THE Jewish OBSERVER

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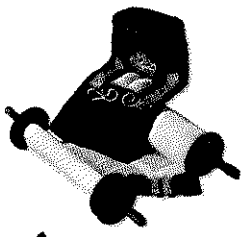

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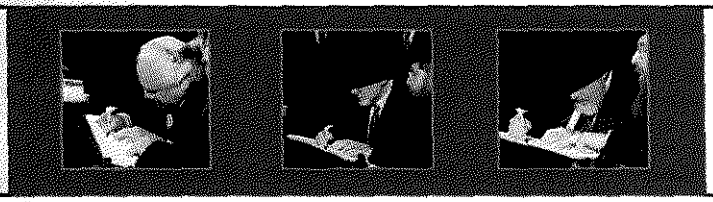

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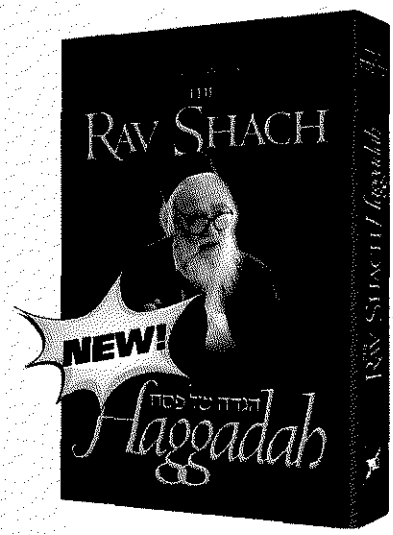


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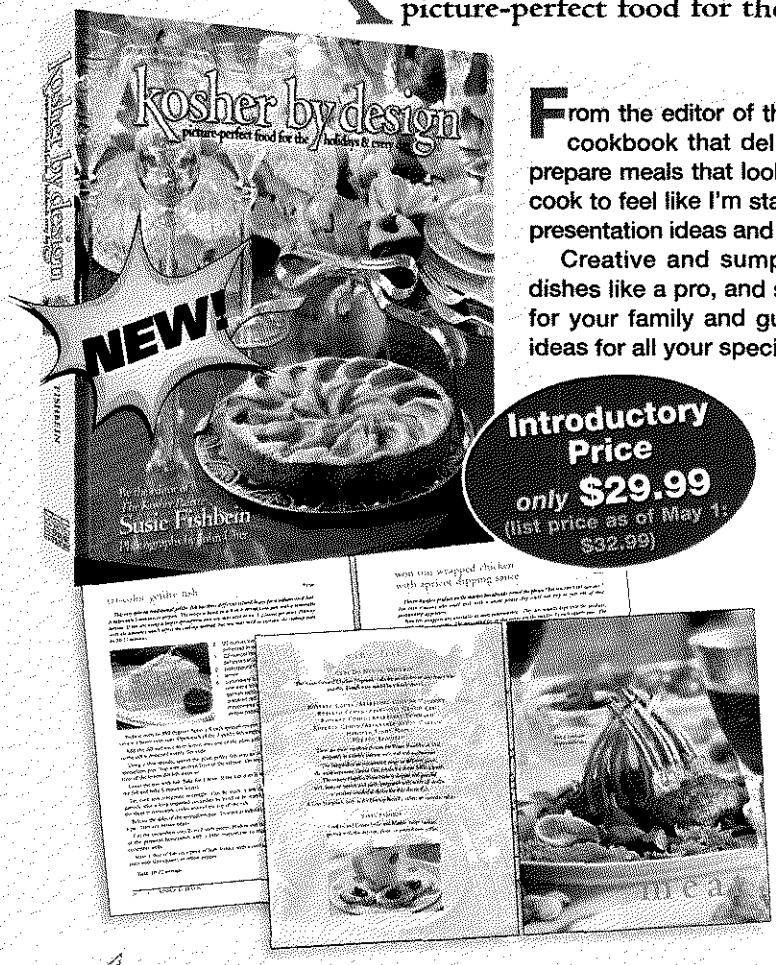


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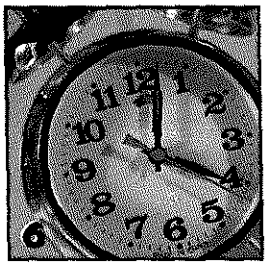

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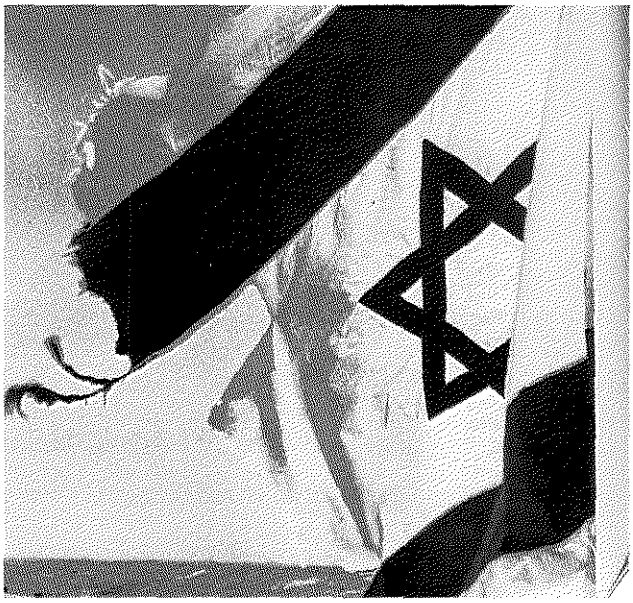
*Rabbi Avi Shafran*

# A New Yet Familiar Face



## *Shinui's Roots and Why They Matter*

The stunning ascendance of Shinui, the anti-religious Israeli political party, now the third largest in the Knesset and the Likud party's partner in Israel's new governing coalition, should do more than alarm us. It should make us think.

Some observers not well disposed to Chareidim have suggested that the victim be blamed: Were Chareidim more integrated into Israeli society, they say, more interactive with their non-observant fellow citizens, were they only to dress and live their lives "less differently," or to show a willingness to exchange full-time Torah study for army service and lucrative professions, they would surely earn others' good will instead of the opposite.

And of course, they add, the Chareidi refusal to accept the notion of multiple-"Judaisms," and Chareidi determination to preserve what spirit of *Shabbos* and *kedushas Yisroel* is currently fostered by the State, don't help either.

There is surely room for greater Chareidi outreach to non-religious Israelis (though reports indicate that there is more today than ever), and for more effective *hasbara* explaining Chareidi beliefs and positions (though here, too, there seems to be a good deal already). But laying the blame for animus against Chareidim at their own doorstep is little different from holding all Jews responsible for their "reputation" among much of humanity as overly clannish or haughty or liberal or conservative – not to mention poisoners of wells, killers of children, drinkers of blood and plotters of world domination.

No, hatred, simply put, happens; it isn't always earned. Recognizing its roots, though, can often be instructive, as it may be here.

### OF ISMS AND SCHISMS

Surprising at the time to many of us who came of age in the vicinity of 1967, when Israel stunningly defeated the array of Arab armies determined to destroy her, were the denunciations by Torah leaders of earlier times of "Zionism," the philosophy that culminated in a Jewish State[1]. Granted, nationalistic aspirations were a far cry from a collective Jewish return to Torah and *avodas Hashem*. "*Artza alinu*," we well understood, was a far cry from

**Rabbi Shafran** serves as Agudath Israel of America's Director of Public Affairs and as the American director of Am Echad, the Agudath Israel-inspired educational outreach effort and media resource.

[1] Some members of our parents' generation may have also been taken aback by similar ideological reservations in view of the euphoria surrounding Israel's survival in the face of the Arab invasion in 1948.

"*na'aseh v'nishma.*" But wasn't a Jewish movement aimed at bringing Jews together in their ancestral land, the land promised us by *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, at least a step in the right direction?

There were those, of course, who in fact saw it precisely that way, and still do. They call themselves Religious Zionists and choose to view the Zionist endeavor as a fulfillment not of Theodore Herzl's dream, but of the prophecies of the *Nevi'im*.

That has not, though, been the approach of the majority of *Gedolim*, either before or after 1948. Though they were "Zionists" par excellence – praying constantly and fervently "*V'sechezena eineinu b'shuv'cha l'Tziyon b'rachamim*" – they saw the contemporary movement that had adopted the name "*Tziyon*" as something less than salubrious for the Jewish people.

The perspective was well articulated by the Kamenetzer Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Reuven Grozovsky (later *Rosh HaYeshiva* at Torah Vodaath), Chairman of the American *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* in the post-World War II years. He wrote (loosely translated):

> [In secular Zionism, the *Gedolim*] saw a deeper radicalism than that of Reform, in the [Zionist] declaration that the Jews are not a nation of Torah but rather a people of nationalistic aspiration. They misrepresented all the links in the chain of our mesora throughout history as nationalistic symbols, and they culled from the Torah and its *mitzvos* and holidays only what they could distort and present as nationalistic celebrations and customs; they uprooted them entirely from their essential roots in the Creator of the universe."
>
> (BA'AYOS HAZ'MAN)

What Rabbi Grozovsky sought to explain was that the Zionist philosophy's essence is the desire to define the Jewish mission as the establishment of a Jewish state like other states. He and the other *Gedolim* at the helm of Agudath Israel, as well as many other *Gedolei Yisroel*, firmly rejected that redefinition. That rejection is, in fact, a direct corollary of viewing Torah as the soul of the Jewish nation.

## ALTERED STATE

Even enthralled as so many of us were by the events of 1967, by the *nissim g'luyim* (open miracles) with which *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* favored *Klal Yisroel* in *Eretz Yisroel* through the medium of the modern state Jews had created, those of us who studied Rabbi Grozovsky's words seriously and pondered them well knew that, despite all the wonders we had witnessed, including the capture of the *Kosel Ma'aravi*, he had accurately described the troubling essence of the movement that had midwifed Israel.

But Rabbi Grozovsky also made clear that he did not consider the movement *qua* movement and the *de facto* state to be equivalent. Even in his time, he saw the relationship between secular Zionism and State of Israel as a complex one. Though the former was clearly the engine of the latter, he averred, the Torah attitude toward a here-and-now "Jewish State," even one not based on Torah, is less simple and straightforward than its position toward a clearly anti-Torah philosophy:

> **The State, however, is a reality, as is the Jewish community within it, and our goal now is not to argue about whether to say *Hallel* [on the anniversary of its founding] or *Selichos*, or whether it represents the first glimmering of the ultimate redemption or only the birthpangs of *Moshiach* and a new *golus*. Firstly, it makes little practical difference; what is the point of arguing about the hidden divine plan? And secondly, why bring about a war of words when the opposition [to our position] is so great, because the [Jewish] heart so desires to see in this [establishment of Israel] the beginning of Jewish salvation, and that is the stance of so many?**
>
> (IBID)

Rabbi Grozovsky goes on to explain that while some religious Jews consider it just as wrong to acknowledge or interact with the Jewish State as it is to acknowledge the legitimacy of secular Zionist philosophy, others – and "the majority of *talmidei chachamim* agree with this approach" – assess the situation differently. They "make a distinction between a state and a movement" based on the fact that by living under a government, one is, willy nilly, part of its citizenry, and to pretend otherwise and not participate in its affairs would only squander the rights afforded its citizens to advance their interests. Quite the contrary, to forfeit those rights would only give others poorly disposed to religious concerns increased power to do as they wish.

There are indeed Chareidim who shun all recognition of the Jewish State and refuse on principle to even vote in its elections (though they are not to be confused with the astonishingly misguided souls who give aid and comfort to the murderers of Jews – and who are condemned by even the aforementioned camp). But the majority of *Gedolim*, including those at the helm of Agudath Israel, have always maintained that it is incumbent on Torah-faithful Jews to deal with the state in good faith as citizens, to vote in elections and form political parties to advance the religious community's interests.

What is more, the State has to some degree accommodated religious concerns, beginning with David Ben-Gurion's pre-State agreement with Agudath Israel pledging the nascent government's respect for Shabbos, *kashrus*, the Torah's requirements regarding personal status issues, and religious education, to other elements – including deferment of full-time Torah-students from military service – collectively known as the "Status Quo Agreement."

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### *"V'TOMMY TOMMY YIKRA"*

Over the years, however, many features of the Status Quo have been whittled down, especially in the areas of *Shabbos, Kashrus* and personal identity. And religious elements that were once part of the fabric of Israeli life have been downgraded, if not jettisoned entirely, by the State's legislature and judiciary. Alongside the deterioration, and not unrelated, many Israelis' commitment to the Land (sourced as it is in the Jew's spiritual bond with *Kedushas Ha'aretz)* has waned as well. And, of late, the antithetical-to-Torah philosophy of "Let us be like all the nations" has loudly asserted itself. The success of Shinui should be a wake-up call to all who are *chareidim lid'var Hashem.*

Tommy Lapid, Shinui's founder and leader, in other words, is neither new nor an anomaly. While his party may not even have existed a mere few years ago, it should be very familiar.

It is simply the true face of secular Zionism – without the pragmatic spirit of accommodation that characterized most of his predecessors.

Which is why Mr. Lapid's open and declared goal is to put an end to the role that Torah concerns, standards and leaders play in the working of the State... that there be a state like any other on the holy soil of *Eretz Yisroel.* His philosophy is that Jewishness in the contemporary world is a nationalistic concept, not a religious one. And so he is threatened by Torah. He sees it, rightfully, as an obstacle before his plan, one he must uproot to persevere.

### AXIS OF *K'FIRA*

To further his goals and gain strength, Mr. Lapid is not beyond cynically making use of "religious" alliances, like one with the American-grown contemporary Reform and Conservative movements, in their concerted effort to have Israel recognize the alternate "Judaisms" they offer. That campaign has itself deleteriously dovetailed with yet another manifestation of secular Zionism: an activist Israeli High Court under the leadership of Aharon Barak, he of the "enlightened and progressive values." Lawsuits brought by the Reform movement to chip away at the religious status quo were welcomed and happily co-opted by Justice Barak and company, and have been cheered on by Shinui's supporters. Only one Judaism – the authentic one – is their enemy.

Those court decisions probably should have been alarm clock enough for the Chareidi community to awaken to the realization that the old anti-Torah secular Zionism was taking on added vigor. Indeed, observers like Yonoson Rosenblum, while they may not have put things in precisely those terms, tried mightily to turn up the alarm's volume. For that matter, honest secular intellectuals, too, like Professor Ruth Gavison, tried to arouse the Israeli public, and especially its observant citizens, about the unprecedented power the Israeli judiciary had arrogated to itself. Anyone who may have pushed the snooze button, though, should by now have been jolted awake by the mocking voice of Tommy Lapid.

### SAVING ISRAEL

Amid the maelstrom of recent years' vicious Arab attacks against Jews in Israel, all Jewish hearts have been filled with anguish, and with fear for the safety of our brothers and sisters in *Eretz Yisroel.* And all of us have been filled no less with determination to do all we can to assist our fellow Jews, and to see that Israel is supported – financially, politically, and in the media. That is, of course, precisely what we should be doing.

Israel and her citizens are facing the greatest threat they have faced in decades. They are confronted by a lying, conniving and cruel enemy, one whose leaders have proven cynical and untrustworthy. We must, as a result, work to fight the rampant misrepresentation of Israel in the press, and to advance her interests through interaction with our elected representatives.

But at the same time, we who truly

affirm Torah's primacy know that the ultimate merit for her redemption must be spiritual. Thus, ironically, to save Israel, we must oppose Zionism (in the word's political "*ni'ihyeh k'chol ha'goyim*" sense). We who consider ourselves *ma'aminim b'nei ma'aminim* must counter Shinui's efforts at every turn. And we would do well to get our own *hashkafa* houses in order as well, remembering that, in the end, we are still Agudath Israel, not a movement or party that sees *Klal Yisroel* through a nationalistic lens.

The philosophies of such groups begin from a demonstrably different point than ours. By their lights, Israel is the ultimate solution to anti-Semitism, it alone can serve as the ultimate refuge of Jews, and represents the fulfillment of 2000 years of Jewish *tefillos*.

To us, things are just not that simple.

To them, our long and bitter *galus* was seen to have ended in 1948. To us, it did not. And it should be clear as day from the events of recent years that, unfortunately, we were right.

This defining distinction should be evident by the questions we ask of our *Gedolim* – from whom we seek guidance on myriad personal and communal issues. Others tend to assume certain stances regarding the Middle East, even though important and delicate *she'eilos* of *bein Yisroel le'amim* – not to mention *piku'ach nefesh* – are at issue, without apparent concern for any such guidance. We are different. And if Israel's (or the Likud party's) positions are automatically our own, there is something dreadfully wrong.

### *LA DIFFERENCE*

Anti-Semitism, it has been observed, often increases when Jews drift from the recognition of their fundamental "apartness" from other nations. When assimilation is idealized, in other words, the world sometimes reminds us against our will that we are indeed different. Rampant Hellenization of Jews in the ancient Greek world, for one example, was followed by *Apion*, the earliest work that historians call "anti-Semitic." Post-Enlightenment French and German Jewry, for another, sought to swallow Western European culture whole, to become one with a citizenry that subsequently set new benchmarks in hatred of Jews.

It may be taking that concept too far to apply it to intra-Jewish hatred, but could there be an analogous calculus in the realm of the hatred for Chareidim we have come to witness of late? Could it be, in other words, that we have become fuzzy about some important ideological distinctions of our own, and – in a metaphysical sort of cause-and-effect dynamic – brought about their hostility towards us?

It might be an uncomfortable thought, in these times of threats and terror aimed at "Zionists" (read "Jews," of course, ironically), but it would perhaps be a great *zechus* for Israel and *Klal Yisroel* were we who affirm the supremacy of Torah to reinforce our commitment to our guiding principle: All problems that confront us – personal, communal, and national – can, and must, be resolved in accordance with Torah-based guidance.

