

EXCERPT
Traveling to the Rebbe



OUR CHASSIDIC ROOTS
דבריו ימי
חסידיים

CHASSIDIC LINKS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES THAT FIRST APPEARED
IN THE CLASSIC COLUMNS OF HATAMIM

Reb Avraham Ber¹

by the editors of *HaTamim*

One of the guests who came to Lubavitch for the *bar mitzvah* of the Rebbe [Rayatz] on 12 Tammuz, 5653 [June 26, 1893] was the great chassid, outstanding in both intellectual pursuits and prayer, Reb Avraham Dov Ber, son of Reb Yirmeyah, of Bobroisk. Reb Avraham Dov is remembered with great praise among chassidim. He would speak with hesitance about worldly matters,² but when it came to chassidic matters and chassidic stories, he was quite articulate.

He was very tall, and his appearance was impressive. His father, Reb Yirmeyah, was born in Homel, and was a businessman, as well as an accomplished scholar. As a young man he had once seen the Alter Rebbe, but his main adherence was to the Mittler Rebbe and to the *Tzemach Tzedek*. He was also a member of the inner circle of the great Reb Aizik *HaLevi* of Homel.

The chassid Reb Yirmeyah chose the best *melamdim* to educate his son, and he excelled academically due to his outstanding

1. From *HaTamim*, Issue No. 2, pp. 120-128; 19 *Kislev* 5696. The editors of *HaTamim* inserted the following introductory remarks at the beginning of the article:

Some biographical notes concerning [the childhood of] the famous chassid, Reb Avraham Dov Ber of Bobroisk, o.b.m., known as "Reb Ber Yirmeyah's." This essay is based on notes made by one of the students studying in Lubavitch at that time, who heard the whole story from this chassid himself.

2. An alternative translation: "he stuttered when speaking of worldly matters."

ability and prowess. The scholars of Homel admitted him to their circle, and when he reached the age of *bar mitzvah*, the *Rav* — Reb Aizik — accepted him as his student. Reb Avraham Dov studied under Reb Aizik for four years, with great diligence. At the age of seventeen, he was brought by his father to the *yeshivah* in Lubavitch for the festival of Shavuos.

[Reb Avraham Ber told of his background]:

My father was quite wealthy; he grew wealthier each year, and he donated large sums to charity. Besides that, my mother went out of her way to cater to visitors and guests in our home. Whenever my father planned a trip to Lubavitch, a lottery was held to determine which of the chassidim would be privileged to accompany my father, at his expense.

When I reached the age of six, in the year 5592 [1832], Father took me to Lubavitch for Shavuos, before enrolling me in the *cheder*. Right after Pesach I was told that this year my father would take me to Lubavitch. We began preparing for the trip on Lag BaOmer.

In Homel, a large feast was always held in honor of Lag BaOmer, and Reb Aizik would deliver a chassidic discourse. It was impossible to accommodate all the chassidim and other residents of the town all at once. Therefore, the celebration was spread out over three or four days — sometimes even five or six days.

It was an old custom in Homel to hold a special celebration on the *Shabbos* after Lag BaOmer: This was called “the Joyous *Shabbos*,” for the celebration was as joyful as *Shabbos Bereishis*, which follows Simchas Torah. When Lag BaOmer fell on Sunday, the entire week — until after the Joyous *Shabbos* — was celebrated as a festival.

The program for this celebration was as follows: after the *davening*, all the chassidim, the scholars, the affluent businessmen,

and the elders would assemble in Reb Aizik's home. There, they discussed what spiritual improvements and what civic improvements were needed in the city, and they drew up a tax assessment to collect money for various purposes. Then they paid a visit to the cemetery, after which they returned to the *beis hamedrash*, where tables had been set up with food for the feast held in honor of the *mitzvah*.

Each day of the festival Reb Aizik would deliver a lecture on *Chassidus*. During that time, the monies were collected for the previously mentioned tax, to support the various projects. Small children were enrolled in the *chadorim* during that season, and the pupils of the intermediate and senior *yeshivos* were examined on their knowledge.

