

# R' YAAKOV (YANKEL) HAKOHEN KATZ

Some parts were taken from a previously published article, Custody of The Avner Institute. A special thank you goes to Rabbi Menachem Kirschenbaum, Director of the Avner Institute. Also, a special thank you to Yechiel Cagen of JEM My Encounter project for providing a transcription of an interview with R' Hirsh Katz, son of R' Yankel.

It is early afternoon and R' Yankel Katz is sitting at his desk in downtown Chicago. His private phone rings. His face turns beet red. R' Yankel darts to the rack for his grey hat, grabs the cup at his special sink, and ritually washes his hands. His gartel properly fastened, he sits down and grips the receiver. "Yes?" he asks. His voice, so used to having people under him, sounds here like a child peeking up at his teacher. The voice over the phone is in Yiddish—warm, fatherly, yet stern.

R' Yankel listens. A certain yeshiva needed more funds. The building for that Chabad center somewhere in the Midwest was in escrow. Also, the widow with seven children had contacted the Rebbe again, nearly insane with worry. "Yes, yes, I know," R' Yankel whispers, nodding. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." You can be sure the check will be in the mail that very day. And that the only people who will ever know are he and the Rebbe.

## A UNIQUE PERSONALITY

R' Yankel Katz was born in the Russian province of Mogilev in the year 5665 and arrived in America together with his family as a young child. He was the oldest of nine children. They settled in Chicago where his father R' Shneur Zalman opened a small business and as soon as he was old enough, Yankel was helping out in his free time. Eventually he opened up a clothing business and

quickly became very successful.

To describe R' Yankel as a tremendous baal tzedakah would be totally inadequate. He lived and breathed ahavas yisrael and would go to the greatest lengths to help another Jew in any way possible. His home was open to everyone, meshulachim, visiting rabbonim and roshei yeshiva not only stayed or lived by him but many actually held a personal key to his house which allowed them to come and go as they pleased. He would not only assist people with money but with practically anything they needed. If he wasn't able to help out himself he always found the proper people who could. Everything was done quietly and with such simplicity that, even his own children were unaware to the extent of his wealth and philanthropy (This was also due to the fact that he never spent extra on himself and his family, though they never lacked anything).

R' Yankel never wasted a second and although he never studied in a yeshiva he was always learning in his spare time. There was a sefer constantly open on his office desk - even while dealing with business matters - be it a chumash, tehillim, tanya or gemorah. He would finish the entire tehillim every day in shul and in his later years, when he would be up late at night, he would finish it again.



REB YANKEL ADDRESS A TZACH FUNCTION AT 770. CREDITS: LUBAVITCH ARCHIVES

### HISKASHRUS

The Katz family descended from Lubavitcher Chassidim going back to the times of the Tzemach Tzedek. It was said that the family produced melamdin who taught in Beis Harav but it's unclear who these melamdin were and who exactly they taught. After immigrating to America their connection to Lubavitch was greatly weakened.

In the year 5690, everything changed. The Frierdiker Rebbe had arrived on American shores at the end of the previous year with the purpose of visiting the various Jewish communities across the country. As part of the trip, the Frierdiker Rebbe paid a lengthy visit to the city of Chicago. In those years a visit by any European Jewish leader was a very unique and spiritual experience for the Jews of America. But this visit was something out of

the ordinary. The Frierdiker Rebbes' *mesiras nefesh* in Russia was by then well known throughout the entire Jewish world and he was therefore received with the greatest respect and admiration by everyone without distinction.

When the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived at the train station in Chicago, a crowd of fifteen thousand people were there to greet him. The visit, approximately two-and-a-half months - from Yud Alef Shvat until Chof Tes Sivan - made a tremendous impression on the entire Jewish community but among the people most affected was R' Yankel. He was deeply stirred by his encounter with the Frierdiker Rebbe and as a result the long lost connection to Lubavitch was rekindled. He began sending large sums of money to the Frierdiker Rebbe in Europe. When the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in America, perma-



CREDITS: AVNER INSTITUTE



REB YANKEL LEADING HOSHAINOS, AS HE WOULD EVERY YEAR.  
CREDITS: LUBAVITCH ARCHIVES

nently, ten years later he donated enormous sums of money to help fuel Lubavitch activities in America and in other parts of the world. Banquets, plaques, dedications, or even thank-yous, were against his religion. For example, that he funded much of the purchase of the land for Kfar Chabad is not well known, and his role in the acquisition of 770 for Lubavitch is simply recorded on his gravestone near the Rebbe.

