnace, where did they go?

Rabbi Yochanan said עלו לארץ ישראל ונשאו נשים והולידו בנים ובנות - they went to Eretz Yisroel, got married and had children.

I would like to explain the Gemorah: Every person has to be a הולך going up higher. each day doing more and more in the service of השם ית'. The Vilna Gaon explained, אם אין אתה הולך מעלה בע"כ אתה יורד מטה - if one does not go higher not only does he remain on the same level, but he goes down.

Therefore, the Gemara asked about חנניה מישאל ועזריה how much higher could they go?

The Gemara answers that to live properly, be good husbands raise children properly, that is the highest service to G-d.

Rav Mendel Kotzker used to say ואנשי קודש תהיו לי - holy mentchen, holy people you should be.

Regarding Har Sinai it says ויחזו האלקים ויאכלו ושתו - and they saw Hashem and they ate and drank. In eating and drinking you could see G-dliness - to know where to eat and how to eat and when to eat. If it is proper and with human values, eating has קדושה.

We will conclude with a story from the Chofetz Chaim:

The Chofetz Chaim's son was in Warsaw and chassidim asked him to tell them about a miracle that the Chofetz Chaim had performed. The son answered "by you it is a miracle if G-d does what the tzaddik wants. But by my father the miracle is that he does what G-d wants."

To live life in a holy manner is the greatest kedusha.

## JOY OF A WEDDING

Thank you, Rabbi, for permitting me to express my feelings. I am thankful to G-d that I and my wife are able to participate in your wedding.

I feel that I am now not at a cousin's wedding, but at my own daughter's wedding but without obligations to pay the caterer's bill and without a headache about the sitting arrangements.

According to the Jewish tradition, a wedding ceremony has to be performed by giving a ring. The ring can be made from any material, gold, silver, or copper. However, it cannot contain any diamonds. A person could say the most beautiful and nicest poems and yet the marriage will not take effect, only by giving. A happy marriage is not based on flowery words, and not even on kissing and hugging. A happy marriage is only based by giving. To give themselves over to his or to her mate.

As a ring has no head or tail, such should be a marriage. No one is the head, no one is the tail, both are equal.

The ring also contains no diamonds. If a scratch happens in any material, you can smooth it out. However, if it happens on a diamond, you cannot fix it, the scratch remains. Life in marriage is not always smooth. There are disagreements, but you have to try to smooth it out and come to an agreement.

Let us summarize these three things on which a happy marriage is based:

By giving up yourself to each other and ensuring that no one is the head or tail in family life. If a misunderstanding happens, try to straighten it out.

In the old country was a custom that the parents of the bride and groom used to go to the cemetery and invite the souls of their deceased parents and family. Here tonight are the souls for your departed family, and among them is the soul of your great and famous Rabbi who brought his blessing, and he is confident that your home will be built on the beautiful foundation of authentic Judaism.

You have dreamed, and your dreams became a reality. You have hoped and your hopes were fulfilled. You wished and your wishes came true. You are now husband and wife. happiness. There are three elements needed to create happiness.

First, trust in G-d that He is the father of life, that he guards our steps, that his mercy accompanies us day and night, in sun and in thunderstorm. Secondly, trust in yourself, and trust in each other.

My dear Chosson, I want you to realize that upon you will depend on the happiness of the young girl now entrusted in your care. My dear Kallah, I want you to feel that your attitude, your patience, your happy cooperation can

make or mar the happiness of the young man whose partner you now become. Thirdly, is the knowledge that no Jew can be happy unless he knows that he has done his Jewish duty. No Jew can be happy unless he shares the sorrows and joys of his people.

Building like this on trust in G-d, on respect for each other, and social responsibility entitles you to ask for G-d's help. And so, may He guard you under the wings of His mercy and keep you together in joy and in long blessed life for many, many years to come.



## NEXT YEAR IN YERUSHALAYIM

There are two occasions during the year when we (officially) recite the timeless prayer, "*L'shanah habba'ah b'Yerushalyim*- Next year in Yerushalayim." Although the prayer is on our hearts and minds constantly and we often sing it, it is only officially part of the liturgy of our prayers on Yom Kippur and on Pesach. During the waning moments of Neilah after we have spent the awesome day of Yom Kippur fasting and in penetrating prayer, the entire congregation announces together, "Next Year in Yerushalayim." The second occasion is on Pesach at the conclusion of the Seder. After we have fulfilled the many unique mitzvos of the night and have performed the many steps of the Seder, we begin the final section of the Seder with the declaration of, "Next year in Yerushalayim." What is the significance of these two occasions and their connection to this timeless prayer?

The final redemption can come, either because Klal Yisroel as a nation merits it or, if they are undeserving when the designated time arrives, they will be redeemed in fulfillment of the promise, "And He brings redemption to their (our forefather's) children's children, for the sake of His name". The difference is that if the redemption comes because Klal Yisroel merits it, then they will be entitled and deserving of the salvation that will occur. However, if they must be redeemed because of the promise made to the forefathers, Moshiach's arrival and the salvation that ensues will completely be an act of kindness by G-d.

When a person is in dire need of financial assistance, he can receive it in one of two ways. If he is compelled to come on to the grace of others and to ask for charity, when he receives what he needs although he will surely be very excited, he will inevitably feel some shame because he had to ask for kindness. Therefore, he will restrict his excitement to the privacy of his own home. However, if a person works tirelessly until he himself earns the money he needs, his excitement is far greater. He has no reason to be ashamed of the money he received; in fact, he has every right to be very proud of it. Therefore, his excitement will be expressed in a far more ostentatious and uninhibited manner.

There are two unique time-periods dedicated to redemption. The first is Pesach, the anniversary of our miraculous redemption from Egypt. While it was truly an amazing event, we did not possess sufficient merit to be redeemed. In fact, the Medrash relates that as the Jews left Egypt the Angel of Egypt complained that "These (the Jews) and these (the Egyptians) are both idolaters." Although the Jews had some merits still, in reality, G-d saved them out of His boundless love for His People. Therefore, on Pesach night when we pray to be redeemed once more, we do so in the privacy of our

homes, because the redemption of Pesach required tremendous kindness of G-d.

On Yom Kippur however, after we spend an entire day immersed in spiritual endeavors, ignoring our physical needs, begging G-d for forgiveness, and proclaiming our true inner desire to serve Hashem, we rise together and, in unison, publicly proclaim, "Next year in Yerushalayim." At that moment, we are on a level when we need not be abashed to request the redemption in a public forum. We have demonstrated that our true desire is to be a Holy People, even though throughout the year we sometimes lose focus of our true goals. When we are on that lofty level, we have earned the right to publicly request the redemption.

## HESPED FOR RAV AHARON KOTLER<sup>3</sup>

Even though I am not worthy, and even though I do not have the ability to properly relate the greatness, of the tremendous personality and leadership qualities of my teacher and master, Rabbi Aharon Kotler zt'l, however because I am the Rav of this shul, and being that I am a disciple of the venerable Rosh Yeshiva, it is impossible for me not to express some sentiments and feelings about the great sage and gaon, who enlightened the entire Torah world throughout his lifetime.

The Gemarah Sanhedrin (105) relates that when Rabbi Eliezer was ill, four great Torah scholars came to visit him. They each extolled his virtues and how valuable he was to the world. Rabbi Tarfon stated, "You are more valuable to Klal Yisroel than drops of rain because rain only nourishes in this world while you nourish your students in this world and the next world." Rabbi Yehoshua followed and said, "You are more valuable to Klal Yisroel than the sun itself because the sun shines in this world while you shine in this world and the next world." Finally, Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryah said, "You are more valuable to Klal Yisroel than parents because one's parents bring him into this world while you bring your disciples into this world and the next world."

What is the meaning of the aforementioned statements of the holy Tana'im by stating that Rabbi Eliezer's value is greater than rain, the sun, and one's parents?

It is well known that in order for any seed, and subsequently any plant, to sprout and produce fruit, there must be proper exposure to sun as well as sufficient rain. However, there is a difference between how the sun affects a plant versus how rain affects a plant. The sun remains in its place millions of miles away from earth and only its rays reach the earth. The sun itself has no relationship, so-to-speak, with the plants and trees on earth. Rain on the other hand, traverses the distance from the rain clouds to the earth, and the raindrop itself enters the plants and trees.

Both rain and sun, however, can only 'fulfill their mission' of nourishing life on earth if seeds were pre-planted in the earth. The sun and rain cannot create those seeds. The concept of creating seed from nothing in order to reproduce life is only accomplished by parents. It is only after the 'parent-fruit' has produced seeds, which are then planted in the ground, that the rain and sun can be effective.

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<sup>3</sup> *The following is a eulogy delivered by Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn in the shul where he was the rabbi, Congregation Anshei Slonim. It was delivered in honor of the yahrtzeit of his Rebbe, Harav Aharon Kotler zt'l (2 Kislev). In attendance were two thousand b'nei torah and talmidim, including Harav Moshe Feinstein zt'l, Harav Pinchos Teitz zt'l, and Harav Shneur Kotler zt'l. The eulogy was published in the Hama'aor periodical, Volume 15, Number 1 (January 1965).*

Rabbi Yehoshua declared to Rabbi Eliezer that he is greater than the sun. The sun heats and lights up the world with its powerful rays, but Rabbi Eliezer's warmth enlightens this world and the next world through his deep and penetrating wisdom. Rabbi Tarfon added that Rabbi Eliezer is not only greater than the sun which shines its light from afar, but he is even more valuable than rain. The rain which descends to the earth and fuses with the growth below becomes part of its recipient. Rabbi Eliezer is such an embracing loving Rebbe that he unites with his students; he infuses some of himself into the fabric of their souls and invests in them life in this world and the next.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryah added that indeed the sun and rain are extremely valuable and vital to the perpetuation of life, but what good are the sun's rays or rain if there are no seeds in the earth to receive the blessings from above? Rabbi Eliezer, therefore, is more precious than the sun and rain; in fact, he is even more precious than parents who are the progenitors of life itself. By teaching myriads of students Torah and proper conduct in Avodas Hashem he created a generation who will seek the life-giving rays of the spiritual sun and rainfall to continue to nourish their souls.

All these praises can also be applied to our great Rosh Yeshiva, the gaon, Reb Aharon zt'l. With his insight, perception, and brilliance, he has enlightened the Torah world. However, he was not only like the sun which shines from afar but he was like the rain which bonds with its recipients. He became involved, and cared for the welfare of every student and worried for them so much that their premonitions and anxieties became his concerns as well.