Reb Aizik decreed that when Lag BaOmer fell on Thursday or Friday, the celebration was to continue until after the second *Shabbos*. In 5592, Lag BaOmer fell on Friday of *Parshas Bechukosai*, and so the celebration lasted until after *Shabbos Parshas Bamidbar*. I was thrilled at the time, for I knew that my father was going to enroll me in the *cheder*, and take me to Lubavitch, together with the rest of the Chassidim.

I will never forget that pilgrimage — the memory of it remains engraved upon my heart. We departed from Homel in four wagons, each drawn by two horses. There were fifteen passengers in each wagon: some were seated in two rows inside the wagon, some sat along the sides of the wagon, and two sat up above, next to the coachman. Everyone was in an extremely happy mood.

Most of the people traveled on foot; their ecstasy indescribable. They rode in the wagons only for an hour or two at a time to rest their feet. Reb Aizik rode in the lead wagon, along with my father and some other chassidim. I was seated next to my father, just opposite Reb Aizik.

Mother woke me very early Sunday morning, telling me to dress quickly and go to Reb Aizik's house. From there, the holy pilgrimage to Lubavitch would depart. With great joy, my mother

packed the new suit she had sewn for me, instructing me to wear it only on *Shabbos*, and when I would be privileged to have an audience with the Rebbe.

We came to the street where Reb Aizik lived and despite the early hour, the street was already buzzing with people hurrying to and fro, as though it were a market day. We arrived at Reb Aizik's home and found the courtyard packed with men, women, and children: some conversing excitedly, some dancing. The four wagons stood ready for the trip.

It was impossible to enter Reb Aizik's home, for it was already filled to capacity, and Mother had no idea where my father was. As we stood there, we learned that Reb Aizik had lectured on *Chassidus* all night, and they had begun the prayer service at daybreak. The other scholars and wealthy businessmen had just now arrived to escort their *Rav* on his way.

A short while later we heard the sound of music. Suddenly, people began to emerge from the house through the door and windows. They walked backwards, their faces toward the house and their backs to the courtyard. Everyone in the courtyard began to tremble, and within a few seconds Reb Aizik appeared. He stood there and blessed the assembled crowd, bidding them farewell; then he climbed onto one of the wagons.

Just then, my mother caught sight of my father, as he too climbed onto the wagon after Reb Aizik. She began to shout, "Yirmeyah! Yirmeyah! Here is Avraham Berel. Please take him, please don't forget Avraham Berke," but her voice was lost in the loud confusion. Just as the wagon carrying Reb Aizik and my father began to move, I began to cry, seeing that my father had forgotten about me.

All those in the courtyard raised their voices in song, as they began to follow the wagon. Meanwhile, Mother noticed Reb Yisrael Aharon the *melamed* among the crowd, and she informed him that father had left me behind, and had not heard her when she called him. Reb Yisrael Aharon lifted me in his arms

and, forcing his way through the multitude, he carried me to the wagon where my father sat.

The wagon proceeded very slowly, as the host of people accompanying us increased. At each intersection, hundreds more joined us. Before our escort from Homel had a chance to turn back and return home, a party from the town of Belitza appeared. They had come to welcome our procession, which would be passing through their city. In Belitza, Reb Aizik descended to meet the residents of the town along with father and the other travelers in our wagon. However, I was afraid that my father would forget me once again, and so I remained in the wagon to await their return.

Our journey from Homel to Lubavitch lasted five days, from Sunday to Thursday of *Parshas Naso*. We passed through many cities and towns, villages and rural settlements. Wherever we went, there was rejoicing and celebration. On the way, we were joined by other wagons headed for Lubavitch from Bobroisk, Szczedryn, Smilian, Toltchin, Minsk, Borisov, Zhlobin, Shklov, Rogatchov, and many other places. Many foot travelers also joined the procession. We were scheduled to arrive in Dubravna on Wednesday at *Minchah* time.

Our last stop before that was to be in Zaliszkina, fifteen or sixteen *parsah*³ from Dubravna, where the wealthy chassid Reb Eli Moshe lived. When we arrived in Zaliszkina, we found many — at least twenty or thirty — wagons, with hundreds of people resting on the grass in the open field across from the courtyard of Reb Eli Moshe.

Tens of groups of people were scattered all over the place: some engaged in conversation, some sleeping, some eating and drinking, some reviewing a chassidic discourse, some dancing. I held tightly to Father's coat, so that he would not forget me.