And we can expect the elected representatives who serve the Torah community in a Knesset ruled by overtly hostile ideologues to also guide themselves by the wisdom of our Torah leaders. While they may feel severely limited by the secular thrust of the current ruling coalition, they can bear in mind Rabbi Reuvain Grozovsky's directive in *Ba'ayos Hazman*:

> **At the very least, we must use our power of representation in the Knesset to speak up for righteousness and challenge the destructive forces of *resha* (inquity).**
>
> (IBID)

May the *zechus* of articulating our principles and living by them, in this season of *ge'ula*, stand us in good stead, and allow us to witness with our own eyes the true glimmering – and fruition – of the ultimate redemption. ■


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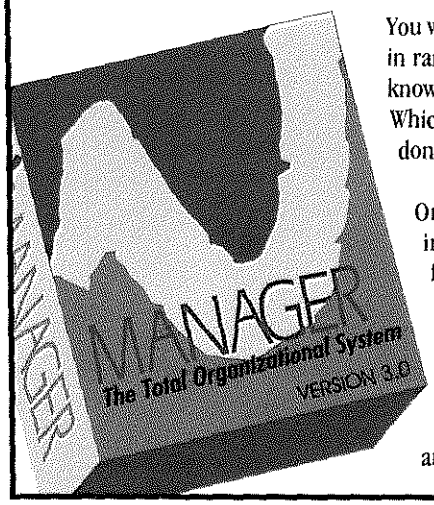


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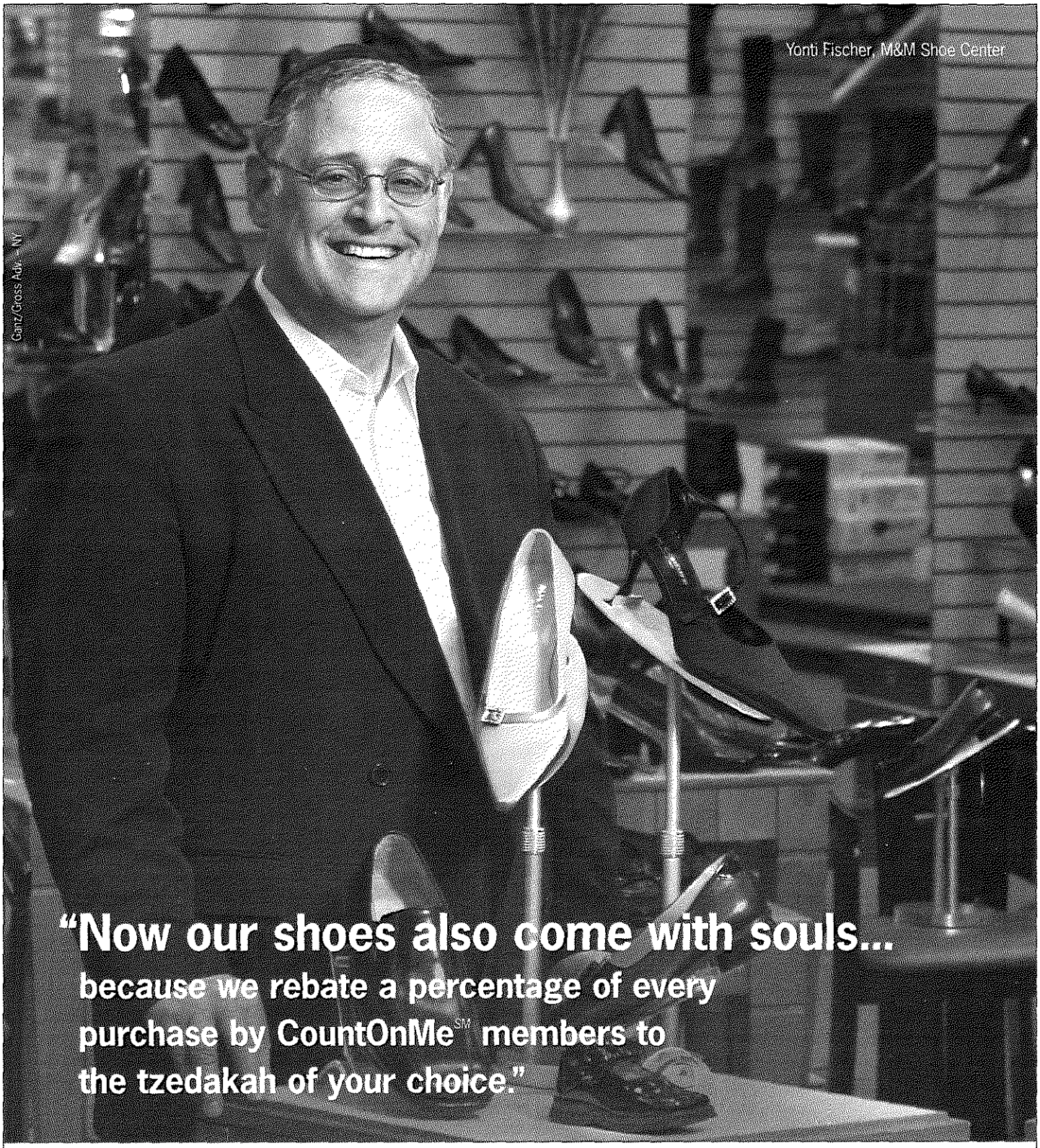


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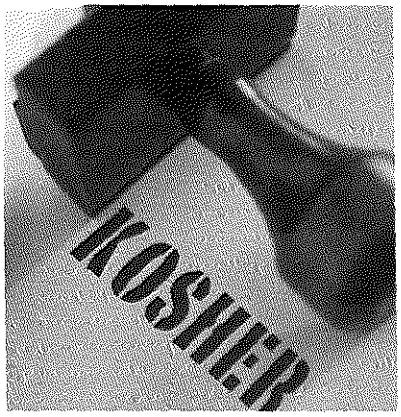
# Necessary Protection or a Gratuitous Involvement?

### THE SUPREME COURT'S REFUSAL TO HEAR

For nearly 113 years, consumers of kosher foods in New York State were protected by laws against abuses by unscrupulous purveyors. The laws go back to the days when so-called kosher butchers were selling horsemeat as kosher provisions. The proliferation of kosher butcher stores (some 2300 in the 1930's, mostly run by proprietors who presented themselves as kosher butchers) only exacerbated the problem of widespread abuse. Many of these stores were often facetiously referred to by *Kashrus* observing Jews as "*Bosor Bosor*" (meat[1]-meat) rather than "*Bosor Kosher*" (kosher meat – in some instances the signs were actually misspelled), further supporting the need for state intervention to protect unsuspecting consumers.

In February 2003, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal on the May 21st decision of the United States Second Circuit Court of Appeals rendering New York State's century-plus-old kosher food laws unconstitutional. The decision in effect upheld the lower court decision, which objected to the state's definition of *kashrus* as being "in accordance with Orthodox Hebrew requirements." The immediate impact was to invalidate most of New York's *kashrus* laws (save for several Kosher for Passover provisions), eliminated the need for the continued existence of the Kosher Law Enforcement Bureau of the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, and effectively put the State's Advisory Board on Kashrus out of commission.

The implications of the actions of the nation's highest court go well beyond the borders of New York. Nineteen other states have similar laws on the books, all of which can presumably be challenged and vacated. Two jurisdictions, Baltimore County and the State of New Jersey, already were forced to change the laws after successful challenges. Both subsequently adopted the alternate,




but less-than-ideal, "disclosure model," which merely requires an establishment to post the identity of the certification, but does not substantially protect consumers against misrepresentation or fraud. In fact, disclosure offers the least protection for those who need it most. Scrupulous observers of *kashrus* are usually well versed in the differences between various *hechsheirim*, and recognize the names of the *rabbanim* who certify *kashrus*. Even they need protection, but not nearly as much as the innocent, oft-uneducated consumer who wishes to buy kosher.

### A MATTER OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

There is good reason why the New York *kashrus* laws were not challenged in over a century. They were never viewed in a religious context, as the court ultimately opined, but as a means of consumer protection, much like Truth in Labeling and Truth in Advertising serve to safeguard unsuspecting consumers from buying products with false claims. The laws never forced anyone to eat foods that they did not want. That is why when the New Jersey laws were challenged, Conservative groups joined the Orthodox in supporting the continuation of the kosher food laws. What harm would be done if kosher was defined according to the strictest definition? Who would suffer (, as judicial review often seeks to determine)?

Following the Supreme Court action, at least one Conservative leader saw a PR opportunity to drag *kashrus* into the religious battle arena. While most Orthodox Jewish organizations praised efforts by Governor George Pataki and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver to move swiftly to introduce new legislation protecting kosher consumers, the Conservative spokesman instead cried foul, according to *The New York Times*: "I think that if the law will only be protecting the Orthodox community, the law will essentially exclude the larger segment of Jews," said Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, the association of Conservative congregations in North America. Exclude? Will Conservative Jews be denied the right to eat whatever or wherever they like and prefer? Is any discrimination intended or *de facto* exist?

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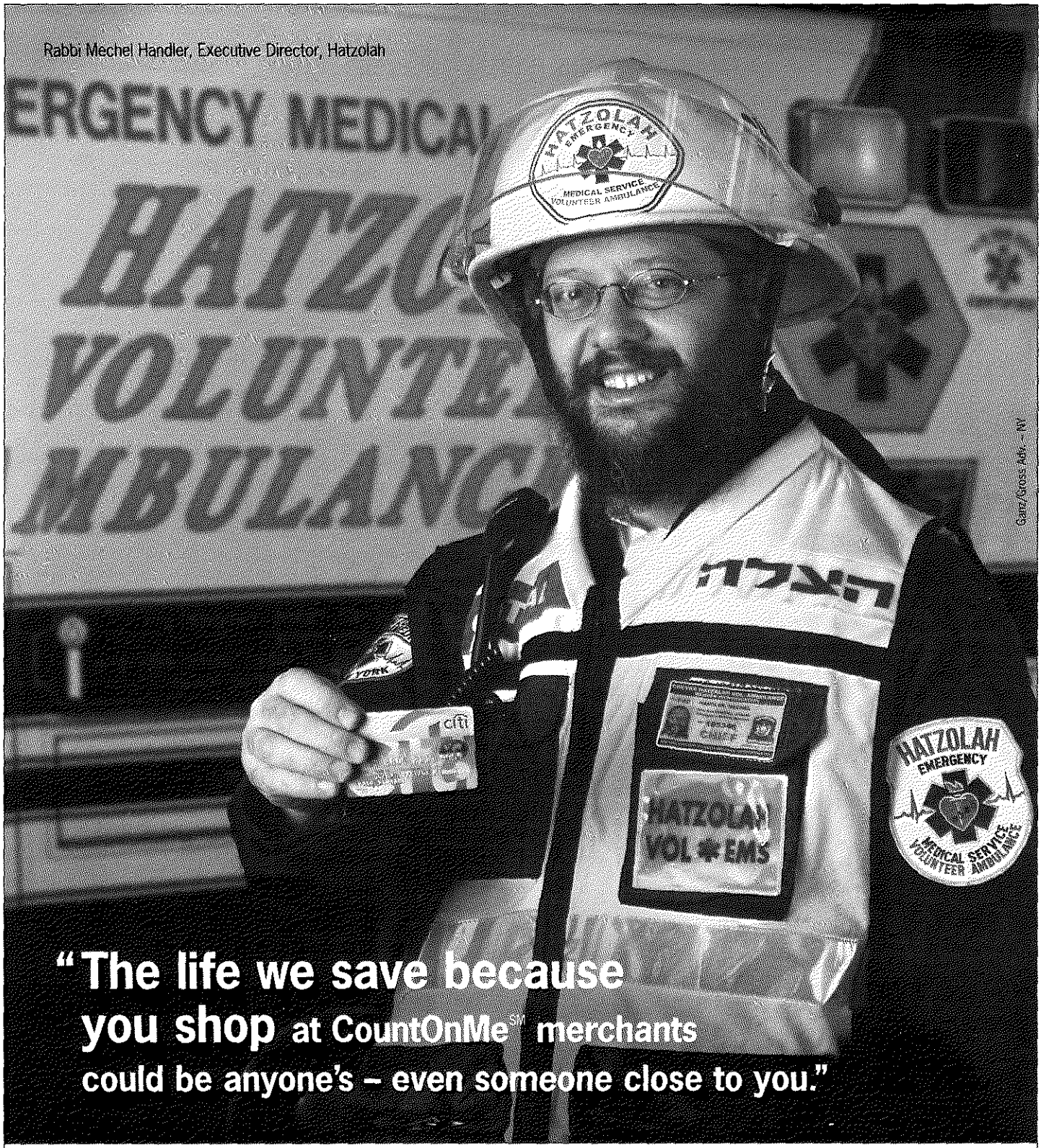
[1] When written in Hebrew, the appearance of these two words is almost identical: בשר כשר

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Rabbi Epstein was motivated in part by the fact that the challenge to the New York State laws came from butchers in Commack, N.Y., whose certification was provided by the local Conservative rabbi and whose "kosher" meat were repeatedly not *kashered* properly, thus violating state law, according to State *kashrus* inspectors. Brian and Jeffrey Yarmeisch of Commack Service Kosher Meats were tagged with fines exceeding $11,000 for failing to salt and soak the meats they sold. To deal with the fines, they triggered an ill-fated, decade-long, legal battle to destroy the *kashrus* laws as well as their own business. They were apparently willing to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Nathan Lewin, the noted Washington constitutional authority, who represented Orthodox groups in the appeal before the Supreme Court, said Orthodox standards have been used by the State because all other Jews accept them, whereas Orthodox Jews do not necessarily honor the *kashrus* standards of Judaism's other branches. Most Conservative Jews do not eat kosher on a regular basis, and when they do, they accept the broad standards in the marketplace. Many of the Conservative Jews that my marketing firm interviewed found it to be a non-issue, and in general viewed the higher kosher standard as necessary and "an accommodation" to those who seek the highest standards in *kashrus*. After all, many of them frequently accommodate friends, relatives and business associates who adhere to kosher requirements, and who certainly would not be satisfied with the Commack butchers' model of *kashrus*.

The kosher laws were also not an issue for Reform Jews, since most of them are totally indifferent to *kashrus* in any case, with the notable exception of Pesach, when most American Jews respect some restrictions. According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Study (Council of Jewish Federations), 92% of American Jews participate in at least one *seder* (as opposed to less than 70% who fast on Yom Kippur). They tend to walk up and down special Pesach aisles in supermarkets all over the country and purchase traditional Pesach items, many with Jewish sounding names. Even they, when shopping for Pesach, expect the food to be kosher, period.

### RELIGIOUS COERCION OR MEETING AN EXPANDING NEED?

Other critics of the kosher food laws raised the Israeli-style argument of religious coercion, even intimating that the support by elected officials like New York's Governor Pataki was politically motivated. They wondered why Jews after 3000 years suddenly need government protection of *kashrus*. The Jews, of all people, survived over the centuries because of their ability to adhere to the Torah. What has changed? they wondered.

For the pious *akerres habayis* (homemaker) living in pre-War Europe, there certainly was no necessity for outside intervention to assure that the products consumed in her home were kosher. Most, if not all, of the food that the family ate was prepared at home. Even chickens were purchased


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- Only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*.
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- No Viennese table and no bar.

**THE MUSIC**

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*Rosh Hayeshiva, Yeshiva Gedola of Philadelphia*

**Rabbi Yaakov Perlow**
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*Rosh Hayeshiva, Yeshiva Shaarei Yosher*

**Rabbi Eli Simcha Schustal**
*Rosh Hayeshiva, Bais Binyomin, Stamford*

**Rabbi Yisroel Rokowsky**

**Rabbi Yisroel Simcha Schorr**
*Roshei HaYeshiva, Yeshiva Ohr Somayach*

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*Rosh Hayeshiva, Beth Medrash Govoha, Lakewood*

**Rabbi Yisroel Tzvi Neuman**
*Rosh Hayeshiva, Beth Medrash Govoha, Lakewood*

**Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Schustal**
*Rosh Hayeshiva, Beth Medrash Govoha, Lakewood*

**Rabbi Yeruchem Olshin**
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**Rabbi Mattisyahu Salamon**
*Mashgiach, Beth Medrash Govoha, Lakewood*

**Rabbi Elya Ber Wachtfogel**
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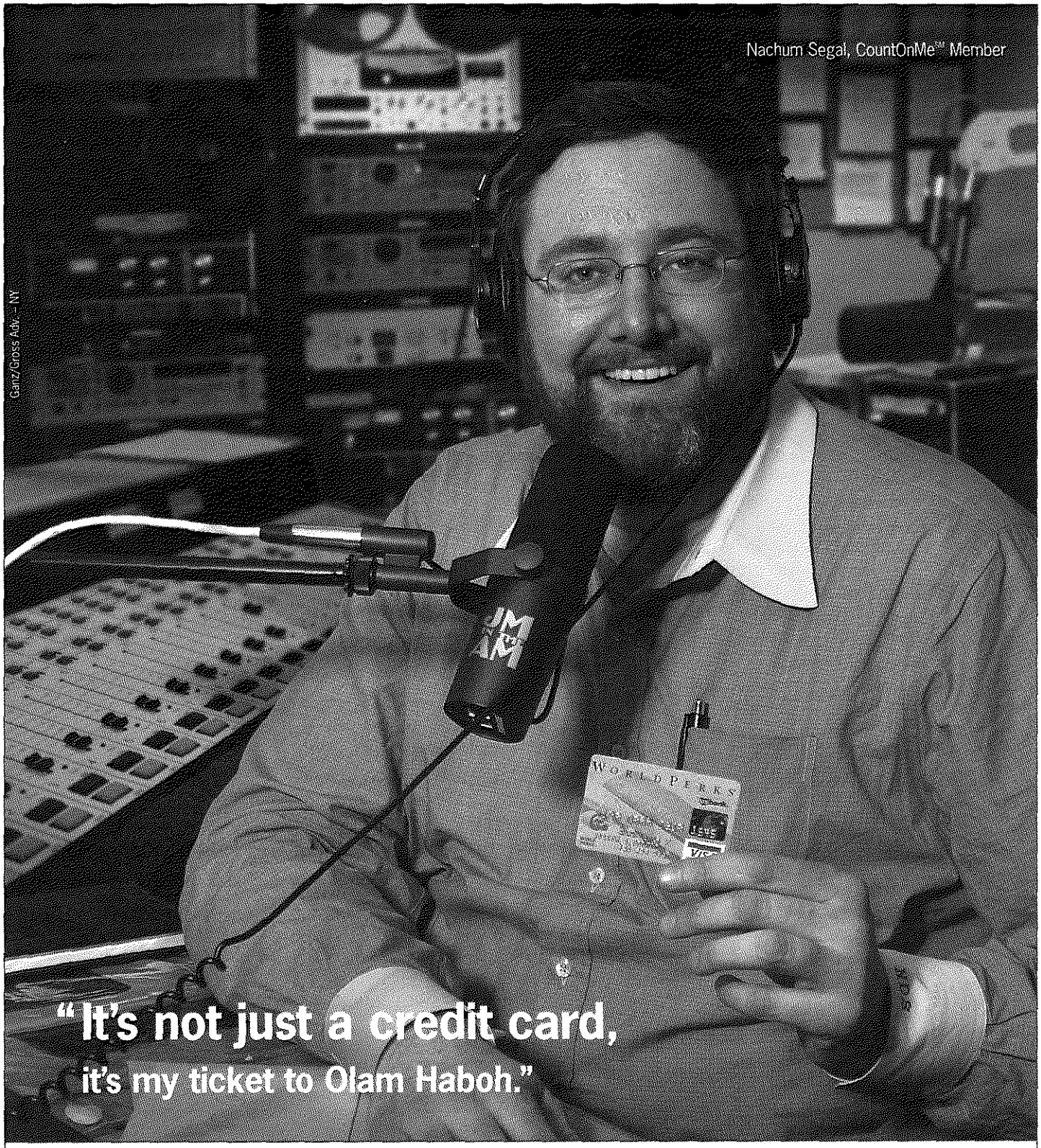


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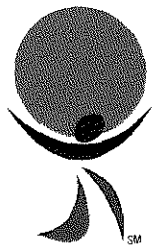

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live in the marketplace, to be slaughtered by the village *shochet*. All of the other preparations, including the soaking and salting of meats, was done by the women of the house.

But then the industrialized mass production entered the field of food preparation. Most kosher foods were no longer prepared at home, but instead were bought, first in local delis and small mom-and-pop grocery stores, and then in larger supermarkets. Technology further enhanced the ability of manufacturers to produce foods that could be stored for long periods of time in freezers or instantly heated in a microwave oven. Expanded automobile and airline travel meant that Jews were frequently away from home when they ate, and had to rely on certified kosher products wherever they were.

Today, the scope of the kosher food industry is staggering. Of approximately $500 billion that the US sells in ingredients and food products, more than 2/3 is certified kosher. Industrial plants all over the world, including more than 500 in China, produce kosher ingredients so that they can sell their products to the large American food manufacturers, most of whom manufacture $150 billion of certified kosher foods (out of $500 billion). Kosher consumers can choose from more than 75,000 packaged goods that have some kind of *hashgacha* (supervision). More than 18,000 of the nation's 30,000 supermarkets have some form of kosher food section, a growing number in major Jewish markets even have a *mashgiach temidi* (full-time supervisor) and sell raw meats and bakery items, all with an eye towards keeping the kosher consumer in the store.

### THE KOSHER CONSUMER: NOT ONLY "A NARROW GROUP"

The fortune of *kashrus*-minded consumers further improved in recent years with the remarkable acceptance of kosher by many non-Jews, including Muslims, people with lactose intolerance, vegetarians, and many ordinary Americans who either like certain kosher items (like deli and pickles) or believe that kosher foods are better and healthier. A report by the respected Mintel Organization (which each year authors some 600 consumer reports all over the world) in March 2003 reveals that 28% of Americans of all backgrounds said that they buy kosher at some point during the year with the knowledge that they are buying a kosher product. In the same report, IRI (an agency that gathers and interprets supermarket scanner data) relates that many mainstream food products with kosher certification grew by 15% over the past 5 years, as opposed to similar products without a *hechsher*.

