

### A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIFE OF

# REB YISROEL BUCHMAN OBM

8 Tishrei 5689 - 6 Iyar 5749

#### **FAMILY ROOTS**

In 5651 (1891), Reb Yisroel's father, Reb Shneur Zalman, was born. Growing up in Homel under the protection/instruction of his grandfather, Reb Mordechai Yoel, Reb Shneur Zalman was able to soak in the joy, energy, and depth of chassidic life, the love and self-sacrifice for all Jews, and a deep sense of hiskashrus, bonding with the Rebbe, that Reb Mordechai Yoel and the Homel community as a whole radiated forth.

In 5666 (1906), his parents sent him to Lubavitch to study in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim, under the guidance of the Rebbe Rashab and the directorship of the Rebbe Rayatz. These were the days of the flowering of the yeshivah, the years in which the students were totally submerged in the sea of Torah and the sea of Chassidus. All that was on their minds was prayer, study, and the Rebbe whose teachings had inspired this unique atmosphere.

There Reb Shneur Zalman studied for several years. Afterwards, he married his partner for life Chayah Gruniah Minkowitz, the daughter of Reb Leima Minkowitz, one of the pillars of the chassidic community of Neville. Though Neville had also earned a distinguished place in the annals of Lubavitch history, Reb Shneur Zalman chose to make his home in Homel. There he and Chayah Gruniah took their places as active members of the community, reaching out to others in difficulty (these were the years of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, when poverty and tribulations plagued the entire Jewish community), sparking chassidic life in the town, and maintaining their own - and inspiring others to - bond with the Rebbe Rashab and then the Rebbe Rayatz

In 5684 (1924), shortly after the Rebbe Rayatz moved the center of the Lubavitch movement from Rostov to Leningrad, Reb Shneur Zalman set up his own home in that city, only a few blocks from the Rebbe's home. From then until the time that the Rebbe was forced to leave Russia in 5688 (1927), Reb Shneur Zalman was a fixture in the Rebbe's household and was entrusted with many missions by the Rebbe Rayatz. As the Rebbe notes in one of his letters to him, he was of the people to whom the Rebbe entrusted the responsibility of hiding the manuscripts of the Rebbe Rayatz when he was imprisoned in 5687 (1927).

#### IN THE FACE OF CHALLENGE

With the departure of the Rebbe Rayatz, the lives of Reb Shneur Zalman, his family, and indeed, those of all of the chassidim, underwent a drastic change. As long as the Rebbe was in Russia, there was a driving force propelling the chassidim forward. There were persecutions; there was poverty, endless challenges of a nature that today we cannot understand. But the Rebbe's presence inspired his chassidim to push onward.

After the Rebbe departed, that changed. It could not be said that the chassidim fell into despair; that's a contradiction in terms; despair is a curse to the very nature of a chassid. And quite the contrary, they continued the effort to maintain Jewish practice with self-sacrifice, founding and maintaining underground schools for children and doing what is possible to maintain synagogues, mikvaos, and ritual slaughter. But there was a difference. Before they felt carried by the Rebbe's energies; now they had to rely on their own.

It was here where Reb Shneur Zalman stood out. His home, tiny as it was, became a center for hospitality and for Torah study. He was followed and arrested by the N.K.V.D. They tortured him repeatedly, slamming the iron door of his cell on his fingers and subjecting him to other harsh

suffering, but they could not break him or force him to change his conduct. And even during this time, he felt bonded with the Rebbeim and would express those feelings by journeying to Rostov to visit the resting place of the Rebbe Rashab each year on Beis Nissan, his yahrzeit, regardless of the danger or expense involved.

#### **EARLY YEARS**

Yisroel HaLevi Duchman was born to Zalman and Chaya Grunya, on Shabbos, 8 Tishrei 5689 (1928). The Frierdiker Rebbe, who was then in Riga, sent a letter with a bracha for the newborn boy.

Yisroel grew up in Leningrad of the 1930s, at the height of the communist oppression. He and his older brother, Dovber Menachem Mendel, remained home and were educated by their father, while their oldest brother, Mordechai Yoel, was sent away to the underground branch of Tomchei Temimim in Kutaisi, Georgia. Despite the challenges, Yisroel had a stable education for his first eleven years.