The wealthy chassid Reb Eli Moshe, his sons, sons-in-law, wife, daughters, daughters-in-law, grandsons, granddaughters, brothers,

3. Around 40 miles in conventional units.

sisters, and all their kin, had their hands full as they labored to serve the assembled chassidim who were on their way to Lubavitch. They provided food and drink for everyone, free of charge.

The chassid Reb Eli Moshe used to say, “Ninety-nine percent of all that Heaven bestowed upon me because of the Rebbe’s blessings, belongs to the chassidim; only one percent belongs to me. So, friends, eat and drink, as it is all a blessing of the Rebbe and a gift of G-d. Eat, drink, and be merry! Be strong chassidim, with the energy to serve G-d through Torah and *mitzvos* and the *avodah* of the heart.”

In Zaliszkina, we met the two famous chassidim, the *tzaddik* Reb Hillel of Paritch and the chassid Reb Betzalel of Ozaritz. Their great joy at meeting Reb Aizik is indescribable. The three of them ate lunch together in Reb Eli Moshe’s home. When we left Zaliszkina, forty additional wagons joined us, along with many companies of foot travelers. Most of them carried knapsacks on their shoulders and walking sticks in their hands. Some of them had good voices, and sang as they walked. Those riding in the wagons joined the chorus with great joy.

Our journey proceeded among the tall trees of a vast forest. The sound of music could be heard in the distance, as each stanza of the song echoed through the forest. The effect was as if a choir of singers was positioned at the edge of the forest, repeating whatever we sang. Finally, I spied sunlight in the distance, indicating that the forest was ending. Inside the forest, the daylight was obscured by the thick branches, as though it were twilight.

A few moments later we emerged from the dense trees into a broad open field. The sun was shining brightly, and ahead of us was a big mountain. All of us who were riding in the wagon — except Reb Aizik, the elderly *tzaddik* Reb Yechiel ben Reb Meir “the tearful one,” and the *gaon* Reb Zalman Dov “the milkman” — got off the wagon to walk until we reached the mountain top. From the mountain’s peak we could see the gardens and homes of the city of Dubravna, still more than two miles away.

As we went down the mountain, we saw a large crowd of people standing along both sides of the road. We soon learned that the chassidim of Dubravna — led by the famous chassid Reb Nechemiah — had come out to greet the guests who were on their way to Lubavitch.

After we reached the Dubravner Chassidim assembled at the bottom of the hill, Reb Aizik descended from the wagon and went to meet the *tzaddik* Reb Nechemiah. My father accompanied him, after appointing the wagon driver Reb Avraham Meir to keep an eye on me, and ordering me to obey his instructions to the letter.

I was exhausted from the trip, and soon fell fast asleep; thus, I knew nothing of our arrival in Dubravna. When I finally awoke, Reb Avraham Meir was already finishing his breakfast. He informed me that we would be resuming our journey within an hour or two, and would arrive at nightfall. On Thursday toward evening, we finally arrived in Lubavitch.

On Friday afternoon, about an hour before sunset, the large *shul* was already packed wall-to-wall with people. On the platform in the center stood the Rebbe's sons and a few of the elder chassidim, including Reb Aizik. Suddenly the word spread: "The Rebbe is coming!" Instantly there was silence, all eyes focussed on the place from where the Rebbe would enter.

I was standing on top of one of the stoves, holding Reb Avraham Meir's hand. In a moment, I saw a man dressed in white silk, with a fur hat on his head, proceeding toward the platform. He sat in the chair prepared for him, and began to speak in a powerful voice: "And G-d spoke to Moshe: Count the numbers of the sons of Gershon too..."⁴ (This is the second discourse on that verse which was later printed in *Likkutei Torah*).⁵

I remember well how I went in to the Rebbe with my father for

4. *Bamidbar* 4:21-22.

5. Pp. 46-49.

yechidus on that occasion. Father had to wait in the outer room for many hours, until it was his turn to enter. Meanwhile, I sat on a widow ledge. When the time appointed for our audience arrived, my father asked the people standing near me to hand me over to him. I was passed hand-to-hand over the heads of the assembled chassidim.