These new realities completely tear asunder the argument that legislation protecting kosher consumers is for "a narrow group of Orthodox Jews that observe kosher," as opponents have charged. It isn't practical to suggest that self-policing replace government intervention. Nor is the failure to protect kosher consumers consistent with American standards for consumer protection in the marketplace. A good example is organically grown foods. The United States Department of Agriculture last October established standards for organic foods, and created a Certified Organic standard. The law requires that the organic foods are indeed made of nearly 100% organic ingredients. A recent attempt by a legislator to relax standards for his meat-producing region was forcefully thwarted by other legislators, the media and the Bush administration.

The organics precedent means that the government sought to assure consumers that when they buy organic products, they are not watered down or compromised in any way. Why should a consumer of kosher, irrespective of who that might be, be subject to a different standard, especially since kosher is far more prevalent on supermarket shelves than organics?

### THE OBSERVANT JEW'S BENEFITS

It is indeed disturbing that some Torah-observant Jews are also dismissing the need for the legislation, arguing that we as a community should self-police *kashrus*, as if this were possible or even preferable. With 9200 plants in the US manufacturing kosher products, it is highly unlikely that self-policing would be even remotely effective. Rabbi Luzer Weiss, who heads the *kashrus* enforcement arm of New York State's Department of Agriculture and Markets, offers a convincing resume of abuses that make his office so essential. His nine *kashrus* inspectors continue to deal with regular fraud and abuse of *kashrus* at every level – retail, wholesale, and foodservice. In one


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case, a kosher caterer was found relabeling non-kosher cheese as kosher. In another instance, a meat restaurant used dairy salad dressing. And then there was the "kosher hotel" found using non-kosher parts of chickens. In 2002, state inspectors conducted more than 8,000 inspections, with thousands of citations and numerous prosecutions.

While it may be impossible to pinpoint every instance of *kashrus* abuse, one thing is certain: without the arm of the law threatening fines and prosecution, the major deterrent will have been lost. In addition to the state, *kashrus* agencies deal with a regular dose of the fraudulent use of their symbols – as many as 1,000 cases a year. While many are innocent mistakes, there are many that would not cease and desist without the threat of prosecution hanging over them.

The scope of the market in both geographic and demographic terms makes it an impossibility to establish some universally accepted consumer union that would monitor kosher standards. As we saw from the lawsuit, there would never be unanimity in any case, and not all consumers are educated enough to make a judgment on their own. Without any enforcement capabilities, the chances are that even a respectable self-policing structure would be doomed to failure.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Where do we go from here? In the very least, we will need creative approaches to craft a State bill that protects kosher consumers, has teeth, and of course passes the Constitutional test. We already know that a disclosure law is a cosmetic remedy for a serious problem, but it may be the only recourse that would be agreed upon by diverse elements and have the ability to withstand the court test. It is unfortunate that the best protection, at least for New Yorkers, no longer exists. Optimally, the disclosure model will be enhanced to the point that consumers will be able to be better watchdogs.

This may also be the moment to strive for a national bill, much like the organic lobby managed to do. Kosher is by far a larger category than organic, or any other specialty – or ethnic food, for that matter. A third of all foods on supermarket shelves are certified kosher, are available in supermarkets throughout the Union, and are used by a cross section of Americans. (Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, Director of Government and Public Affairs of Agudath Israel of America, is a strong advocate for just such a measure.)

In the very least, a national bill would mandate disclosure of what standard is used to determine kosher status without the need for the state to define it. A national bill would assure that the growing body of national food companies would not be able to skirt the disclosure requirement in most states. Kosher is no longer a New York phenomenon, although it is the state with nearly half of all kosher ethnic sales, and thus remains the hub for kosher.

For America to simply ignore the needs of kosher consumers is just not kosher. ■


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*Rabbi Yosef Levinson*

# Korban Pesach

# A MITZVA NOT TO PASS OVER

## I. TWO *MITZVOS* OF ETERNAL CONNECTION

Though it has been more than nineteen hundred years since we last savoured the meat of the *korban Pesach*, we have not forgotten the importance this *mitzva* plays in the commemoration of our freedom from slavery. The *Seder* commences "*kol ditzrich yeisei veyifsach* (whoever is in need, come and celebrate Pesach)." We lament our inability to eat from the *korban Pesach*. This year we are in *galus* (exile) and we may invite all to join us, even as we begin the *Seder*. However, when the *Beis Hamikdash* stood, only those who were designated before the slaughtering of the Pesach could participate with us[i].

The significance placed on the *korban Pesach* by the Torah is evident from the following fact: it is the only *mitzva* for which *Hashem* offers us a second chance to fulfill, if we are unable to do so at the assigned time[ii]. Why are we given a second chance to fulfill this *mitzva* and not other *mitzvos*? Even though we may not offer the *korban Pesach* today, let us not pass over this *mitzva*. We can still learn its laws and reflect on its lessons. Perhaps by displaying our desire to fulfill this *mitzva*, we will hasten the *Geula* (redemption).

The *Sefer Hachinuch*[iii] writes that we bring the *Pesach* offering to recall the wondrous miracles that *Hashem* performed in redeeming us from Egyptian servitude. The plagues inflicted on the Egyptians, and the other miracles that took place, are irrefutable proof that G-d is the Creator of the world and that He controls all that happens.[iv] Additionally, through those miracles, *Hashem* acquired us as His servants. We enjoy *Hashgacha p'ratis* (Divine Providence) and guidance in our lives, and we have the privilege of serving the *Ribbono Shel Olam* (Master of the Universe) through Torah and *mitzvos*. As the Torah states, "for they (*Bnei Yisroel*) are My servants, whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt."[v]

The *korban Pesach* was more than a means to recall our experiences in Egypt and our redemption from there; it was the very vehicle through which we proved ourselves worthy of *Hashem's* deliverance. As the appointed time of *Bnei Yisroel's* release drew near, *Hashem* took note that they did not possess any *mitzvos* to merit freedom. Thus, He gave them the *mitzvos* of *Pesach* and *milla*.[vi]

The *Maharal* explains [vii] the significance of these two *mitzvos*. Through *bris milla*, we became servants of *Hashem* – all servants have a mark identifying them as belonging to their master[viii], and *milla* identifies us as G-d's servants.

*Hashem* also gave us the *mitzva* of Pesach, which the Torah describes simply as "*avoda*."[ix] He designated us as His *avadim* (servants), giving us the opportunity to serve Him; for how can we refer to one as an *eved* if he does not provide any service to his master? Thus, by fulfilling these two *mitzvos*, we demonstrate our dedication to His service and are deemed worthy of redemption.

We can understand how *milla* distinguishes us as *Hashem's avadim*. But what is the significance of the *korban Pesach*? As Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner writes[x], any action that is done for the sake of our Creator may be called "*avodas Hashem*," so why is it only when

**Rabbi Levinson**, a member of Kollel Beth Hatalmud of Melbourne, Australia, is the founding editor of *Mo'adim Uzemanim*, the Kollel's *Yom Tov* publication, where this essay first appeared. His article, "Unmasking the *Megilla*," was featured in JO March '03.

referring to the *mitzva* of *korban Pesach* that the Torah uses the expression "*avoda*"?

He explains that a servant can serve his master who acquired him many years before, and then a servant can at times serve a master in order that the master should acquire him through his service.[xi] The same can be said about "*avodas Hashem.*" We perform other *mitzvos* for *Hashem*, for we are already His *avadim.* The *mitzvos* of Pesach, however, initiate us into *Hashem*'s service – we become His servants.

How, though, does the *Pesach* transform us into *avdei Hashem*?

Rabbi Avigdor Miller זצ"ל writes that there are many transgressions that are punishable by *kareis* (early death). Only two sins, however, are for neglecting to fulfill a *mitzvas asei* (positive command); all the others are for transgressing a *lo sa'aseh* (negative command). He explains that the common denominator of these two *mitzvos* – *Pesach* and *milla* – is that they both serve to distinguish us as *Hashem*'s people. Circumcising one's flesh demonstrates that not only is the *neshama* (soul) of a Jew different from that of other nationals, his *guf* (physical body) is different as well[xii]. The *Rambam* writes that *milla* tempers man's desire and pleasure, and is a permanent reminder that a Jew must strive to perfect his character[xiii].

The *Pesach* is a unique offering. Before *yetzias Mitzrayim* (exodus from Egypt), all *korbanos* were burnt completely on the *mizbe'ach* (altar). For man to attempt to eat that which was designated for *Hashem* would have been a desecration of the *korban.* The first *korban* to have meat that man was permitted to eat was the *Pesach* offering. Thus it served as a declaration that *Bnei Yisroel* were "a holy people"[xiv], whose bodies were elevated to the holiness of a *mizbe'ach.* Only they could eat that which was designated for *Hashem;* and when they did, it was considered as if the offering were burnt on the altar.

Since these two *mitzvos* proclaim that the body of the Jew is to be devoted to *Hashem*, and that such a Jew is sacred, one who neglects them deserves a severe retribution.

Furthermore, through these two *mitzvos,* we earned our freedom and entered *Hashem*'s service. *Milla* and *Pesach* are the proclamations of our uniqueness, and remind us of our potential. We must strive to be as holy as the *mizbe'ach* that stood before *Hashem.* Since the purpose of our release from bondage was to serve *Hashem,* it is only fitting that we first demonstrated our readiness and willingness to be His servants.[1]

[1] The *mitzva* of *matza* contains a similar message. We eat *matza* to recall our suffering in Egypt, where it was all we had to eat. *Matza* also reminds us that we left *Mitzrayim* in great haste. Rabbi Avigdor Miller adds that eating *matza* is another declaration that we are a holy people. All the *menachos* (meal sacrifice that the *Kohanim* offered and ate from) were baked as *matza,* except for some of the *lachmei toda* (loaves brought with a thanksgiving offering) and the *shtei halechem* (the two loaves offerred on Shavuos). By eating *matza,* we state that we are as holy as the *Kohanim,* who are dedicated to service of *Hashem (A Nation is Born* 12:20).

## II. THE MANY APPROACHES TO KNOWING *HASHEM*

Let us take this analogy a step further. The *mizbe'ach* always retains its *kedusha* (holiness), even when no *korbanos* are being consumed on it. It is a monument of dedication to *avodas Hashem.*[xv] Its sole function is as an instrument for Jews to serve their Creator. So, too, every act that a Jew does should be for the sake of *Hashem.* His every deed should be imbued with holiness, distinguishing him as a servant of G-d. Shlomo *Hamelech* exhorts us, "*B'chol d'rachecha dei'eihu*" (Know *Hashem* in all your ways).[2]

This idea is reflected in the *mitzvos* of the *Pesach.* The *Pesach* must be roasted completely – not cooked in water or partially broiled. *Hashem* wants us to enjoy our food; and when done for His sake, it is a *mitzva* to eat. *Hakaras hatov* (gratitude), which eating of tasty food engenders, is in itself an important form of *avodas Hashem,* and is also an effective means to achieve love of the Creator.[xvi]

[2] *Mishlei* 3,6. Rabbi Avigdor Miller (*Bamidbar* 9,12) writes that this is also reflected in the *mitzvos* of the *Pesach.* We consume the entire *Pesach,* leaving nothing over. When one eats solely for his pleasure, he may choose one dish over another, leaving food over. Since we eat to fulfill *Hashem*'s will and realize the potential of this *mitzva,* we refrain from other delicacies and completely consume the *Pesach.* At the same time, we may not break a bone to eat the marrow, for one who does so demonstrates that he is motivated solely by appetite. By eating only the meat, he evinces his desire for the service of G-d (Rabbi Avigdor Miller *ibid*). We eat and enjoy our food, but we are not ravenous.


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Of course, we should eat and derive pleasure from this world to give us the strength and energy to learn Torah and fulfill *mitzvos.* It is also an excellent opportunity to thank our spouses, families and everyone else who is kind enough to help us. In this way, we provide encouragement and foster *ahavas Yisroel.* When we eat, we can reflect on the wonders of creation. Rabbi Miller made a career of discovering *Hashem*'s greatness through the wonders of nature. We can concentrate on the intricacies and the miracles of the human body[xvii]; we can observe *Hashem*'s greatness by studying the food that we eat – even by examining the peel of an orange or apple:

1. The green color of the unripe fruit protects it by concealing the fruit amongst the leaves of the tree.

2. When the fruit ripens, the beautiful colour of the peel announces that it is fit to be eaten, and it makes the fruit conspicuous between the green leaves. It also makes the fruit appealing to the palate.

3. The fruit's peel is coated in plastic, keeping the fruit airtight and waterproof. The fruit begins to decay as soon as it is peeled.

4. The peel's fragrance attracts eaters and adds to their pleasure.

5. The fruit peel is biodegradable; it eventually disintegrates and vanishes, unlike man-made packages.

6. The fruit peel is also recyclable; it turns into soil and fertilizer.[xviii]

We recite a *beracha* before we derive benefit from this world to remind us to eat for the sake of *Hashem*[xix]. *Chazal* want us to express our gratitude and appreciation for the gifts that G-d bestowed upon us. The *berachos* also remind us to reflect on the wonders that He created.

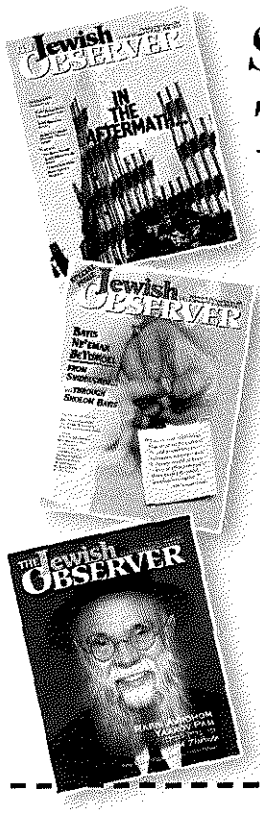
We can also serve *Hashem* in our chosen profession, by working to provide for our families so that they – and we – have the means to learn Torah, fulfill the *mitzvos,* and give *tzeddaka* (charity) to support Torah institutions. Even when we accept money from a customer, we should bear in mind that we are doing *chessed* (kindness) for a fellow Jew by providing him with life's necessities or pleasures. We need to earn a living, but our main concern should be to help our brethren.[xx]

We can also fulfill the will of *Hashem* by using our natural talents. Even though *letzanus* (joking around) and levity are usually frowned upon, when used for the right purpose, they are considered great *mitzvos.*

**Rabbi Beroka was once visited by Eliyahu *HaNavi* in the market place of Lefet. When Rabbi Beroka asked Eliyahu, "Is there anyone here who is destined from the World to Come?" Eliyahu pointed to two people and said, "They are destined for the World to Come." Rabbi Beroka went and asked them what they do. They told him that they are comedians who cheer up those who are depressed. Also, whenever they see two people quarrelling, they strive to make peace between them.**[xxi]

## III. MAN: THE MIZBE'ACH PERSONIFIED

"B'*chol d'rachecha dei'eihu*" (Know *Hashem* in all your ways) is commonly per-

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ceived as the steps one takes after having fulfilled the obligatory *mitzvos*. One who wants to come closer to G-d will not be satisfied with fulfilling his duty. He will use every available opportunity to serve and come closer to Him.

Rabbi Hutner writes that "*b'chol d'rachecha dei'eihu*" can also be viewed in the opposite light. Man can perform the *mitzvos* because it is his duty to do so. If he completes his tasks, he is free and may do as he pleases (as long as his desires do not conflict with the will of *Hashem*). One who performs all his deeds for the sake of Heaven, however, does not perceive the *mitzvos* as a burden that must be completed. Rather, once he considers himself a servant of *Hashem*, he has no domain of his own, and is always prepared to do his Master's bidding.

Shavuos is *z'man Mattan Toraseinu* - *Hashem* gave us the Torah and *mitzvos* so we may do His will. Before we could accept the *ol* (yoke) of Torah and *mitzvos*, however, we had to first accept *Ol Malchus Shamayim* (the yoke of Heaven).[xxii] This happened on Pesach, *z'man cheiruseinu* – when *Hashem* freed us from slavery. Through the *mitzvos* of Pesach, which proclaim our uniqueness and *kedusha*, we became His servants. These *mitzvos* remind us that our sole desire should be to fulfill His will – thus "*B'chol d'rachecha dei'eihu*" is the foundation and introduction to serving Him.

Just as *Hashem* acquired us to be His *avadim* when we left Egypt, so too every Pesach, as we re-live the *geula*, we become His servants. We renew our bond with *Hashem* through fulfilling the *mitzvos* of Pesach, and we are thereby reminded of our potential – to be a holy *mizbe'ach* before our Creator. This is why *Hashem* gave us *Pesach Sheini*. Our Creator genuinely desires our service, and if one was not qualified to be involved on Pesach, he is granted another opportunity to declare his allegiance to G-d.[3]

Whether or not we partake of the *korban Pesach* this year, let us ensure that we do not pass over its valuable lessons. Let us remember our special status and dedicate our every deed to *Hashem*. ■

**CORRECTION**

In the article "Unmasking the *Megilla*," by Rabbi Yosef Levinson (March '03 – p.12, col. 3), the line should read, "He allowed, however, a new decree to be issued, which Esther and Mordechai could word as they see fit." Not "... which Esther and Haman could word as they see fit."

Sorry. *Ad d'lo yada.*

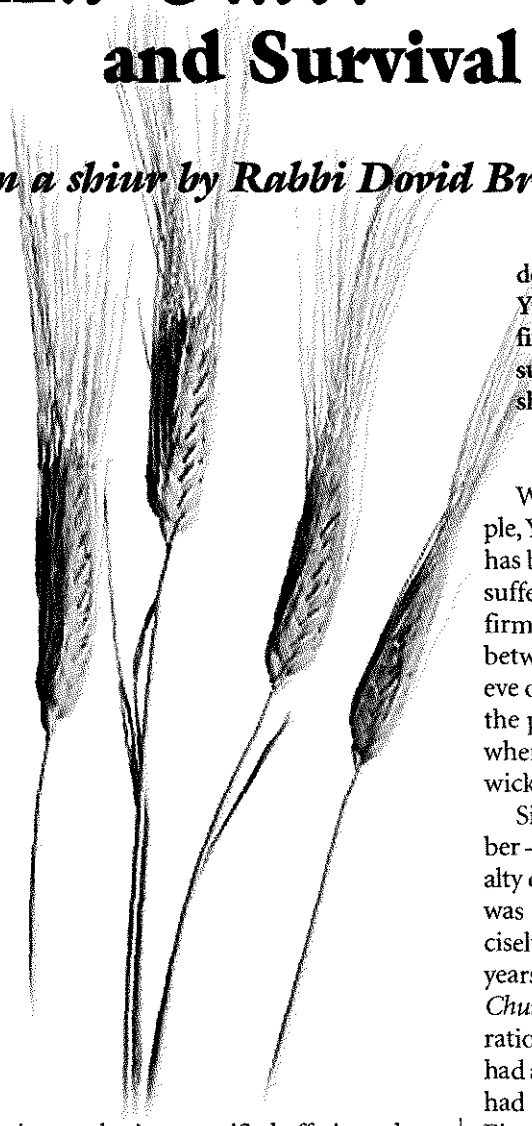
[3] Let us for a moment turn our focus to the episode relating to *Pesach Sheini*. The Torah (*Bamidbar* 9, 6-7) recounts that men who were *tamei* came to Moshe on *Erev Pesach* complaining how it was unfair that they could not offer the *korban Pesach* because of their ritual uncleanness. Although they had a strong desire to observe this *mitzva*, how could they question the law, which exempts them from this commandment?

