

The Jewish Weekly

The Letter from an Orphan Janitor

by Rabbi Tuvia Bolton

There was a Jew named Yisrael who lived the last thirty some years of his life in Israel, in the city of Bnei Brak, holding the same janitorial job throughout. He was a very simple, hardworking, genuine person, yet he never really was able to read Hebrew.

Born in the USA, Yisrael had a difficult childhood. When he was nine years old his father passed away. His mother, thinking that her child would hamper her chances of remarrying, put him into a Jewish orphanage.

The orphanage advertised that they were strictly religious and promised her that her child would not transgress the Shabbat. But they lied. They sensed that she wouldn't check up on him and soon poor little Yisrael found himself working seven days a week.

He felt that something was wrong, but because he was young, really hadn't received much of a Jewish education and was quiet by nature, he didn't make any problems. Instead, he suffered silently and prayed for some sort of miracle.

And that's what happened. One day when he was eleven or twelve, he saw a very impressive photo of an elderly bearded Jew in a newspaper, and below it was an article. The man, who was called Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak, was the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He had been in communist prison but now lived in Brooklyn, and he loved to help people and he made miracles.

Yisrael said to himself, 'He will understand me,' and decided to write him a letter. It took him a few days to get up the courage and, because he wasn't such a good writer, a few more to actually write it.

Then there were the problems of getting a stamp and envelope and putting the letter in a mailbox without being noticed. But his simple determination prevailed and finally he proudly managed to sneak it off in the post.

The letter began with his sad story and ended with a request for a blessing to not have to work on Shabbos, or even better yet, to get out of the place completely. But after three weeks of no reply he just gave a sigh, said to himself, 'Looks like I won't get an answer,' and forgot about the entire incident.

Then, one morning there it was! A letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe to him! A miracle letter!

First: it was the first letter he ever received in his life! Second: It was the first time anyone paid attention to him. Third: this great, holy Rabbi actually noticed him!

And two more miracles: no one intercepted and destroyed the letter he sent, and another that the same thing didn't happen to this letter he received.

He took the envelope to his room, closed the door, sat down, opened it and began to read.

The Rebbe wrote that he was happy to hear from him; that Jews must always be strong and proud to be G-d's people and that he shouldn't worry. Then he wished him Mazal Tov on his upcoming Bar-Mitzva and assured him that when he began putting on tefillin, things would get better.

Sure enough, when Yisrael turned thirteen his mother bought him a pair of tefillin. A few weeks later the orphanage miraculously decided to find him a job 'outside' and, again miraculously, his new boss did not require him to work on Shabbat.

The Rebbe's blessings all came true and when he reached the age of fifteen he had saved enough to move out of the orphanage completely.

But he didn't forget the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak. As time passed he became more attached to him and his chassidim and by 1950 when the Rebbe passed away and was replaced by his dynamic son-in-law Rabbi Menachem Mendel, Yisrael despite his handicaps, considered himself to be a full-fledged Chabad chassid.

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But the new Chabad Rebbe was more demanding. He explained often and at great length deep existential and kabalistic concepts, such as, how G-d creates all being constantly, the eternal uniqueness of the Jewish people and how the Torah is the blueprint of it all. But he always managed to put these ideas in a simple inspiring way.

For instance, how we can learn to serve G-d from electrical appliances.

We are surrounded by electrical appliances: lights, ovens, telephones, computers etc. that are activated by a completely invisible power; electricity. These appliances provide powerful and positive things as light, warmth, motion, and communication to benefit man. But only if we push the right button to turn them on.

Similarly, in each Jew (and each human) is an invisible power called the soul. This power, like electricity, is invisible, but it has the ability to illuminate, warm up and bring blessing and meaning to the world.

We only have to push the proper button; find a way to motivate each Jew. And when we do, we find that a little light and good, pushes away much darkness and bad. We can stop the pain, suffering, war and ignorance in the world.

Yisrael took this idea seriously, as did all the other chassidim. Soon young men and newlywed couples began traveling throughout the world to spread the ideas of chassidut, but Yisrael didn't know what to do in order to participate in this mission.

He was very shy, spoke with a bit of a stutter, didn't have any talent for writing or teaching or much of anything else. He couldn't give charity because he didn't have any money. He tried to learn Torah but couldn't really concentrate for long. All he could do was be honest, nice and pray.

So he prayed for another miracle. And again it worked! He had a brainstorm.

It Once Happened...

The previous Rebbe had written three small booklets translated into English. Each contained forty-some pages of simple explanations on chassidic ideas about G-d, the Jews and Torah and other interesting things.

Yisrael bought three pamphlets, bound them together with a piece of cardboard, wrote on the cover: "Chassidut Chabad-Lubavitch", tucked it in his coat pocket and went to the Brooklyn Public Library. After strolling over to the 'Judaism' section, he took a book from the shelf, pretended to be reading it and then, when he was sure that no one was watching, put the book back on the shelf with his Chassidic creation next to it, and made his departure. (Something like how he secretly mailed that letter to the Rebbe).