At the onset of the summer of 5701 (1941), the Nazi armies invaded Russia and advanced deep within its territory. In Elul (September) of that year, they laid siege to Leningrad, cutting off access to the city. The heavy bombardment and the lack of supplies created havoc in the city. Corpses could be found throughout the streets, some were killed by German artillery and some simply died of starvation.

R. Yisroel's two brothers were killed in the war. Berl Menachem Mendel was drafted into the Soviet army and fell in battle, and Mordechai Yoel left the house one day and didn't return. Broken by the loss of his sons and his body ravaged by famine, R. Zalman had to be hospitalized. The responsibility of securing food for the family fell upon eleven-year-old Yisroel. With charm, cleverness, and ingenuity, he procured scraps of food from the nearby Russian army camp. With these, he sustained his family and others who looked to the Duchmans for help.

#### **TEMPORARY HAVENS**

When the Leningrad siege broke, the Duchman family escaped the city and headed to Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where a chassidic community flourished. When the war ended, the Duchman family escaped Russia with false Polish passports. For the next few years, the Duchmans, together with thousands of other refugees, made their home in the camp of displaced persons in Poking, Germany.

At that point, Yisroel left his family to study in the branch of Tomchei Temimim yeshivah in Brunoy, France under the mashpia R. Nissan Nemenov. In 5710 (1951), Yisroel became engaged to Rochel Rubashkin - daughter of R. Getzel and Rosa - and on the 15th of Elul they were married.

The Rubashkin family of Nevel had deep chassidic roots and were known for their exceptional hachnosas orchim. (For example, before Pesach, Shalom Rubashkin, Getzel's father, would purchase an entire cow and distribute its meat to the yeshivah students.) R. Getzel and his wife Rosa maintained that tradition.

R. Getzel had a deep bond to the Rebbe, and even at an advanced age, he would stand throughout the entire farbrengen. Once, he commissioned a megillah to be written for himself, and when it was completed the sofer commented that it was nicer than the Rebbe's megillah.

When R. Getzel heard that, he immediately brought the megillah as a gift to the Rebbe, who insisted on paying a token eighteen dollars for it. The Rebbe used that megillah every year afterwards.

Though his parents had moved to New York, R. Yisroel joined a group of Lubavitcher shochtim in Ireland who prepared meat to be sold in Europe and Eretz Yisroel. It was there that R. Yisroel's first child, Sholom, was born.

When the Rebbe's brother, R. Yisroel Aryeh Leib, passed away in England on 13 lyar, 5712 (1952), the Rebbe instructed that the body be brought to Eretz Yisroel and buried in Tzfas. The Rebbe had specific instructions regarding the burial, and he wanted R. Bentzion Shem Tov to supervise the procedure. At that time, R. Bentzion was in Dublin, visiting the shochtim, and was staying at R. Yisroel's home. The Rebbe conveyed several of the instructions through R. Yisroel. This was R. Yisroel's first communication with the Rebbe.

#### **ESTABLISHING A HOME**

In 5714 (1954), R. Yisroel and his family immigrated to America, and settled near the Rebbe in Crown Heights.

On his first Shabbos, the Rebbe searched for him at the farbrengen, but did not see him. When the chassidim heard that the Rebbe was looking for R. Yisroel, they thrust R. Yisroel onto a table. The Rebbe smiled and said, "He hasn't had time to rest from the trip and he already wants 'shishi' (a prominent aliva)..."

Thus began a relationship which became a focus in R. Yisroel's life. He would say, "Some people live to make business deals, others devote their energy to the stock market, and others live for their professions. My vitality is from spending time speaking with the Rebbe."

In the beginning, R. Yisroel took a job in a butcher store, but later he started his own poultry business. Soon after, while in yechidus, the Rebbe asked him to tell him some good news, and he told the Rebbe about his opening his own butcher shop. R. Yisroel then asked the Rebbe if he could be his partner, and the Rebbe gave him a \$50 bill. In his unique manner, R. Yisroel told the Rebbe, "If you're giving the money to be a partner, \$50 is nothing, and if you're giving it as a segulah (a spiritual charm), then, one dollar is also enough."