According to our elucidation of this *mitzva*, however, we can explain their motive. Through eating from the *korban Pesach*, we proclaim and celebrate that we are the holy servants of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. By exempting us from this *mitzva*, *Hashem* demonstrates His dissatisfaction with our service. This is similar to what we are taught concerning rain on *Succos*. If we are compelled by rainy weather to leave the *succa*, it is comparable to a servant who offers a drink to his master, but instead of taking a drink, the master pours the jug in the servant's face, saying: "I don't want your service" (*Succa* 28b-29a). This is why the men who were *tamei* were so distressed that they could not offer the *korban Pesach* that year. Moreover, they explained that they contracted *tuma* as the result of performing a *mitzva*. [They were either the bearers of Yosef's coffin, or Mishael and Eltzafon, who were commanded to remove Nadav and Avihu from the *Mishkan* (Sanctuary), or they had assisted with a *meis mitzva*, a deceased individual who had no one to look after his remains (*Succa*, 25a-b).] They thus argued, "How can we be considered unworthy of being *Hashem*'s servants when our 'unworthiness' has come about through having fulfilled one of His *mitzvos*?" (see *Seforno*) To this, *Hashem* responded: On the contrary, because of their strong will to serve Him, He would grant them the special honor of being the vehicle through which the *mitzva* of *Pesach Sheini* would be taught to Moshe.

[i] *Zevach Pesach*; *Ma'asei Hashem*
[ii] *Bamidbar* 9,10-11; Sefer *Hachinuch*, *Mitzvos* 380, 381.
[iii] *Mitzva* 5
[iv] ibid, *Mitzva* 380
[v] *Vayikra* 25,42, see there with *Malbim*.
[vi] *Rashi Shemos* 12,6; See also *Shemos* 13,8 with *Rashi* and *Da'as Torah*.
[vii] *Gur Aryeh*, *Shemos* 12,6.
[viii] *Shabbos* 58a.
[ix] *Shemos* 12,26;13,5.
[x] *Pachad Yitzchak*, *Pesach Ma'amar* 42.
[xi] See *Kiddushin* 23b.
[xii] Rabbi Miller *The Beginning* 17:14.
[xiii] *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:49.
[xiv] *Shemos* 19,6.
[xv] *See Gur Aryeh*, *Shemos* 20:22.
[xvi] Rabbi Miller, *Bamidbar* 9,11.
[xvii] *Ralbag*.
[xviii] See *The Universe Testifies* p. 93.
[xix] Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, *Horeb* 673; see also *Meshech Chachma*, *Devarim* 8,10.
[xx] *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* vol. 1 p.34.
[xxi] *Ta'anis* 22a.
[xxii] *Pachad Yitzchak*, *Pesach* 44, based on *Mechilta*, *Yisro* to 20:12.

# Sefiras Ha'Omer and Survival in *Galus*

## *Adapted from a shiur by Rabbi Dovid Brown z"l*



Coming on the heels of the long-anticipated and much celebrated Pesach *Seder*, the beginning of the seven-week-long *mitzva* of *Sefiras Ha'Omer*, on the second night of Pesach, seems like a mere footnote to the main text. Certainly, it is less appreciated than the rites of the *Seder*. The idea of commemorating the Exodus on our nation's day of independence is easy to grasp, but why a *mitzva* for the day *after Yetzias Mizrayim*?

As its name suggests, *Sefira* is tied to the *Omer*. When the *Beis Hamikdash* was still standing, the forty-nine-day period of the *Omer*-counting was inaugurated on the Sixteenth day of Nissan with the offering of the annual *minchas omer*, consisting primarily of barley flour from the brand-new harvest. The days were then counted until Shavuos, when the freshly harvested wheat was used for the offering of the "*Shtei Halechem*" – the "two breads." Today's *Sefira*, in the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash* and without the *Omer* and *Shtei Halechem*, does not quite satisfy the Torah commandment, but was instituted by *Chazal* as a reminder, however pale, of the original three-part *mitzva* from our more glorious past – *zeicher l'Mikdash*.

This is puzzling. Why did the Sages choose to memorialize this particular detail of the Temple services? Moreover, if among the various themes inherent to the count from Pesach to Shavuos, one of the functions of the *Sefira* is to give emphasis to specified offerings, then doesn't it lose its meaning once those *korbanos* have been lost?

**Nochum Brown** is a member of the Kollel of Bais Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, NJ. His late father, **Rabbi Dovid Brown**, of Baltimore, is the author of *Mysteries of the Creation: a cosmology derived from* Tanach *and* Chazal (Targum Press). His seventh *Yahrzeit* is on the Fifteenth of Nissan. May the *zechus* of the Torah herein be credited towards *illuy nishmaso*.

### GUARANTEE OF SURVIVAL

To gain an understanding of the significance of *Sefiras Ha'omer* in our times, let us turn our attention to a passage in Yirmiyahu:

> **The word of G-d came to me, saying: "Go and call into the ears of Yerushalayim saying: 'So has G-d said: "I have recalled for you the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal days, when you followed me into the desert, into a land that cannot be sown. Yisroel shall thus be holy to G-d, the first of His produce. Whoever consumes him shall be held guilty; evil shall befall him;" G-d has spoken.'"**
>
> YIRMIYAHU 2, 1-3

With this endearing call to his people, Yirmiyahu conveyed a prophecy that has been treasured ever since by a long-suffering nation; treasured for its confirmation of the special relationship between G-d and *Yisroel* – even on the eve of the nation's decline – and also for the promise that the day will yet come when wrongs will be righted and the wicked shall be brought to justice.

Significantly, this promise to remember – and reciprocate – the love and loyalty of our forefathers during the Exodus was given some 850 years later, at precisely the critical moment: In the final years of the first *Beis Hamikdash*, the *Churban* (Destruction), already in preparation, was at hand. The Jewish people had at last forfeited the Divine favor that had for so long repelled their enemies. Fiercely independent for close to a millennium, they were soon to be broken and sent into exile, beginning a long history of *galus* that persists to this very day. How was the nation to endure, to avoid the fate of every other people that, once vanquished and dispersed, was absorbed by its conquerors and disappeared?

Yirmiyahu provided the answer. The prophet who presided over so much tragedy was also entrusted with the secret for the banished people's survival.

> **I have recalled for you the devotion of your youth... when you followed Me into a different kind of exile, into a barren desert with no provisions, and**

**you did not ask, "How will we survive? What will we eat?" It made no sense, but you placed your trust in Me. The time has come to repay you in kind, and when you, the timid sheep, should find yourself in *galus*, among seventy wolves, you need not ask, "How will we survive?" "All those who consume [you] shall be held guilty; evil shall befall them." G-d has spoken.**

**Yes, you will encounter in *galus* powers that wish to devour you. There will be oppression, there will be suffering. But their vicious designs will ultimately fail. In the end you will triumph; it is they who will perish.**

### THE DEGREE OF DEVOTION

The sacrifice involved in wandering, without food and water, into the vast desert was considerable. It is true that in Egypt the Jews were lowly slaves, but they still had grown accustomed to eating well. Of the land, it is said, "Egypt was like a garden of G-d"; food was plentiful and varied. Thus, even while being sustained with the Heaven-sent *manna*, we find the Jews complaining in the *Midbar* (desert): "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we would eat in Mitzrayim for free; the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic" (*Bamidbar* 11, 4-5). In addition, by the time the call to leave had come, the once crushing yoke of slavery had been lifted – six months prior to *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, as recorded by *Chazal*. The emancipated Jews might have protested the apparent absurdity of marching millions of men, women, and children into the desert without exhaustive preparation, which could have been done while waiting comfortably in Mitzrayim. Instead, the *emuna* that filled their hearts banished any trace of skepticism.

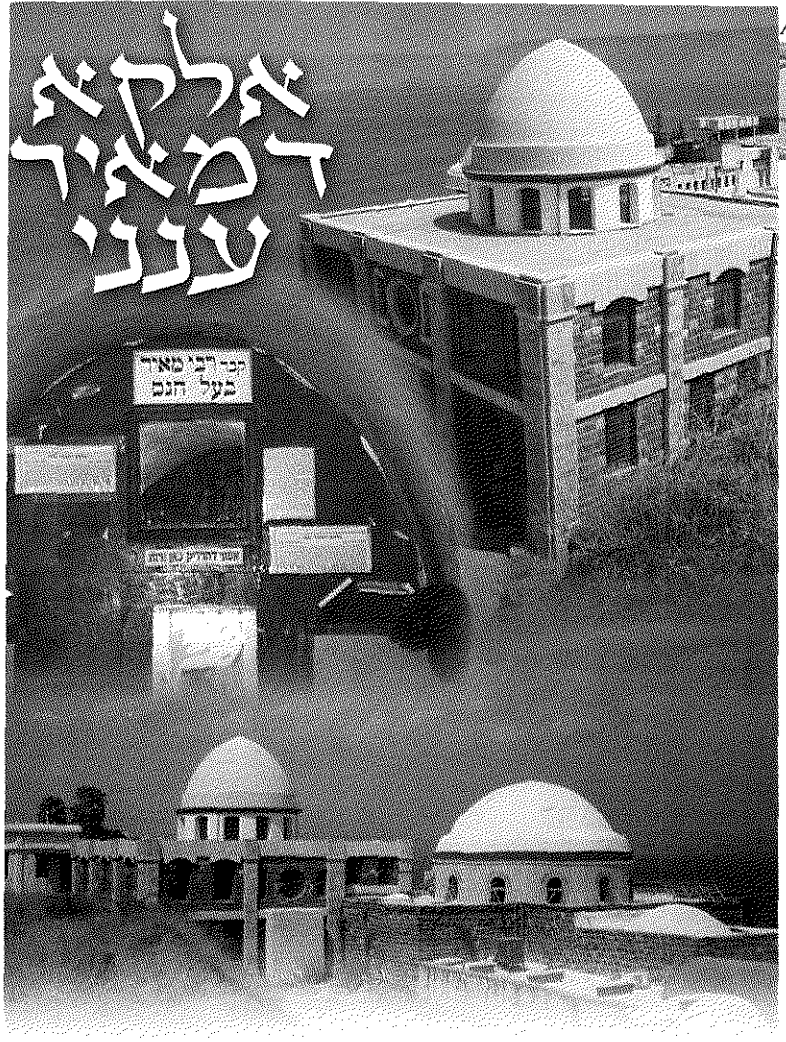
It is true that, originally, no one expected to be mired in the desert for forty years. That occurred as punishment for later sins. But they did expect to spend seven weeks of preparation for *Mattan Torah* (Receiving the Law at Sinai) in the *Midbar*; the march into *Eretz Yisroel* could not be undertaken without the Torah.

Yet we are still short of a full appreciation of what is meant by "the devotion of your youth, the love of your bridal days." For this we must understand the significance of the *Minchas HaOmer* and the *Sefira* that accompanies it.

It was not at random that the *galus Mitzrayim* came to its end on precisely the Fifteenth day of Nissan. On *Rosh Chodesh*, the Jews were told that they were to eat the *korban Pesach* on the night of the 15th "with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand" (*Shemos* 12,11), ready to leave on a moment's notice. Not the 15th simply because the *makkos* (ten plagues) will have run their course by then. The *makkos* could have begun earlier, or stretched on longer. Rather, it was, as the *passuk* says: This night was reserved in advance for the watershed events that occurred on it.

### AGRICULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

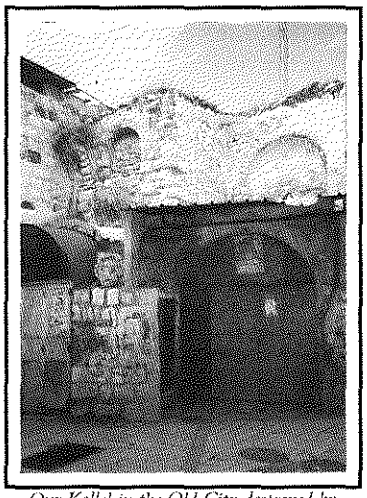
Among the many reasons for the choice of this date, some are linked to the regional agricultural




THE CUSTOM of supporting the poor of the holy land through *Rebbe Meir Baal Banes* Charity is a hallowed Jewish tradition from time in memorial. It was a deeply ingrained ritual, especially by women during *licht bentching* to provide generously to those who made the great sacrifice and trekked to the holy Land from far away places, to dedicate themselves to *Torah* and Avodah in *Eretz Yisroel.* In time the great Rabbis and *Tzadikim,* in various lands of the Diaspora, organized the formal collection of these funds, in order to support the ever-growing settlement of the holy land.

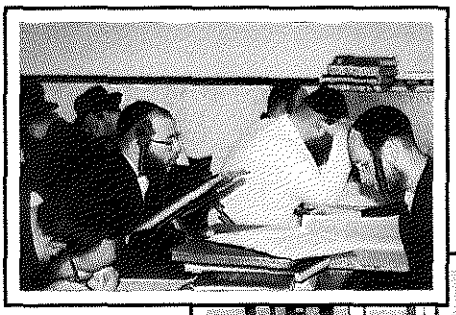
*Kever of R' David Zehiltover: "He strengthened the hands of the inhabitants of the Holy Land"*

GIVING in the merit of *Rebbe Meir Baal Hanes,* is an exalted *mitzvah,* as related in many holy *seforim.* We find two hundred year old tombstones of our great *Rebbes* engraved with praise of their support of this holy *mitzvah.* For them it was of outmost importance, and they never ceased in their diligent and loving devotion to this effort.

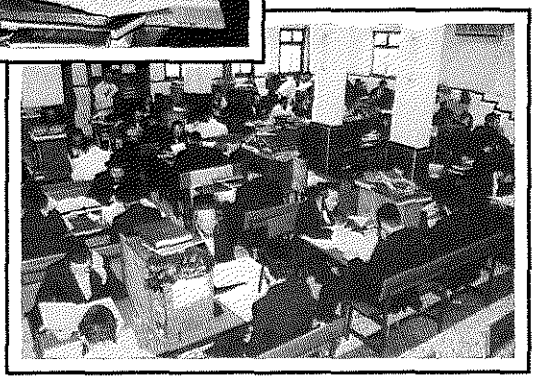


*Our Kollel in the Old City destroyed by arab riots in 1928*

OUR institution has been in operation since it's founding without disruption, since 1799. All through out this time, the *Kollel* sustained 1000's of families who made it to the holy soil of *Eretz Yisroel.* It was only through the great leadership and dedication of the *tzadikim* of the Kosov-Viznitz dynasty, who illuminated the Jewish communities throughout the Bukovina-Marmorosh area of Romania, and thanks to their great love for *Eretz Yisroel,* that our charity has survived all through many perilous years of great tribulation of *klal yisroel.*



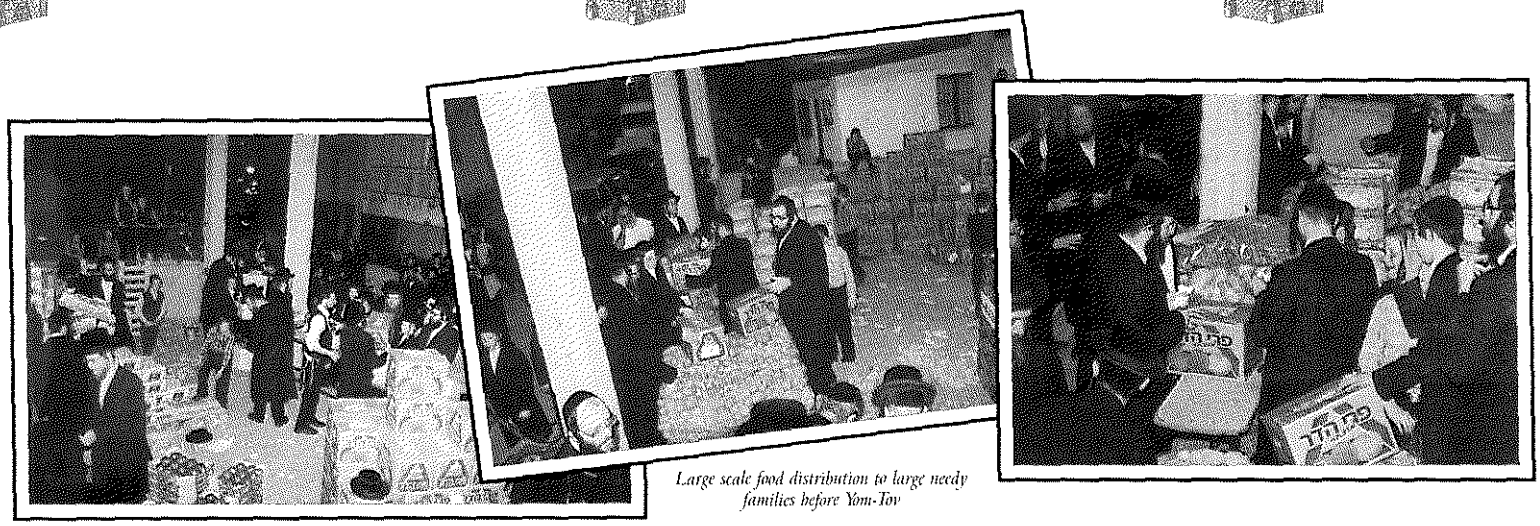
TODAY, our *tzedaka,* endeavors to support and sustain many facets of torah life. More than five hundred scholars study in ten different places, in our *kollelim.* Dozens of our alumnae have become prominent Rabbis in many cities of Israel.



Close to one hundred important seforim in aspects of Torah have been authored by our talmidim. Thousands of families receive stipends for the holidays, in an honorable discreet way. In addition to the many widows and orphans who depend on our charity.

*Seniors enjoying a meal in our home*

BUT the pressing needs of a growing community, far outstrip our ability to provide. More and more Torah scholars are knocking on our doors, more and



*Large scale food distribution to large needy families before Yom-Tov*

more needy appeal to our institution. The generosity of their brethren *"acheinu kol bais yisroel"* in the Diaspora is their only hope.

**WE OFFER** the possibility to inscribe the name of your loved ones in our *sefer zicaron* that has been kept safe for generations, or by engraving their name on the grand plaque in the various *Batei Midrash,* where the sweet voice of Torah study never ceases to be heard.

**ANY TIME** one is in urgent need, or in request of hatzlacha, all you need is the *zchus* of *Rebbe Meir Baal HaNes*. By having the *pushka* ready and handy, and adding the prayer of: *"ELAKA D'MEIR ANENU"*. Our office has received many amazing letters, attesting to the great wonders this *mitzvah* can merit from Hashem. It is only so, because of the great many *Tzadikim* who assured us of its efficacy.

**EXCERPT OF A LETTER FROM ONE CONTRIBUTOR**

*... please find a signed check in the amount of $360.*

*Just a note: My son was in the WTC Building #1, and I hadn't heard from him for the first two hours. I put aside $180. I took the money out of my wallet and put it on the table next to me and said, "This is for my son's life" and my thoughts were for R' Meir Baal Haness to pray for me, and as I put the money down I recieved a call from my son, he had just gotten down to the ground floor, and called me as he was leaving the building. None of the cell phones were working, but he was able to get through to me. A ness for sure!*

*Hope this story brightens your day!*

For more information, please contact our office:
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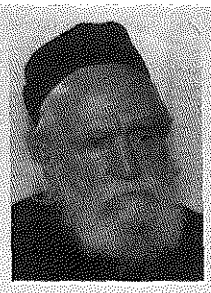
# HARAV MOSHE FEINSTEIN *zt"l* *and* THE OZROVER REBBE *zt"l*



*ONE CAN NOT FATHOM THE LOFTINESS of the Rabbi Meir Baal Haness tzedokoh, but there were gedolim who knew. The Ozrover Rebbe zt'l once spoke at a gathering of gedolei hador and said that he inherited great secrets from his holy ancestors about the great benefit of this tzedokoh for the poor of the holy land, but is afraid to reveal the exalted matter for if he does, other charitable institutions would be deprived. If everyone knew the great importance of this tzedokoh, they would give all their donations to it in order to merit the immense zechuyos, both spiritual and physical, which are channeled through it!*

*WHEN HE FINISHED SPEAKING, Horav Moshe Feinstein zt'l, who was sitting next to him, turned to him and asked him to explain his words. He told him, "I cannot explain in public." The two got up and went into a corner of the hall, where they conversed privately for a long time. When they returned to the table, Harav Moshe Feinstein zt'l said excitedly, "I cannot reveal what I just heard, but I recommend whole heartedly to donate generously to the tzedokoh of Rabbi Meir Baal Haness, because you can not fathom the tremendous zechus!"*

conditions. We will focus on one of these. In the part of the world that included Egypt and *Eretz Yisroel*, the middle of Nissan marks the beginning of the harvest season (see *Rashi, Bereishis* 8,22).