Let us analyze a few more sayings of Chazal that will help us further relate the personality of our Rebbe, the Rosh Yeshiva zt'l:

The Gemorah Bava Basra (94a) quotes Rav Chanan bar Rav who said in the name of Rav that on the day that Avrohom Avinu was niftar, all of the respected personalities from every nation stood in a line and declared, "Woe is to the world that has lost its leader! Woe is to the ship that has lost its captain!"

When a doctor sees a patient, the doctor will try hard to cure his patient. However, the doctor is well aware that his own life is not in danger. On the other hand, a captain at sea is on the same ship that the passengers are on and therefore, if their lives are in any sort of danger his life is in danger as well. Therefore, the efforts of the captain on the ship to ensure the safety of his passengers will be far more intense than the efforts of the doctor standing behind the operating table operating on his patient.

The Rosh Yeshiva was truly like the captain of a ship. He felt inextricably bound to his many students and his soul was intertwined with theirs. This was especially true because he personally shared their pain because of the massive and unspeakable losses which they suffered.

When the Rosh Yeshiva arrived on the shores of America, there was a massive deficiency in Torah study. There was hardly anyone who was

dedicated to in-depth, analytical, penetrating Torah study. There were hardly any students who were interested in learning from the great Rosh Yeshiva.

It was at that point that he began his final phase of greatness as a Rebbe, i.e., he became like a parent to his students. He dedicated himself to creating an army of disciples and was committed to planting seeds of people who would commit themselves to the ideals of serving G-d with their entire soul and being *moser nefesh* for Torah study.

At this point, there began another transition in the life of the Rosh Yeshiva. Rain does not only fall on plants and trees, but it also falls on pavement, causing roads to become sullied. So too, the Rosh Yeshiva committed himself to lowering himself into the mud in order to draw out those who would support and help strengthen the Yeshiva.

The pasuk (Shemos 18:21) says, "And you shall search from among the people, men of valor; those who fear G-d, men of truth, who hate insincerity, officers of thousands, officers of hundreds, officers of fifty, and officers of ten." In every generation, there were elite Jews who were repulsed by money because they felt it had no value. The Rosh Yeshiva zt'l grew up with those feelings as well. But here in America, in order to sustain the yeshiva, he was forced to busy himself with money. How much degradation and humiliation did he suffer because of money! How much time did he have to waste in order to procure the necessary finances to upkeep the yeshiva! This too, is part of the reason why the efforts of the Rosh Yeshiva are analogous to rain. Often, he was forced to lower himself into the muck, just like the rain which falls and creates mud. Still-in-all, he remained as dedicated as always, constantly shining his ethereal light upon his students.

What is the point of reciting kaddish? The commentators explain that we recite kaddish in order to fulfill our mission in coming to this world, i.e., to sanctify and promote the Name of G-d. The Navi (Yeshaya 43:7) expresses this idea, "Whoever is called by My Name and for My Honor, I have created him, I fashioned him, I made him." Thus, when a Jew passes away from this world the sanctity and holiness that he produced in his lifetime is lost. Therefore, the deceased's son arises and declares, "*Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'mey rabbah*- May His Great Name be made Great and Holy." It is as if the son is saying, "Father, you have departed to the next world. Therefore, we commit ourselves to continuing your holy work of sanctifying G-d's Holy Name so that once again, his Name will be sanctified and made great."

The Rosh Yeshiva is no longer with us! There is no one who can fill his shoes! There is no one who can sanctify the name of G-d with his passion and vitality. It is now incumbent upon us, with our feeble abilities, to carry the Rosh Yeshiva on our shoulders, by continuing his holy work and efforts.

*Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'mey rabbah!*

## "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"



Essays by Rabbi Dani Staum  
About his  
Zeide, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn  
& Bubby, Rebbetzin Frumah (Frances) Kohn

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*24 Iyar 5779/May 24, 2019*

## UNQUENCHABLE FIRE

There are certain people whose accomplishments seem to traverse normal human limits. They seem to possess uncanny and selfless devotion to their causes which influence Klal Yisroel and promote Torah. What is the secret to their unmitigated energy?

How did Rav Yaakov Yosef Herman (All for the Boss) continue to devote himself to Torah causes when there were so many odds against him on a constant basis?

How did the Chofetz Chaim infuse hope and instill Torah values in his generation, to such a degree that his influence is still poignantly felt until today?

How did the Ponovetcher Rav build his yeshiva, after escaping the ashes of Europe?

How did Rav Aharon Kotler rebuild Torah in the spiritual desolation of America?

How did Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel promote the greatest Torah institution in the world?

How did the Bluzhever, Bobbover, Belzer, Gerrer, Satmar, Klausenberger, and Kaliver Rebbes rebuild after all of the devastation they endured, and the loss of so many of their chassidim?

On a personal note, I wonder how someone like my Rebbe, Rabbi Berel Wein, continues to travel and teach, and to recently publish another book, after so many years of devotion to education and teaching?

A few weeks ago, I was in a local seforim store perusing the newest English publications when a book caught my eye. It was about the life of Rav Zusha Wilamowsky, known in the circles of Lubavitch as "the Partisan". Although it wouldn't seem that such a book should pique my interest, I was actually very excited and immediately purchased it. Rav Zusha is my great uncle, the brother of my Zaydei, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn z"l.

I wish there was such a book about my Zaydei's life. But my Zaydei didn't talk much about the painful war years and his experiences, and we only know bits and pieces from the few anecdotes he shared and from stories related by others. But the book about Rav Zusha contains a few quotes and insights that my Zaydei shared about his younger brother who predeceased him.

It may seem strange that they had different last names, but that was a result of the war years. At one point my Zaydei's passport was taken away and he was thrown into prison. He found a passport with the name Kohn on it

(there were no pictures on the passports then). From then on that was his name, despite the fact that he was not a kohain.

The book describes Rav Zusha's youth which mostly paralleled that of Zaydei. Their father was the Rav of the town, and a saintly Jew, who, along with their mother and only sister, was killed by the Nazis. They learned in the great yeshiva of Baranovich, the yeshiva of Rav Elchanan Wasserman zt'l hy"d. During the war years they were separated. Zushe ended up with Tuvia Bielski's Partisans in the forests.

In the Displaced Persons camp after the war, Rav Zishe discovered Lubavitch and forged an inextricable lifelong connection with it. For the remainder of his life, Rav Zusha became devoted to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who affectionately referred to Rav Zusha as "my partisan". In fact, on the monument above his grave it says "R' Chaim Zusia who was known as the Rebbe's Partisan".

On Succos 1986, a weakened Rav Zusha, briefly joined the major Simchas Bais Hashoaivah at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights, the main headquarters of Lubavitch. But after a few minutes he wasn't feeling well and he entered the succah and laid down on a bench. It was there that he passed away. He died as he had lived his life, as a faithful devotee fulfilling his mission.

The book describes the incredibly selfless dedication that Rav Zusha had to the Rebbe and his causes. Rav Zusha dedicated his life to fulfilling the word of the Rebbe, and considered any request the Rebbe made of him to be a holy mission. He often spoke of "reporting to duty", "the battlefield", and "onward march".

The common thread between those who persevere beyond all odds and accomplish incredible things is that they have an unyielding sense of mission and responsibility. They aren't merely doing what they want to do; they are striving to accomplish what they feel needs to be done. They feel the weight upon their shoulders.

The gemara (Shabbos 138b) relates that when the rabbis arrived in the vineyards of Yavneh they related that they feared that Torah would be forgotten from the Jewish people. At that point, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai declared, "Heaven forbid, that Torah will be forgotten from the Jewish people, as it says, 'for it will not be forgotten from the mouths of your progeny'."

The Bais Yisrael of Ger explained that by declaring that Torah would never be forgotten, Rabbi Shimon was essentially taking responsibility to ensure that it would never happen. It wasn't just a prediction; it was a commitment.

That is what we celebrate on Lag Baomer. The fire of Torah was ignited within our souls at Sinai. But a fire will only endure as long as it has fuel. In the time of Rabbi Shimon, it seemed that the fuel source had been depleted. Rabbi Shimon himself fueled the fire with every fiber of his being and reawakened the surging flames.



In the generation following the Holocaust, the flames of Torah again seemed to have been weakened by the nefarious flames of the crematoriums. But then too, there were those who declared that Torah would not be forgotten, and in so doing committed themselves to its preservation, despite impossible odds.

Those heroic personalities have refueled the fire which continues to burn in the hallowed halls of our shuls, yeshivos, and homes.

The fire of Sinai and the fire of Rabbi Shimon continues to burn within our hearts, ensuring that it will indeed never be forgotten!

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*24 MarCheshvan 5783/November 18, 2022*

## BACK ISSUES

There is something special about sitting on the lap of a grandparent. It's even more special when that grandparent begins to rub or scratch your back.

I have nostalgic memories sitting on my Bubby's lap at many a Shabbos seudah while she warmly scratched my back. It would continue until she blurted out, "Alright, my hand is hurting!" The key was to try to make sure she was engaged in conversation and was distracted to get a longer back-scratching session.

Even when I was too old to sit on her lap, I would nonchalantly sit next to her, hoping that she would pick up on the hint. The real challenge was when another sibling sat on her other side for the same reason.

One summer when I was working in a camp office, one of the heads of the camp walked into the office and began rubbing his back against the protruding corner of the wall in the office. When I laughed at the unusual scene, he explained that it was obvious that it might have made more sense to make it more circular. He felt that the only plausible reason why it was constructed as a corner was to give people a way to scratch the itch on their back.

There does seem to be some logic to his assertion. After all, when someone has an itch anywhere on his body, he can easily scratch it to relieve the discomfort. But when a person has an itch on his back, it can be maddening trying to relieve the itch, especially when it's just out of reach.

One of the greatest gifts I ever received was a cheap flat wooden stick with bent finger like protrusions at the end. That little backscratcher is one of the greatest inventions ever created. Modern technology at its best!

There is a famous expression, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." I once read that the origin of the expression is from the English Navy during the 17th Century. At the time soldiers who were absent, drunk, or disobedient were tied to the ship's mast and flogged with lashes by a fellow crew member. Crew members struck deals between themselves that they would deliver only light lashes with the whip (i.e., just "scratching" the offender's back) to ensure they were treated the same if they were on the receiving end at some future time.

Generally, it is understood to mean if you help me, I'll help you. There are those who feel that this is the idea of friendship - you help me, and I help you.

In megillas Esther when king Achashveirosh cannot fall asleep, he asks that he be read to from his book of chronicles. He assumed that someone must have done him a favor that he didn't repay and therefore no one wanted

to help him. In other words, someone had scratched his back and he hadn't reciprocated. When he found out that indeed Mordechai had saved his life and he hadn't done anything in return, he immediately instructed Haman to rectify the situation.

