

The Rebbe's SEFER TORAH

The Small Sefer Torah often referred to simply as - “The Rebbe’s Sefer Torah” - has its beginnings rooted in a moving saga from one of the earliest periods in the history of Chassidus; *“The Story of the Brothers from Slavita”*.

Each year on Simchas Torah the Rebbe would dance vigorously with this Torah, it is a moment etched within the memories of the countless people who merited seeing it. As we approach Simchas Torah, we present a detailed account of the history this unique Sefer Torah possesses. The article travels from the time of its birth, over 150 years ago, throughout its long journey to becoming the Rebbe’s prized belonging.

EARLIEST BEGINNINGS

The primary source, which tells over the story of this Sefer Torah in its entirety, is a Sefer called “Yechidei Segulah” written by Rabbi Isser Frankel OBM. In it he tells over about a pair of individuals more commonly known as the “The Brothers from Slavita”. The two brothers owned one of the first Printing houses, dedicated to printing Seforim. Chassidim may know

them best as the Printing House that was first to print the Tanya.

In his Sefer, Rabbi Frankel wrote a section called: “The Inherited Sefer Torah”, in which he tells over the story as he heard it from Reb Shmuel Abba Schapiro, a direct descendant of the “Brothers”.

In the first part of this article we have laid out a number of pieces directly from the above Sefer, translated into English.

Following that, we will complete the story of how it became a possession of the Rebbe, and recount a number of special Simchas Torah moments which occurred together with it.

[Slight deviations have been made from the literal translation, to ensure the readers clarity.]

During the time when the righteous Brothers of Slavita, were imprisoned, they

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Much research has been put into this article. It is based predominantly on the following sources: Sefer Yechidei Segulah; Igros Kodesh of the Friediker Rebbe; Igros Kodesh of the Rebbe; Sefer V’zos Hatorah; various other Seforim and Kisvei Yad.



found favor in the eyes of the local officials, who in turn made an effort to ease their suffering. One official who stood out in his kinship towards them was Count Tcherbtuv, who permitted Chassidim to bring Kiddush, Havdalah and a Sefer Torah for the two Jews incarcerated under the law.

Though the Brothers strongly desired to have a Sefer Torah with them, they were also well aware of the putrid conditions in which they lived. The prison cells were filthy and definitely did not have the cleanliness that befits the sanctity of a Sefer Torah. Hence they decided to keep the Sefer Torah as separate

“Yeriyos” (sections) and not bind them together like a regular Sefer Torah. This way they would have the comfort of having a Torah with them, however it technically wouldn’t attain the Halachic status of a Sefer Torah.

The Sefer Torah was the craft of an expert Sofer, written with specially grown ink, sent by the sons of Reb Shmuel (Shmelke) of Nikelsburg.

Only once the Brothers were released from prison did they sew together the sections of the Sefer Torah.

All that was missing were the ‘Atzei Chaim’ upon which they would mount the Sefer Torah. The pair of ‘Atzei Chaim’ the

Brothers used for their Sefer Torah, itself came along with a story:

When the Tzaddik Reb Michel Zlotchover wrote his own Sefer Torah, the Koznitzer Maggid sent him a pair of ‘Atzei Chaim’ to use. However it took a while until Reb Michel received it. In the meantime, Reb Michel’s Chassidim heard what the Koznitzer Maggid had in mind, and wanted themselves to have the great zchus of providing their Rebbe with the ‘Atzei Chaim’. Therefore they fashioned a magnificent pair of ‘Atzei Chaim’ out of silver.

Now the Tzaddik faced the predicament of choosing one pair of ‘Atzei Chaim’ over the other. In the end, Reb Michel chose

the pair made out of silver, however he assured them that the other pair of 'Atzei Chaim' would belong to great Tzaddikim someday.

Indeed the Sefer Torah the Brothers used in prison was hoisted upon these very 'Atzei Chaim' which the Koznitzer Maggid had made.

This extraordinary Sefer Torah was passed down son-to-son, up until the oldest son of the Shapiro family.

When the Communist movement came to power in the Soviet Union, they confiscated this Sefer Torah from the house of a wealthy Jew from Moscow named Brodsky, in the name of exhorting their power upon all.

[Thus concludes the excerpts from the Sefer "Yichudei Segula".]

AN INHERITED SEFER TORAH

At this point we will learn about how this Sefer Torah eventually became the Rebbe's possession.