Among his most secret and notable acts were bank accounts he set up in the name of the Frierdiker Rebbe and his family members at the American National Bank and Trust of Chicago. These accounts, with \$5,000 each, enabled the Frierdiker Rebbe and his family to enter the U.S. in 5700. All this was in addition to the huge sums paid to Chicago politicians to enlist the aid of First Lady,

Eleanor Roosevelt. Sworn to secrecy during his lifetime, it was recently discovered that money for the “fix,” the release and delivery of the Frierdiker Rebbe from Nazi-occupied Warsaw to freedom, came from the American National Bank and Trust of Chicago. Coincidentally, his banker’s name was also Jack Katz.

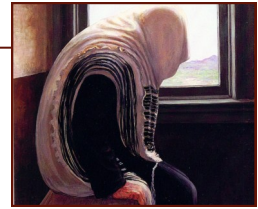
Shortly after the Frierdiker Rebbe arrived in America for the second time he appointed R’ Moishe Leib Rodshtein to direct Lubavitch activities in Chicago. R’ Yankel was by then a very successful businessman and philanthropist and donated large amounts of money to various causes but after R’ Moishe Leib came to Chicago, R’ Yankel made Lubavitch in America, and its expansion, his top priority and the focus of his life.

When the Chabad yeshiva in Chicago opened up, there was much resistance from certain factions in the community but R’ Yankel only intensified his support for both the Chabad activities in general and for the yeshiva in particular. In order to outweigh the opposition, a select group of bochurim was sent from New York to help strengthen and better establish the yeshiva. R’ Yosef Weinberg served as the menahel of the yeshiva and R’ Avraham Mordechai Hersherberg served as its rosh yeshiva. A short while later a day school, initiated by the Frierdiker Rebbe, was started as well. Once again, so as not to arouse opposition, it was officially established by three wealthy baalei batim from the community and, naturally, R’ Yankel was one of them.

It soon became known that it was all the work of Lubavitch but by then it was too late. Nevertheless, those opposed to the school and yeshiva did everything they could to disrupt it. They constantly ran to city officials to complain about all the “illegal” activities being done in the building. For instance, the law required for every building to have a front and back entrance, so they hired a goy to destroy the stairs leading to the back door of the yeshiva building and immediately went to report to the city officials about this breach in the law. The yeshiva received a fine of one hundred dollars per-day that could only be paid in cash. R’ Yankel didn’t think twice and paid the fine from his own pocket until the entrance was repaired.

Years later, at a shalosh seudos gathering in Silver Springs, Maryland, R’ Yankel overheard one of the congregants retell the story. “Did you know,” said the person,” that the fine was a hundred dollars a week?” R’





## YOM TOV MEALS WITH THE REBBE

As mentioned in the article, Reb Yankel played a figurative role during the Rebbe's Yom Tov meals in the Frierdiker Rebbe's apartment.

Reb Yankel posed his (often simple) questions on various *Halachos*, *Minhagim*, or any other parts of Torah, and the Rebbe always patiently clarified his difficulties.

### SING LEBEDIKER!

Additionally, Reb Yankel was often instructed by the Rebbe to sing and liven up the mood as befitting a Yom Tov table. For example, on the night of Simchas Torah, 5729, the Rebbe commented to him:

"The two heartfelt *Niggunim* (*"Niggunei Dveikus"*) which you sang earlier were very good, but we must sing joyous *Niggunim*. After all, it's Simchas Torah today!" They sang "*Ve'somachta*" and "*Uforatzta*" and the Rebbe encouraged the singing.<sup>1</sup>

At another occasion, the Rebbe said: "Reb Yankel Katz signs *Niggunim* with words. Sing instead a more joyous *Niggun*; *Mimitzrayim!*"<sup>2</sup>

### WHY ARE YOU PUSHING HERE?

Once, when a discussion arose regarding the *Ma'amorim* recited by the Rabbeim to "purify the atmosphere" (*"Taharas ho'avir"*)<sup>3</sup>, the Rebbe asked: "Is there anyone here who knows which *Ma'amorim* they were? It was printed in HaYom Yom..." One of the Bochorim<sup>4</sup> began to whisper the answer quietly, and the Rebbe turned to him and said: "Don't be bashful! If you know the answer, tell us!"