Father entered the Rebbe's inner chamber, and I followed him, holding tightly to the corner of his coat. The room in which the Rebbe sat was quite large, the walls lined with cabinets full of *seforim*. The Rebbe sat behind a large desk, upon which lay a few *seforim*, several boxes filled with coins, and two lit candles.

As Father entered the chamber, the Rebbe was studying a *sefer* which lay open before him. But when we approached the place where the Rebbe sat, he raised his eyes from the *sefer* and gazed into father's eyes, and into mine. Father's entire body began to quake, and I also became flustered and began to weep silently.

The Rebbe stretched out his holy hand to take the *pidyon* from my father, as father stood in his place, paralyzed with fear, unable to make a move. He remained standing in silence, his head bowed, his eyes running rivers of tears which fell to the floor. At first he managed sufficient self control to keep from being heard, but within a few moments he broke into loud weeping, his voice wailing up and down the scale. When I saw Father crying like that, my heart went to pieces and I too began to cry in earnest as I looked into the Rebbe's holy face.

The Rebbe read the *pidyon* that father had handed him, and studied it for some time. As he read it, he looked up into father's face, and into mine, from time to time. Then he began speaking to Father. As soon as the Rebbe began speaking, Father ceased his weeping. He moved his lips silently, repeating every word the Rebbe spoke, but making no sound. The Rebbe continued speaking to Father for a long time; then Father asked him several questions, which the Rebbe answered.

When the Rebbe finished speaking, Father said, "Here is my

son,” as he pointed to me and moved me closer to the Rebbe. “I am about to enroll him in the *cheder*, and I request that the Rebbe bless him.”

The Rebbe studied me for a moment, then he closed his holy eyes. After a few moments he opened them again, looked directly at me, and said, “Study diligently, and do not waste any time. May G-d (blessed be He), help you to become a scholar and a chassid.”

“Amen!” Father and I both exclaimed.

As soon as we emerged from the Rebbe’s holy presence we went to the small *minyán* room. Father lifted me onto his shoulders and began to dance with the chassidim who were already rejoicing in song and dance. This was the usual custom in those days: whenever someone had the privilege of *yechidus* with the Rebbe, he would break into a dance upon leaving the holy chamber.

Father continued dancing for a very long time, until his clothes became soaked with perspiration, as wet as if they had just been removed from the laundry tub. Afterwards, he sat down on one of the benches in a corner of the *shul*, to rest. “I must rest for a bit,” he said, “but soon we will go to the home where our *Rav* is staying.”

I perceived that Father was in a joyful mood — though completely exhausted, he continued clapping his hands and stomping his foot to the rhythm of the dance. From time to time he would snap his fingers, or whistle a piercing, high-pitched note that refreshed the spirits of those who were weary from dancing, giving them renewed energy to dance even faster.

I was always fond of joyous occasions in general, and dancing in particular. My earliest memories are of chassidic dances. That was at the time I first began to crawl; I could only do so on all fours, but could not yet stand up. Whenever someone held me in a standing position, or placed me in my infant’s walker, I would cavort about in imitation of the dances I observed in my father’s home. As soon as I began to walk and talk, my first words were to shout that I wished to join the chassidim in their dancing.

One of Mother's favorite activities was entertaining guests, especially when a chassidic *farbrengen* was involved. The chassidim who were Father's close friends came to our home frequently for study and conversation. Afterwards they would begin a dance. I always joined in, while holding on to the corner of the jacket of one of the dancers.

Among those who took part in the *farbrengens* and dances there were two young men — the youngest in the whole group — who were very lively individuals. They were talented singers, and their voices could be heard above everyone else's. They were also swift dancers, and whenever they broke into a dance they would lift me onto their shoulders. Sometimes Anshel Gitte's would carry me, and sometimes Shlomo Peshe's would carry me; either way, I thought I was the luckiest fellow in the world.

I used to refer to our *farbrengens* as "Little Simchas Torahs." When I was three years old, I began to attend the kindergarten class of Reb Elimelech the children's teacher. There, I would play with the other children in my class, and we heard stories from the *Chumash*, Prophets, and *Aggadah*. I would say to my friends, "Yesterday (or the day before) we had a Little Simchas Torah at our house."