Although that may be common courtesy, it's a far cry from true friendship.

The Jewish people are instructed to not only perform acts of chesed, but to love chesed (Michah 6:8).

Perhaps part of the reason why we are unable to properly scratch our own backs is so that we can help someone else. Loving chesed entails that we don't scratch someone else's back solely so that he will scratch our back too. Rather, we do so because it's an opportunity to help another feel more comfortable. Everyone needs someone else to comfortably scratch their back.

On a metaphoric level, every Jew needs to feel an itch in his back. One's back symbolizes his history. That itch reminds him that he descends from greatness and has a mission to continue the legacy of his people. That is an itch that should never cease to be felt, because it energizes him to stay the course of his sacred mission.

My rebbe, Rabbi Berel Wein, often quotes the gemara (Eiruvim 13b) that Rabbeinu Hakadosh was once asked how he became the great Rav Yehuda Hanassi? His terse response was, "I once saw Rabbi Meir from the back".

Rabbi Meir was a talmid of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Akiva was a talmid of Rabbi Elazar ben Hurkanus and Rabbi Yehoshua, who themselves were talmidim of Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai. Rav Yochanan ben Zakkai had seen Hillel. Rabbeinu Hakadosh felt his greatness was the result of having seen Rabbi Meir and thereby having a minimal connection to previous generations. Rabbeinu Hakadosh then added, "And if I would have seen him from the front, I would have been even sharper."

This week, on 27 Cheshvan, my family marks the yahrtzeit of my beloved Zaydei, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn. Although my Bubby was the best physical back scratcher, I learned from all my grandparents to feel the metaphoric itch in my back that reminds me to look back and recognize the greatness I descend from. Now, my task is to "pay it forward" to try to help my progeny recognize the greatness behind them so that they can continue to pass it on as well.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*28 Cheshvan 5778/November 17, 2017*

It was undoubtedly one of the most exciting days of my pre-married life.

In 2000, I was one of the older bochurim in the Bais Medrash program of Yeshiva Shaarei Torah. At one point during that winter, the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Mordechai Wolmark, and many of the Rabbeim went to Eretz Yisroel, each for a different reason. So, I and two friends in yeshiva decided that we didn't want to be left out. It was shortly after the resurgence of the second intifada, and plane tickets and hotels were relatively cheap. We booked a room in the King Solomon Hotel in Yerushalayim, and headed to Eretz Yisroel for a week.

One of the days we were there, Rabbi Wolmark was visiting a few Gedolei Yisroel, and graciously invited us to join him. We met at the home of Chacham Ovadia Yosef zt'l in Har Nof. Rabbi Wolmark was already there with my rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchok Heimowitz, and they were speaking in learning. We were enamored by the large room, filled wall to wall, and floor to ceiling, with sefarim. It is said that Rav Ovadia knew where every sefer was, and used them all. Before we left, Rav Ovadia gave each of us his characteristic loving gentle slap on the cheek, and a blessing.

From there, we packed into a small rental car for the hour-long drive to B'nei Brak. That afternoon, we had the privilege of visiting and receiving blessings from Rav Chaim Kanievsky shlita, Rav Aharon Leib Steinman shlita, and Rav Michel Lefkowitz zt'l.

When we arrived back in Yerushalayim that evening, I was still trying to process that in one day I had met four of the foremost Torah leaders of our time.

What struck me also was the fact that in the presence of Gedolei Yisroel, my rebbe was also a talmid. I still have the mental image of Rav Ovadia giving my rebbe the same loving slap on the cheek that he gave me. In front of Rav Ovadia we were both students. Being there with my rabbeim, was analogous to a father and son going to visit the saintly grandfather.

One of the distinctions of Gedolei Yisroel is their ability to relate to all Jews on their level. Tens, if not hundreds, of Jews from all walks of life, seek their blessing and guidance every day, and walk away feeling rejuvenated and invigorated.

Each Gadol also has his own approach and personality. When we visited Rav Michel Lefkowitz zt'l, the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponovezh l'tzirim, he made us feel so welcomed. His uncanny warmth and shining countenance made us feel perfectly comfortable sitting next to him. When we stood in the presence of Rav Chaim and Rav Aharon Leib, it was with a sense of reverence and awe.

Our culture doesn't only enjoy its sports icons and celebrities, it worships and idolizes them. Our children don't want to just play ball like the best athletes, they want to be just like them.

We are deeply influenced by who we consider our heroes. We need to be able to explain to our children the difference between wanting to be as athletic and to play like the pros, versus wanting to be just like them in other facets of life.

It goes back to the question of what defines a hero? Is a hero someone who can accomplish physical feats that others cannot, and has therefore achieved accolades and stardom, or is a hero someone who lives his/her life for others, sacrificing personal comfort for the sake and well-being of others?

I always cherish the day that I had the opportunity to meet four real heroes, together with a couple of my rabbeim, who are also my personal heroes. People who live life always thinking about Hashem and His people. Those are people truly wish emulating.

*I am sending out this essay on 27 MarChesvan, the yahrtzeit of my Zaydei, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn z'l. It's amazing that it's been thirty years, and it's amazing that he remains, and iy'H always will remain, of my foremost inspirations and role models in life. Aside from being a talmid chochom of note, based on his smile and ever-present warmth and good-natured personality, one would think he lived the happiest life and had the most comfortable youth. The truth however, was vastly different. He was orphaned and alone in his teen years, after the Nazis barbarically murdered his parents, particularly his saintly father who was the Rav of his town.*

*My Zaydei raised money for the young, burgeoning Bais Medrash Govoha of Lakewood in its formative years, and for Shaarei Tzedek Hospital in Yerushalayim. He was the Rav of the famed Slonimer shul on the Lower East Side for over two decades. He had an uncanny ability to connect with everyone, and he was an example of one who gave of himself for others.*

*But personally, he was, and is, my Zaydei and a perpetual inspiration.*

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*23 MarCheshvan 5782/October 29, 2021*

## GET UP AND COME

I recently mentioned to a neighbor that I am returning to being a therapist in private practice, part-time. Instead of wishing me hatzlocho, he launched into an unsolicited lecture which included all his opinions and grievances about therapy and therapists. That included complaining that therapists are always asking how something makes you feel and what's that like for you. I asked him how it made him feel when therapists asked him that?

Another one of the points he made was that therapy is a needlessly dragged-out process. "Why can't therapists just tell their clients the advice they need to hear and move on? Why do clients have to come back week after week, often to hear the therapist rehash the same points?"

I have learned long ago that when people have an agenda it's not worth arguing with them. As someone once said, "I've already made up my mind, so don't mix me up with the facts!" But the question is a valid one. Why is therapy a process? Why can't we just get some advice and live happily ever after?

Most people seek therapy at a time of personal crises. Things may have become somewhat unbearable, and the immediate goal is to navigate out of the crises. But in doing so, it often becomes evident that other personal changes may be necessary. The challenge with change is that embedded habits are not easily broken.

All our behaviors - even negative ones - serve some purpose for us. There's a reason we do what we do, even when it impacts us negatively.

Someone who eats a pint of ice cream every time he has a tough day, may be well aware that his behavior is unhealthy. Yet, he does it anyway because he is desperate for a quick boost to assuage his angst and misery.

Similarly, a parent may spend hours on his/her phone looking at social media or playing games, all the while ignoring family and responsibilities. Here too, despite the fact that parent may know his behavior is negative, he continues to do it anyway because he doesn't know how else to deal with the stress of his day.

In addition, a person can be in denial that he has an issue, because he is subconsciously protecting himself from the shattering of his ego that would occur if he admitted that he has a problem.

For such people change will only be possible when they figure out a better alternative to deal with their stress.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we are creatures of habit. We get used to doing things a certain way and it's hard to change.

When Lot, along with his wife and daughters, were escaping Sodom, they were warned not to turn around. Lot's wife didn't adhere to the warning, and she became a pillar of salt.

Lot's wife turned back, symbolizing that she could not pull herself away from that life, thereby dooming herself to being stuck in that world.

In addition, when Hagar sought a wife for her son Yishmael, she returned to her native Egypt to choose an Egyptian woman. Rashi (21:21) notes that this is a fulfillment of the idea, "throw a stick in the air and it will fall back on its root."

That quote is poignant for us all. Especially when under pressure, we revert to what we've always done, because it's always easiest to return to what feels familiar.

For all these reasons, creating new habits and routines takes time, conscientious effort, encouragement and commitment. It is especially imperative to reflect on the inevitable failures along the way so one can recognize his weaknesses and get back on the bandwagon.

Every month on Rosh Chodesh, just before Shemoneh Esrei someone klapps on the bimah and announces "ya'aleh v'yavo", a reminder to insert the special Rosh Chodesh prayer.<sup>4</sup> In some shuls the "custom" is for five people to klapp, each louder than the previous. Then during Shemone Esrei itself, every other person says the words "ya'aleh v'yavo" out loud, in case you forgot from the last 6 reminders. *How does that make you feel?*

The literal meaning of the words *ya'aleh v'yavo* is "get up and come". Rosh Chodesh is a time of renewal, the beginning of a new month. When I hear the klapp I try to think of it as a friendly slap on the back, along with the call to "Get up and come", to renew my goals and commitments.

At the beginning of the year, we decide on certain resolutions and positive changes we want to implement in our lives. We feel that this year is going to be the year! But we forget that change is a process. Then, when we invariably resort to our old habits, we think we have failed, and throw in the towel completely.

Rosh Chodesh is a monthly renewal to "get up and come" back on track. We return to the starting line, invigorated and recommitted, knowing that it's a process and doesn't happen overnight.

With such an opportunity, how does that make you feel?

*This week, 27 Cheshvan, marks the yahrtzeit of my Zaydei, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn z"l - Rav Yaakov Meir ben Rav Yosef Yitzchak.*

*My Zaydei, like all my grandparents, was part of the "ya'aleh v'yavo generation" - those who were not given any option other than to get up and come in order to survive.*

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<sup>4</sup> During Shachris when it's forbidden to interrupt, there is just a klapp.

