

1907

SLICE OF LIFE

The Hallway was His Classroom



Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Munitz

As a boy back in Russia, my father, Rabbi Yisroel Meir Munitz, would study Torah very diligently, and every Thursday night – even before his Bar Mitzvah – he would study all night. One Thursday, he had a headache and couldn’t concentrate, so he decided to go home from the study hall. It was a cold winter night, and on his way home, he heard singing; he was passing by a gathering of chasidim celebrating the Chabad holiday of Yud-Tes Kislev. He decided to go inside, and as he would often say, once he entered, he never left.

He became a real chasid, studying Chabad teachings, and praying at great length, and he even taught Torah to children when it was against Soviet law.

At one point, after a close call with the KGB while teaching Torah, he and his friends resolved to one day open a yeshivah of their own. And in the 1950s, once they were living in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, they did. Oholei Torah, as it was called, started off in the home of one of those friends, Reb Elya Chaim Roitblat, who taught alongside my father, while the other friend, Reb Michael Teitelbaum, took care of the administration.

I was born a little before this, though, in 1951. We were still living in the Lower East Side, but for the brit, my father wanted to bring me to Crown Heights. That way, the Rebbe – who had only recently assumed the position – could serve in the honorary role of sandek, by holding me during the ceremony. My father wanted to name me after the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, as well as after a relative whose name was Yosef.

At a farbrengen just before the brit, my father

asked the Rebbe whether it is proper to also have this relative in mind while giving me the Previous Rebbe’s name.

The Rebbe replied that “the name of a tzaddik,” meaning a truly saintly figure like the Previous Rebbe, “should not be mixed with those of other people.”

Later, it emerged that this long-lost relative was actually alive – which was another reason, according to our tradition, not to name me after him!

By the day of the brit, my mother still wasn’t feeling well and couldn’t travel to Crown Heights, so it took place in the Lower East Side, and the Rebbe sent three yeshivah students to represent him at the event. As they were emerging from the subway on their way back, they saw the Rebbe coming out of 770.

“Are you coming from the brit?” the Rebbe inquired. “What is the name?” “Yosef Yitzchok,” they replied. “The name of a tzaddik,” remarked the Rebbe.

When we moved to Crown Heights, we lived in an apartment on New York Avenue – just down the road from where the Rebbe and his wife lived at the time. As children, we tried to figure out the time that the Rebbe would be walking to 770 in the morning, and we would wave to him as he walked by. The Rebbe would make sure to look up at us and wave back.

Before my Bar Mitzvah, I had a special audience with the Rebbe, along with my father, and after that, I would have an audience with the Rebbe each year on my birthday. The custom was that you would write a note with anything you wanted to say, and when you came to the Rebbe, he would read it, and, almost at the same time, respond to everything you had written. One year, while reading in my note that I was turning 17, he took a pen, circled my age, and wrote “tov.” That is to say, the Hebrew word for “good” has the numerical value of 17. As he gave me a blessing for the year ahead, with a small smile, he picked up the paper and showed me what he had written.

When my father started to get too old to keep teaching in Oholei Torah, the school was planning to suggest that he retire. But when they wrote to the Rebbe about it, he replied that it would be worth keeping my father there, if only for the students to see his face in the hallway.

And so, my father was given the responsibility of sitting in the school hallway – and any kids who were misbehaving in class would go out and spend time with him. I later heard from many Oholei Torah students that they would try to get sent out

of class so that they could study together with my father – especially when they had a test coming up!

In the late ‘70s, I moved to Pittsburgh to serve as a Chabad emissary under the direction of Rabbi Sholom Posner, who founded the local Chabad yeshivah. It was just after my father had passed away, and he took me in like his own son.

At first, we moved into a house that had belonged to one of the teachers in the local school and was being sold. It was barely livable; there were broken windows and doors, and the heat didn’t work. It was so freezing in the winter that we had to move out, but the search for a replacement was difficult. When we did find something that we could afford, I didn’t know if it would be large enough for our family. So I wrote a letter about the apartment to the Rebbe, to which he replied: “As is well known – it is preferable to buy.”