All of my little friends (sometimes even the older children, who were already reading Hebrew from the *Siddur* or *Chumash*) envied me. I was exceedingly proud, for I was the only one in my class who frequently had an opportunity to attend a Little Simchas Torah. What's more, to ride on the shoulders of those jolly young fellows — Anshel Gitte's and Shlomo Peshe's — while they danced their wonderful dances, was a privilege enjoyed by no other child but me.

I loved to taunt my classmates about this, especially little Schneur Zalman Dov, the son of the chassid Reb Aryeh. He in turn, would taunt me, for I was only named after my maternal grandfather, who had died quite young, while [Schneur Zalman Dov] was named after both the Alter Rebbe and the Mittler

Rebbe. But whenever he gave me his verbal abuse, I reminded him that I could get a ride on the shoulders of Reb Anshel and Reb Shlomo while they danced.

I once asked my mother why it was that the chassidim — who spent so many hours conversing and *farbrenging* — were always so joyful, dancing and prancing about. She replied that they — the chassidim — had been sitting and studying; they celebrated the Torah knowledge that they had aquired, which constituted a “Rejoicing of the Torah.” It was after this that I began to refer to these events as “Little Simchas Torahs.”

Being accustomed to Little Simchas Torahs, I was not surprised by the vigorous dancing of the chassidim in the little shul. But why did they make it a point to dance specifically after they emerged from the Rebbe’s holy presence? Furthermore, why was such an audience in the Rebbe’s private chamber called *yechidus*? For example, one might ask another, “Were you in *yechidus* yet?” To this, the reply might be, “I am just about to go in to *yechidus*,” or “Thank G-d, I have just been in *yechidus*.” One might also hear remarks such as “so-and-so went for *yechidus*,” and “so-and-so is waiting for *yechidus*.”

My mind became totally preoccupied with these two questions: a) why is entering the Rebbe’s private chamber called *yechidus*? b) why do chassidim begin dancing when they emerge from the Rebbe’s chamber? This preoccupation gave me no rest, and when I noticed that my father was in such a good mood, I asked him my two questions.

Father asked me: “Do you know about the *Mishkan* that Moshe built in the wilderness according to G-d’s command? Do you know about the special chamber that was there, in which the Holy Ark with the Tablets stood? Do you know that once a year, on Yom Kippur, Aharon the *Kohen Gadol* would enter that chamber to light the incense and to pray for all of Israel?”

Being eager to show off my erudition to my father, I quickly recited everything I knew about the Temple that King Shlomo

built, about the Holy of Holies with the Ark and the Tablets, the sacrificial service performed by the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, and especially his entry into this innermost chamber. When the *Kohen Gadol* pronounced G-d's holy Name, all the people in the Temple courtyard would kneel and bow, touching their faces to the ground.

As I spoke, I proudly demonstrated to Father how they bowed and fell on their faces. For the past two years I had been in *shul* on Yom Kippur afternoon, and when everyone in *shul* had knelt and bowed, I had copied the grownups. Upon rising from my bowing, I had run to tell Mother about it; she then gave me a slice of white bread without butter, explaining that it was a holy fast day.

"Who entered the Holy of Holies together with the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur?" asked Father?

"Only the *Kohen Gadol* — no one else!" I replied.

"And what did the *Kohen Gadol* do after he completed the sacrificial service of the holy fast day of Yom Kippur?"

"Our teacher, Reb Elimelech, told us that the *Kohen Gadol* was very wealthy, and he wore golden garments, made from his own personal gold. When he completed the service in the *Beis HaMikdash*, he would go home accompanied by all the Jews, with song and melody. When they arrived at his home, there were tables laden with all sorts of food and drink. Everyone joined in the most joyful celebration, for their sins were forgiven."

"And now," asked Father, "do we have a *Beis HaMikdash* and a Holy of Holies?"

"No," I replied as a sigh escaped my heart, "Now we have neither a *Beis HaMikdash* nor a Holy of Holies."

I looked up at my father, waiting to hear what he would say next about all of this. But before I could regain my voice, a new group of people entered the *shul* singing, and another dance broke out. When father realized that most of the men in this group were our townspeople from Homel, he suddenly sprang up from his bench with outspread hands and a spring in his step and joined their dancing.