R. Yisroel worked long hours each day. He would rise every day at four a.m. to pick up the chickens and start his delivery route. But he did not see his occupation merely as a means of earning a livelihood; rather, he also used his warmth and humor to motivate his clients to donate to charitable causes. He would work in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where he would converse with the locals. His conduct left a favorable impression on them, and changed their view of the Rebbe and Lubavitch. In order to enable R. Yisroel to dedicate time to the Rebbe and helping others, his wife Rochel worked in a factory. Despite their long work hours and communal activities, their children felt that their parents were devoted to their needs.

#### AT THE REBBE'S SIDE

However, what excited R. Yisroel was to be at the Rebbe's side and assist him.

Every Rosh Hashanah since arriving in the US, the Rebbe would walk with hordes of chassidim from 770 to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, where they would recite tashlich over a pond. On Rosh Hashanah 5717 (1956), there was a torrential downpour, but this did not stop the Rebbe and the chassidim from walking to tashlich. Drenched to the bone, they arrived at the park to find the gate locked. The Rebbe was not deterred and decided to scale the enclosure. R. Yisroel, always at the Rebbe's side, offered the Rebbe his help. The Rebbe declined, but gave R. Yisroel his siddur to hold while he climbed the wall.

On Erev Pesach, in the afternoon, the Rebbe would personally distribute a piece of matzah to each member of the chassidic community. R. Yisroel would take matzah not only for himself, but also for the Yiddish writer Chaim Grade. Though Grade lived several hours from 770, R. Yisroel would always make the journey so that the writer would have the Rebbe's matzah for the Seder night. Chaim Grade was very appreciative of the matzah, and he would send back greetings to the Rebbe and a poem or short story as a present. On the second night of Pesach, R. Yisroel would approach the Rebbe and give him regards from Grade and the gift that he sent. The Rebbe would always press R. Yisroel for details on their interaction.

The year Chaim Grade passed away, R. Yisroel was unsure of whether he should collect matzah or not, and he decided not to. The next day, he regretted not having gone, and on the second night, he stood in line to receive matzah. When he approached the Rebbe, he explained that every year he would receive matzah, and even now that Chaim Grade passed away, he shouldn't lose out. The Rebbe replied that he had indeed wondered on the previous day why hadn't come to receive matza. Every year after that, R. Yisroel would merit receiving matzah from the Rebbe, and after his passing, his son R. Sholom inherited this merit, (though he would receive an entire matza "far der gantzer colel - for Colel Chabad).

After Rebbetzin Chana passed away, the Rebbe asked R. Zalman, R. Yisroel's father, to watch over her apartment so that nothing would be taken by over-zealous souvenir seekers. Then he turned to R. Yisroel and asked him to watch over his father, saying, "Your father will watch over the apartment and you will watch over him."

Once, as the Rebbe entered his office with his secretary, R. Yisroel followed behind. Seeing R. Yisroel, the Rebbe asked him whether he wished to ask something, and R. Yisroel replied that he did but it should be "yisroel umalka bilchodoihi" - Yisroel and the King alone. At that, the Rebbe motioned to secretary to exit.

#### **SIMCHAS TORAH JOY**

Simchas Torah stood out as a special time between R. Yisroel and the Rebbe. On Simchas Torah morning, R. Yisroel would lead Shacharis, and then before hakafos, he would joyously recite kiddush over mashkeh. He would enter with two large trays of cake that his wife had prepared, encouraging everyone to take a bite. Thus began the day of exuberant celebration in 770.

The Rebbe enjoyed R. Yisroel's natural chassidic happiness, and when R. Yisroel was more subdued, the Rebbe would motion to him, seeking an explanation for the change. At the Simchas Torah farbrengen, R. Yisroel would give out l'chaim. On one occasion, the Rebbe asked him if he gave Dr. Resnick, to which R. Yisroel replied in his jolly mood, "Him? He's a vukell"

"How do you know?" the Rebbe challenged him.

I'm his patient," R. Yisroel replied.

"Do you pay him?" asked the Rebbe.

"Of course," he answered.

"Nu." the Rebbe concluded.