*I am unable to fathom how he endured all the pain and loss that he suffered in his life. But even more remarkable is how he was able to remain true to his upbringing and maintain his love for Torah and people throughout his life.*

*My Zaydei was a rav for almost three decades in the famous Slonimer Shul on the Lower East Side. He was beloved for his wit, warmth, and charisma. He was an excellent speaker and knew how to connect with people. He was a disciple of some of the great Torah giants of his time and was himself a talmid chochom of note.*

*But for me, he and my Bubby remain a link to a generation of heroes, of those who rebuilt from the ashes. They too could not afford to look back as they escaped destruction and had no prerogative but to get up and come. Yet somehow, they did and somehow, they renewed their lives and built families.*

*Our challenge to "arise and come" is far different than theirs was, but for us it is a challenge, nonetheless. In their example we can find encouragement and confidence that we too can traverse our challenges and become greater because of them.*



# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*26 MarCheshvan 5784/November 10, 2023*

## BROTHERLY LOVE

The month of Cheshvan is the only month on the Jewish calendar that has no unique endemic avodah. Even months that contain a fast day have special focus and significance.

For me personally, when our Succah and its decorations are put away and Cheshvan begins, I pull out my grandfather's notes.

My mother's father, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn, was the Rabbi of the renown Slonimer Shul on the Lower East Side. Aside from being a noted talmid chochom, he was an excellent speaker. From his pleasant personality, charisma, and sense of humor, one would never know the extreme difficulties of his youth.

As his yahrtzeit is 27 Cheshvan, I think a lot about him and the profound effect he continues to have on me during Cheshvan.

I have a few pages of my grandfather's notes and some taped recordings of derashos he gave in Yiddish that are very precious to me. His writing is very hard to read and every year I try to decipher a little more of his writings.

My grandfather's father, the Rav of the town of Selz, Russia, along with his mother and sister were brutally murdered by the Nazis. He had no idea what happened to his ten years younger brother, Zusha.

My grandfather spent the war years on the run, including some time with partisans in the forest. Alone in the world, he used his excellent social skills and sharp mind to survive. Most of the stories of how he survived will never be known as he hardly spoke about his war experiences.

My grandfather's family name was really Wilamowsky. At one point during the war his passport was confiscated. Somehow, he found a passport on the ground that bore the name Kohn. As the passports then had no pictures attached, from then on, he became Yaakov Kohn.

Sometime later, he met my grandmother in Tashkent where they married. They eventually arrived in America and began life anew on the Lower East Side. Once he came to America, it was easier to leave his name as Kohn. He would say that he was Rabbi Kohn who wasn't a Kohain.

One day, someone was speaking to my grandfather and heard that his original name was Wilamowsky and that he had had a younger brother named Zusha. The man informed my grandfather that his younger brother Zusha was alive and well. Zusha had survived the war, also having spent the war years with partisans. After the war, Zusha became extremely close with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. In fact, for the rest of his life, the Rebbe would refer to Zushe as "my partisan" and Zusha became a beloved and noted personality in Lubavitch circles.

As soon as he was able to, my grandfather rushed to Crown Heights where he was reunited with his brother. Unbeknownst to them, during the war years they had not been far from each other.

That reunion must have been incredibly joyous and emotional. For the rest of their lives, the two brothers remained close. The fact that they lived in two different worlds made no difference whatsoever. My grandfather was a Lithuanian Rabbi, while Reb Zusha was a heartfelt devotee of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As the only survivors of their family, they had time no or energy to waste on the difference in the way they lead their lives.

On a national level, the Jewish people's collective heart is shattered over the recent tragedies, and we feel continued angst over the plight of our captives and soldiers.

Yet, at the same time, we are also awed by ourselves and the incredible unity we all feel now. The added focus on Hashem, the renewed recognized primacy of Torah study, the dedication to performance of mitzvos like tzitzis and Shabbos observance, the increased emphasis on prayer and Tehillim, and the selfless chesed being performed, is heartwarming and encouraging.

In a sense, many Jews didn't know they had a brother who was still alive. They felt that the Jews who were not like them were almost a different people, alienated and cutoff, and lost in the past. But then on Simchas Torah, Hamas took away our passports that bore our names and affiliations. The only thing Hamas saw was that we were Jews. We suddenly realized that we are all brothers and sisters, and that we need to be there for each other. We now see pictures of Jews of different backgrounds helping each other, hugging each other, and giving chizuk to each other.

Rav Chaim Marcus, one of the esteemed Rebbeim in Heichal HaTorah, and Rav of Congregation Israel of Springfield, NJ related to the Heichal students some of his experiences from when he joined a rabbinic mission to Eretz Yisroel last week.

During their trip one of the people they met was Dana Cohen. On Simchas Torah, her religious yishuv, Shlomit, was not attacked. But the nearby yishuv of Pri-Gan was attacked and needed assistance. Dana's husband, Aviad, and others from Shlomit's security team rushed to help Pri-Gan. Arriving there even before the army, they saved Pri-Gan from eight terrorists who were trying to infiltrate. However, in doing so, two members of Shlomit security, including Aviad, were killed.

Dana, now the mother of four orphans, told the assemblage, "We have to work on maintaining and growing the incredible emunah and achdus we all feel now. If that happens then my husband's death will have been worth it."

Unbelievable words!

At the conclusion of the Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln noted that they could not consecrate the land upon which the battles were fought.

The soldiers who gave their lives fighting had already done so. The only thing left for them was to ensure that they did not die in vain.

That is now our task as well. It's up to us to ensure that they did not suffer or die in vain!

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*24 Cheshvan 5779/November 2, 2018*

## RIDE THE WAVE

Last year on December 25, 2017, Heichal HaTorah hosted a grandfather-grandson morning of Torah learning. It was beautiful and touching to see grandfathers sitting next to their grandsons learning together.

On that morning, I was about to begin my shiur by saying how touched I was by the event, and that I would give anything to have the opportunity to spend a morning learning with either of my grandfathers. Just before I began, Rabbi Mitch Bomrind, grandfather of my student, Elazar Milstein, said to me, "You know I learned with your Zaydei! He was a very special person!" I was very moved by that statement, and it threw me off for a few moments.

My Zaydei, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn zt'l, was indeed a great talmid chochom and a beloved personality. He remains one of my greatest influences and inspirations, almost three decades after his passing.

The following week, Rabbi Bomrind texted me that he had a great story about my Zaydei to share. I called him, and he related the following:

"In the early 80s, I was at a dinner for Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim. Your grandfather was the emcee and he was sitting next to the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Moshe Feinstein zt'l, in what may have been the last dinner the aging Rosh Yeshiva was healthy enough to attend.

"The executive director, Rabbi Eidelman, approached the Rosh Yeshiva and mentioned that they had a dilemma- the honoree was a wealthy fellow named Daniel Potkaroni. He owned a hosiery store on Orchard Street and was very successful. Although he donated money to the Yeshiva, there were two other donors who had pledged twice the amount of money to the Yeshiva. It would look funny for the Yeshiva if there were two people who gave double the amount that the honoree gave.

"Your grandfather immediately turned to the Rosh Yeshiva and asked for permission to rectify the situation. The Rosh Yeshiva told Rabbi Eidelman to leave it to Rabbi Kohn.

"Your grandfather walked to the podium and related the story at the end of Yevamos (121a): "Rabbi Gamliel said- I was once traveling on a boat and from a distance saw a boat that shattered and sank. I was grieved over the apparent death of the Torah scholar who was on board. Who was it? Rabbi Akiva. But when I disembarked on dry land, he (Rabbi Akiva) came, and sat, and deliberated before me about halacha. I said to him "my son, who brought you up from the water?" He replied to me: דף של ספינה נזדמן לי וכל גל וגל שבא עלי נענעתי - לוראשי - A plank from the boat came to me, and when each and every wave came before me, I bent my head before it. (Thus, the waves didn't wash him off the board, and he was able to ride the waves until he reached shore).

Your grandfather continued, "The word  $\eta\delta$  (which Rabbi Akiva held onto) is an acronym for  $\text{דניאל פוטקרוני}$ . Whenever the Yeshiva has been a dire situation, whenever the waves and challenges have threatened to wash the Yeshiva out, that  $\eta\delta$  has come to its rescue. The Yeshiva has been able to count on and hold onto its  $\eta\delta$  and that is how it has been able to endure."

"Mr. Potkaroni was so moved and enamored by your grandfather's witty presentation, that he immediately tripled his original pledge, which of course solved the problem."

Rabbi Bomrind then added-

I had the privilege to learn with him on numerous occasions when I was a Rav on the East Side. He had Shas on the back of his hand. But what was more, I learned from him how to deal with people!

This Sunday, 27 Cheshvan, is my Zaydei's yahrtzeit R' Yaakov Meir ben R' Yosef Yitzchok. May his neshama have an Aliyah!

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

23 Kislev 5773/December 7, 2012

What a delightful Holiday Chanukah is; a holiday of light and a celebration of the divine. The customs and traditions of Chanukah add to the joy of the day, as we play dreidel and then eat latkes and donuts until we ourselves feel like an unbalanced dreidel.

But I would like to call your attention to the week before Chanukah when there is an extraordinary series of days which most of us hardly think to associate together:

The nineteenth of Kislev is a day of great celebration for Chabad Chassidim. It is the anniversary of the release of the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, the holy Ba'al HaTanya, Rav Schneur Zalman of Liadi, from jail in 1798. Lubavitcher Chassidim consider the day the 'Rosh Hashana of Chassidus' and celebrate it with great fanfare. [In addition, it is the yahrtzeit of the Maggid of Mezritch, one of the greatest students of the Ba'al Shem Tov, who died on 19 Kislev 26 years before the Ba'al Hatanya's release from prison.]

The twentieth of Kislev is the yahrtzeit of Rav Yitzchok Hutner zt'l, the legendary Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin. Rav Hutner was a deep and profound thinker who inspired thousands of students through his unique and penetrating analysis of many ideas contained in the Torah, specifically connected to the holidays. Rav Hutner possessed a regal bearing and exuded the majesty of Torah.

The commemoration of his yahrtzeit is not only observed in Yeshiva Chaim Berlin but also has connection with other yeshivos founded by Rav Hutner's disciples, such as Yeshiva Sha'ar Yoshuv in Far Rockaway, founded by his student Rav Shlomo Freifeld zt'l, and Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem, founded by his student Rav Noach Weinberg zt'l.

The twenty first of Kislev is a day of celebration for Satmar Chassidim. It is the anniversary of the day of the release of the Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum zt'l, from the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp on December 4, 1944. The Rebbe was one of 1,685 people who were part of the famed 'Kastner train' which Dr. Rudolph Kastner arranged through clandestine negotiations (bribing) with the infamous Nazi, Adolph Eichmann.