I was startled by this, and didn't know what to do. My first impulse was to follow my father, but I was afraid I might be trampled under their feet. I retreated, and climbed up to stand on one of the benches. From there I noticed the wagon driver Reb Avraham Meir among the dancers, but when I called his name he didn't answer.

I stood on the bench and watched, as father danced in the middle of the circle. All around him were several of the Homeler Chassidim, among them Reb Avraham Meir the wagon driver and Reb Shlomo Peshe's. Each one danced with closed eyes, his right arm on his neighbor's shoulder, his left arm waving to the beat of the sacred melody issuing from his mouth. An indescribable aura of holiness surrounded the dancers' faces. The love and brotherhood, the bliss and the ecstasy, are unimaginable. Each one held his neighbor tightly, in friendship and harmony. I nearly burst apart with desire to join the dance.

Reb Avraham Meir passed me by a second time, and then a third. Each time, I called to him, but he didn't respond. But suddenly, someone seized me from behind. I felt myself flying through the air, and there I was riding on the shoulders of one of the dancers. Bending my head forward, I discovered that Reb Shlomo Peshe's was carrying me on his shoulders. My rapture knew no bounds!

In a thunderous voice, the chassid Reb Zalman Yaakov Esther-Disha's (a leading citizen of Homel, he was the *gabbai* of the *shul* and was intimately involved in all affairs of the community and its institutions) suddenly cried out, "Here ends the first *hakkafah!* Now it's time to *daven Minchah.*"⁶ Within seconds of this announcement the dancing ceased, and everyone got ready for *Minchah*.

Father's words about the *Beis HaMikdash*, the Holy of Holies, the Ark, and especially his last question, "And now, do we have

6. These rituals imitate those customary in the *shul* on Simchas Torah during *Hakkafos*.

a *Beis HaMikdash* and a Holy of Holies?” had left me somewhat sad and dejected. In my mind, a new question began to take shape: why was everyone so joyful, if the *Beis HaMikdash* remains destroyed and goats⁷ cavort in the place where the Holy of Holies once stood?

The men in the *shul* began *davening Minchah* in melodious tones, each one displaying his vocal talents; they *davened* loudly, in the Simchas Torah style. Meanwhile, my thoughts were busy with my new question — why are they so happy while the *Beis HaMikdash* remains destroyed? At the same time, I recalled all the stories [about the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*] our teacher Reb Elimelech had told us on the previous *Tishah BeAv*. I therefore decided to ask Father to explain it all to me after he finished *Minchah*.

When the *davening* ended, Reb Zalman Yaakov Esther-Disha’s announced that liquor and cake were being served. I then turned to Father and said, “You asked me whether we still have a *Beis HaMikdash* and a Holy of Holies. Well, nowadays we have neither, so why is everyone dancing so joyfully? After all, the *Beis HaMikdash* is destroyed, and goats caper in the Holy of Holies!”

When Father heard this question he replied, “You are right, my son, you are very right. The *Beis HaMikdash* that stood in the Holy City of Jerusalem (may it be speedily rebuilt) is now destroyed. When the Jews will do *teshuvah*, the Holy One (blessed be He), will send us *Mashiach*, our righteous redeemer, who will gather us from the four corners of the earth and take us — together with our houses and our furniture — to the Land of Israel, where he will rebuild Jerusalem and the *Beis HaMikdash*. Until that time, we have neither the *Beis HaMikdash* nor the Holy of Holies.

“However”, my father continued, “in the meanwhile — from when the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed until G-d will have mercy

7. Another translation: “demons.” Cf. *Yeshayahu* 13:21.

and send *Mashiach* who will return us to the land of Israel, and rebuild Jerusalem and the *Beis Hamikdash* with the Holy of Holies — Lubavitch is our Jerusalem, the *shul* where the Rebbe *davens* is our *Beis HaMikdash*, and the room where the Rebbe sits is our Holy of Holies. The Rebbe himself is our Holy Ark containing the Tablets of G-d's Holy Torah.”

Father's facial expression and solemnity as he spoke these words made an awesome impression on me. Then, the realization struck me: Father and I had just been inside the Holy of Holies, and we now found ourselves in the *Beis HaMikdash*. What a wondrous idea! Very wondrous indeed!