Turning to the Bochorim, the Rebbe said: "If you don't know the answer, why are you all pushing here?"

A HaYom Yom was brought to the table and Reb Yankel began to read aloud, specifying the titles of the *Ma'amorim* that each of the Rabbeim would repeat to purify the atmosphere. The Rebbe smiled a few times while he read (when hearing his interpretation of the *Roshei Teivos*).<sup>5</sup>

### CHASSIDISHE USHPIZIN

On Sukkos each year, Reb Yankel would repeat what he had heard from the Frierdiker Rebbe about the "*Chassidishe Ushpizin*". During the meal on the second night of Sukkos, 5726, he said:

"I have the custom of repeating each year the words which we were privileged to hear from the Frierdiker Rebbe, that just as there are the general '*Ushpizin*' that grace us with their presence on Sukkos, there are the seven '*Chassidishe Ushpizin*' as well. Now as well, there is no change in this regard; the seven *Ushpizin* continue to come."

The Rebbe added: "[Only that today], we can also include the Rebbe, my father-in-law!"<sup>6</sup>

### WHO IS BOSS?

Reb Yankel once asked the Rebbe: "About the '*Ushpizin*' it says that *Yaakov Avinu* comes and all the rest come along with him. If all the rest come regardless, why, then do we refer to it as '*Yaakov's Ushpiza*'?"

The Rebbe replied: "You have partners in your own business as well, but nevertheless, who is the real boss?"<sup>7</sup>

### YOU SAW THE GILUYIM!

Once, on the night of *Shvi'i Shel Pesach* Reb Yankel related: "The Frierdiker Rebbe said in 5703 that by the Rabbeim there were great '*Giluyim*' on *Shvi'i Shel Pesach*. What was he referring to; which '*Giluyim*'?"

The Rebbe replied: "Weren't you in the [Frierdiker] Rebbe's presence on *Shvi'i Shel Pesach*? You saw all the '*Giluyim*'! What, then is your question?!"<sup>8</sup> ■

HaMelech Be'mesibo Vol. 1 p. 273

Ibid p. 311

HaYom Yom 28 Tammuz

Reb Meir Friedman

HaMelech Be'mesibo Vol 1 p. 65

Ibid p. 104

Ibid p. 124

Ibid p. 208

Yankel, who was sitting at the table, answered, "A hundred dollars a day." He never added that he was the one who paid it, let alone establish the yeshiva.

One must realize that we are talking about a time when medium wage was just thirty dollars a week! R' Yankel didn't wait for the Rebbes' command nor did he look for other possible ways to solve the issue; he simply paid without asking questions! Such was his mesirus nefesh for the Frierdiker Rebbes' inyanim. It was also common for him to pay the teachers' salaries if the necessary funds were lacking and for many years he virtually covered all of the yeshivas' expenses.

On another occasion, the English teachers in the day school demanded a raise in salary. Mr. Robinson (another one of the three baalei batim behind the school), turned to the school board for a compromise but the teachers would not be swayed. Eventually R' Yankel told them that he was responsible for such matters. He offered them to take the issue together before the Frierdiker Rebbe for him to make the final decision. They agreed to the suggestion and travelled to New York.

However, upon entering the room of the Frierdiker Rebbe they suddenly became extremely frightened and all of their complaints vanished. The mazkir, R' Eliyahu Simpson, asked them what they wished to ask the Rebbe but they could not emit a sound! After exiting the room they each blamed the other for not speaking up and each gave the same claim - the Rebbes' face was lit with such a bright light that he simply could not bring himself to complain before the Rebbe!