*[On a more humorous note, this year the night of December 4<sup>th</sup> coincided with 21 Kislev. In ma'ariv prayers of that night we began reciting 'V'sayn Tal Umatar' during Shemoneh esrei, an addition of two words. It has been said that on that night Yekkish Jews<sup>5</sup> tell their wives that they will return home from ma'ariv late due to the insertion of two added words...]*

For some time, my Zaydei, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn zt'l, was the Rav of the Slonimer Shul in New York's Lower East Side. On one occasion he was invited to speak at a sheva berachos of a most unique marriage. The groom's

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. Jews of German descent known for their exactness and punctiliousness

side was of Satmar Chassidic descent, while the bride's side was a blend of Litvishe and Chabad descent.

My Zaydei noted that their marriage granted him a new insight into the great dream of Yaakov Avinu (recorded in Parshas Vayetzei, Bereishis 28:12-17). The verse states that in his dream Yaakov envisioned a "סלם" (*'sulam'* - ladder) that was implanted in the ground with its head reaching the heavens. My Zaydei explained that he noticed that the first letters of the word *sulam* are an acronym for "Satmar, Lubavitch, Misnaged<sup>6</sup>". In his dream Yaakov envisioned the unity of these three groups, and that was at the root of the ladder which leads to the heavens.

In the week before Chanukah there are consecutive days of celebration/observance for these three groups. Each of these groups, along with every other sect of Torah-Jewry are a lamp upon G-d's Menorah. It is incumbent upon us to respect the light of each of those candles. We may not agree with each other, nor do we observe each other's customs, but we have to respect the light they add to G-d's Menorah.

That indeed is the ladder that leads to heaven, and the key to the ethereal light hidden in the Chanukah candles.

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<sup>6</sup> The Jews of Lithuanian descent were often called *Misnagdim* – 'opposers', because of their early opposition to the Chassidic movement during its early years.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*21 Cheshvan 5775/ November 14, 2014*

## ONGOING CONNECTION

Next Thursday, 27 Cheshvan will be the yahrtzeit of my Zaidei, Rav Yaakov Meir Kohn zt'l.

Every year during the weeks before his yahrtzeit I take out the few binders I have containing his writings containing his Torah thoughts. Many of those thoughts were written in his distinctive, difficult to read, shorthand writing, hastily recorded on the back of any paper that was in his vicinity. There are divrei Torah written on the back of invitations, bills, letters, and receipts stuck into the pages of his seforim.

Every year I try to decipher some of his writings. It is painstaking, because it's word by word. But each thought that I successfully am able to decipher is so precious to me.

My Zaidei also had a tremendous collection of seforim which lined most of the walls of his Lower East Side apartment. My Bubby would often complain to him that there was no more room for more seforim. Her efforts were futile however, as he would sneak bags into their apartment and leave them under the dining room table. He would then clandestinely move the bags into his study.

The week after he passed away, two bags full of seforim were found under the dining room table.

I inherited my Zaydei's love of seforim and also his challenge of not having sufficient room for all of them. My wife is nervous that I am going to start taking beds out of our house so I have more room for seforim.

In my collection, I have a few seforim from my Zaidei. Although most of those seforim have been reprinted, those old seforim are precious to me.

One of the most personally beloved of that collection is my Zaidei's Kovetz Shiurim.

Kovetz Shiurim is a familiar sefer in the hallowed halls of yeshivos the world over. It is a collection of the shiurim of Rav Elchanan Wasserman zt'l hy'd, the great Rosh Yeshiva of Baranovitch who was murdered during the Holocaust. During his youth my Zaydei was a student in the Baranovich yeshiva and heard shiurim from Rav Elchonon.

Kovetz Shiurim was first printed in 1964 by the author's son, Rav Simcha Wasserman zt'l.

The sefer I have is from that original printing and has a purple cover. I imagine my Zaydei entering a seforim store in 1964 and seeing that the shiurim of his late Rebbe had been collected and printed. I imagine how it brought back memories of his days as a student in the yeshiva and the images of his saintly rebbe delivering those same shiurim. I imagine the bittersweet



emotions that seeing the sefer for the first time must have evoked, perhaps even a few tears.

When I hold that sefer and I learn from it I feel connected, not only to my beloved Zaide, but also to what he felt connected to – the Torah of the previous generation.

The sefer connects me to my Zaydei, which undoubtedly connected him to his rebbe and a world lost.

Isn't that the story of the Jewish people's connection to Torah?

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*24 Cheshvan 5780/November 22, 2019*

## WHEN LESS IS MORE

This past Friday night, I'm sure everyone who davened at Kehillas Zichron Yaakov came home from shul and spoke about the d'var Torah recited before maariv. I'm also sure I'm not the only one whose wife asked her husband when he walked in from shul if davening was over already. Why? Because the speech consisted of an excellent thought from the Brisker Rav, that was repeated - from start to finish - in under ninety seconds.

A rabbinical colleague related that, before he was a Rabbi, he was once asked by the shul Rabbi to deliver the Friday evening d'var Torah before maariv.

It was the week of Parshas Beshalach. He began by quoting the pasuk which states that the Jewish people stood trapped between the sea and the approaching Egyptians. At that point, Moshe began to pray. Rashi quotes the Medrash which states that G-d replied to Moshe, "this is not the time for lengthy prayers. The nation must proceed." My colleague then said, "this is not the time for lengthy speeches. Now is the time to proceed." And with that he motioned for the chazzan to proceed with barchu.

The crowd was delighted. And the rabbi never again asked him to speak on Friday night.

It's a difficult balance to strike. Everyone is looking for inspiration, but no one wants to sit through long speeches.

So, when people discover someone who can inspire in a short amount of time, they won't let him go too easily.

In Camp Dora Golding, we have achieved that balance. Rabbi Mayer Erps, a noted educator and dynamic storyteller, shares a three minute "bullet derasha" which contains a powerful story and a great lesson. The six hundred campers, who have just recently eaten kokush cake and chocolate milk for breakfast (kiddush is recited between shachris and Krias HaTorah), listen with rapt attention. By the time they start getting edgy, the speech is over, and we are well into Mussaf.

My Zaydei, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn z"l was not only a scholar of note, he was also sharp-witted and understood people very well. When he and my Bubby arrived in America after World War II, they moved to the then fledgling but burgeoning community of Lakewood. My Zaydei was a student of the illustrious Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Aharon Kotler zt"l before the war, when Rabbi Aharon was Rosh Yeshiva in the town of Kletzk. While living in Lakewood, my Zaydei would travel and speak on behalf of the young yeshiva and on behalf of the Va'ad Hatzalah , which was under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Silver.

In the early 1950s my Zaydei and Bubby spent a Shavuot on the Lower East Side of Manhattan so my Zaydei could deliver the pre-Yizkor appeal at the Anshe Slonim shul at 172 Norfolk Street.

The well-known shul was in an august and imposing building, boasting hundreds of seats, noted cantors and choirs. At that time, the shul was searching for a new Rabbi. By the time my Zaydei got up to speak, it had already been a long davening. He shared a brief poignant thought and then said to the assemblage, "My friends, I could easily continue speaking for another half hour, extolling the virtue of Va'ad Hatzalah and the vital work they do. But I know that you are all aware of its importance. In addition, I'm sure - like my wife- your wives prepared wonderful meals that are waiting for you after davening. Let's consider it as if I spoke for the extra half hour, and everyone should contribute to this vital cause." With that he sat down.

It was the most successful appeal the shul ever had.

That night, the leadership of the shul set aside their long list of potential candidates and offered my Zaydei to be the Rabbi of the prestigious shul. The rest is history. He became the Rabbi for over twenty years, until the shul closed its doors in 1974.

I remember one Shabbos morning during my youth, when our family hosted a Rabbi in our community and his family for the Shabbos seudah. He was distinguished and well-known, and his lectures were delivered with passion and emotion. However, they were not known for their brevity.

During the seudah, amidst the other topics of discussion, my mother mentioned that her father was also a community Shul rabbi. Then my mother added that her father always said that speeches cannot be too long, otherwise you'll lose the attention of the congregation. My father's looks and gentle kicks under the table didn't help. The Rabbi in our home laughed good-naturedly. The following Shabbos his speech was as long as always.

I must admit that as a shul rabbi for over a decade, it is very hard to strike the right balance. Every rabbi wants to inspire by conveying an important lesson, which is best brought out with stories to illustrate and other points of reference. It is an ongoing arduous challenge to balance content with attention span. But it is a balance that every rabbi must strive for.

In an age of "quick chizuk", such as Meaningful Minute and WhatsApp groups that convey 1-5-minute divrei Torah, that challenge becomes all the more pronounced. (It's axiomatic that one doesn't become a scholar from brief inspirational clips. Scholarship and erudition are the result of effort, exertion, and being able to sustain attention, often during long lectures. Bursts of inspiration are like a match that ignites a flame. That fire needs to be fueled so that it can develop into a more substantial and enduring fire. The purpose of this essay is surely not to minimize or downgrade the value and need of lectures. It is only to reinforce that in our fast-paced world, bursts of inspiration are invaluable.)

I wish I could still personally glean from my Zaydei's wellsprings of knowledge of Torah and interpersonal dealing with people. He passed away when I was eight years old. Yet, his legacy continues to inspire me, and he remains of my foremost role models in life.

I cannot fathom how a person who suffered so much loss and was an orphaned refugee, could have emerged with such a jovial personality and contagious vivaciousness. His love for Torah and for people largely defined him, and all who knew him testified to that.

On Wednesday morning, 26 Cheshvan/November 6<sup>th</sup>, at 3:16 A.M., my wife and I were blessed with the birth of our son. It was three years to the day after the birth of our daughter, Aviva Rochel (November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004).

On Thursday morning, 27 Cheshvan, after being called up to the Torah, the special Mi Shebeirech prayer was said for the speedy recovery of my wife and newborn son, and that our son merit to be ritually circumcised next Wednesday, with G-d's Help.

27 Cheshvan is also the yahrtzeit (anniversary of the death) of my illustrious Zaydei (Grandfather), Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn, HaRav Yaakov Meir ben HaRav Yosef Yitzchak zt'l. Nothing in life is coincidental and it was personally meaningful to recite a blessing for our newborn son on the day of his great-grandfather's passing. As a student of Rabbi Berel Wein shlita, I have learned to appreciate the vital connection that Klal Yisroel has with its past and future. Our task is to perpetuate the customs and traditions of our ancestors in order to instill those values and beliefs in our progeny. May we be so worthy!

My Zaydei was not only a great scholar and an acknowledged Rabbi, he was also loved for his convivial personality. His charisma and wit enabled him to develop deep relationships with the most unusual people.