As these thoughts about the *Beis HaMikdash* and the Holy of Holies were being entertained in my mind, I heard Father speaking to me again. “Are you aware, my son, that after Moshe deposited the Ark and the Tablets in the Holy of Holies, he was able to hear G-d's voice speaking to him from between the *Ceruvim* on top of the Ark?”

“Yes,” I replied, “I heard Mother reading about this to my aunt.”

“The words that the Rebbe speaks to each chassid entering his chamber for *yechidus*, are the words of G-d,” father continued. “Just as the *Kohen Gadol* used to enter the Holy of Holies all alone, so too, whoever enters the Rebbe's room (which is now our Holy of Holies) does so all alone. That's why the audience is called *yechidus*.⁸ And just as the *Kohen Gadol* and all of Israel rejoiced when he emerged from the Holy of Holies, so too, we chassidim all rejoice and celebrate the great kindness that G-d has shown us by giving us the privilege of entering our Holy of Holies and receiving our Rebbe's holy blessing. Remember well the words of the blessing the Rebbe gave you,” Father cautioned me. “G-d willing, when we get home, you can tell Mother all the details.”

Before I could reassure my father that I remembered the

8. *Yechidus* means “private” in Hebrew.

Rebbe's blessing, and was able to repeat it word-for-word, Reb Zalman Yaakov Esther-Disha's approached us. He brought father to the table to partake of the liquor and cake. He gave me a sweet biscuit with some jam on it; I recited the blessing of *Mezonos* out loud, upon which my father and the others who were near enough to hear my blessing answered "Amen."

Reb Abba David the *Chazan* and Reb Baruch Shimon the Bookbinder congratulated father for having the good sense to bring me to Lubavitch. "You were very wise to bring your Avraham Berel to Lubavitch," said Reb Abba David. "These days, it's necessary to train the children in *Chassidus* from early childhood."

"If you ask me," remarked Reb Baruch Shimon, "It was his wife's clever idea, not his own. She is a truly wise woman, a real chassidic woman, who is always entertaining guests."

"I too, entered the Holy of Holies, along with my father, and the Rebbe blessed me," I related, as I looked at Father to see whether I was permitted to tell them the words of the blessing I had received from the Rebbe. But Father was busy in conversation with the men on the opposite side of the table.

Just then, Reb Shlomo Peshe's came running in drenched with perspiration, and announced that all the chassidim who had come from Homel had already been in *yechidus* (thank G-d). They were now *davening Minchah*, and would arrive here very soon.

"For bringing such good news, you deserve a glass of liquor and some cake," Reb Zalman Yaakov Esther-Disha's said to Reb Shlomo Peshe's, "Here it is, take it, say the blessing, then say *LeChayim!*"

Reb Shlomo Peshe's recited *Mezonos* over the cake, and *Shehakol* over the liquor; then he blessed the whole assembly with *LeChayim*, his face radiant. After he drank, he began to clap his hands, sing, and dance while standing in his place.

He turned to his audience and asked in bewilderment, "Have you been sitting motionlessly like this the whole time, eating and drinking but not dancing? I am well aware of what a big chassid

Reb Zalman Yaakov Esther-Disha's is. Our *Rav* says of him that he has a great deal of common sense, but his frigid disposition and his strict etiquette are intolerable. If you follow his example, you will all wind up like white geese — fattened geese that waddle about with great dignity and crow in orderly unison.

“Brothers, we get enough of his manners and etiquette at home in Homel. Here in Lubavitch, our Holy Jerusalem, we are liberated from the yoke of the authorities on etiquette, who look to the *misnagdim* for guidance, and pay attention to what direction the wind blows, worrying about what people will say.”

“Just look at that!” exclaimed Reb Abba David the *Chazan*. “Now he too has become one of the speakers. When we were still young, we never dared to open our mouths and speak at a chassidic gathering, let alone voice our opinions out loud. Believe me, Shlomo, it takes real impertinence.”

“Times have changed!” said Reb Gershon Leib the Scribe. “In our days we behaved very differently. Young folk knew their place, and their only duty was to listen and pay attention when elder chassidim spoke among themselves.”