Reb Shmuel Abba Schapiro (mentioned at the beginning of this article, as the one who told over the story of this Sefer Torah, to Rabbi Isser Frankel) was the descendant of these "Brothers from Slavita" and the one who was supposed to inherit the Sefer Torah.

Reb Shmuel Abba Schapiro was actually a relative of the Friediker Rebbe.

How So?

His wife Miriam was the daughter of



The first print of Tanya, printed in Slavita by the Schapiro brothers.

Rebbetzin Sheina Brocha Dulitsky, whom was the sister of Rebbetzin Shterna Sara – the wife of the Rebbe Rashab, the father of the Friediker Rebbe. Additionally the two sisters were great-grand-daughters of Reb Yosef Yitzchok from Ovrutsh, the son of the Tzemach Tzedek. Hence, Reb Shmuel Abba was essentially married to a first cousin of the Friediker Rebbe!

We will now recount the continuation of the Story as was once heard directly from Reb Shmuel Abba:

During World War I, there was much destruction all over Europe. The various countries involved pillaged each other and many precious artifacts were misplaced far from their owners. Once the war concluded, Russia and Poland made a treaty agreeing to return to one-another all artifacts that had sentimental value.

During those times, Reb Shmuel Abba had been doing business dealings with a high ranking official known as Count Randzvil. He entreated him to help recover the Sefer Torah from the Communists who had confiscated it years earlier. After some time, Reb Shmuel Abba's efforts paid off and the Torah was returned to its rightful inheritor – the father of Reb Shmuel Abba Schapiro.

As conditions in the Soviet Union turned for the worse under the Communist rule, the Schapiro family escaped Russia to Eretz Yisroel, leaving almost

Throughout the many Simchas Torah's we merited to dance together with the Rebbe B'gashmiyus, there are two years which stand out in particular. Below we will share excerpts from diaries written by Chassidim who were fortunate to behold those memorable moments themselves.

SIMCHAS TORAH 5738: Hakofos will continue

On the eve of Shemini Atzeres 5738, the Rebbe entered 770 for Hakafos at 9:00. After saying the Pesukim of Ato Horeisa they began Hakafos. The Rebbe was honored with the first Sefer Torah (the small one) for the first Hakofa. The Sefer Torah was handed to the Rebbe by Reb Binyomin Althoiz, who spoke to the Rebbe for a few moments. The Rebbe answered him smiling. The remaining Sifrei Torah were given to various elderly Chassidim including Rabbi Chodakov. The Rebbe followed the Chazzan Reb Yankel Katz, walking very slowly, as the Rashag and the elderly Chassidim tread behind. Many of the Chassidim who stood on the perimeter of the "Shvil" (the path cleared for the Rebbe) kissed the Rebbe's Sefer Torah and wished the Rebbe the traditional Brocha of "Derlebt iber a yar" (a Brocha that the Rebbe be healthy and well throughout the entire coming year) to which the Rebbe answered "Gam Atem".

The Rebbe arrived at the center of the Shul where a

special space surrounded by tables had been prepared for Hakafos, and awaited the Rashag. Once the Rashag approached, the Rebbe stood in the middle and awaited the Moshiaich Sefer Torah. Once it was leaning on the table, the Rebbe and the Rashag placed their hands on each other's shoulders, and danced while the crowd sang the Hakafos Niggun. The Rebbe seemed to be more enlivened than usual, and the Hakafo continued until the Chazzan insisted on ending the Hakafo, to which the Rebbe obliged. The Rebbe then returned back to the front right corner of the Shul, where the Rebbe would usually Daven.

The fourth Hakafo was given to the guests who had come from around the world. The Chassidim began to sing 'Al Haselo Hoch Hoch', and the Rebbe turned to face them clapping softly – it almost seemed that it was difficult for the Rebbe to bring his hands together, as the Rebbe's left hand leaned on the Shtender. This continued for a short time, until the Rebbe's face turned a pale white, and

...they decided that such a remarkable Sefer Torah, should belong to someone of great stature.

everything behind – besides this precious Sefer Torah.

When his parents passed away, and Reb Shmuel Abba inherited the Sefer Torah, they decided that such a remarkable Sefer Torah, should belong to someone of great stature.

Therefore in the year 5707, Reb Shmuel Abba wrote to the Frierdiker Rebbe asking him if he would like to purchase the Sefer Torah.

The Frierdiker Rebbe responded to his letter as such:

(Free Translation)

“... and in regard to your question whether I desire to procure the Sefer Torah, know that ‘desire’ and ‘financial capability’ are two separate character traits. Yet much thanks for expressing interest to gratify me with this special merit, in addition to inquiring about the situation of my family and I. I very much look forward to your forthcoming letter...”