On another occasion, R. Yisroel told the Rebbe that they had guests visiting for Simchas Torah who were not that familiar with the chassidic lifestyle. His wife, fearing the impression they would get of R. Yisroel, had advised him to restrain himself. Hearing his explanation, the Rebbe responded. "Du zolst nispael veren fun zei?! Zei zol nispael veren fun dir! – You be impacted by them?! Let them be impacted by you!"

In 5749 (1988), the last Simchas Torah of R. Yisroel's life, he came to the Rebbe's hakafos after many l'chaims. As always, he and the Rebbe shared a lively interchange, and at one point, the Rebbe handed him his handkerchief. (When his son Sholom joked later that he would now have a precious inheritance after 120 years, R. Yisroel replied, "No, the handkerchief will go with me." When he unexpectedly passed away later that year, it was indeed laid over his face in his final resting place.)

#### **CLOSER THAN A FATHER AND SON**

But R. Yisroel's connection with the Rebbe was more than just special moments; it was an ongoing relationship. As R. Yisroel once told the Rebbe, "I am here because my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather were with your father and grandfather in the cold and in the heat, in all the difficult times."

Once, the Rebbe held a farbrengen despite being burdened by a severe cold. During the sichos, he coughed repeatedly. Afterwards, R. Yisroel commented to those around him, "It's a shame that there's no one like my father around. Once, when my father entered yechidus, the Rebbe began to cough. Let me get you tea,' my father said. When a Jew coughs, he should drink tea. It helps.

It was that type of intimate attachment to the Rebbe that motivated R. Yisroel to spontaneously throw a huge Kiddush in 770 on the night following Rosh Chodesh Kislev when the Rebbe first went home after his heart attack in 5738. R. Yisroel was simply overwhelmingly happy and he wanted others to share in his happiness. His connection to Rebbe expressed itself in a love for 770. Whenever he was in town, he would visit 770 every day, and after a long day of work, he would go to 770 before going home.

#### A GENEROUS HEART

Perhaps the area in which R. Yisroel most distinguished himself was his care for Russian Jews. In 5724 (1963), after R. Mendel Futerfas left Russia, he immediately went to 770 to meet with the Rebbe. At that time, he appealed to the chassidic community: "There are chassidim in Russia who lack basic necessities. Some simply do not have what to eat. Others have already received permission to leave Russia, but they don't have the money for tickets. Why are you all sleeping?"

R. Mendel's words stirred action. Together with several of other chassidim who had Russian roots, R. Yisroel founded Lishkas Ezras Achim, an organization dedicated to helping Russian Jews. R.

Yisroel put his soul into these efforts, raising many thousands of dollars for these activities. "I don't understand spiritual matters," he would say humbly. "I understand material things. I want another Jew to have food to eat, a bed to sleep in, and for him to receive this with a warm, inviting smile." R. Yisroel remembered what he had gone through in Russia and the difficulties he experienced after leaving, thus he resolved to do whatever he could to ease others in similar situations.

When the gates of the Soviet Union opened and Jews were allowed to emigrate to Eretz Yisroel, it was only natural for Ezras Achim and R. Visroel to help them settle. For this purpose, he made fundraising trips, giving tirelessly of himself so that others could have what they needed.

In the course of these efforts, he developed a relationship with Dr. Yirmiyahu Branover. Before Dr. Branover left Russia, R. Yisroel had been involved in helping arrange his exit from the country. When Dr. Branover founded Shamir, an organization to help Russian immigrants in Eretz Yisroel, R. Yisroel partnered with him, and together they raised large sums and organized many projects for these immigrants.

When R. Yisroel reached out to others, his assistance was not only material. R. Yisroel would always try to get whoever was involved to connect to the Rebbe. With this in mind, he brought one of the guests of honor at a fundraising dinner for Shamir to the Rebbe. Before dollars, R. Yisroel put on tefillin with him for the first time. When they passed by the Rebbe, R. Yisroel told the Rebbe proudly that the philanthropist had put on tefillin for the first time. The Rebbe gently commented to R. Yisroel that this wasn't something to be proud of... Then, with a warm smile, the Rebbe asked the philanthropist, "If I were to give you a pair of tefillin, would you put them on every day?" The philanthropist said he would. R. Yisroel told the Rebbe that he would like to be his partner, but the Rebbe said he could be his partner in other projects. The Rebbe asked R. Yisroel to purchase the tefillin immediately and bring back a paid receipt.