He calmly left the library, looking straight ahead, feeling as though he had just completed a mission-impossible espionage job! He had planted a seed of Judaism in the world, and prayed that it would bear fruit.

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One night, years later Yisrael was riding the subway home from work in an almost empty subway car. Only one other person was sitting there, reading his newspaper. Yisrael looked his way just as the other fellow also looked up from his paper and a conversation ensued.

Yisrael told him he lived in Crown Heights and was a Lubavitcher. The other fellow, also a Jew, replied that he lived in Monsey and although he wasn't a Chassid, Lubavitch made him religious.


His story was like this. He was not from an observant family, and until about five years ago knew almost nothing about Judaism. But then, one day he happened to be in the Brooklyn library looking for a book on Judaism when he noticed a strange booklet in the bookcase that seemed out of place. He took it out, saw it had a makeshift cardboard cover with a crudely handwritten title about chassidut, opened it up from curiosity and, although he didn't really understand much of what it said, he couldn't put it down!

It was something about chassidic Judaism and had a completely different angle on G-d, the Jewish people and the Torah. For the first time he saw that Judaism was something very deep and alive. That really got him interested and eventually made him an observant Jew.

So our Yisrael the janitor actually saw the fruits of his labors!

Reprinted from an email of Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim, www.ohrtmimim.org.

Editor's Note: the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson ז"ל's 73rd Yahrzeit and the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson's inauguration 5711 (1951) was Wednesday, 10th Shevat – February 1st of this year.



Shabbat Times – Parshat Beshalach

	Candle Lighting	Motzei Shabbat	Motzei Shabbat ר"ת
 Jerusalem	4:39	5:54	6:33
Tel Aviv	4:54	5:55	6:29
Haifa	4:44	5:53	6:30
Be'er Sheva	4:57	5:57	6:34



Wandering Jews in the 9th Arrondissement By Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles

The farbrengen (chassidic gathering) room in "770 Kfar Chabad" - a near replica of Lubavitch World Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, NY - was more packed than usual, Old-timers and community members as well as yeshiva students crowded around the tables, hoping to clearly hear and imbibe wisdom and history from Rabbi Zalman Sudakevich (1915-2012), one of the founders and builders of the chassidic village.

For several consecutive hours they listened spellbound, with only a few brief pauses to toast "l'chaim" and perhaps sing in unison a stirring chassidic melody, as Rabbi Sudakevich described to them the enormous difficulties of living a chassidic life in Russia during the decades of Communist oppression, arrests, torture and executions, which he himself also suffered personally.

He also related fascinating episodes from the years of struggle for the Russian chassidic immigrants to Israel to establish Kfar Chabad (located one train stop east from Tel Aviv, before Lod and Ramle), at the instigation of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson (the "Rebbe HaRayatz"), and after the Rebbe passed away in 1950, with subsequent encouragement, instructions, advice and blessings of his son-in-law successor, Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, who also gave them specific instructions how to interact with government offices and the public.

At one point Rabbi Sudakevich digressed to tell about an unusual mission given to him by the Rebbe HaRayatz during an interval in his life between the two long periods in Russia and Israel. It happened after the immigrants arrived in Paris from Russia, and had to be there for many months (and for some, years) before becoming able to continue on to Israel.

"In 1947, several months after I reached Paris, a most unusual message was received from the Rebbe HaRayatz. [He sent his son-in-law (and future successor), who was in France at the time to help with his mother's immigration to America.] to instruct two senior chassidim, Rabbi Yehuda Hain and Rabbi Chayim Shreiber, that they should spend time walking through different streets of the city. I asked to accompany them.

"Why did the Rebbe require this? For what purpose? We had no idea. But the Rebbe had said it, and that is what we should do, so, we did it."

The three rabbis set out the next morning. Not having the faintest clue where or what direction to go, they wandered aimlessly through the Paris metropolis, wherever their feet and impulses took them.

They turned into yet another side street, and before they had gone more than a few meters, they heard a call that halted them immediately.

It was a woman's voice. "Jewish rabbis! Can you please wait for me a few moments?"

They looked up, seeking the source of the voice. In a fifth floor window they spotted a grey-haired older woman, who again called down to them, begging that they wait for her until she can come down to join them.

"Can this be what the Rebbe intended?" They murmured to each other.

The woman walked briskly up to them. Although slightly out of breath, she spoke with strong emotion. She identified herself as a Jewish woman, and that her grandson was soon to turn thirteen. It was her deepest wish and concern that he learn the basics of Judaism, that he should know what is tefillin and be trained how to put them on.

Her voice broke. "I want him to celebrate his bar-mitzvah properly, like a kosher Jew, but I have no idea where in Paris there is someone who can instruct him for this."