In essence the Frierdiker Rebbe was explaining that due to dire financial

straits, he couldn't afford to buy the Sefer Torah, although he was quite interested in it.

A number of years later, when Reb Shmuel Abba's wife passed on, he resolved to pass the Sefer Torah on to the Rebbe, who had since assumed the Nesius.

Below are two letters between the Rebbe and Reb Shmuel Abba dated during that time period, in which they discuss the Sefer Torah.

On the 20th of Adar, 5714 the Rebbe writes:

(Free Translation)

“...Because in your letter you touch upon the Sefer Torah found amongst your possessions, I would appreciate if you would write to me more details regarding it (*the Sefer Torah*)...”

And then on the 2nd of Elul 5714:

“To My *Mechutan* the well-known Chossid, G-d fearing man, son of greats, Harav Shmuel Abba *Sheyichye*,

Shalom Uvracha!

After a long interval, it is with great



pleasure to receive your letter written on Monday of Parshas Voeschanan, which was delayed in its arrival to me. Of most importance is the beginning of your letter, where you describe the words you heard from my father-in-law the Frierdiker Rebbe, which has since been engraved in your memory, regarding your parents stemming from the Tzaddik Reb Pinchos Koritzer, and The Brothers from Slavita whom endured much suffering and self-sacrifice for the dissemination of Chassidus. Upon such it is clearly ruled in the Mishna

the Rebbe turned to Reb Leibel Groner, asking for his chair. The Rebbe sat down and brought his Siddur close to him. The way the Rebbe leaned his head on the Shtender, and his closed eyes, displayed that no-doubt the Rebbe was enduring excruciating pains.

Reb Leibel Groner, called to a Doctor who was standing near the Bima, who immediately called out for water to be brought to the Rebbe. Reb Binjamin Klein attempted to hand a flask of water to the Rebbe, yet the Rebbe refused to drink.

Cries of “air! air!” and “make space around the Rebbe!” resonated throughout 770. The Chassidim bolted out of 770, rushing to give the Rebbe breathing room. Within minutes there were a mere hundred people left inside the Shul. The glass windows to the Ezras Noshim were burst open to allow fresh air to flow in. After a short while the Rebbe instructed Reb Leibel Groner that Hakafo's continue until their conclusion.

When they reached the seventh Hakafo, the Rebbe stood up. Those around suggested that the Rebbe remain

in his place and not walk to the center of the Shul for the Hakafo. Yet the Rebbe insisted on doing it in the usual

location. Once the small Sefer Torah was handed to the Rebbe by Reb Binjamin Althoiz, the Rebbe walked slowly and painfully to the center of the Shul. Some wished to kiss the Sefer Torah as the Rebbe passed them, yet Reb Leibel Groner stopped them so that the Hakafo conclude as quickly as possible.

It is told, that earlier that day the Rebbetzin asked one of the Chassidim who had come to visit her, which Sefer Torah would the Rebbe would be holding that night. To which he responded, the small one. The Rebbetzin asked, “How much does it weigh?” to which he replied that it is extremely light. The Rebbetzin persisted to ask, “How much does it weigh with the Kesser on top of it?” When he answered that it would still be quite lightweight, the Rebbetzin turned to him and said: “Say

L'chaim that the Rebbe should be Gezunt.” The incident left him very perplexed, but just a while later he understood...



(Mesechta Edeyois Perek Beis Mishna Tes) that a son is parallel to akin to his father, especially a first born son.

As you don't mention anything regarding your health, this is a definite sign that all is well with you.

This that you mention in connection with the Sefer Torah, I have already written to Reb Pinye Althoiz in connection to this, and surely he has already contacted you concerning this..."

At the time Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi was the Rov of the Chabad community of Tel Aviv. When he was informed that the Rebbe desired this Sefer Torah, he immediately jumped at the opportunity to purchase it for the Rebbe.

The Schapiro family was requesting the sum of 500 Liro, in exchange for the Sefer Torah, quite a large amount of money at the time. However Rabbi Ashkenazi swiftly borrowed the necessary funds, bought the Sefer Torah, and sent it to the Rebbe as a gift just in time for Rosh Hashana 5715.