My Mother related to me that my Zaydei was constantly involved in collecting funds for various Torah institutions. On one occasion, he went to meet a noted philanthropist who had just recently donated a large sum of money to a secular organization. When the philanthropist asked my Zaydei why he had come to see him when they had never met, my Zaydei simply replied that he wanted to shake the hand that had so selflessly donated so much money to a charitable organization. Then, without saying another word, my Zaydei stood up and left. A few months later, when the man donated another sum of money to a second secular institution, my Zaydei returned and repeated his prior visit. A few months later when my Zaydei went back for a third time, he walked out with a sizeable donation for a Yeshiva he was collecting for.

On another occasion, my Zaydei was informed that a wealthy entrepreneur was in the hospital recovering from surgery. My Zaydei went to the hospital and pretended that he "just happened to be there". They struck up a conversation, after which my Zaydei got up and left. When the man returned home, my Zaydei was able to solicit a worthy donation for a Yeshiva from him as well.

Although my Zaydei possessed the gift of oratory, he understood that there was no greater connection than that of a deep and warm relationship.

He and my Bubby had a home without doors (at least figuratively). My Bubby never knew how many guests to expect on Shabbos and she cooked accordingly. Their home was constantly graced with notable Torah

personalities and leaders. It was truly a Torah home, built on the pillars of chessed and Torah study.

May our budding family follow my Bubby's and Zaydey's examples and build a home predicated on those same values; a home of vibrant warmth and positive relationships in which the sounds of joy, laughter, and Avodas Hashem unceasingly resonate. May we merit to enter our son into the covenant of our forefather Avrohom in its proper time; to raise him and his siblings for Torah, Chupah (marriage) and ma'asim tovim (good deeds).

My Zaydei, Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn zt'l, was a talmid chochom and a great ba'al middos. He was born in Russia before the Holocaust and escaped the Nazis. His parents, however, were not as lucky and were killed by the wicked Nazis. Somehow my Zaydei arrived in a city called Samarkand in a country that today is called Uzbekistan. It was there that he met my Bubby and got married.

Life in Samarkand was very difficult. They had very little money and food. My Zaydei's pants ripped, and he desperately needed to buy a new pair but he simply did not have the money. My Bubby and Zaydei had to save up money for some time before they had enough to go out and buy a new pair of pants. Finally, when they had enough money, my Bubby gave my Zaydei the money and sent him to buy himself a new pair of pants. Imagine how annoyed and upset my Bubby was when my Zaydei came home without the money or the new pair of pants. My Zaydei explained that he had lost the money and there was nothing he could do.

Years passed and eventually they came to America and moved to the famous Lower East Side of Manhattan. One day while my Bubby was walking down the street, she met a Jewish man from Europe. When she told him that her name was Kohn, he excitedly asked her if she was related to Rabbi Yaakov Meir Kohn. When my Bubby said that he was her husband the man told her that my Zaydei had saved him from jail in Samarkand. He explained that the Russian authorities had thrown him into jail for no reason and he had no money to pay them off. Then one day, my Zaydei appeared and - although he had never met the man before - he gave the guards money to set him free. It was then that my Bubby realized where the money for the pants had gone. My Zayedi had used it to save that Jew from jail and didn't want to tell her about the chessed he had done.

The Gemarah says that by nature every Jew is full of mercy, modesty and good deeds. When my Zaydei saw a Yid who needed money to save himself he simply forgot about himself and how badly he needed pants and immediately gave away all the money he had saved up for so long.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

25 Sivan 5782/June 24, 2022

## THE GREAT LIE

"And let me conclude, dear graduates, by saying that as you go forth from the hallowed halls of our institution, know that life bears many vicissitudes and unknowns. But fear not! The educational fortitude you have received during your years here will stand for you in good stead. We are confident that you will be able to proceed into the vagaries of life with conviction and fortitude and to accomplish great things. Know this - the world is now open before you and you can become anything and do anything. Dream big, graduates, pursue your dreams, and make us proud."

*End of pontification. Time for crowd to wake up and applaud politely.*

'You can be anything you set your mind to be' is one of the great lies often touted. It sounds nice, but it's simply not true!

The hackneyed graduation message can be chalked together with the message of entrepreneurs who have become incredibly successful. In podcasts and articles, they tell us if they were able to do it so can you, and it's as simple as following their 3 or 4 step plan. Just purchase their book or program and, before you know it, you'll be fabulously wealthy too. Then you'll be able to peddle the same lie, about being able to procure quick and easy wealth, to others.

The reality is that there is a predestined path for every one of us. We are not amorphous entities ready to be shaped into anything we desire. We are granted unique and particular personalities, talents, and limitations. The family and community into which we were born as well as the generation into which we were born both shape and limit the trajectory of our lives.

When a five-year-old is asked what he wants to be when he grows up he may reply that he's going to become a fireman, policeman and doctor, and possibly invest real estate or become an entrepreneur on the side.

Part of maturity is recognizing that we are limited in the choices we can make. In addition, every choice we make is an act of exclusion, choosing one thing is to the exclusion of everything else. Many people have a significantly hard time making choices because they are hard pressed to close the door on all other possibilities.

Our biggest challenge is more about how we deal with the cards dealt with, than about choosing the cards we are dealt.

This week, 30 Sivan, is the yahrtzeit of my Bubby, Rebbitzin Fruma (Frances) Kohn a'h. I was blessed to have my Bubby for the first four decades of my life and that my children knew her, if even slightly. In her youth, my Bubby and most of her family survived Siberia and the horrors of World War



II. After being liberated from Siberia, she met my Zaydei and eventually made their way together to the United States.

A few years later, my Zaydei was offered to be the Rabbi of the prestigious Slonimer shul on the Lower East Side. At first my Bubby cried at the mere prospect of becoming the Rebbitzin of a sizeable congregation. It wasn't what she had "signed up for". But eventually she embraced it and fulfilled the role for two decades with aplomb. She would cook each week for Shabbos, never knowing how many guests would return home with my Zaydei from shul. Their apartment was a welcoming place for all different types of Jews. It's amazing how much delicious food and warmth emanated from that minuscule kitchen on the Lower East Side.

I should add that in the 1970s the shul's membership dwindled until the shul was forced to close its doors and sell the building. After that my Zaydei became a kashrus mashgiach.

As I've gotten older, I've often wondered how hard that must have been for my grandparents. I was born well after my Zaydei had left the rabbinate. My memories of him are of his ever-present warmth and sense of humor. If there was any bitterness no one ever saw it.

The real question in life is how we respond to each situation. My grandparents came from a generation that had far less choices than we are privy to. Though we may have more options, we too often find ourselves in different situations than we had envisioned for ourselves.

We may not be able to be anything and everything we want to be. But we can choose how we proceed in every circumstance and what our attitude and perspective is.

Perhaps the more accurate message we can convey to our graduates is: "Dear Graduates - the serpentine paths of life may not always lead you where you expected. Nevertheless, we are confident that you will be able to proceed into the vagaries of life with conviction and fortitude and to accomplish great things. Dream big, graduates, pursue your dreams. But remember that even when our dreams are not fulfilled, Hashem is leading us on a path tailor made for our greatest growth and spiritual accomplishment."

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*5 Menachem Av 5774/August 1, 2014*

I was eight years young. My mother's father - my Zaydei - had recently passed away, and I was still trying to come to terms with the concept of death. I was having a hard time grasping the idea that I would never again see my Zaydei, who I loved and adored. The fact that my mother was not home for the first week after so she could sit shiva with her mother, sister, and brother in my Zaydei's apartment in the Lower East Side only made it more difficult.

But shiva ended, my mother returned home, and life was starting to return to normalcy. Now a few weeks later, for the first time since my Zaydei had died, we were going to visit my newly widowed Bubby. We came to the door and rang the familiar bell. Bubby replied in her familiar way. It all seemed so usual, like it always was.

Then we entered the apartment. I will never forget how my mother began crying bitterly as we walked in. All the usual pictures were where they always were, the furniture was where it had always been, Zaydei's myriad seforim were still lining the shelves of his study, and as usual Bubby was cooking something. But there was no big gemara open in his study, no new seforim hidden under the dining room table, and most profoundly Zaydei did not come to greet us with his trademark gleaming smile.

That painful moment revitalized the pain of the raw wound that Zaydei was gone.

My younger siblings born after Zaydei's passing, had a very different experience when they came to visit that apartment in later years. They could hardly understand the pain we felt because they never knew Zaydei; they didn't know what was missing.

We are very blessed in the current exile. We can visit Eretz Yisroel and the Kosel, there is no dearth of Shuls or Yeshivos throughout the country, and the proliferation of Torah and mitzvos is unparalleled.

The events of the past week remind us of the peril we constantly face and that the Messianic era has yet to arrive. But even so Yerushalayim has regained its status as the capitol of our world, and the country is flourishing.

However, all is not well. As long as the Bais Hamikdash is not rebuilt and korbanos not offered, things are not as they should be. The greatest challenge for us is that we don't even know what we are missing. We cannot fathom the excitement of offering a Korban Pesach, and we have no inkling of the inspiration of seeing the Kohanim performing the Avodah while the Levites sang with harmonious beauty. We do not know the excitement of the tri-annual pilgrimage for the holidays, and we never experienced the awesome trepidation of seeing the Kohain Gadol perform the Yom Kippur service. We were never privy to the feeling of devotion to G-d and acutely sensing that you have achieved atonement when offering a korban.

Although we don't know what we are missing, the very fact that we want to know what we are missing, is indicative of the fact that we wish to connect with that forgotten world.

On Tisha B'av, we demonstrate our connection, or at least longing for connection, with that more G-dly world. We remind ourselves that for all the blessings we have G-d is not yet home. His Presence may have never left, but we cannot experience it fully. We long for the day when the dome of the rock will be replaced with the third Bais Hamikdash, an eternal reunion, when all our tears will be dried forever.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*26 MarCheshvan 5781/November 13, 2020*

## SIMPLE GREATNESS

You won't find "Lower East Sider" in a dictionary. If you google those words, you'll get some entries about prices of apartments and other various news about the Lower East Side. But for the tens of thousands of Jews who grew up and lived on the Lower East Side of Manhattan there is significant meaning. In fact, those old timers take it as a great compliment to be a "Lower East Sider".

Lower East Siders possess a combination of simplicity, exuding warmth, extreme friendliness, being non-judgmental, and unpretentious. There was, and is, nothing fancy about the Lower East Side, and everyone seemed to know everyone else. It was the land of Gus's pickles, China Town noodles, H and M skullcap, and the Williamsburg bridge. There were also countless shuls, but none were in competition with the other.

I was born and spent my formative years on the Lower East Side. Both sets of my grandparents lived on the Lower East Side and it was exciting to be able to walk over on Shabbos to see them or eat a seudah at their apartment. Our family moved from the Lower East Side to Monsey in 1988.