The three rabbis smiled broadly as they stared at each other in amazement. They felt certain this was why the Rebbe had insisted they wander around Paris.

They turned back to the woman and one of the older rabbis gave her directions to a synagogue not far from the apartment house of her daughter, whom she was then visiting. They knew that the rabbi there could teach the boy everything he needed, and in a warm manner.

Rabbi Sudakevich lifted his cup, proclaimed "l'chaim!" and concluded his recollection: "If we hadn't taken our 'stroll' at the Rebbe's orders, who knows if that boy crossing the threshold to the Jewish age of responsibility would ever have found out about the mitzvah of tefillin."

Immediately, one of his listeners sprang to his feet. "Reb Zalman, do you know the name of the street in Paris where you met that woman, and which shul you directed her to?"

His tone of voice was one of curiosity, but those sitting near him saw that he was tense as a coiled spring.

Rabbi Sudakevich stared at his questioner, Rabbi David Lesselbaum, a devoted chassid who also was a resident of Kfar Chabad, and hesitated to reply. "Ah, this was many years ago, several decades, but if I remember correctly, it was in the Fifth District, on Fourth or Fifth Street." He paused again as he scratched his forehead, "and the name of the shul was Rashi Synagogue."

"Unbelievable!" exploded Rabbi Lesselbaum. "According to your description, the woman that you three spoke to, was my grandmother of blessed memory, and the bar-mitzvah boy...was me!"

All those present stared at Lesselbaum in astonishment. He continued: "Indeed, 1947 was the year of my bar-mitzvah. I received from my parents an education totally devoid from Judaism, but somehow my grandmother managed to convince them that I deserved to be given a taste of authentic Judaism in preparation for my bar-mitzvah. My private lessons took place in the Rashi Shul, which I now understand my grandmother knew about only because of her encounter with you three rabbis!"

Rabbi David Lesselbaum is a well known figure among the French-speaking Jews in Israel. Over the years he has helped hundreds of them to grow in their observance of Torah and the commandments, all due to the mysterious demand of the Rebbe HaRayatz of his three chassidim, to wander aimlessly through the street and alleys of Paris.

Reprinted from an email of KabbalaOnline.org.

He is probably the most outstanding Biblical role model for our times.

This is my view of Yosef. But why am I referring to him at a time when our public Torah reading is from the Book of Shemot? This is because in Parshat Beshalach there is a reference to Yosef. The Torah describes how at the very moment when the Bnei Yisrael were hurrying to take whatever possessions they could as they were fleeing the land of Egypt, Moshe was engaged in a special mission: To find the remains of Yosef.

This is because Yosef had made his family promise him that they would take his remains with them when the nation eventually left Egypt. So the Torah tells us, "ויקה משה את עצמות יוסף עמו" - Moshe took the bones, the remains, of Yosef with him."

I would like to add some depth to this statement. Yosef had received the finest possible education, within his parents home. It was thanks to that education that he was well prepared for the challenges of life ahead of him. It was thanks to that education that he was able to withstand temptation and always remain true to the traditions of his people.

For Yosef what was important was that he should integrate, but not assimilate.

Yosef engaged with the Egyptian society, in fact so much so that he rose right to the top of that society. Instead of allowing the Egyptian culture and way of life to influence him, his actions always reflected the finest quality of his tradition and families.

No wonder therefore that, of all Biblical characters, the Talmud only refers to Yosef as 'יוסף הדיין' - Yosef 'the righteous'.

So in Parshat Beshalach we're told, "ויקה משה את עצמות יוסף עמו" - Moshe took the remains of Yosef with him." Yes, it was important both literally and figuratively that Yosef should not be left behind. Indeed he accompanies us to inspire us right to this very day.

So let's try to remember how Yosef was, caring for others and let's join together to bless our soldiers and healthcare professionals, and Chevra Kadisha members worldwide, for peace and for those who need healing, shidduchim, children and parnassah and may we be blessed to have the most awesome, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful, healthy, amazing, relaxed, spiritual and sweet Shabbat

Yossi

The Jewish Weekly's PARSHA FACTS

NUMBER OF MITZVOT: 1
MITZVOT ASEH: 0
MITZVOT LO TAASEH: 1

NUMBER OF PESUKIM: 116
NUMBER OF WORDS: 1681
NUMBER OF LETTERS: 6423

HAFTORA:
Ashkenazim & Chabad: Shoftim 4:4-5:31
Sephardim: Shoftim 5:1-31

The Shabbat on which Parshat Beshalach is read is called **שבת שירה**, because it contains Az Yashir. (15:1-18).

שבט is Monday, Feb. 6, 2023.

בשלה
פרשת

This week is sponsored
In memory of the 7 victims of last
Shabbat's terror attack in
Neve Yaakov and in honor of a speedy
recovery for all injured in both attacks
last Shabbat