The Rebbe expressed deep gratitude to



Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi

Rabbi Ashkenazi for this, as can be clearly seen in the letter below:

(Free Translation)

"I would like to take this opportunity to

convey my greatest and deepest thanks for the Sefer Torah that arrived here just days prior to Rosh Hashana, and was read from on Rosh Hashana. As it is stated in Zohar, that just as Hakadosh Boruch Hu looked into the Torah, and based upon that created the world, so to every Jew builds his individual world through reading in a Sefer Torah. Yehi Ratzon, that during this year you, your spouse, and your offspring, merit to a new world filled with revealed good."

THE REBBE AND THE SEFER TORAH

During the first few years that the Sefer Torah was used by the Rebbe, a number of letters were exchanged between the Rebbe and Reb Shmuel Abba, highlighting how much the Rebbe cherished the Sefer Torah.

We will bring a number of them:

(Free Translation)

4th of Tishrei 5715

"To My *Mechutan* the well-known Chossid, G-d fearing man, son of greats,

SIMCHAS TORAH 5748: Extraordinary revelations

On the night of Shemini Atzeres, the Rebbe walked towards the center of 770 for the first Hakafo, trailed by the older Chassidim. Once the Rebbe received the Sefer Torah and began to walk, the Rebbe was noticeably very at ease, and shone bountiful smiles in all directions. The Rebbe also pointedly brought the Sefer Torah closer than usual to the Chassidim, giving them a chance to kiss it. The Rebbe made one circuit around the Bima while saying the pesukim.

The Rebbe then stopped and began singing the Hakafos Niggun. Un-ordinarily the Rebbe grasped the Sefer Torah from the middle and began twirling it from side to side! With sweeping motions the Rebbe turned to each side of the Shul, gazing deeply into the eyes of the Chassidim.

Minute by minute the Rebbe danced with intensified momentum, passionate joy spiraling in leaps and bounds throughout the packed Shul, as the burning love in the hearts of the Chassidim transcended any other emotion and feeling possible. The Rebbe returned to his place surrounded by the impassionate cries of "Yechi Adoneinu Moreinu Verabeinu!" – Long live our beloved Rebbe! This reaction was the sole matter on the minds of

Chassidim, as they attempted to convey their intense gratefulness for meriting such an extraordinary and exalted moment.

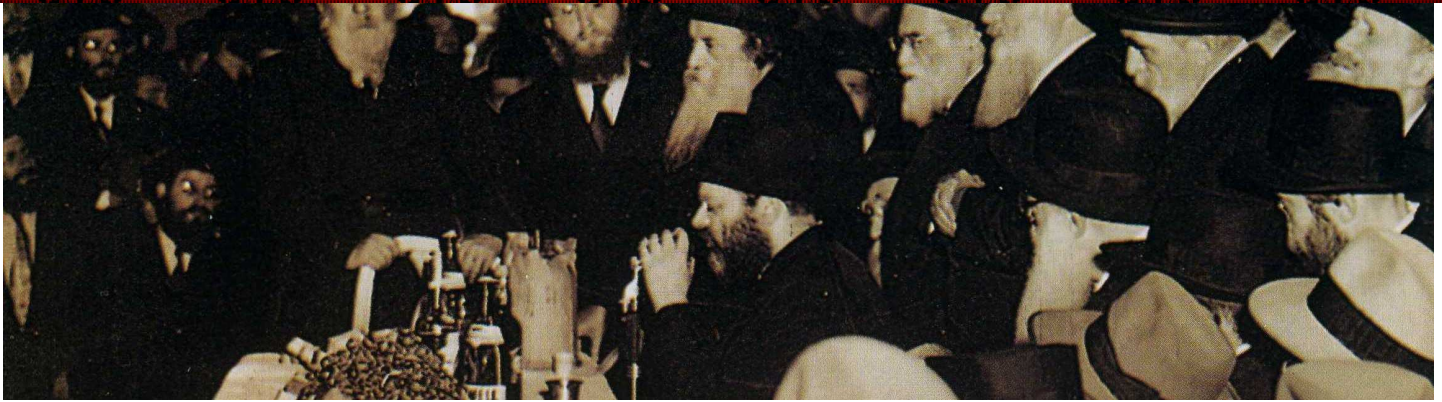
The following night, Chassidim were astonished once more. At the end of the Seventh Hakafo just as the Rebbe was about to return the Sefer Torah to the Aron, suddenly the Rebbe turned and went up to the Davening Bima, still clutching the Sefer Torah, and began singing "Uforatzta". The Rebbe danced vigorously moving the Sefer to all sides, intensively encouraging the Chassidim.