The barley crop is the first to ripen, on or around the fifteenth; wheat matures later. Thus we find in the Torah's account of the *makkas barad* (hailstorm): "The flax and barley were destroyed, for the barley was ripe and the flax had formed stalks. But the wheat and spelt were not destroyed, for they are late [crops]" (*Shemos* 9, 31-32). In the same vein, the *mitzva* to bring the *Minchas Omer*, the barley offering prescribed for the Sixteenth of *Nissan*, is introduced as follows: "When you come to the land that I am giving to you and you reap its harvest, you shall bring the *Omer*, the first of your harvest to the *kohein*." On the other hand, the *Yom Tov* of Shavuos, held after forty-nine carefully-counted days, is associated with the first fruits of the wheat harvest (*Shemos* 34,22), and the *mincha* offering unique to it – the *Shtei Halechem* – is made of wheat.

In the economy of ancient times, the concept of international trade did not exist. Each country lived off its own produce. In such a system, availability of food varied with the seasons. In the summer and fall, the recent harvests provided plenty of grain, but as the winter set in, the supply would begin to dwindle, and one was fortunate to have enough in reserve to make it through the winter months, when nothing grew. Those less fortunate simply starved. All spent the last of the winter months in eager anticipation of spring, and a new injection of the life-giving produce.

If we are interpreting the Torah's indications correctly, Egypt's harvest season – at least for 2448, the year of the Exodus – was to begin on the Sixteenth of Nissan (the day the annual *Omer* celebrates the beginning of the barley harvest; more on this later), or, in any case, shortly after the Fifteenth of the month. The Fifteenth of Nissan, then, was hardly the most opportune time of the year to leave Egypt. The previous year's food had all but run out; indeed, all the Jews could muster to provide for their trip was a batch of dough "wrapped in their clothes, on their shoulders" (*Shemos* 12, 34). While every household left *Mitzrayim* heavily laden with the gold, silver and jewelry that they had obtained from the Egyptians, along with herds of livestock trailing behind them, there was no substantial store of grain or flour in all of Egypt that could fully provide for their *tzeida la'derech* (food for the trip for the months ahead). There was, however, (in the Jewish enclave of Goshen, where the fields were not devastated by the hail and locust – see *Yalkut Me'am Lo'eiz*) the ripened barley – true, more suited for animal feed (in the eyes of the ancients), but food nonetheless. These crops beckoned from the fields, standing ready for the sickle, if only the Exodus could wait just a little bit longer.... Better yet, departure could be put off until the summer, by which time the wheat could be harvested and ground into flour, filling sacks that could be carried out on the backs of the many donkeys in their possession.

Surely, at the very least, a few extra days, during which some barley could be gathered for the trip, would not make a difference in terms of the Exodus's purpose.

But no. Not less than one day before the barley harvest was to begin, just before the long-awaited food was to be in hand, on that day they were to leave.

Why? The question had to be on everyone's mind. But it went unasked, because all knew the answer: *Hashem* knows our human needs better than we do; He can be trusted implicitly. By choosing the Fifteenth of Nissan for *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, this magnificent expression of *emuna* was evoked, with the result that G-d's people would be left with the everlasting merit – the guarantee conveyed to Yirmiyahu and that people's descendants: "Just as you followed me faithfully into the *Midbar*, on an impossible journey that betrayed all logic, without questioning My ability to sustain you; so too will I follow you faithfully into exile, to guarantee your survival against the most impossible

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odds. True, the suffering in *galus* will be intense, but you will live to see your oppressor's demise."

### THE *OMER*: A LESSON FOR THE AGES

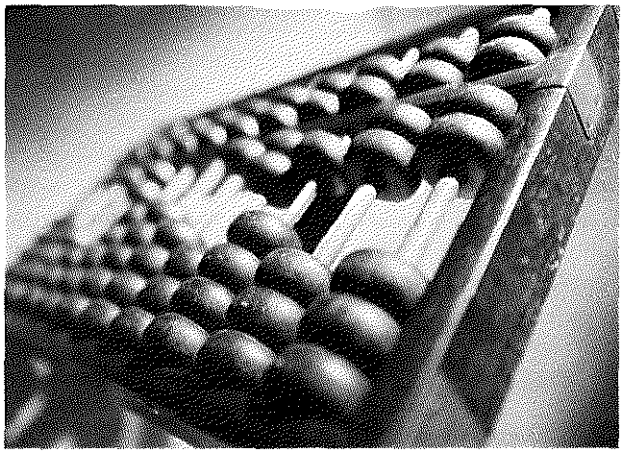
This lofty example set by our forefathers should not be lost on succeeding generations. Thus, one might say, the Torah prescribes a *mitzva* for the day after *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, when the act of offering a *mincha* comprised of the very first of the newly reaped barley highlights the fact that the Exodus of the previous day took place *just prior* to the harvest. It is then that we begin counting the 49 days remaining until Shavuos and *Mattan Torah* – the days that the Jews were well aware would inevitably be spent in the forbidding desert that they were entering. This affords us an opportunity to consider the amount of time during which our forebears placed themselves unreservedly under the protection and care of their G-d, and for us to endeavor to allow some of their faith to filter into our own hearts.

On Shavuos, rounding out this series of *mitzvos*, the beginning of the wheat harvest is marked by the offering of the *Shtei Halechem*, symbolizing the sacrifice involved in leaving *Mitzrayim* without waiting for provisions truly befitting free men. The wheat they could have expected for their journey was instead "offered" toward the ideal of submitting to the judgment and service of the Creator. Not coincidentally, it was on this day that the young nation was presented with the privilege and responsibility of *Mattan Torah*.

It now seems eminently sensible that the *Omer*, of all the elements of the Temple service, should be singled out to be perpetuated even in *galus*, for it is precisely the virtue that the *Omer* represents which has served to keep us alive amidst the degradation and suffering of close to two thousand years in exile. If it is no longer possible to actually bring to the *Beis Hamikdash* the *menachos* of barley and wheat, then let us at the least count the days from one to the other, giving us pause to reflect on what is nothing less than the key to our survival.

It is no wonder, then, that *Chazal* repeatedly ascribe the salvation from various oppressors in our history to the *zechus* of the *Omer*: Gideon's victory over the *Midyanim* after years of subjugation; the annihilation of Sancherev's army at the wall of Yerushalayim in the days of Chizkiyahu; the escape of the Jewish remnant from the Babylonian sword during the *Churban*; and the dramatic downfall of Haman and his genocide decree in the time of Mordechai and Esther (*Vayikra Rabba* 28).

May we similarly witness today, as we count the days of the *Omer*, the *yeshua* we so sorely need, along with the ultimate fulfillment of Yirmiyahu's prophecy, *bimhera beyameinu*. ■



# Think, Ask, Internalize!

## AN UNDEVELOPED INCLINATION

*I once heard a distinguished* Rav *delivering* Mussar *to his congregation. He urged them toward the obviously laudable goal of ridding their houses of televisions. The congregants, of course, have heard this particular message before, they will hear it again, and they almost certainly recognize the truth that underlies the* Rav's *plaint. Yet we all know what both the* Rav *and the congregants know: That this is a never-ending, ongoing ritual. The congregants who have televisions will not get rid of them (after all, they just installed satellite dishes!). The* Rav *knows that the congregants who have televisions will not throw them out because of the* derashos. *The congregants know that the* Rav *knows this.* Olam k'minhago noheig.[1] *What is going on here?*

*An apparently unrelated anecdote: My daughter once told me that a speaker that day had discussed how women merit the World to Come via their facilitation of their husbands' and children's Torah study.[2] One of the girls present asked a question: What about women who never marry and/or never have children, or have husbands that cannot or do not learn? The speaker responded: "I get this question every year, but I do not answer it, because we do not encourage that kind of lifestyle."*

While these two vignettes may appear very different, the issue that underlies both these scenarios is the same; the latter case builds on the former: We frequently leave our *avodas Hashem* to others, because that is more comfortable; if and when, finally, we do think about *avodas Hashem* and how it is to be accomplished, we may find ourselves admonished not to ask challenging questions about its direction!

Thus, we never develop a *yeitzer ha'tov.*

Let us analyze that assertion, first vignette first: *The congregants with the televisions have externalized their "consciences."*[3] In this case, who is the external conscience? *The Rav! Why is this a problem? Because then, the battle between their consciences and their drives takes place outside themselves.*

Delving a bit deeper, we Torah-true Jews have a common perception of what is "good" and "holy." We all know, for example: television = bad. We possess, however, great desires, drives and temptations.

*Chazal* tell us that we are born with our *yeitzer ha'ra;* but we acquire our *yeitzer ha'tov* only at the age of *bar* or *bas mitzva.*[4] Our conscience – our *yeitzer ha'tov* – begins work late and comes from outside of us. In the meantime, we can identify internally with our drives and our own agendas – our *yeitzer ha'ra.*[5]

At that point – and often beyond – we are, in essence, stuck in the mode that some of us experienced in our school days: There is a system that we recognize, in some abstract way, as "good." Often, however, we test the system, bend the rules, and exploit its weaknesses (a' la' the *"naval bereishus haTorah"*[6]). All too often we adhere to the system as

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[1] *Avoda Zara* 54b.

[2] See *Berachos* 17a.

[3] I am using the English word "conscience," with its connotation of conscious recognition and awareness, as a synonym for *yeitzer ha'tov.*

[4] See *Avos d'Rabbi Nassan* 16:2 and *Kohelles Rabba* 4:9. I am indebted to Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer שליט"א for a precious reference, *Piskei Tosafos to Nedarim* no. 62 (free translation): "The *yeitzer ha'tov* is given in the mother's womb when the person knows the entire Torah. At the moment of birth, the *yeitzer ha'ra* enters the person and banishes the *yeitzer ha'tov* until a person becomes intelligent and the *yeitzer ha'tov* enters him."

[5] It is concerning a person at this stage of life that the *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* (vol. 1 p. 255) insightfully notes that when he speaks to himself about his drives and desires he says things like: "I want this"; yet when he speaks to himself about proper behavior he admonishes himself in the format of: "**You** shouldn't do that." The ideal is to accomplish the converse. I know of an *oved Hashem* who has named his *yeitzer ha'ra* "Rembrandt" (after the great artist, not the toothpaste) reflecting the *yeitzer ha'ra*'s capacity to paint beautiful – yet deceptive – portraits. He thus attempts to isolate and externalize his *yeitzer ha'ra.*

[6] See the *Ramban* at the beginning of *Parashas Kedoshim.*

minimally as possible so as to not be expelled, suspended or otherwise punished, scraping by and passing to get "through." I am what I want and what fulfills my desires; the school – or principal – is my external *yeitzer ha'tov.*

As we progress through life, many phenomena may become parts of our externalized conscience. In the case of the *Rav* and the congregation, the *Rav* remains his congregation's external conscience. We feel good being associated with the stratum of *Yahadus* that detests televisions – while we ourselves hide them deep in our houses, because we do feel guilty or ashamed. Rituals and forms of attire – that are not internalized – are often also part of this external conscience.[7] The *Mekkubalim* call this an *Ohr Makkif* – an enveloping light that does little to affect the internal state of the soul. The *yeitzer ha'tov* does not become an *Ohr P'nimi* – an internal illumination.[8]

With a conscience that is outside and distinct, we can maintain a superficial identification with a good and holy system, yet simultaneously do as we please – as long as the system doesn't "catch up" with us and castigate us. We are much like a fellow who will speed as long as he sees no policeman. True, we may feel somewhat guilty over our pleasures, but as *Chazal* note, guilt does not help very much in restraining us from negative activities.[9] (We might even end up at a non-*gebrokts* Pesach vacation in a Las Vegas hotel-casino!)

Internalizing the conscience is the process of becoming a fully developed *Oved Hashem.*

## WAGING THE BATTLE INTERNALLY

While it would be great to emerge victorious over our *yeitzer ha'ra,* the reality is that most of us must battle our *yeitzer.* If my *yeitzer ha'tov* is still extrinsic to myself – embodied in my *menahel,* my *rav,* etc. – the battle is between my *yeitzer ha'tov* and me. What if, however, my *yeitzer ha'tov* is no longer outside of me, but inside me? If I have internalized my conscience, it is part of me, and it is ever present in my consideration.

For most of us, the internal balance between *yeitzer ha'ra* and *yeitzer ha'tov* is an ongoing struggle, the battle of *bechira.*[10] The first foothold of the *yeitzer ha'tov,* however, is equated with the onset of maturity.[11] I am beginning to go beyond my subjective agenda, the one which caused me to seek the weaknesses I could exploit in the system. I have a component within myself that weighs matters objectively – and I need to make decisions. This, of course, restricts my "fun." A 19- or 20-year-old may express his resistance to this maturity thus: "Eventually, when I am 21 or 22 and get married, I will lead a full Torah life. Now I'm young. I want to enjoy myself. Let me have my TV [or worse...]." The danger in this perspective is fairly obvious. An external conscience is a terrible nuisance. Since it impinges on my lifestyle, I seek to drown it out – at first, perhaps, with behavior that distracts me from its inconvenient reproaches (like watching lots of television). Matters then may deteriorate. *"Ha'omer echta v'ashuv ein maspikin b'yado la'asos teshuva* – "One who says, 'I will sin and then repent,' they do not grant him the opportunity to do *teshuva.*"[12] Maturity, in the spiritual sense, will then tarry – perhaps never to arrive....

But now, what is the conscience, the *yeitzer ha'tov,* that we seek to internalize?

This leads us to the second vignette.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter says that *yeitzer ha'tov* is often a synonym for the intellect (*"seichel"*) while *yeitzer ha'ra* is frequently identified with emotion (*"kochos ha'nefesh"*).[13] Not, says Reb Yisroel, that intellect is always used for the good, nor that emotion is always for the bad. The converse can, and does, occur. Nevertheless, following intellectual conclusions will usually lead one to good; following emotional drives will generally lead elsewhere.

When a person internalizes *emmes,* awareness and contemplation grant the objectivity necessary for a true *cheshbon ha'nefesh.* The *Rambam* tells us that the first test of *Adam Ha'Rishon* was not that of good vs. evil, but rather that of *emmes* vs. *shekker.* If *emmes* is external, then the *kochos ha'nefesh* – and *shekker* – hold internal sway, and evil follows – extending gradually, imperceptibly, at first, then sprouting and growing beyond control.[14] External awareness cannot do the trick.[15]

But, indeed, how do we educate ourselves (and others) to achieve *Emmes*?

We must *think,* we must *ask,* we must

[7] Perhaps *Chazal* had this problem in mind when they advised one who feels compelled to sin to don different garments, wrap himself differently, and go to a place where no one knows him before committing the sin (see *Mo'ed Kattan* 17a): A person must know that sinning is not compatible with being a part of Torah society. All too often we "walk the walk and talk the talk," and gloss over our shortcomings with our extrinsic affiliation.

[8] It is interesting, in this context, to note that Reb Itzele from Volozhin, in his *he'ora* at the beginning of his father's *Nefesh HaChaim,* cites *Mekkubalim* who locate the *yeitzer ha'ra* between the *penimi'im* and the *makkifim.* (A very beautiful and understandable explanation of *Ohr Penimi* and *Ohr Makkif* is in Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin's *La'Torah v'la'Mo'adim* in the section on *Simchas Torah Hakkafos.*)

[9] *"Resha'im mele'im charata"* – *Shevet HaMussar* chap. 25, on the basis of *Nedarim* 9b; see the discussion of this concept in the *Hakdomas Talmid HaMechaber* to the *Avnei Milluim.*

[10] Of course, the classic description of that battle is to be found in one of the many "must see" sources upon which this essay is built, the *Kunteres HaBechira* in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* vol. 1, p. 111ff. (Most of this essay is captured by the *Michtav Mei'Eliyahu* in his analysis of *"Ein lecha ben chorin ella me she'oseik ba'Torah"*(*Avos* 6:2) there, p. 117ff.)

[11] This is in line with the *Chazal* that we cited in note 4, that we are born with a *yeitzer ha'ra,* while we acquire a *yeitzer ha'tov* at *bar* (or *bas*) *mitzva.* The expansion of that *yeitzer ha'tov* is then a life-long process.

[12] *Yuma* 85b. The *Nefesh HaChaim* (1:12) notes that sinners live in the midst of their accumulated *Gehinnom* – the constant distracting stimuli of this world prevent them from experiencing it on an ongoing basis. Upon leaving this world, divested of its commotion, they finally confront and experience the shame and degradation of their activities. That accumulated *tuma* is destructive, and makes *teshuva* all the more difficult as well.

[13] *Ohr Yisroel Iggeres* 30, Vilna 5660 edition and reprints p. 84. Everything we have discussed (and more) is essentially found in the *Ohr Yisroel,* there, and in the first lines of the *Iggeres ha'Mussar.*

[14] See *Sukka* 52b.

[15] *"Yod'im resha'im she'darchom l'misa, v'yesh lahem cheilev al kislom"* – *Shabbos* 31b.

seek *answers*, we must demand of our *Rav* or teacher or *sefarim* that they give us answers, which we must then *contemplate* and *internalize*.[16]

(Here, of course, there is a difference between the case of the televisions and the case of the women and *Olam Habba*. In the former case, the congregants know the answers - they try, mostly with success, to avoid thinking about them. In the latter case, someone actually asked a question – but was told not to ask. In both cases, the intellectual faculty is suspended - in the former, internally; in the latter, externally.)

So how do we go about doing this?

### FROM CONTEMPLATION TO INTERNALIZATION

Let me answer on the basis of an experience. I once gave a *hashkafa shiur*, in which I presented all sides of the issue, even those that I was going to ultimately reject. Someone asked me:

■

When a person internalizes *emmes*, awareness and contemplation grant the objectivity necessary for a true *cheshbon ha'nefesh*.

■

Why present positions that are against *Mesora* even as an intellectual *hava amina* (premise)? Suffice it to say that the *Gedolim* oppose position X!

At first glance, this approach is tantalizingly appealing. It certainly saves significant mental exertion, which may then be devoted to *mego, rov* and *chazaka* [classic Talmudic stratagems]. Furthermore, there is a strong emotional appeal in the simple citation of "*Ru'ach Yisroel Sabba*." Much literature in our circles is based on this approach. This apparent short cut, however, is not without potential pitfalls:

Declarative statements remain extrinsic. It is only by inculcating the quest for truth and meaning; by acquiring and imparting both the truth and its basis; by training ourselves and others to rigorously assess, analyze and critique; by thinking, that we internalize the *yeitzer ha'tov* of *emmes*, and we "*mohn*" (make demands) of ourselves. It is only when we ourselves make demands of ourselves that they are truly inescapable. We (the congregation) will only change when we ourselves demand it of ourselves, not when the *Rav* demands it from us.[17]

This is not to say that that there is no room for rote education. As Rabbi Dessler notes (*Michtav Me'Eliyahu* vol. 3, pp. 131-133), there is much that one can learn "by osmosis" – by absorbing values from the right environment and contact with the right people. Indeed, in the right environment, one can reach levels of outstanding piety.[18] But, says Rabbi Dessler, one's true level is what he has accomplished on the basis of habituation, but what he has accomplished in his personal battle with the unique *yetzer ho'ra* that *Hashem* has imparted to him.[19]

The *Maharal, Be'er Ha'Golah*, end of

[16] I would like to note to the many readers who are familiar with the 19th century children's story of "Pinocchio" that the tale serves as a very powerful metaphor for this essay.

[17] The *Shem MeShmuel* on *Dayeinu* in the *Haggada* says that the reason *Am Yisroel* in the *Midbar* fell so many times from very high levels to great depths is because the *madreigos* that they acquired were not their own internal accomplishments, but extrinsic ones conveyed to them by *Moshe Rabbeinu*.