When R. Yisroel returned with the receipt, the Rebbe began to take out bills to pay him. After accepting a few of the bills, R. Yisroel said that it was enough. The Rebbe protested, stating that he hadn't paid the full amount.

"It's okay." R. Yisroel answered. "I want to be the Rebbe's partner. Take the money for the tefillin," the Rebbe insisted. "We will be partners in other things."

#### CARING FOR THE NEAR AND FAR

For R. Yisroel, caring for others was not just concern for those in faraway lands. Countless young brides and grooms can tell of how the collections R. Yisroel organized for them gave them the means to establish their homes. And it was not only that he gave, it was the way he gave. The recipients could sense that he was genuinely happy when helping them.

Giving was an ongoing, natural part of R. Yisroel's life, in the style of the classic chassidic saying, "The piece of bread that I have is yours just as much as it is mine." All year long, his Shabbos table was flanked by guests from all over the world.

Needless to say, his partner in all of these efforts was his wife Rochel, who worked tirelessly to provide for all the guests. And for these activities, R. Yisroel showed her the utmost appreciation and respect.

The following incident highlights the Duchman's self sacrifice for others' sake. It was 5723 (1962) and R. Yisroel was earning very little.

To supplement his income, R. Yisroel served as a chazan in a nearby shul for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. He earned around \$300, and he set aside the money to buy their own washing machine. At that time, an uncle visited from Eretz Yisroel, to receive a bracha from the Rebbe to marry off his 3 older daughters. The uncle was clean shaven, and in yechidus, the Rebbe told him that if he would grow a beard, he would find good shidduchim for his daughters. The uncle was at loss, since he knew his wife wouldn't agree to him growing his beard. He was 10 years older than her, and if he let his white beard grow, he would look even older. The Duchman's knew that their aunt very much wanted a leather coat, which she and her husband couldn't afford it, and they decided to give all the money they had saved for the much needed washing machine, so that their uncle could buy for his wife this luxurious coat.

the ploy worked, the man began to grow his beard, and within just a few months, all three girls found good shidduchim.

#### WHAT IS MOST DEAR

Perhaps what a father wants more than anything else is that his children perpetuate those things that are dear to him. For this reason, R. Yisroel would always seek to teach his children the importance of hiskashrus, bonding with the Rebbe, and train them in this endeavor. Indeed, some of his most important interactions with the Rebbe centered around his children.

Once when his second son, Yossi, was a young child, he swallowed an open safety pin. The pin had descended beyond the reach of any instruments and had lodged in a point in his esophagus where it presented a very real danger. Not knowing any way to remove it, the doctors planned surgery. They warned that the surgery could have negative consequences, but leaving the pin there could be life-threatening. When they asked for R. Yisroel's consent, he answered that before he agreed to anything, he would have to consult the Rebbe.

The Rebbe objected to the surgery and said that they should see the doctor who was scheduled to perform the surgery and have him speak to the Rebbe. That surgeon refused to meet with them or speak to the Rebbe on the phone. Instead, the Rebbe spoke by phone with the head of the emergency room, and gave him precise instructions how the pin could be removed by lowering a strong magnet down the boy's throat. Needless to say, by following the Rebbe's instructions, the doctor was able to extricate the pin without difficulty.

After the procedure was finished, the doctor who had originally been scheduled to perform the surgery insisted that he speak to the Duchmans. He told them, "My father was a doctor. If my own father had told me that he had removed the pin without surgery, I wouldn't have believed him. It was possible only because of your holy Rebbe."

At a later date, when Yossi had already matured, he asked his father to request a blessing from the Rebbe for him. The Rebbe gave a generous blessing and told R. Yisroel, "You can tell Yossi, I think about him more than he thinks about me."

One Erev Pesach, before R. Yisroel went to approach the Rebbe to receive matzah for Chaim Grade, his youngest son, Boruch, by then a young man, asked his father to get matzah for him as well. When R. Yisroel made his request, the Rebbe asked R. Yisroel if Boruch was still in Miami. After R. Yisroel answered positively, the Rebbe happily gave him a piece of matzah for

Boruch and told R. Yisroel to tell his son that it was shmurah matzah, shmurah with all its meanings. It will protect him."