On the day of Simchas Torah after the Pesukim of Ato Horeisa and the usual 3 and a half Hakafos, unexpectedly, the Rebbe handed his Siddur to Reb Leibel Bistrizky, and began to encourage the singing strongly with both hands, rapidly accelerating the singing, while waving the Sefer Torah to all sides.

Years and years have passed since we have been Zoiche to behold the Rebbe dancing or

receiving an aliya with his Sefer Torah. Yet we strengthen ourselves through internalizing the memories of those treasured moments as they were impressed on the innumerable people who were fortunate to witness them.





A precious moment like no other – the Rebbe dancing in the center of 770 with nothing but this Sefer Torah, moving it back and forth towards the tens of thousands of Chassidim crushed within 770

Harav Shmuel Abba *Sheyichye*,
Shalom Uvracha!

I endeavor to thank and acknowledge today, that Harav Binyomin Eliyahu Gorodetzky delivered the Sefer Torah just days before Rosh Hashana, and during Rosh Hashana I received *Aliyos* and *Maftir* in the Sefer Torah, and may your mind be at peace just as you have caused mine to be.

And may it may be the will of Hashem, that we merit to bring pleasure to each other, and that we merit to do so with health and joy.

With thanks and blessings that you be sealed for a good year..."

Later on during that year the Rebbe again wrote to Reb Shmuel Abba, and mentioned the Sefer Torah:

"...And once more great thanks regarding the Sefer Torah, and with heartfelt wishes..."

During the year 5715 Reb Shmuel Abba sent to the Rebbe the chapters of the Sefer Yechidei Segulah that discusses the history of the Sefer Torah (from which we previously shared some excerpts). The Rebbe responded in the letter translated below:

"To My *Mechutan* the well-known Chossid, G-d fearing man, son of greats, Harav Shmuel Abba Sheyichye,
Shalom Uvracha!

After your long silence it was a great pleasure to receive your letter, particularly because I worried about the situation of your health.

Much thanks for the good news that the situation has bettered, and may it be Hashem's will that from now on, you

should only share good tidings.

With great interest I read the transcript regarding the "Inherited Sefer Torah" (from the *Sefer Yechidei Segula*) which you attached to your letter. Surely you know how attentive my father-in-law the Friediker Rebbe was to accounts and memoirs of days gone by, because of the tremendous power they have to enliven our day-to-day lives. I am sure that his reverence has many more such journals specifically ones pertaining to your golden pedigree tracing back to Reb Pinchos Koritzer and the "Brothers from Slavita". It would be ideal if you would print these. We live in a confused and chaotic generation – a generation that so desperately needs a true example of individuals who sacrificed themselves for the sacred ideals that the nation of Yisroel has always held dear..."

THE MANTEL

The Mantel of the Sefer Torah was also bought by Rabbi Moshe Ashkenazi, in memory of his brother Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi, and his name is inscribed on the Mantel. Rabbi Meir Ashkenazi was the Rov of Shanghai, China and had passed away just a short while before. Interestingly, every few years the Ashkenazi family would exchange the cover of the Sefer Torah for a new one, because of the great deal of wear-and-tear it went through.

It was this Sefer Torah that the Rebbe always held close to him, and the one the Rebbe chose to use when he received aliyos for Krias Hatorah, during Kol Nidrei, and with which he danced on Simchas

Torah.

During Yom Tov and other times when we use two Sifrei Torah for Krias Hatorah, Maftir was always read from this Sefer Torah. After the "Moshiach Sefer Torah" was completed in 5730, the Rebbe instructed that for the first part of Kriah the "Moshiach Sefer Torah" should be used, and the Rebbe would receive Maftir from this Sefer Torah.

SIMCHAS TORAH WITH THE REBBE'S SEFER TORAH

Once the Sefer Torah arrived in 770, the Rebbe held this Sefer Torah every year during Hakafo on Simchas Torah. With one hand the Rebbe would embrace the Sefer Torah, while the other was placed on the shoulder of his brother-in-law, the Rashag.

After the Rashag took ill in 5748, the Rebbe would tightly grasp the bottom handles of the 'Atzei Chaim', while gently waving the Torah to and fro. A precious moment like no other – the Rebbe dancing in the center of 770 with nothing but this Sefer Torah, moving it back and forth towards the tens of thousands of Chassidim crushed within 770, as they sing and dance to the joyous notes of the Rebbe's Hakafo Niggun.

May the Oibershter reward the fervent efforts of Chassidim and Temimim to enliven their connection to the Rebbe, by ensuring that this Simchas Torah we are reunited with our Rebbe B'gashmiyus as he dances with his special Sefer Torah.