My Zaydei, whose yahrtzeit is this Shabbos, 27 MarCheshvan, was the Rabbi of the well-known Anshei Slonim shul on Norfolk street until it closed in 1974.

My Zaydei had a warm relationship with Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l. The last gift my Zaydei left me is a set of Igros Moshe inscribed with a brief beracha from Rav Moshe. The inscription is dated 12 Kislev 5745 (December 1985). At the time I was five years old. Rav Moshe was niftar a little over a year later; my Zaydei was niftar less than three years later. It's one of my most treasured seforim.

Even after Rav Moshe was niftar, his sons, Rav Dovid and Rav Reuven, would attend our family simchos, primarily in honor of my Bubby a"h. I had the zechus that they attended my bar mitzvah and wedding.

The Lower East Side was the perfect place for Rav Moshe and his family. Rav Moshe was the posek hador, and the gadol hador. His greatness in Torah was matched only by his incredible humility.

Those traits were personified by his son, Rav Dovid who was niftar this week.

My aunt would often note that it was known that if you wanted to find Rav Dovid and Rav Reuven on a given day, you first checked the pizza shop on the Lower East Side, where they often ate breakfast together.

If you didn't know who Rav Dovid was and you passed him on the street, you would have no idea that one of the leading halachic authorities in the

world, a man who was fluent in the entire Torah, and the Rosh Yeshiva who had succeeded his illustrious father, had just passed you.

A few years ago, my father went back to the Lower East Side for Shabbos to attend a simcha. During the kiddush, Rav Dovid walked over to him to say Good Shabbos.

On one of our dates, my wife and I went to a restaurant in Boro Park. When our food arrived, I went to wash. (She probably ordered a salad and didn't need to wash). When I returned to the table, she noticed a look on my face that she couldn't decipher. When she asked me what happened, I pointed beyond her. She couldn't figure out what in the world I wanted. After I said a beracha and took a bite, I told her not to back up too quickly. At the table behind us were seated Rav Dovid and his Rebbitzin, along with another couple.

Rav Dovid was so great and yet he was so simple. He went shopping, he humbly walked the streets of the Lower East Side, and he was accessible to anyone who wanted. I look at the picture of him and his Rebbitzin from our wedding and marvel at the fact that he not only schlepped to Lakewood to attend, but also was willing to be in the picture with us. (The same is true about Rav Reuven and his Rebbitzin.) It was, and remains, very meaningful to us.

In a world so focused on glamour and publicity, it's rare to find people who are perfectly happy keeping to themselves and living a simple life. But I don't know how one can do so when he is a leader of his people with earth-shattering questions and pressing matters coming to his door constantly.

This week we celebrate the bar mitzvah of our son, Avi. Somehow, I hope we can convey to him some of the lessons we learned and gleaned from Rav Dovid Feinstein zt"l.

The nostalgic streets of the Lower East Side have lost some of their greatness, and Klal Yisroel has lost a quiet Gadol and leader. May his memory be for a blessing.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*27 Sivan 5780/June 19, 2020*

## CROWN RESTORATION

One of the positives about this very difficult period of anxiety and isolation, was that I was able to take care of some of those things that "I'll get to one day".

One of those things was purchasing a new Shabbos tallis, and fixing the zipper on my tefillin bag. Both my tefillin bag and my Shabbos tallis have a great deal of sentimental value to me.

My tefillin bag was designed and sewn by my mother, a gift for my bar mitzvah. The picture she drew for my tefillin bag was printed on my bar mitzvah invitations and on the benchers that were disseminated then. A few years ago, the zipper on that tefillin bag ripped. Every morning, as I put away my tefillin I thought about fixing it. But then the day would begin, and I would forget about it.

A few weeks ago, I finally brought the tefillin bag to the cleaners. Three days later, I had a strong zipper and a functional tefillin bag. It gave me a renewed appreciation for a very personal and meaningful gift my mother gave me years ago.

My Shabbos tallis too desperately needed to be replaced. It was the original tallis I received from my in-laws and then-Kallah over eighteen years ago. I remember well the excitement I had when we went to purchase it and I donned it that first time. I was especially proud of the beautiful silver atarah (crown) atop the tallis.

Hundreds of times since then, I have pulled the tallis with the atarah over my head during davening, on Shabbos, Yom Tov, and while serving as the Chazzan on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The space inside that tallis is very meaningful, not only because of the sentimentality of the tallis, but also because of how much tefillah I uttered there. But, like all physical commodities, the time came when it had to be replaced. It had gone from being holy to being quite hole-y, and the atarah was falling off in a few places.

I purchased a new tallis and gave in my old one so the atarah could be polished and transferred into the new one. A week later, my new tallis arrived. I hardly recognized the atarah - it was polished and fixed up and looked beautiful atop the new tallis.

This coming Monday, 30 Sivan, our family will mark the first yahrtzeit of my Bubby, my mother's mother, Rebbitzin Fruma Kohn a'h. The pasuk (Mishlei 17:6) states, "the crown of elders is their grandchildren". Rashi explains that the crown of grandparents is seeing their grandchildren following the straight path. It gives them a sense of fulfillment and purpose to know

that they have fulfilled their life mission and ambition to raise the next generation of Torah observance.

My other three grandparents passed away before I was fifteen. But I was blessed to have my Bubby in my life for almost four decades of my life. It was such a gift that my children were able to glimpse a relic of the previous generation. They were able to meet a survivor of Siberia, a member of the generation who gave everything for the preservation and perpetuation of Torah living, amidst vast personal loss and struggle.

When one visits a grave, the custom is that before one takes leave, he places a stone atop the grave. The symbolism is that although the one buried can no longer personally garner merits, but we can give them merits through actions we perform in their memory. We place a stone atop their grave, as if to say that we can still add to their legacy.

Bubby has passed on. We, her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, have the perpetual task to polish her crown and make sure it sparkles and shines. In fact, we are her crown!

May her neshama have an aliyah.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

25 Teves 5772/January 20, 2012

## SHMATAH PIZZA

One of the most exciting experiences of my youth was visiting Eretz Yisroel for the first time. I was eight years old and my Aunt Miriam was going to Eretz Yisroel for the unveiling of my beloved Zayde at the end of August. My older brother was away in camp so my parents offered me the opportunity to accompany my aunt for the eleven day trip.

I was enamored by everything along the way. I loved the plane, especially because the seats were so roomy. [The next time I flew a few years later the seats shrunk immeasurably...] When we finally landed, my Bubby, Uncle, and cousin met us at the airport. Bubby was so excited to see me she hugged me and lifted me off the ground (the only time I remember that happening.)

The ten hour flight and all of its excitement were a bit much for an eight year old and at that point I was hungry and cranky. We went to an Italian restaurant in Yerushalayim but I refused to order anything. After a few minutes of negotiations my Aunt finally convinced me to order an Italian Pizza. After all what could be bad about pizza?

When the pizza arrived I promptly announced that I wasn't going to eat it. My exasperated Aunt asked me why not? "Because", I explained, "it smells like the shmattas (rags) in Bubby's house." My aunt tried to convince me that I was being ridiculous but I was emphatic about my refusal. My cousin took the pizza and sniffed it, whereupon he burst out laughing, "It's true, it smells like shmattas!" My Aunt took one bite and admitted that we were right. It was real Italian cheese and pizza, not for our American taste buds.

I found something else to order and everyone continued eating. When we finished we noticed that the pizza was gone. Had the waiter taken it back? Bubby shrugged us off, "I don't know what you're all complaining about. The pizza was delicious."

Throughout the years, we periodically laugh about the shamattah-pizza, and how Bubby couldn't understand why we wouldn't eat it.

In our home, we teach our children that when you don't like something you don't announce, 'Oh that's gross!' Rather you politely say, 'That's not my taste.' It is not only insulting to disparage food that someone else worked hard to make, but it is insensitive to speak negatively about something you don't like when someone else may enjoy it.

Such an expression does not only apply to food but to anything else in life. Just because you don't like a game, place, or idea, doesn't make it wrong or bad. It may not be *your* taste, but someone else may find it pleasurable.

The idea of tolerance is extremely important. Our society would like to believe that it is politically correct and accepting of difference. But underneath all



its social babble, our world is extremely intolerant and impatient with differences of others.

That intolerance infiltrates our camp as well. Our exile began because of intolerance which bred contempt and enmity, and it is apparent that we haven't rectified that malady yet.

What may be a shmattah to one person may be delicious to someone else. What one person may find inadequate another may find appealing and acceptable. We don't have to agree with other's opinions, but we still have to learn to tolerate differences.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*24 Sivan 5781/June 4, 2021*

## A CROOKED LETTER

When anyone asked "why" in her presence, my Bubby, Rebbitzin Fruma (Frances) Kohn would repeat the quip, "Why is a crooked letter!" However, with her European accented English it would come across as "Vy is a crooked letter." The irony and G-d's humor was that for the last decade of her life, Vy was the name of Bubby's Latin-American caretaker. Every time I went to visit Bubby and she called Vy I had to restrain myself from repeating the quote I heard from her so often...

In retrospect I have come to realize that the humorous quote is actually quite profound. My Bubby was part of a generation who did not have the luxury and could not afford to ask why (or vy).

Bubby grew up in a small Polish village called Tarnograd. She recounted that she had a wonderful childhood, and her family was somewhat wealthy, which was recognizable by the fact that they were one of the few homes in their town to have indoor plumbing. But then the dark clouds of World War Two rolled in. Her family escaped the Nazi massacre of their village but eventually were deported to Siberia by the Russians. The only one to avoid that fate was her one married sister who would send care packages to the rest of the family. That ended when the Nazis killed her sister, brother-in-law, and their infant child.

After eighteen months in Siberia the family was released. They traveled southwest and ended up in Samarkand in Uzbekistan. There Bubby met my Zeidei, married and had their first child, my Uncle Shmuel. When the war finally ended, they ended up in Paris and from there they came to the United States.

When she would recount some of her experiences from those dark and painful years, Bubby would note that she sometimes felt like she was talking about someone else's life. It was hard to imagine that she had endured and survived those terrible experiences.

On one occasion when I was in graduate school pursuing my master's in social work, I was paired up with fellow students to discuss our family background and how and when our ancestors arrived in America. I was speaking about my Bubby and Zeidei and referred to their coming to America after the war. One student asked me, "You mentioned the war. Would that be the Civil War, Korea, or Vietnam?" I apologized for my lack of clarity and explained that among Jews we take it for granted that when anyone refers to "the war" it's referring to the Holocaust and World War II when our people were targeted for merciless and baseless genocide.