In 5736 (1976), when getting matzah from the Rebbe, R. Yisroel asked for matzah for his Sholom who had become one of the Rebbe's special shluchim to Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe told him lovingly, "He's my shliach. I sent him matza myself, and I don't need an intermediary." The following year, in 5737 (1977), R. Yisroel had learned his lesson and he didn't ask for his son. But the Rebbe asked him, "Why didn't you ask for your son? I hear that he's doing great things." Seeing R. Yisroel's bewildered look, the Rebbe joked, "What happened? Sholom ran away?" and the Rebbe continued, "Indeed, he should want to be here, but in actuality, he should be there." And the Rebbe gave him a matzah for his son.

#### INTERCEDING FOR OTHERS

The friends of R. Yisroel's children recognized his uniqueness and looked up to him. Though a generation apart, he did not hold himself aloof; rather, he shared in their lives.

One of the shluchim in Eretz Yisroel whom the Duchmans knew well had been childless for several years after their marriage. Sensitive to his friend's anguish, R. Yisroel took the initiative to approach the Rebbe during a Lag BaOmer farbrengen — when the Mitteler Rebbe would work miracles, most of which involved blessing for childless couples - and asked for a bracha for that couple. The Rebbe gave his blessing and shortly thereafter the couple was blessed with children.

R. Yisroel also imparted insightful thoughts in his unique style. Once, after the Rebbe had held a weekday farbrengen, a number of the bochurim gathered together with R. Yoel Kahan, the Rebbe's chozer, to review the farbrengen. R. Yoel's office was, at that time, in R. Yisroel's basement. After the review of the Rebbe's farbrengen, R. Yoel and the bochurim began an informal farbrengen. R. Yisroel, hearing what was happening, brought down, not only mashkeh, but also frankfurters and cold cuts from his butcher store.

As the bochurim were hungry, they heartily ate the food provided. R. Yoel continued the farbrengen, explaining how the Rebbe was giving them a foretaste of Toraso shel Moshiach, the Torah's inner secrets that Moshiach will reveal. R. Yisroel glanced at the bochurim and commented, "M'est frankfurters un m'redt zich veggen Moshiach... "You're eating frankfurters and you're speaking about Moshiach..."

There was a double meaning to his words. On one hand, they were a form of critique. He had been brought up in a generation where spirituality was synonymous with sacrifice; people were honest enough to realize that you cannot mix material desires and spiritual yearnings together. On the other hand, he was also aware that a new light was dawning. The time was coming when the material not man's seeking indulgence, but the goodness and plenty that G-d had brought into the world - would not be a contradiction to spirituality anymore, and that soon, with Mashiach's coming, their fusion would be complete.

#### "THE LIVING WILL TAKE IT TO HEART"

On Thursday, 6 Iyar 5749 (1989) R. Yisroel passed away at the age of 59. He was buried in New York near the Ohel. (Incidentally, a few months earlier, at the farbrengen of 22 Shvat of that year, the Rebbetzin's first yahrtzeit, the Rebbe strangely turned to R. Yisroel and said, "Say Lchaim for your father."

After his passing, his son Baruch wrote a letter to the Rebbe, explaining how he had always felt that his bond with the Rebbe was through his father. Now, that his father had passed away, he felt broken and unsure of what to do. The Rebbe answered him, "Your father is certainly in Gan Eden. There he is highlighting your positive virtues. If you give him a k'li, a medium, with which to work, he will be very successful."

The Rebbe once said that arichus yomim, long life, is not a chronological phenomenon, but is judged by the extent of the experience with which a person was able to fill his life. Though he lived only 59 years, R. Yisroel enjoyed a life filled with many positive experiences.

He raised a family who would continue to carry out the Rebbe's desires on both the personal and communal plane with the same dedication. R. Yisroel's wife Rochel, the matriarch of the family, still maintains an open house, with guests visiting at all times. Through her guidance and the inspiration of the memory of R. Yisroel, their children and grandchildren are actively involved in different dimensions of the Rebbe's work and take leadership roles within the chassidic community.

Reprinted from: "AS I HEARD THEM" Stories, Sayings and Memories from Lubavitch of yesteryear.

#### B"H

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