I could barely afford the rent, and now the Rebbe was telling me to buy a home! When I got the reply, I ran straight to Rabbi Posner. “How could I possibly do this?!” “The Rebbe said to buy a house,” Rabbi Posner replied. “So find a house that is for sale, and you will buy it.”

But when I found one, the price was exorbitant – there was no way I could afford it – and so I went back to Rabbi Posner. That’s when he told me, “I’ve bought much larger properties without any money.”

Rabbi Posner knew some of the members of the local Federation who might be open to supporting a community educator, and he advised me to approach them. “But if you ask for a thousand dollars, they’ll only give a hundred. Ask for ten thousand.” I thought that was too much, so I only asked the Federation for seven – and they gave me all seven. “You should have asked for twenty-five!” Rabbi Posner chided me.

Eventually, a free loan society in Crown Heights gave me enough money to cover the rest, and the Jewish owners of the house agreed to let me rent the house until I had done so.

And so, as impossible as it had seemed when the Rebbe first raised the idea, we ended up buying the house and living there for nineteen years, until we moved to open the Mesivta Menachem yeshivah in Buffalo, New York. Along the way, Rabbi Posner taught me a lesson: When the Rebbe tells you to do something, you do it! You’re worried about material considerations? You don’t have enough money? Worry about those things later – G-d will help.

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Munitz is a mashpia (chasidic mentor) in the local community and a teacher in the Ohr Temimim yeshivah of Buffalo.

WHO'S WHO

Who was the Baal Shem Tov?

The Baal Shem Tov, meaning "the Master of the Good Name," was born Yisrael, son of Eliezer and Sara on Elul 18, 1698. His teachings, emphasizing the worth of every Jew in G-d's eyes, lifted the spirits of the Jews of his time and encouraged them in their Divine growth. He also attracted some of the greatest spiritual giants of his age to his doctrine of Chasidut. Two of his main teachings are: to love every Jew regardless of his status; and everything that happens is a result of Divine Providence. When the Baal Shem Tov ascended to the heavenly chamber of Moshiach, he asked, "When will you come?" Moshiach replied: "When your teachings will be spread out."

The Rebbe Writes

from correspondence
of the Lubavitcher Rebbe

2nd of Shevat, 5740 [1980]

Executive Director North American Jewish Students Network

Greeting and Blessing:

Your letter of the 16th of Kislev reached me with some delay. Subsequently, I was gratified to be informed by the Lubavitcher activists who participated in the Convention that it was both an impressive and stimulating event. Of course, as our Sages emphasize, "The essential thing is the deed," and real Hatzlocho [success] is measured in terms of actual accomplishments in matters of Torah and Mitzvos. And if this applies to every individual, how much more so in the case of a Convention to which hundreds of young Jews have been brought together from different parts of the country. Thus, the fullest measure of the Convention's success will be reflected in the actual results, in tangible deeds and activities into which the Convention's aims, resolutions and spirit will be translated.

In view of your leading position in the organization and, especially, since you and your colleagues undoubtedly invested an enormous amount of energy, time and effort into the Convention, and "a person treasures his handiwork," you will surely wish to see the Convention achieve the maximum tangible results.

Needless to say, the above will largely depend on the follow-up, as is customary in such a case. It would be highly desirable that every participating student, and especially the group leaders, should receive copies of the resolutions, with an encouraging cover letter that would stimulate the actual implementation of the resolutions to strengthen Jewish knowledge, identity and commitment among Jewish students in the fullest possible measure.

At this time, approaching the Yahrzeit-Hilulo of my father-in-law of saintly memory on the 10th of Shevat, whose life and work is surely known to you, every one of us will surely remember his total dedication to the spreading and strengthening of Yiddishkeit, and how much he urged everyone to be involved in this vital activity.

We recall, particularly, that one of the first public

pronouncements which my father-in-law made immediately upon setting foot in this country forty years ago was, "America is not different" - not different from any other place insofar as a Jew's commitment to the eternal Torah and Mitzvos is concerned. And in keeping with the principle that "action is the essential thing," he immediately threw himself into a determined all-out effort to make his vision a reality. How well he succeeded, with G-d's help, in this vital task is a matter of open record, as anyone who is familiar with the American scene, as it was then, and as it is now, can clearly see, especially on the campuses of the colleges and universities in all parts of this continent.