I read an article a few years ago in which the Novominsker Rebbe discussed the need to teach about the Holocaust from a Torah perspective in our yeshivos. The rebbe noted that for the first decades after the war those lessons were not included in the yeshiva curriculum because it was too raw and too painful. At that point, the mission of the Torah world was to rise from the ashes and to look ahead with confidence at the formidable task of rebuilding and thriving. They could not afford to dwell on the unbearable pain of what had occurred.

However, as the years and decades wore on, and the number of living survivors continues to wane, we have an obligation to preserve the dark memories of what happened. We have to give our children a framework and perspective to understand the judgement of Hashem and to remember the calamitous events that occurred. We must speak of the heroism of the faithful and the uncanny mesiras nefesh to preserve mitzvos under the worst of circumstances. Those lessons must be preserved now before the opportunity is lost. Years ago, we could not afford to speak about it. But now we cannot afford not to.

A month ago, on Lag BaOmer, we heard about the terrible tragedy that occurred in Meron with the tragic death of 45 precious Jews. One of those 45 was Donny Morris. Anyone who has attended Camp Dora Golding the last few summers is well acquainted with Donny's radiant smile, easygoing personality, and excitement for davening and Torah learning.

At her son's funeral Donny's mother, Mrs. Mirlana Morris, eulogized him with tears in her eyes: "I have so many questions, but so few answers." She then added, "But what I know for sure is that you were loved by so many. The impact you had on hundreds is remarkable. Daddy and I couldn't be prouder to call you, our son."

Her painful yet powerful words contain what has often been the cry of our people. So many questions and so few answers. Yet, we are so proud of our mission and accomplishments, and know that our impact has changed the world.

Next week, 30 Sivan, our family marks Bubby's second yartzeit. It's an appropriate time to remind ourselves that although we cannot know the Vys of the world we remain faithful to our destiny, knowing that it is the only hope to straighten all that's crooked.

# "RABBI'S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)"

*12 MarCheshvan 5783/October 27, 2023*

## TIMELESS WORDS

When I think about my Bubby, Rebbetzin Fruma Kohn a"h, my mental image is of her reciting Tehillim. Until her last years, she would read the entire Tehillim every week. No doubt, I and my family have benefited tremendously from those repeated recitations.

Someone once presented the Chofetz Chaim with the Tehillim of his mother. The Chofetz Chaim caressed its pages and with tears in his eyes remarked, "Who knows how many tears my mother shed over this Tehillim that I be a faithful Jew."

The gemara (Sanhedrin 92b) relates that when Nevuchadnezzar witnessed Michael, Chananyah, and Azariah emerge unscathed from the furnace he had them cast into, he was overwhelmed. At that moment, he began to recite beautiful words of praise to Hashem. His words were so magnificent that if an angel had not slapped him, his praises would have put to shame the praises and songs of Dovid Hamelech in Tehillim.

If Nevuchadnezzar uttered beautiful praises, why was it fair that he be silenced just because he was going to upend the praises of Tehillim?

The Kotzker Rebbe explained that the greatness of Tehillim is not due to its ornate prose and distinct vernacular. In that regard, it's very possible that Nevuchadnezzar was more eloquent than Dovid Hamelech. The greatness of Tehillim and the reason Dovid is called, "sweet singer of Yisrael", is because he never stopped calling out to and praising Hashem. Even during difficult times of persecution and challenge, and even when Dovid suffered personal adversity and national defeat, he never stopped calling out to Hashem.

The only way to measure whether Nevuchadnezzar's praises were greater than Dovid's would be by seeing what happened when Nevuchadnezzar received a slap. When Dovid suffered the "slaps of life" he never ceased calling out to Hashem. Therefore, the angel slapped Nevuchadnezzar to see how he would react. When that happened, he immediately stopped praising and he began blaspheming. That was a clear demonstration that the praises of Nevuchadnezzar didn't compare to the praises of Dovid Hamelech.

During the early 1970s, my rebbe, Rabbi Berel Wein, directed the Orthodox Union's kashrus department. On one occasion, he was aboard a small plane together with a shochet flying to inspect a slaughtering house. There was terrible turbulence, and the plane was shaking violently. Rabbi Wein admitted that even for a seasoned flyer as he was, it was unnerving. Still, he

tried to appear calm so as not to make the shochet nervous. The shochet, who was holding on for dear life and feverishly reciting Tehillim looked at Rabbi Wein and quipped, "You know, even a rabbi can say Tehillim sometimes!"

Rav Shimshon Pincus explained the power of reciting Tehillim with a parable:

There was once a great and powerful king, who was beloved by his subjects for his benevolence and leadership. There was a high-ranking general in the king's army with whom the king spent a great deal of time. Over time the king and the general developed a close-knit friendship. From security issues they began to discuss philosophical and theological matters. They sought each other's advice and confided with each other, and their friendship deepened.

They began to meet every day, and no one was allowed to disturb them during that time.

One day the king was informed that a rebellion had broken out at the edge of his kingdom. Fearing that the rebellion could gain traction, the king needed someone he could trust to be absolutely loyal to him to immediately squash the rebellion. It was a painful decision, but the king realized there was no one better for the job than his beloved friend.

The general did not hesitate, and he and the king tearfully bid each other farewell. The general was able to crush the rebellion quickly, but he had to remain there to ensure that it would not erupt again.

As time passed, the king missed his friend terribly. Then one day a letter arrived in the mail from the general for the king. The king excitedly read the letter in which the general expressed how deeply he missed the king. The general wrote about how he thought of their daily meetings, and longed to see the king again.

Each week after that another letter arrived in the mail and reading them became the highlight of the king's week. But then after a few months the letters stopped coming. At first the king thought a letter or two had gotten lost in the mail. But after a month, the king nervously sent a delegation to find out what had occurred.

The delegation returned looking somber. From the look on their faces the king understood that his dear friend had died. The king was crestfallen and inconsolable. He returned to his daily affairs, but everyone around him could see that he was not himself.

A few days later, one of the king's ministers approached his majesty clutching a box. He explained to the king that the box contained all of the 150 letters the general had sent him. The minister asked the king's permission for him to read one of the letters. The king agreed. As the minister passionately read the letter, eliciting the emotions from within its words, tears streaked down the king's face. It evoked deep nostalgia from within him. At the same

time, it gave the king a measure of comfort enabling him to again feel the deep connection with his late friend.

Each week afterwards the minister would again return to read another one of the 150 letters.

Hashem had a dear friend, as it were. Dovid Hamelech was unyieldingly devoted to Hashem throughout his difficult life. Dovid constantly spoke about yearning to be close to Hashem and feeling His presence.

When Dovid left this world, no one could ever fill his shoes and relate the praises of Hashem in the same passionate manner. But Dovid left behind 150 "letters"; the 150 chapters of Tehillim.

We begin pesukei d'zimrah each morning by declaring, "With the songs of Dovid Hamelech we will praise you". In addition, there is a beautiful tefillah customarily said before reciting Tehillim in which we ask that Hashem, "turn mercifully towards the words of Tehillim that I will read, (and consider them) as if Dovid Hamelech, peace upon him, himself uttered them..." When we recite chapters of Tehillim we are not only reciting the words of Dovid Hamelech, but we are also hoping that in heaven Hashem hears the words we utter as if/when Dovid himself recited them.

There is an old Jewish joke about a Jew running away in despair from a potentially disastrous occurrence shouting: "We can no longer rely on miracles. Therefore, let us now begin to recite *Tehillim!*" The truth however is that Jews see the recitation of Tehillim as a natural reaction to a troubled time and not only as an appeal for miracles.

The timeless words of Tehillim symbolize that no matter what the situation, one can and must always look to Hashem for guidance and salvation. The words of Tehillim reverberated joyously in the Beis Hamikdash. They were recited tearfully by our ancestors during times of persecution and pain. They are recited during times of joy and times of challenge. There is no emotion in the world not expressed in the timeless words of Dovid Hamelech. We find expression of our innermost hopes, longings and prayers. They grant us solace, hope and comfort as no other words ever written can. And it is with the words of Tehillim that we will greet Moshiach very soon.

Dear Rabbi Staum,

For various and complicated reasons I just came upon your reminiscence of your grandparents in "The Bukharian Jewish Link."

It brought back some sweet feelings and memories that I am happy to share with you.

I met your grandfather in 1972, shortly after my wife and I married and moved into the Grand Street co-ops on the Lower East Side. While exploring the neighborhood, we came upon the Slonimer shul, as it was called, and I met Rabbi Kohn, who was still struggling to keep a minyan going on Shabbes. (As I recall Rabbi Kohn was also working at that time as the mashgiach for Shapiro's Wines.) The minyan met in the small beis medrash downstairs, since it was impossible to keep the huge upstairs shul going. The minyan was a very motley crew of poor people, old people, "characters" - and, then me (- also a "character" I guess).

Your grandfather took care of everyone with great respect and warmth. Nothing was beneath him in terms of shepherding this remnant. My wife and I were welcomed into his home and the rebbetzin, your grandmother, was always gracious and happy to see us. For a while we even became a havrusa together, learning gemara on Shabbes afternoons. He was well respected in the general community and among the other rabbonim.

In 1978 my wife and I moved to Israel, and we lost touch. I am sad that I did not try to resume our contact when we returned to the States. But I will always cherish his memory as a Rav and a mensch.

Please forgive me, but I must ask what his first name was, as I do not recall anymore. And when did he pass away?

May you continue the wonderful legacy of your grandparents!

kol tuv,

David Greenstein

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On Shavuos this year (5784/2014) I met Rabbi and Rebbetzin Dovid Weinberger. Rabbi Weinberger is the father-in-law of our shul rabbi, Rav Yosef Kaiser.

Rabbi Weinberger related that when he was a chosson he was walking on the Lower East Side with his future father-in-law, Rabbi Nissan Alpert zt"l. There they met a short man who Rabbi Alpert introduced to his future chosson as Rabbi Kohn (which Rabbi Weinberger now realized was unquestionably my Zaydei). When Rabbi Alpert mentioned that this was his future chosson, Zaydei asked what the kallah's name was. When Rabbi Alpert said her name is עדינה, on the spot Zaydei replied that ראשי עדינה is עם דוד יחדו נגזר ה' for תיבות. Rabbi Weinberger concluded that he and his father-in-law were floored with Zaydei's quick wit.

Rebbetzin Weinberger (nee Alpert) recounted how Rabbi Kohn was always full of simcha and was so witty. She recounted that Zaydei once said that we have to always be careful with the שטן. He then added that שטן stands for שחורים, taxi drivers and נשים (as in immorality...).