[18] *Editor's note*: Along the lines of the positive impact of the right environment, it is interesting to note the comment reported by NRP MK-elect Mrs. Gila Finkelstein in the name of her father ("The New Face of the National Religious Party," *The Jerusalem Report*, Dec. 30, '02): *A year later she [Mrs. Finkelstein] got her own wig. It wasn't a simple decision. For many modern Orthodox women, covering one's hair remains one of the most complicated mitzvos to accept, a symbol of servitude. Finkelstein felt that way, "My own mother, who was very Orthodox and a descendant of the Vilna Gaon, didn't cover her head. And my father never insisted." But he came to regret that. "Before he died, he once told me, 'The stupidest mistake of my life was that I didn't ask your mother to cover her hair.' He came to believe that the head covering set a religious tone in the house, that had my mother done so, perhaps my [oldest] brother wouldn't have turned secular." – NW.*

[19] Rabbi Dessler explains further: There are people who give much money to *tzedakka*, and are even meticulous to do so in secret, but are nevertheless dishonest in their business practices. How can a person can be so inconsistent? He explains: This person became habituated to the trait of *tzedakka* from his environment, but never became habituated to the trait of honesty.


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*Be'er* 7 says it best. Only when we fully explore and comprehend the truth. Only then will we be able to best our enemy (he was talking about an external one, but in our discussion we are dealing with our internal adversary):

*When an individual does not intend to scoff – rather only to state his belief – even if these positions stand against your belief and system, don't say to him: "Don't talk, seal your mouth!" For then the system will not be clarified. On the contrary, in such matters we should say: "Speak as much as you want, all that you want to say, so that you will not be able to say that were you granted permission to expand you would have spoken further [and convinced me with your beliefs]." If you do close his mouth and prevent him from speaking, that points toward a weakness in the system. This [approach] is the converse of the general impression, which is that it is not permitted to discuss the system, and that thus the system is strengthened. On the contrary! That approach undermines the system!... Thus [through the former approach] a person comes to the inner truth of matters... for, any hero who competes with another to demonstrate his might wants very much that his opponent muster as much strength as possible. Then, if the hero overcomes his opponent, he proves that he is the mightier hero. What might, however, does the hero display if his opponent is not permitted to stand strong and wage war against him?...*[20]

It is worthwhile to recall here Reb Chaim Volozhiner's[21] explanation of "*Hevei mis'avek b'afar ragleihem*" (literally translated as: "Sit in the dust at the feet [of the Sages]"). He explains *mis-avek*, based on Yaakov *Avinu*'s encounter with Eisav's *malach*, as connoting wrestling: You must wrestle (intellectually) with your *Rebbe* (with respect, of course – "at his feet") – ask questions, demand answers – not to test the Rebbe, *Rav* or teacher, but to get your own mind in gear so you can make your own *cheshbon ha'nefesh* (reckoning) and be your own conscience: "*She'yisbarer v'yisames eitzel ha'Adam ma chovaso be'olamo*. That a person's task is in his world should be clarified and become compellingly true to him." (Introduction to *Mesillas Yesharim*).

## STRIVING TO BE *HASHEM*'S CHILDREN

In taking our thesis to its conclusion, we might understand an interesting perspective of the *Zohar HaKadosh*. The *Zohar* calls the 613 *mitzvos* "*Taryag Ittin*" (613 Suggestions).[22] Although there are other interpretations, the obvious derivation of "*mitzva*" is from the verb *tzaveh*, i.e., command. Why does the *Zohar* depart from the simple meaning?

Perhaps the *Zohar* is pointing at the difference between the external *yeitzer ha'tov* and the internalized *yeitzer ha'tov*. At the earlier stage, the *mitzvos* resemble the rules and regulations that an external system must impose on its constituents. This is the level of *avdus* – the impositions of a Master on His servant.[23] For the immature individual – be he seventeen or seventy – structure of rules is necessary: a system to confine him to the straight and narrow.

But it is not for that end that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* created us: "*Bannim attem la'Hashem Elokeichem*" (*Devarim* 14:1). The more we internalize "*Hashem Elokeichem Emmes*," the more we achieve that true *Tzellem Elokim*, which is our innermost essence. Our conscience is then not imposed by command but by inner truth – no longer the directive of a Master to a servant, but the loving advice of a Father to his beloved – and loving – child.

I know it's hard to think. My learning *rebbe* in camp a quarter century ago, Rabbi Hillel David שליט"א, challenged us: "You have no idea how many problems you can solve if you just think about the same thing for five minutes straight!" Many years later, I still find it next to impossible to focus on a thought for more than a few seconds at a time.

But just think... if we would just think.... ■

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[20] See also the *Alter* from Kelm, *Chachma U'Mussar* vol. 2, p. 50 and p. 76 - *Mesora* and Thought must go hand in hand.

[21] *Ruach Chaim* to *Avos* 1:4.

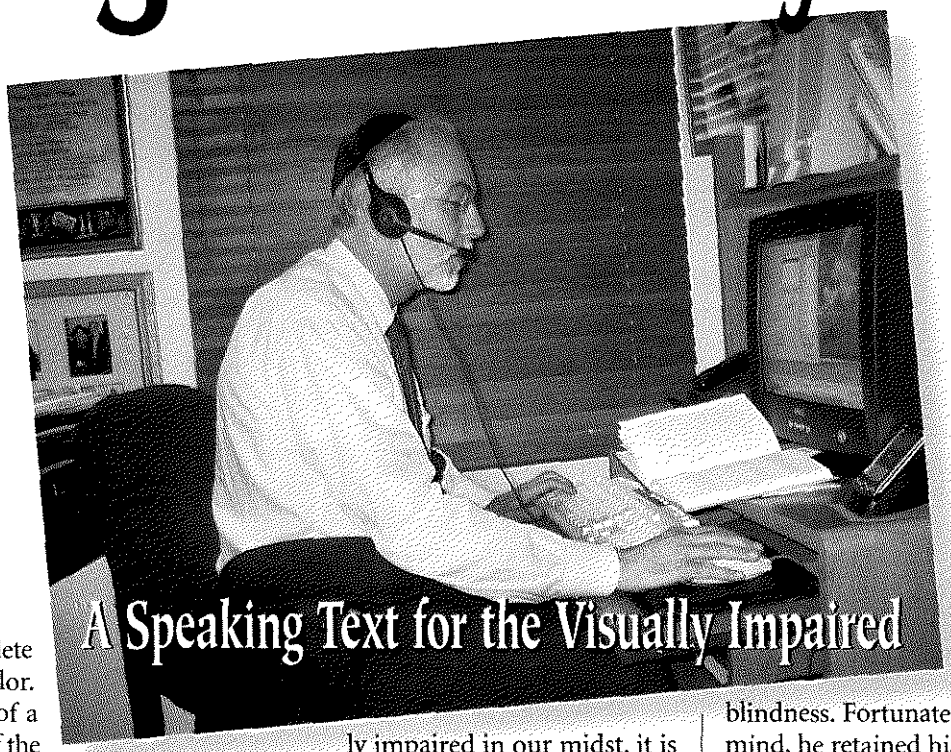
[22] Reb Tzaddok *HaKohein* of Lublin expands on this *Zohar* (vol. 2, 82b) in numerous places. See, for example, *Tzidkas HaTzaddik simanim* 68, 156 and 219.

[23] I know I am on shaky ground here. After all, the *Chofetz Chaim* did not recite "*Berich Shmei*" because he found it presumptuous to state about himself "*Anna avda d'Kudsha Berich Hu* – I am G-d's servant" (see *Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz* vol. 1, the discussion on the German *minhag* not to recite *Berich Shmei*). The Torah reserves the praise of *Eved Hashem* for *Moshe Rabbeinu*. But there are different connotations to *avdus*, and I am using the term here in its more negative implication.

*Avrohom Birnbaum*

# "Light of the Eyes"

## A Speaking Text for the Visually Impaired



### SPARKS OF TORAH IN A DARK WORLD

The world is replete with vivid color. The deep red of a rose, the bright blue of the sky, and the radiant yellow of a sunflower. But for the blind there are no colors, there is no light. How then is it possible for the "light of Torah" to shine upon their otherwise dark world? Just a few months ago, I merited seeing how the light of Torah penetrates all barriers.

A young man was sitting in front of a computer no larger than a *Mishnayos.* He told the computer "*Chumash,*" and the computer started saying the first verse of the Torah. He then commanded "*Rashi,*" the computer began reciting the *Rashi* on that verse. "English," and, yes, the computer began translating the *Rashi.* "Next *Parsha.*" "Next *Aliya.*" "Previous *Perek.*" "Where am I?" "Read Faster." "Read Slower." "Stop Talking." Whatever the user said, the computer responded faithfully. I thought I was dreaming. For the thousands of visually impaired in our midst, it is indeed a dream come true.

The Chofetz Chaim once remarked that the technological advances of his times were for the purpose of increasing Torah study and *avodas Hashem.* Without a doubt, the inventing of the computer and its associated technology has achieved one of its primary purposes in helping bring Torah to people who cannot read with their eyes. Indeed, a shining light has burst into the dark world of the blind with the founding of a truly unique organization called Computer Sciences for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CSB), "*Meor Eynayim,*" founded in 1997 by Rabbi Nachum Lehman.

### IT STARTED IN A *KOLLEL*

It all started several years ago in a small *kollel.* Reb Yitzchok M., a *talmid chacham* and pillar of the *kollel,* was stricken with an incurable eye disease. Day after day, month after month, his eyesight deteriorated. Despite the doctors' best efforts, Reb Yitzchok eventually suffered a complete loss of vision. Reb Yitzchok heroically overcame the logistical hurdles, as he learned to deal with his blindness. Fortunate to possess a sharp mind, he retained his learning partners while continuing to be an integral and inspirational part of the *kollel.*

Despite Reb Yitzchok's efforts, though, his level of learning was compromised due to the nature of Torah study and his disability. Although his *chavrusos* would read the *Gemora, Rashi* and *Tosafos* aloud, there was no independence and no second chance to review difficult passages. Anybody who has been involved in Torah study knows that it entails much more than recitation of text. The scholar must be able to interpret the nuances of the text and contemplate the meaning of each and every word. Such study requires constant and independent review, an ability Reb Yitzchok was not afforded. Even tapes and telephone *shiurim,* which helped immeasurably, were still no substitute for the text-based learning that allows for contemplation and digestion of the written word of a *sefer.* When limited by the material presented by another person, or on a tape, the interactive factor

**Rabbi Birnbaum,** an educator in Lakewood, NJ, and a regular columnist for *Hamodia,* is a frequent contributor to these pages. For products or services described in this article, contact CSB: Computer Sciences for The Blind and Visually Impaired, 2132 84th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11214, (718) 234-6476

Photo: Rabbi Raymond Beyda recording Pirkei Avot for CSB

so integral to successful learning, is lost.

It seemed that the *Hashgacha elyona*, Divine Providence, saw Reb Yitzchok as the appropriate emissary to trigger what can be called, without exaggeration, the beginning of a technological revolution for the visually challenged.

Reb Yitzchok asked one of his *chavrusos*, Reb Nachum Lehman, if he could help and help he did. With his knowledge of computer programming, he spent many months researching the technologies available to the blind community, but was unable to find a workable solution for Reb Yitzchok. Reb Nachum came to the unavoidable conclusion that custom-made software would be necessary to allow Reb Yitzchok to learn freely and naturally. With the help of two professional programmers and several volunteer readers, Reb Nachum commenced the seemingly insurmountable task of giving those unable to read with their eyes, the ability to read with their ears! Through indexed computer recordings of the *Gemora*, *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, several *Rishonim* (early commentators) and *Acharonim* (later commentators), along with custom-made MP3 software, Reb Yitzchok was given the ability to once again learn independently. With the press of a key on the keyboard, Reb Yitzchok could simply access any part of the *Gemora*. He could choose to have it read faster or slower. He could go backwards or forwards, repeat words, or press a button for *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, or one of the many other commentaries that were recorded for him by his peers. Reb Yitzchok was like a fish back in water, as he tackled the *Gemora* with gusto for the first time since he had been struck by blindness.

## AN EXPANDING INTEREST GROUP

This small, in-house project was just the beginning. Word of this innovation spread quickly and Reb Nachum received several requests to install the system for other visually impaired individuals. At the time, the system was not portable and required hours of work to install on new computer systems. That is when Reb Nachum realized that there was a general need for accessible Torah literature, not only for the blind, nor only for scholars like Reb Yitzchok, but also for the many others who could not read conventional texts.

To assess the necessity of the program for the wider public, Reb Nachum ran a small ad in one of the weekly *Chareidi* newspapers. From that single ad, he received more than 70 telephone calls! Besides calls from the visually impaired and learning-disabled, calls come from elderly people whose vision had deteriorated, and parents of young children who were unable to read due to visual or learning disabilities.

He approached *Gedolei Yisroel* for guidance, and was persuaded to expand his program to cater to Jews from all walks of life and all levels of learning. Rabbi Avraham Pam, זצ"ל wrote the following emotional words: "This organization is of utmost importance, and it is impossible to estimate the tremendous *chessed* of it. Praised be those who merit to be a part of this wonderful *mitzva*. A great amount of reward awaits them in This World and in the World to Come."

## ADDRESSING THE NEEDS

As new requests continued to pour in, volunteer readers were recruited for more advanced scholars who needed large quantities of material, and teachers were enlisted for material being recorded for children. In some venues, entire networks of volunteers were assembled to provide for the recording needs of an individual.

One such area was Baltimore, Maryland, where the *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky זצ"ל, was legally blind and was saying a daily *shiur* for his *talmidim*! Reb Nachum had received a telephone call from a member of the Baltimore Kollel detailing the *Rosh Yeshiva*'s situation, and the need for the CSB system. After meeting with Rabbi Kulefsky and demonstrating the system to him, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was noticeably excited and began listing *sefarim* he needed for the coming semester: "*Gemora, Rashi, Tosafos, Rosh, Rashba, Pnei Yehoshua*, and of course Rabbi Akiva Eiger." A room in the Yeshiva was set aside where a computer system was installed for *bachurim* and *Kollel Yungeleit* to record throughout the day for their beloved *Rosh Yeshiva*. A second computer was placed in the *Rosh Yeshiva*'s office for him to use the material

Reb Nachum recalls that one of the saddest moments in his life was when Rabbi Kulefsky personally asked him for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*Ramban* and *Ohr Hachaim* on the entire *Chumash*, a tremendous task. He had to explain to the *Rosh Yeshiva* that it was beyond the means of the organization at the time, but אי"ה, one day, it would be done for him. A few weeks later, Reb Nachum learned that the *Rosh Yeshiva* had left this world, and that he would never have the opportunity to fulfill his commitment to him.

CSB has since completed its first professionally distributed product: the recording of the entire *Metsudah Chumash* with *Rashi* and their linear translations. This project alone involved hundreds of hours of recording, reviewing and editing, and took over four years to complete. It was sponsored by several generous donors and is distributed free of charge to needy users. It can be installed on any standard computer.

### SOME OF THE ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSES

One blind woman who is a special educator to both sighted and blind children writes:

*"One of the subjects that I teach is* Chumash. *The* Metzudah Chumash *has been an extremely valuable tool that allows me to better comprehend the* Chumash *as well as teach it to my students. This* Chumash *will especially benefit my students who have trouble decoding written text and will enable them to process it and understand it."*

The *menahel* of a yeshiva reports:

*"Two boys in the Yeshiva benefit from your* Chumash *for the blind and dyslexic that are available in CD format through your office. Our weekly* Parsha *tests on* Chumash *and* Rashi, *a simple task for most, is an arduous one for these boys. This program greatly simplifies the test preparation process for them."*

Here is a letter from a father:

*"My daughter has recently been considered legally blind. The day I received your 'talking* Chumash' *CD, my daughter was overjoyed. Not only did it enlighten her greatly, but it also motivated her to learn and study* Chumash *and* Rashi *with much more enthusiasm. Though she still needs help with other subjects, her difficulties in* Chumash *have basically been solved, B"H. May* Hashem *give you much success in helping others who reach out to you."*

It is worth noting that the father who wrote the above letter is blind himself and also benefits from other recordings available from CSB.

Soon after the first version of the *Chumash* was released, there were several requests from physically disabled users who could not operate a keyboard. That's when Reb Nachum integrated voice recognition system so that anyone, no matter the disability, could learn *Chumash* by simply speaking to their computer. (Personally, I found it remarkable to witness the system in action.)

Next is *Pirkei Avos* with English translation, a full English commentary, and the Hebrew commentaries of the *Rav, Rashi, Ramban* and *Rabbeinu Yona.* CSB hopes to begin distributing this great work within the next few months.

Numerous *Gemora, Mishnayos,* and *halacha* works are already available


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through the years of volunteer work done for the project across the country. These texts are available to all users upon request. Currently, the CSB library contains over 40 chapters of *Mishna Berura* including the *Biur Halacha* and *Shaar Hatzion,* a compilation of 250 hours of recording.

### ADDING THE VISUAL COMPONENT

CSB is in the process of creating a visual component, whereby the words corresponding to the audio recitation appear on the screen. This will be extremely beneficial to the partially disabled and will be therapeutic for those with language, reading and visual disorders. In addition, many children with dyslexia will be immeasurably empowered by being able to hear the words while simultaneously viewing them on the screen.

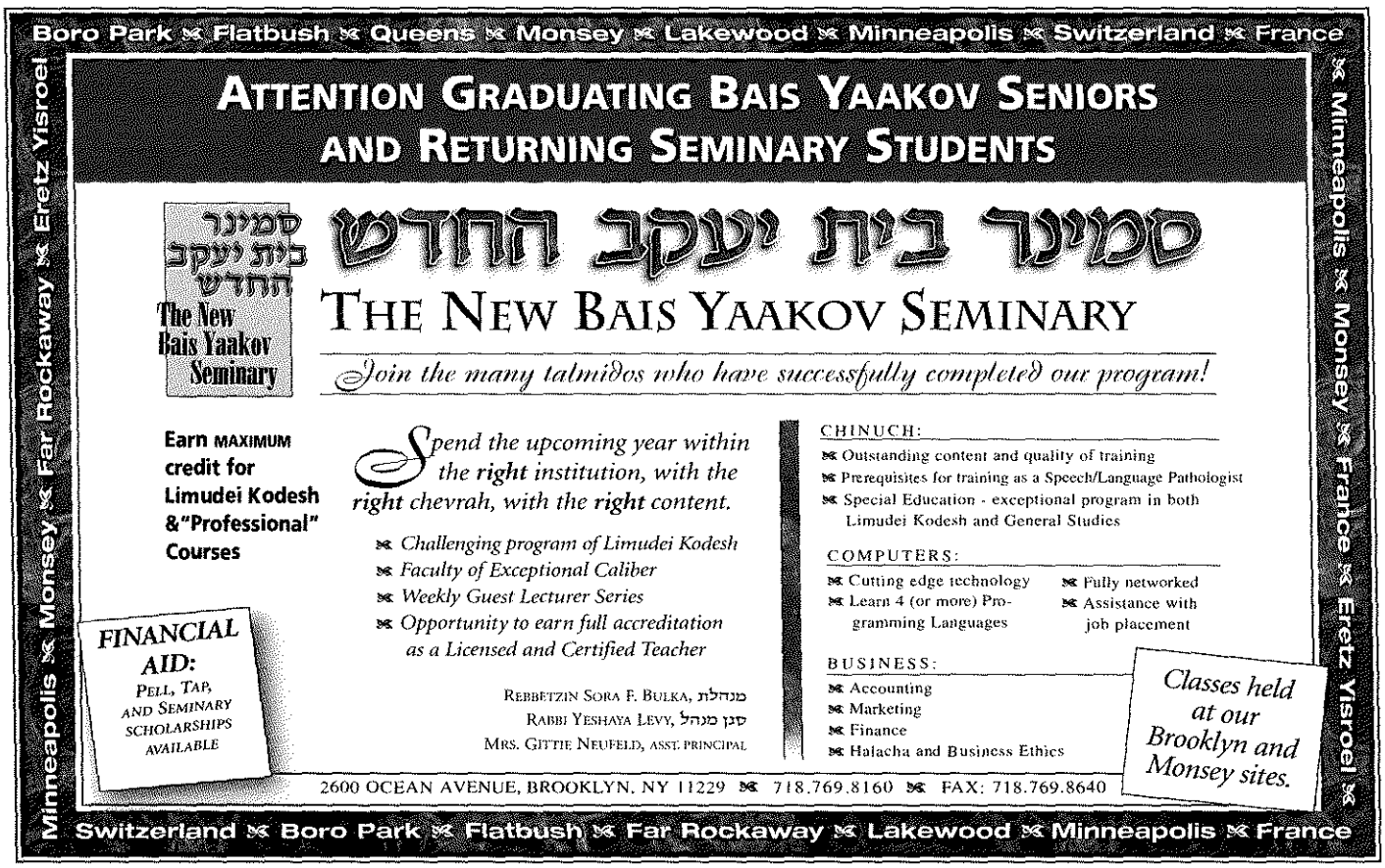
In addition, CSB has begun the development of several children's games that will be integrated into the *Chumash* software, as well as into additional texts to be released. They are working closely with teachers and parents of visually impaired children to create a fun, effective learning experience which will help them overcome their disability and excel in their studies. CSB is also working to expand the library with professional recordings of basic Jewish texts such as *Tehillim, Nach,* and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch,* all with translations and commentaries.