With prayerful wishes for your continued Hatzlocho in all above, and hoping to hear good news from you,
With blessing,

2nd of Shevat, 5745 [1985]

To All Participants in the Annual Melava Malka Of the Hillel Academy of Passaic, N. J.

Greeting and Blessing:

I was pleased to be informed of the forthcoming Annual Melava Malka honoring Rabbi__ and other worthy honorees.

It is gratifying indeed to note that the Passaic and Clifton Jewish community appreciates the services of their Rav, rendered with a dedication and devotion that exceeds what is normally expected of a conscientious Rabbi and spiritual leader. But a graduate of the Lubavitcher Yeshiva demands of himself the very utmost and more. And Rabbi__ is one of the early graduates of the Lubavitcher Yeshiva founded by my father-in-law, the Rebbe, of saintly memory - whose Yahrzeit-Hilulo will be observed on the 10th of Shevat. This, by the way, provides the significant timely connection with the Melava Malka event that follows it so closely. The Baal HaHilulo was the embodiment of real Mesiras Nefesh [self-sacrifice] in his boundless dedication to the dissemination and strengthening of Yiddishkeit, Torah and Mitzvoth, all throughout his lifetime. This spirit permeates the Lubavitcher Torah institutions and activities, as well as its students, of whom Rabbi Bobrofsky is a living and inspiring example.

I extend prayerful wishes to each and all of you, especially to the worthy honorees, honorary officers and all community leaders, that the inspiration of the Melava Malka event be with you in all days ahead, to stimulate you, one and all, to even greater achieve-ments in the cause of Torah education and true Yiddishkeit, in an ever-growing measure.

With esteem and blessing,

inner meaning of Maimonides' statement that "There will be no difference between the current age and the Era of Moshiach except our emancipation from subservience to the gentile nations." In the future, however, when the spirit of impurity will be removed from the earth, everyone will see how every occurrence derives from G-d.

(Keter Shem Tov)

A WORD FROM THE DIRECTOR

In Memory of Rabbi Shmuel M. Butman, Director of the Lubavitch Youth Organization and Founder of the L'chaim Publication.

From the Archives

This coming week we will enter the Hebrew month of Shevat. It was on the first day of this month that Moses began his final repetition of the Torah and alluded to the sins of the Jewish people throughout their 40-year sojourn in the desert. Moses completed this repetition over a month later, on the seventh of Adar, the day of his passing.

As "Moses was the first redeemer and Moses will be the last redeemer," it should not come as a surprise that this month of Shevat has many connections to Moshiach and the Redemption.

The name Shevat relates to the Hebrew word "shevet" which means "staff." Shevet is associated with the concept of authority and kingship, as it is written, "The shevet will not depart from [the royal family of] Judah." The most perfect expression of the concept of royalty will be in the Era of the Redemption, when Moshiach will reign. For this reason, on the verse "And a shevet will arise in Israel," Maimonides comments, "This refers to the King Moshiach."

The word shevet also means "branch" or "shoot." In this context there is also a connection to Moshiach. On the verse "A shoot will emerge from the stem of Jesse" which begins a renowned prophecy concerning Moshiach's coming, the Metzudat David commentary states, "a shevet will emerge... the King Moshiach."

The connection between the month of Shevat and the Divine revelations that the world will experience in the Messianic Era is also apparent from the fact that it is the eleventh month. All existence is structured in a pattern of ten, and eleven alludes to a revelation that transcends this structure.

In this month, which is so completely associated with Moshiach, may we finally merit the long-awaited Redemption, NOW!

Shmuel Butman

L'ZICHRON CHAYA I MUSHKA לזכרון חיה'י מושקא

The name of our publication has special meaning. It stands for the name of Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka Schneerson (obm), wife of the Rebbe.



Published by
Lubavitch Youth Organization
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phone 718 778 6000

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