Turning to Reb Meir Yechiel the Fisherman, Reb Gershon Leib continued, “Do you remember the first time we went to the Alter Rebbe in Liozna?”

These two — Reb Gershon Leib the Scribe and Reb Meir Yechiel the Fisherman — were older chassidim, in their seventies or more. Reb Gershon Leib had already retired from writing Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzos*, and Reb Meir Yechiel had retired from fishing, but they retained the names of their former occupations. They now had ample income from their real estate holdings, and they played a leading role in all charitable affairs (according to their means). They held great prestige among all factions of the community, for they spent the entire day and most of the night in *shul*, studying Torah and *davening*.

By nature, Reb Gershon Leib was the silent type. He used to say that his occupation was a holy one, and his work had to be

done with the proper intent and frame of mind, and required much patience. Thus, over the years, the virtue of patience had become his second nature, and he had become accustomed to thinking rather than speaking.

As a result, when Reb Gershon Leib began to speak, there was complete silence, and everyone present lent an ear to hear what he had to say. Reb Gershon Leib's story is very long, but all the chassidim of Homel knew it by heart. Quite frequently, when there was a *farbrengen* Reb Gershon Leib would retell his beloved story (or at least part of it). It would take me too long to recount my memories of his story.

When I arrived home from this trip to Lubavitch I told my mother everything that had happened to us, and everything that I saw during our journey and in Lubavitch. I also repeated the Rebbe's blessing. I became extremely diligent in my studies after returning from Lubavitch. My *melamed* was quite satisfied with me, and delighted in teaching me. For my second semester, Father transferred me to the second grade *melamed*.

During the next four years, the Rebbe's instructions, "Study diligently and do not waste any time" resounded in my ears, along with his blessing, "May G-d (blessed be He), help you to become a scholar and a chassid."

Father and Mother took great pleasure in my diligent study and my G-d-fearing behavior. By the age of ten I had already acquired a great deal of *Talmudic* knowledge, and father again took me with him to visit Lubavitch.

Then too, I accompanied him in to the Rebbe for *yechidus*. After he finished speaking to Father, the Rebbe gazed intently into my face, and then said to Father, "I can see in his face that he has studied diligently."

He turned to me and inquired about what I had studied. I replied that I had studied the tractates *Beitzah*, *Bava Kamma*, and *Bava Metzia*, and I was now up to the second *Mishneh* of the Chapter entitled *Makom Shenahagu* ["In the place where it

is customary”] in the tractate *Pesachim*. In *Tanach* I had studied *Chumash* with the commentary of *Rashi*, and the Early Prophets.

The Rebbe meditated for a while and said, “What you have studied until now is good. For the future, finish the tractate *Pesachim*, and then study *Bava Basra* and *Nedorim*; *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim*; the weekly portion of *Chumash* with the commentaries of *Rashi*, *Or HaChayim*, and *Panim Yafos*; *Tehillim* with *Rashi’s* commentary, and then the Later Prophets. May G-d help you to dedicate yourself to diligent Torah study and fear of Heaven, and may you be a scholar, a chassid, and a G-d-fearing person.”

During the next three years, from the age of ten until my *bar mitzvah*, I completed the tractates of *Pesachim*, *Bava Basra*, and *Nedorim*, as well, I reviewed *Bava Kamma* and *Bava Metzia*. I thoroughly knew these tractates, along with the commentaries of *Tosafos*.

When Father took me to Lubavitch for my *bar mitzvah*, I had the privilege of receiving a blessing from the Rebbe, while he placed his holy hands upon my head. Unfortunately, I was unable to hear the words of the blessing.

When I returned from Lubavitch, Reb Aizik admitted me as a student at the third table of the *yeshivah*. A year later he promoted me to the second table, and a year after that to the first table. At the age of seventeen I was accepted as a student in the second class of the Rebbe’s *yeshivah* in Lubavitch. This class was taught by the holy Rebbe Reb Yisrael Noach,⁹ and we were examined by the holy Reb Levi Yitzchak,¹⁰ the Rebbe’s son-in-law.

9. A son of the Rebbe the *Tzemach Tzedek*; he later served as Rebbe in Niezhin.

10. He was married to Rebbetzin Devorah Leah, daughter of the *Tzemach Tzedek*.

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