Another important issue being addressed is the issue of pronunciation. The Ashkenazic, Sephardic and Chassidic communities each pronounce words differently. This is especially relevant when learning with small children who may be confused by the different pronunciations. At this point, most of the material available is in the Ashkenazic pronunciation. Rabbi Raymond Beyda, the popular Sephardi Torah lecturer, has agreed to spearhead and actually compose the Sephardic library himself. Material in Chassidic pronunciation is available on a limited basis and will be expanded in the future.

The users of the current programs and texts range in age from 7 to 90 and reside in such diverse locations as New York, California, Australia, England, Israel, and many places in between.

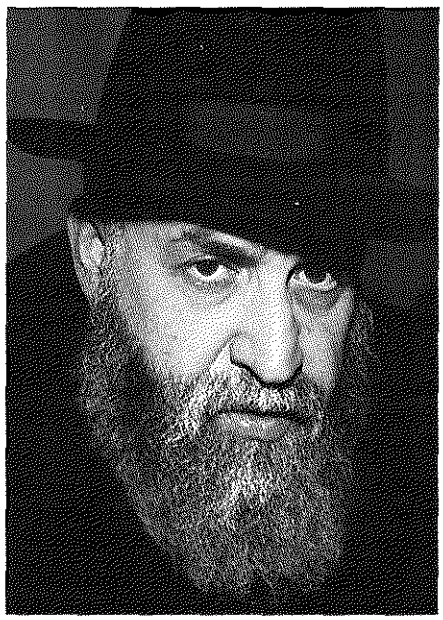
The stories that come back to Computer Sciences for the Blind make their efforts worthwhile. Here is a letter from a father of four who tragically lost his eyesight:

> *"I would like to thank you for creating the* Metsudah Chumash *talking program. I find it easy to operate. Because of this program, I can now do* Chumash *homework together with my four children. Their consequence of my vision loss is now much less. I already feel that it is creating new bonds between my children and myself. May the One Above pay you back for your beautiful project, caring and kindness. I really thank you for making a difference and for changing the dark into light."* ■

# Biographical Notes

The passing of Rabbi Gavriel Ginsberg זצ"ל, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Ner Yisrael of Toronto on 5 Shevat/January 8, marked a great loss for the Torah community. Rabbi Ginsberg, in his close to five decades of teaching Torah, had a profound influence on generations of students.



Rabbi Ginsberg was born in New York in 1930. His entry into the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland around 1946, was a watershed in his life. Absorbing the lessons of the great founders of the Telshe Yeshiva on this continent, Rabbi Elya Meir Bloch and Rabbi Chaim Mordechai (Reb Mottel) Katz, זצ"ל, Rabbi Ginsberg became the quintessential "Telsher."

In 1956, not long after his marriage to Chana Schindler ע"ה, Rabbi Ginsberg moved to New York where he joined the Beis Hatalmud Yeshiva, absorbing its dedication to *lomdus* and *mussar*. While in Beis Hatalmud, he founded and ran a pre-high school yeshiva that served as a preparatory yeshiva for its mother yeshiva.

In 1962, Rabbi Ginsberg was asked by the Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe, Rabbi Mottel Katz, to return to Cleveland and rejoin the Telshe Yeshiva, first as *Mashgiach* and later as a *Maggid Shiur*. Rabbi Ginsberg served as the example *par excellence* that American-born yeshiva students also could attain advanced levels of Torah scholarship.

In 1970, he assumed the position of *Menahel* of the Chofetz Chaim Yeshiva High School in Forest Hills, Queens. In 1985, Rabbi Ginsberg founded the advanced Kollel on the West Side of Manhattan, where he served as *Rosh Kollel*. In 1988, he took up his final post as Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisrael in Toronto, where he remained until his passing. Noteworthy in his lifelong *harbatzas haTorah* was his role with Mr. Avi Schulman in the founding of Torah Umesorah's SEED Program in the 1970's. This involves dispatching groups of yeshiva students and married *kollel* scholars to set up makeshift *yeshivos* and outreach centers in communities across the country during their summer intercession.

These early SEED Programs served as harbingers of the eventual establishment of *kollelim* and mini-*kollelim* in those same communities.

The loss of this great educator and visionary *marbitz Torah* is mourned by his thousands of students, and the many more who were influenced by his great contributions to the world of Torah. – A.B.

# Angelic Reflections

## A *TALMID* REMEMBERS HIS *MENAHEL*, RABBI GAVRIEL GINSBERG זצ"ל

**"... Seek Torah from his mouth, for he is a *malach* of *Hashem*" – *Malachi* 2,7.**

Rabbi Ginzberg, founding *Rav* of Ohr Moshe Torah Institute in Hillcrest, NY, is currently *Rav* of the Chofetz Chaim Torah Center of Cedarhurst (Long Island), New York. He is a frequent contributor to *JO*, most recently with "*Ivri Anochi*" (March '03).

One could fill a volume with the various interpretations of the *malach*-like qualities an effective *Rebbe* might have. Years ago, I thought of a possible interpretation of this *pasuk* : If we examine the activities of *Malachim* in the lives of our *Avos*, we find one common denominator; whatever they did had a lifetime's impact.

The *Malach* that spared Yitzchak at the *Akeida* (Binding of Isaac) saved his life for the 140 years ahead.... The *Malach* that shed a tear in Yitzchak's eyes blinded him for life.... The *Malachim* that escorted Yaakov on his journey to Lavan protected him from fateful harm,

as did the *Malachim* that greeted him on his return to Canaan. Perhaps, then, the *Navi* is teaching us that the *Rebbe* one seeks to learn Torah from should be like a *Malach Hashem* in that his teachings should have an impact on you for a lifetime.

This interpretation took on new meaning when I learned of the untimely passing of the *Rosh HaYeshiva* of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel in Toronto, Rabbi Gavriel Ginsberg זצ"ל. It had been close to thirty years since Rabbi Ginsberg was my *Rosh Mesivta* (high school principal) at Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim of Forest Hills, N.Y. (now located in Kew Garden Hills). In fact, since he attended my wedding eighteen years ago, I seem to remember only two occasions where I saw him again (one of those times was at the *levaya* of his devoted *Rebbetzin* ע"ה several years ago), though we spoke several times on the phone.

Clearly, then, I should be the last person to reflect on the passing of this great Torah personality. Yet, in keeping with this *passuk*'s message, the lessons he taught us so many years ago seem to be leaving their imprint for my lifetime.

Allow me to share some lifelong lessons that have remained with us from almost thirty years ago.

### A QUESTION FOR A *GADOL*

In the mid-seventies, New York Jewry was heavily focused on the plight of Soviet Jewry. There were mass protests and demonstrations both in New York City and in Washington, D.C. One year, a major demonstration was being organized for a Sunday morning at the United Nations Plaza. As in most *yeshivos*, Sunday was a learning day, like all other days of the week, and school would end at 3:30 in the afternoon. A few friends joined me in approaching Reb Gavriel with the request that we be allowed to leave early to participate in the rally.

In response to his question regarding our real motivations, we of course humbly insisted that they were 100% pure. After all, it's an "*Eis la'asos*," there are times that you must close the *Gemora* for *pidyon shevuyim* – liberating our brothers from captivity. Reb Gavriel thought for a moment and responded, "I have great respect for your deep love for *acheinu bnei Yisroel* [a great lesson in *chinuch*: how to talk to a group of know-it-all fifteen-year-olds]; however, it means *bittul Torah da'rabbim* (canceling a group's Torah study). While you might be right, I cannot take this upon my small shoulders. Let's ask Reb Moshe." We all proceeded to the office to call Rabbi Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל for direction.

This incident of long ago never left me. A man older and wiser than any of us understood better than us the meaning of every moment of *limud haTorah*. Yet, he felt incapable of rendering such an important decision on his own. The angelic message that has always remained with me is that for decisions on *bittul Torah da'rabbim*, one needs to turn to the *Gadol HaDor*, whose shoulders are broad enough to assume responsibility.

### HOW DOES ONE *NOT* CRY?

Another lifelong lesson was the depth of feelings that a *Rebbe* must feel for a *talmid*. At the tender age of sixteen, my *chaveirim* and I were totally unprepared to deal with the loss of a childhood friend and classmate who had been with us since our preschool days. Our *chaver*, Avrohom Tzvi Wertenteil ז"ל – a tall, strong, athletic sixteen-year-old boy with a wit and unforgettable smile – took ill, and within a very short period tragically passed away.

Having been selected by my peers to represent them in words of *hesped* (eulogy), I consulted the *Menahel* (Principal) for some direction. Reb Gavriel had not had much personal contact with Avrohom Tzvi, as he had not yet been in his *shiur*. I opened the conversation, explaining my confused feelings and total fright of speaking at a *hesped* for the first time in my life, and I asked for some guidance. Reb Gavriel hesitated for a moment, and then began to sob uncontrollably for the remainder of the meeting.

I was startled, to say the least, as I had never seen a grown man cry so unashamedly, and without explaining why. But the lesson was clear. To him, a *talmid* was like his own child. How does one *not* cry for one's child? As I reflect upon the intensity of his crying, it was more like the cry for an only child.

I also remember vividly something I saw Reb Gavriel do at the *levaya* (funeral) itself. Standing before the open grave, immediately before the *bnei hayeshiva* were going to fill it in, Reb Gavriel reached into his pocket, pulled out his *Siddur*, kissed it tenderly, and placed it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on top of the *aron* (casket). This was done without fanfare, witnessed only by myself and one other boy.

The *Siddur* that Reb Gavriel had put in the open grave was his own personal *Siddur*. He used it three times a day, always looking inside it while *davening*. He carried it with him at all times. I asked him then, and again, on another occasion, why he put that *Siddur* (which was in perfect condition) into the *kever* (grave). He never answered me.

Later I did understand. His *Siddur* meant so much to him, as did *tefilla* in general. At that difficult moment, he demonstrated that while the *levaya* would soon be over for the rest of us, he left a piece of himself behind. A powerful lesson from an angelic *mechanech* (pedagogue).

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### NOT JUST ANOTHER PROFESSION

To Reb Gavriel, being a *mechanech* was an opportunity to emulate *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, who is described as "*Melamed Torah La'amo Yisroel* – Teacher of Torah to His Nation, Israel." More than a job, it defined who he was and what his life was all about.

Whenever we *davened* together, I observed his intensity in *tefilla*. One occasion, however, stands out in my memory. It was an ordinary *Mishmar* night, when following the evening learning session, all the participating high school classes would join together for *Maariv*. On this one evening, as we were about to start, the timer clicked off the lights, leaving the only illumination in the room coming from the memorial bulbs on the wall. As I went over to the box to turn on the light switch, Reb Gavriel stopped me. He said, "It's the perfect setting for a special *davening*. Let's make it special!" And special it was. He transformed an ordinary Thursday night *Maariv* into a *Ne'ila* type experience for everyone in that dimly lit room.

In addition to the year I spent in his *shiur* – which always erupted into a frenzied and lively "*Milchemta Shel Torah*" (battle royal over the meaning of the text, and its ramifications) – I had the privilege at the age of 16 to be his *chavrusa* (study partner) for a six-month period. One day he mentioned to me that since Pesach that year would fall out on *Shabbos* night, there were *halachos* to learn regarding the laws of *Erev Pesach She'chal BeShabbos* (Pesach Eve on *Shabbos*), and we should start the following week. Over the weekend, I came across a recently published booklet by a prominent *Rav* reviewing all the pertinent *halachos* for this day. I purchased it and showed it to Reb Gavriel: "Here, with this booklet it will be much easier."

He thanked me for the booklet, but commented, "If one wants to really be successful in learning, he should never look for the *easy* way. That may work for every other area of study, but not for Torah."

He put aside the booklet, and we spent the next several weeks delving into the *sugya* – first in the *Gemora*, then in the *Tur*, *Rambam* and *Shulchan Aruch*, followed with the *Mishna Berura*. When we finished, all he said was, "Now we're ready for *Yom Tov*."

Since that time, I have made every effort not to look for an easy way to tackle a *sugya* – guided by that angelic lesson reverberating in my head, "This is not the way to study Torah."

### MASTER OF MANY TONGUES

*Chazal* tell us that each member of the *Sanhedrin* had to know seventy different languages. The question is, Why? After all, the members of the *Sanhedrin* had to be completely immersed in learning Torah. Why take the time to master 70 languages?

An *Adam Gadol* (great man) once

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explained that each member of the *Sanhedrin* had to communicate with many types of people – with rich people, as well as poor; with *yesomim* and *almanos* (orphans and widows); leaders, followers and stragglers. Each of these groups has to be spoken to differently. The language of a *yasom* is not that of a family person; the language of a *kalla* (bride) is not the same as that of an *almana*. They were required to speak and understand so many languages in their communication with the various groups in *Klal Yisroel*.

Reb Gavriel also spoke those many languages. He communicated with high school boys in his role as *Rosh Mesivta*. He communicated with *ba'alei battim* (laymen) in his function as a *Rav*, and with *Kollel* members in his capacity as *Rosh Kollel*. He communicated effectively with members of each and every group, because such is the essence of a *mechanech*.

One of the last conversations I had with him was in the summer of '86. While still a Kollel member in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim of Forest Hills, I had been approached to open a new *shul* in the Hillcrest community in Queens. There were pros and cons, and I was agonizing over the decision. Reb Gavriel heard of my difficulty in deciding the right course of action, and called me long distance from Toronto.

His first question to me was, What does the *Rosh Hayeshiva* say? He wanted to share his thoughts on the matter with me, but he wouldn't speak until he heard whether my *Rebbe muvhak* (prime teacher), the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Henoch Leibowitz שליט"א, had voiced a similar opinion. After all, he was always insistent that we do not veer from our beloved *Rebbe*'s *mesora* (legacy) whatsoever.

Once he had hear that the *Rosh Yeshiva* was encouraging me, he began to shout his endorsement of the idea as well. His words to me were, "If I were twenty years younger, I would do exactly the same thing as you are doing. I know you will have tremendous *hatzlacha*!" Many years later, I heard that he had voiced similar words to many different *talmidim* embarking on new projects, giving them much-needed *chizuk*.

I did not have much contact with him after that period, but over the years I have heard from so many people that they had met Rabbi Gavriel Ginsberg, and he had asked about my family, my *shul*, and my well being. He may have been in a different country with his own *yeshiva* to develop, yet he never stopped caring about his former *talmidim*, even decades later.

If my understanding of the *passuk* in *Malachi* is correct – that a person whose impact on his *talmidim* remains for a lifetime is the kind of *Rebbe* one should search for – then the *talmidim* of Reb Gavriel, without a doubt, have fulfilled the immortal words of the *Navi* and found just that type of *Rebbe*. May his memory be a blessing to all. ■


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# The Cousins Connection

The noise dances. The wooden floor shakes in reply. Smells of stuffed cabbage and a burnt-out candle embrace, as the kids' Purim snappers hit the same beat of pop, pop, pop. A gentle, frail-looking pirate, her patch slipping down her face to reveal her tears, cries because a snow-white-bearded Mordechai trampled her as he pushed his way to *Zeidy* to get his Purim dollar.

Surrounded by sisters-in-law I usually love to talk to, I now stand silently, for I cannot compete with soldiers' guns blasting, unsynchronized singing of "*Purim, Purim Lonu*" and kids shouting, intoxicated with sweets in the spirit of the holiday. I stand and smile and drink in the glorious scene.

Forcefully, demandingly, the lonesome Purim nights of my childhood come into focus. With my sister married and my brothers drawn to their yeshiva's revelry, my parents and I spent those nights in the company of mismatched *mishlo'ach manos* packages. Our neighbors' *hutzkening* amplified the quiet in our apartment, a lonely island near jubilant seas of *simcha*.

The night of Purim symbolizes for me the void I felt as a child and the richness I am filled with now. For family – extended family – is the lifeblood of The Purim *Seuda*! And an extended family is what I was desperately lacking when I grew up. Hitler *yemach shemo* robbed me of the most priceless treasures of childhood. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins stolen from me.

No weddings to go to. No cousins to visit and sleep over at. No aunts to ask their opinion on a new dress. I was a lonely, "cousinless" child. True, I had two brothers and a sister. But they were all older than I and in a different category. We did have family on my mother's side, but it was small and they lived miles and oceans away. But I had plenty of empty moments to dream. I would dream of meeting one of my father's four sisters – taken for dead all these years, but actually alive and pining for my father. I had the reunion figured out to the last detail. *We found our aunt!* I would shout for all the world to hear. (*And would you believe it? I was now related to my favorite teacher.* Why not throw that in too while I was dreaming?)

I would sit at the window and watch girls I knew from school walk down the block to visit their grandmother who lived on the corner. I envied them for their relationship, especially when I noticed the cousin bond cut across ages. Three girls in my elementary class were first cousins to each other. How lucky they were with their built-in friendship. They would squabble perhaps, every now and then, but there would always be a happy ending. There had to be. Their loyalty was blood thick. Their social life was secure.... I remember how stunned I was when a classmate of mine nonchalantly commented, "I think that girl is my second cousin, but I am not sure."

Then I would yearn for my future family. I had strong intentions of holding onto every niece and nephew of mine with a tight-hold grip. I was not going to relinquish any part of my family. This comment brought with it a nightmare. That night I blurted out to my brother: *Moshe Chezky, can you imagine? My grandchild and your grandchild will be second cousins, and won't even know each other!* I was horrorstricken by the thought. To a terribly lonesome and cousinless child, this thought was devastating.

At my *vort*, the room swarming with my *chassan's* nine siblings, spouses, children, and four aunts and uncles. My mother announced, "Esther Malka Hindy, you always begged me for a big family. Well, you finally got what you always wanted."

After I got married, I cherished every aunt and uncle (relishing the taste of their titles of "Uncle" and "*Tante*" rolling off my tongue) and wanted to know the name of every cousin. As the years moved on, however, I was heartbroken when I discovered the pitfalls of a large family – children did not know their great aunts and great uncles, much less that their second cousins even existed. This family needed a wake-up call, and I understood that need, felt that need.

**Mrs. Kviat**, a mother of four, teaches English and Creative Writing in a Brooklyn girls' high school.

So I was the one to sound the alarm.

The idea: A Cousins Convention. Who was invited? The granddaughters of my mother-in-law and those of her sisters. About 40 girls ranging in age from 7 to 12 walked into my house, their faces a mixture of anticipation and "Why in the world did I get myself into this?" But then the program started. They learned each other's names, played fun games and sang, learning a theme song about how cousins are worth a MYLLION – the MYLL standing for the names of the shared great-grandparents: Moshe Yehuda and Leah Lieberman. "*Gathered at the Cousins Convention, to pay special attention, that you are my extension,*" their voices blended. And then they listened, wide-eyed, as *Tante* Rachie, a great-aunt and master storyteller, wove the rich (and almost soon-to-be forgotten) past into the present. The "once upon a time" brought to life *Zeidy* Moshe Yehuda and *Bubby* Leah – practically every child in the room had siblings carrying their names. The children were transported back in time, enthralled by the stories of when their grandmother (the other children's great aunts) was a little girl. What fun to listen to *Tante* Esther argue with *Tante* Shirley over who it was that jumped out of the car on the way to the doctor to have their tonsils taken out. How thrilling to hear how *Tante* Miru, an infant at the time and sleeping on a pillow, was almost aired out the window by the cleaning help.

And then some solemn moments, when *Tante* Debora ע"ה, the oldest of the five sisters, is remembered: especially her selflessness in leaving school to sew neckties to help her father (*Zeidy* Moshe Yehuda) pay his choking debts.

The cousins left on *Motza'ei Shabbos* clutching their family directories (which also listed birthdays to encourage them to call each other on their birthdays) and carrying the knowledge that they belong to a greater whole – a group called Family.

*Motza'ei Shabbos* and all of Sunday the phone rang continuously. My first cousins (mothers of the children who had attended) were delighted to tell me how their daughters came home brimming with excitement and bursting with family lore. Each little girl became the heroine of the hour as she repeated the family stories she was privileged to hear at the Convention.

After the next year's convention, the girls over 13 were clamoring for a convention for their age group. (The boys put in their request too; we're still waiting for someone to volunteer to take care of that one.) The Lieberman Cousins Convention was now entering a new dimension. It was no longer just a *Shabbos* afternoon affair, but a *Shabbaton.* The teenagers were placed at a cousin's house with all the cousins their age. Hesitantly and bashful, they walked into their hosts' house on *Erev Shabbos,* from Flatbush, Monsey, Lakewood, and Boro Park, wondering how strangers could act close like cousins should.

After *licht bentchen* all the girls gathered at my place for a program. We *davened,* then played a game in which the cousins were placed into groups at random so that they could get acquainted by interacting with each other. The hush that accompanied the cousins as they had somberly walked into my house was gone. The hearty *Gut Shabboses* and thank you's on their way out were clear evidence that the warming-up process was in full swing. And when it was time for bed, those eleven girls – my daughter's age, staying at my house – who had stood awkwardly around the living room a mere few hours ago, shy and tongue-tied, could not stop talking. On *Shabbos* morning, they refused to tell me what time they finally had closed their eyes (and mouths) to go to sleep.

The highlight of the Convention *Shabbos* was the afternoon get-together. Each age group was assigned a different aunt to pick up and escort to the *Shalosh Seudos* gathering where we ate, sang, and were regaled by *Tante* Rachie's stories (and the other great aunts' comments). When *Shabbos* was over, the picture-taking sessions began. The great-aunts sat in the center – our guests of honor – flanked by 30 teenage Lieberman great-grandchildren.

I stood at the side watching, heart bursting with happiness, relishing the moment of this family portrait. But not for long, for soon I was summoned to join the picture. For *Baruch Hashem,* I too am part of this extended family. ■


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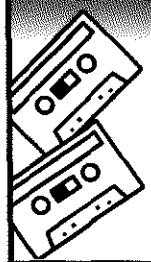
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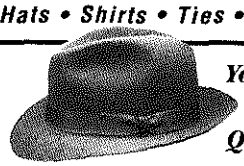
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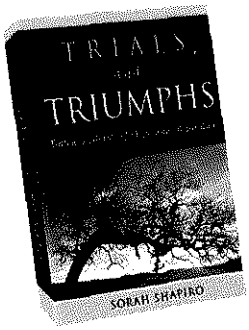
# BOOKS IN REVIEW




***Trials and Triumphs, Timeless Stories of Hope and Inspiration,*** by Sorah Shapiro *(Judaica Press)*

*Reviewed by Libby Lazewnik*

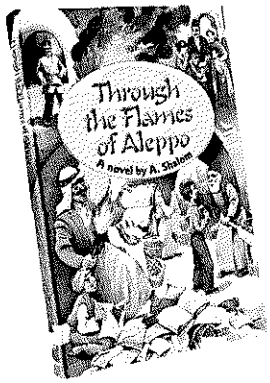
Sorah Shapiro's little gem, *Trials and Triumphs*, is a pocket-sized compendium that will put a new gloss on old values and buff up a faith that may have grown a trifle stale. It's also, simply put, a great read.

Though the tales are historical, they bear a definite relevance for contemporary times. In *The Double-Edged Sword*, for instance, a powerful king sets out to find one truly contended man. When he finds him – and when we read about Leibel's ability to find joy in whatever *Hashem* decrees, though he is put to the test again and again – I found myself wondering why *I* can't be that way. Leibel makes it seem easy.... In the rush-and-tumble of our lives, we can lose sight of the things we should be aspiring to. The shining examples of character and faith on these pages – Yossel's courage in the face of hot-headed Russian soldiers, a Marrano family's desperate clinging to the faith of their fathers, a pious couple's unwavering belief in their *rebbe* – are there to remind us.

One of my favorites was *Earring from Mecca*, which brought to vivid life the dangers and dilemmas of Jewry under Muslim rule. A wicked imam's anti-Semitic initiative provides a humble tailor with the chance to play hero, and to surprise and delight the reader with his ingenious plan to (literally) catch the Sultana's ear for the benefit of his fellow Jews.

As the subtitle indicates, these stories *are* timeless. The author's use of descriptive language and her tightly-woven narrative style evokes seasons and feelings that will capture the reader's heart in any day and age.

I know they did mine. ■




***Through the Flames of Aleppo,*** by A. Shalom, *(Mesorah Publ. Ltd., Brooklyn, NY, 2001 $11.99)*

*Reviewed by Lisa M. Herman*

It is late November / early December 1947. These are turbulent times for the Jews in the Middle East and particularly for those in Syria. The UN has just voted to accord "statehood status" to the Jewish area of what is called Palestine, and Arab riots have erupted throughout the city of Aleppo (as well as in other sectors of the Arab world).

We meet Ezra, who is about ten, and catch a glimpse of life through his eyes: his family, their *hohsh* (house and courtyard), the merchants with whom he chats on the way to *kittab* (school), his classmates and *Rebbe*, and his Arab neighbors. His close-knit family is framed by his father, Eliyahu, his mother Rachael and Uncle. There is also Pauline, Margo and their Arab manservant.

The story begins amidst flames. The Great Synagogue has been set ablaze and the Aleppo Codex (the classic source for the *Mesora* of *Tanach*) has been thrown into the fires, soon to be rescued. There is smoke in the air and the merchants fear for their wares. Some families are lined up to witness while the Muslims burn their houses to the ground. We experience the terror young Ezra feels as he steals stealthily through the city to fetch Sarina, the midwife, for his mother. He successfully accomplishes his mission, and the baby is born. The story ends with the intervention of the king, and a proud Ezra gazing at his new baby brother.

This is an exciting and exotic historic tale. Although the action begins abruptly, after the first few pages, the storytelling becomes clear and flows. Fast-paced and replete with vibrant images, this is a novel to be enjoyed by the whole family. ■

**Libby Lazewnik** a published poet and author, lives in Baltimore.

**Mrs. Herman,** who teaches English in a Brooklyn Bais Yaakov, reviews books for JO.

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***Editorial Note:*** *The following letter addresses a theme discussed in previous issues, dedicated wholly or in part to Children at Risk. The letter writer speaks from the perspective of a parent who passes on the lessons she gained from JO articles and personal experience.*

## WHAT WILL THE NEIGHBORS THINK?

To the Editor:

This letter addresses specific situations. Even if they sound familiar, it does not necessarily follow that the description or prescription would apply in every case. The use of these examples are illustrations of how to place the entire process in perspective.

*You walk in your community with your head held high. You nonchalantly smile at your neighbors while pursuing a normal conversation with your friend. You appear content, yet no one sees your inner turmoil and pain as you cry yourself to sleep at night. Your outward appearance depicts a rewarding life, yet your inward emotions cry bitter tears. Time passes. You begin to back off from friends, you attend fewer family* simchos *and community events. You are now feeling isolated and forlorn. You have difficulty facing your acquaintances and fellow* shul *members. Some of them keep a distance and have difficulty speaking to you, while others appear to be uncomfortable around you. You perceive that nobody understands your pain. The shame is so intense. What are these people going to think about you and your family? You feel alone. There is no one to comfort you, to demonstrate care or concern. Tension rises at home. You begin to blame your spouse. The children sense the static. They begin to exhibit fear due to the insecure air that permeates the home. Home is no longer a warm and loving environment; it has become a pervasive battleground.*

Welcome to this new realm. As you enter this new *parsha* (segment) and embark on this journey of parenting a struggling adolescent, I greet you with bittersweet emotions. This is not a sphere where one generally stations oneself to receive guests. Nevertheless, I do present myself to you as hostess to this new world. I invite you with open arms as you begin to experience some strange phenomena. At this juncture, I extend to you feelings from the bottom of my heart and from the deepest recesses of my *neshama.* Empathy, compassion, care and love are what I offer you as a means to help you understand the complexity of this confusing world.

### *Where Do You Go From Here?*

You are now standing at the threshold of your child's new domain. Where do you go from here? As responsible parents, you may contemplate seeking the aid of a professional. You would probably expect to get a quick fix. No doubt you would like to hear a clinician utter words such as, "This is what you should do so that your child can revert to her/his previous ways." This sounds much like the motherly myth of kissing a baby's booboo and saying, mommy will make it all better." Instead, the competent therapist is honest with you and puts all the cards on the table. You are informed that the various signs of rebellion may remain status quo for a while or could be the beginning of an altered lifestyle that may take a few years to resolve. Then comes the shocker. It is suggested that your child may have to hit rock bottom before climbing upward and turning around. This is not at all what you wanted to hear. You now have two choices. You may wish to remain in denial of your child's current status, or you may attack this problem head on and see it to its fruition.

The first choice may be the easier one. You may not wish to face the reality of your child shifting from your family's traditional lifestyle. Why should you accept your child's preference of living in an emotionally and religiously

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unhealthy manner? You are also probably reflecting on your child-rearing skills and cannot calculate what went awry. You know that you gave your child the best education possible along with a home environment that depicts a Torah-true home. That being the case, where did you go wrong? When and how did you lose control over your child? Who is to blame? With no substantial and sensible answers, you begin to blame everyone around you, your spouse and yourself included. Guilt then goes hand in hand with blame, and you now internalize the problem as your own. What perplexes you, though, is how your child can have her/his own agenda when you, the parent, have controlled your child's home environment and upbringing for so many years. None of this makes sense.

### *The Teen's Agenda*

What of the rebellious teen's agenda? You notice your child's style of clothing and head covering change and so does the interest in her/his religious observance. Your child is now keeping company with different friends, not necessarily to your liking. Her/his choice of leisure and entertainment does not coincide with your family ways. By now, you have probably switched your child's school at least once or twice, if not more. As to your child's performance, s/he is showing little or no interest with school responsibilities and, in general, seems to have difficulty with functioning properly at school. Patience is wearing thin. As each new change takes place, your anxiety level is rising. You are now faced with the shame of your child's visual changes. What will your family members say? **What will the neighbors think?** You now begin to limit your conversation with your friends for fear that someone will make a judgmental statement. How can you keep your head up anymore?

If my description depicts some, much or most of your current lifestyle, then that is because... *been there, done that*.... It is for this reason that I would like to take you further into this journey, to my sector of this world where loneliness no longer exists. Terror, hostility and conflict are familiar to me, yet they are words of the past. Our family environment shifted during these past three years because my husband and I took the second choice. We decided that we were going to help our son in any and every which way possible; whatever it took on our part. As a result, those descriptive words of negativity slowly diminished as our household took on a more peaceful status. How was this accomplished? As my husband and I traveled through that hostile territory, a definitive growth process initiated more positive feelings. Support replaced loneliness, serenity substituted for turmoil, while the negative energies of anxiety and frustration were exchanged for a more productive outlook. This achievement was reached as we developed a new inner strength, the result of which was a life rich with emotional and spiritual growth. This sojourn took place with the direction of a compassionate and competent therapist as our guide, using our *seichel* (basic intelligence) as our compass, and utilizing skills and tools that we had amassed throughout our sessions as our vehicle. Equally important were the support and friendship of many other people who had already *been there, done that.*

### *Some of the Lessons We Learned*

I would like to humbly share some key points that my husband and I have learned. This knowledge enabled us to contend with the daily struggles that sometimes reached crisis levels. The basis of this concept helped alleviate the anger, resentment, shame and guilt. The underlying factor was about **our growth**. Once we understood that *we* had to be the ones to grow and to make the necessary changes, we no longer *expected* to see immediate changes in our son. We recognized that our son would be going through his own search and discovery, which was going to be his sojourn during this period of his life; his *nisayon* (challenge). After all, his *neshama* was taken from the same *otzar* (treasury) as ours, and had its own


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mission to accomplish on this world. We were going to have our own separate *nisayon*, which entailed being on the receiving end of our son's decisions and choices. Our *tafkid* (mission) was to be his guide, not his master. Our own *nisayon* was definitely linked to our son's but had its own integrity. Hearing this new understanding gave us the strength to let go of the guilt. We knew that such *nisyonos* were being experienced by many fine and good families throughout the world. We realized that this struggle was about HIM and not us. We now had more peace of mind so that we could forge forward in helping our son heal as we would be healing first.


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### *A Non-Controlling Position*

It was at this point that we acknowledged that we could not control what our son would be doing during the next few years, nor could we attempt to stop anything from happening by him or to him. All we could do was to establish rules in our home, to be implemented in a compassionate, loving, yet consistent manner. We knew that we could not stop this struggling process from happening; we could only be there with love to help him through the difficult times. Being there with love means unconditionally. It means that we would love him as our son and accept him no matter what he would be doing. This was no easy task, but who says life is easy? As we worked on ourselves, we embraced new traits such as compassion, understanding and patience. This does not mean that we lacked those traits to begin with. Embracing such traits means incorporating those characteristics within our being. We were now able to tolerate his different lifestyle and just focus on the pain of his *neshama*.

I would imagine that at this point you would be questioning, "Am I missing something? What pain of his *neshama*?" After all, who is the one who is suffering with a high degree of pain and shame at the abominable choices that this teenager made? Who is the one who must contend with daily fighting, noncompliance and *chutzpa*? Who is the one who must pick up all the pieces and make constant changes in the family structure? Who is the one who is being treated like a *shmatteh*(rag)?

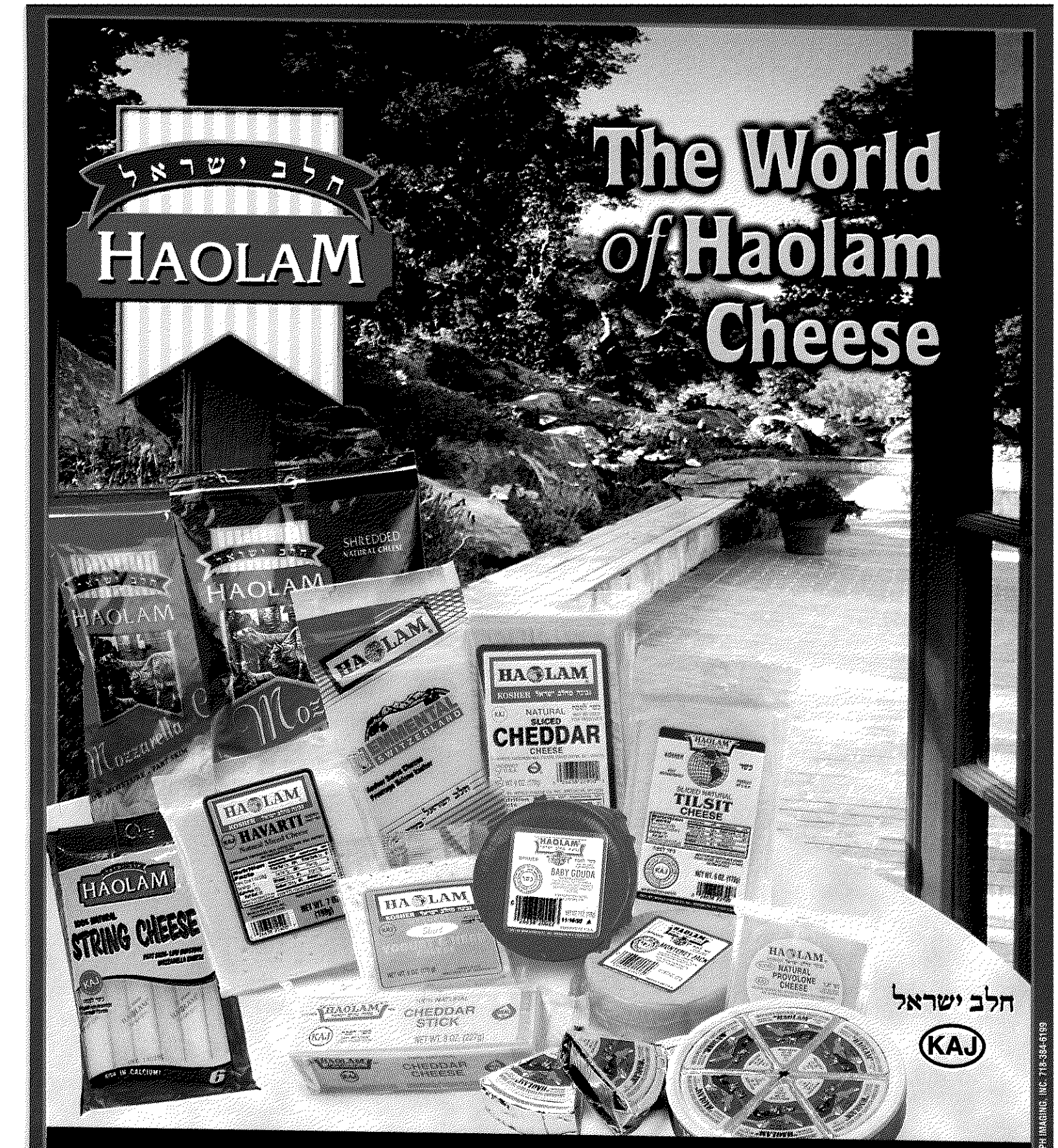
My friend, if you answered "I" to the above questions, then you are correct. Yes, *you* are the one suffering greatly at the hands of this struggling adolescent. However, I have a few more pertinent questions to ask that require much honesty and soul searching. Who is the one with the very sensitive *neshama*? Who is the one who may have been ill-treated by authority figures? Who is the one who may have learning disabilities and cannot handle the structure and rigors of a "normal" school curriculum? Who is the one who may have been embarrassed due to being kicked out of class so many times (whether it was or was not the child's fault)? Who is the one who may have been physically, emotionally or verbally abused by someone, whether it be peer or adult figure? ... When you take a sensitive *neshama* and add one or more of these criteria to that pure and innocent soul, the total adds up to a very pained *neshama*.

### *Cry for Yourself, Focus Elsewhere*

Cry for yourself, yes. Feel sorry for your difficulties, yes. Empathize with you for your pain and your shame, yes. However, DO NOT FOCUS ON YOU! Your focus should be on your child and what you must do to help your child heal. Your child's actions and choice of lifestyle are expressions of a very deep pain that emanates from her/his *neshama*. S/he is crying out, "I have difficulty with my current lifestyle and I do not want to live my life as you do." Do not discard your child's call for help by being contentious. Be there. Love your child unconditionally and do what you can to maintain a loving, warm and caring relationship. It is the unconditional love that will help bring this child back to where you would like to see her/him be in the future.

TIME and PATIENCE are the key to this process, and with it comes the opportunity of much growth. Seek the help you require to help make a difference in your struggling child's life, in your family's life, and mostly, in your own life. A challenge was presented to you as a gift from *Hashem*. This gift is your struggling child. Utilize this gift well and grow with it.

MRS. DEBBIE BROWN

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