#### YOM TOV IN 770

R' Yankel made an effort to spend each yom tov, first by the Frierdiker Rebbe and then later on by the Rebbe. (When his daughter got married, her husband asked her about the various Pesach minhagim she had from home. She replied that there weren't any because her father was never home for yom tov!) Starting in the 5700s, he became a regular guest by the Seudos upstairs in 770, a privilege that only select few merited. After 5731 the Seudos upstairs were discontinued and R' Yankel chose to eat the yom tov meal together with the bochurim.

One year, when R' Yankel entered the sukka of the Frierdiker Rebbe, he began (as is the custom by many) quietly saying the Ushpizin. The Frierdiker Rebbe no-

ticed that R' Yankels' lips were moving and he asked him what he was saying. When R' Yankel told the Frierdiker Rebbe that he was saying the customary nusach for welcoming the Ushpizin, the Rebbe replied, "We have our own Ushpizin". And then, pointing to the chairs around the table, the Frierdiker Rebbe began to list all of the Rabeim saying "here sits the Baal Shem Tov, and here sits the Maggid, and here the Alter Rebbe....etc." Later, when R' Yankel recounted the story he recalled, "I almost collapsed from fright!"

It often happened that when the Rebbe would exit the shul after Maariv on yom tov and go upstairs to his room, he was immediately followed by R' Yankel. They would converse about absolutely anything and everything. (His son, R' Hirsh Katz, often accompanied his father to New York and was present by these conversations. He recalls how his father once complained to the Rebbe about his sons' stamp collection saying, that it takes time away from his Torah study. The Rebbe replied that in Russia he owned a personal stamp collection and once used it to bribe a border official. From then on R' Hirsh never heard his father say another word about his collection.)

After a while the mazkir would open the door and inform then that everything was ready for the Rebbe to visit the dining room (or on Succos, the sukka) where the bochurim would eat seudas yom tov. The Rebbe and R' Yankel would walk side by side conversing the entire way to and from the hall. They were followed from behind by a large entourage of bochurim and chassidim and after returning to 770 they would then go upstairs together for the Yom Tov seuda.

One time, in the year 5733, the Rebbe was returning from visiting the bochurim and as usual walking alongside was R' Yankel. He told the Rebbe that he very much enjoyed the new niggun composed for yud aleph nissan that year, *yifrach b'yamav*. The only thing he couldn't understand was why the words were *yifrach b'yamav tzaddik*, and not *yifrach b'yameinu tzaddik* "a tzaddik flourishes in *our* days"..... The Rebbe smiled broadly and told him to make sure not to say this to the bochurim for they would surely reprint the tehillim with this new nusach!

Perhaps the most unique among these special seudos were the pesach sedarim. From before 5710 R' Yankel was honored to lead the reading of the Haggadah and



his son would ask the Mah Nishtana. The Friediker Rebbe gave him the chazakah on two conditions: it must be recited *b'kol ram* and *besimchah* - loudly and joyously. Many times throughout the seder, particularly by *nishmas*, R' Yankel would lower his voice in order to be able to hear the Rebbe reciting the haggadah. Each time the Rebbe would stop, look up at him and say, "*bkol ram*".

Every year by hakafof R' Yankel would buy the first possuk of *Ata Horeisa* for \$18,000. His family never knew about this until one year, on the day following Simchas Torah, an article appeared in the New York Times stating that "Mr. Katz has bought *Ata Horeisa* in 770 for \$18,000". Apparently the writer was there and heard the announcement.

It was customary for R' Yankel to daven before the

amud in 770 on Pesach and Hoshana Raba. His heartfelt davening will never be forgotten by all who were present. R' Nissen Nemanov once said, "*halevai* - if only we could daven on Rosh Hashanah the same way R' Yankel davens on a regular weekday".

#### DOR HASHVII

Following the histalkus of the Friediker Rebbe in 5710, R' Yankel continued his correspondence with the Rebbe (see letters to Reb Yankel, an excerpt which can be found on page 22) and soon became a sworn chossid, giving himself over to the rebbes' inyanim even more than before. At a certain point he began supplying the Rebbe with books of blank checks and when making use of them, the Rebbe would inform him of the exact amount and he would make sure the check was covered.

He influenced many people who otherwise wouldn't,



REB YANKEL IN HIS LATER YEARS SPEAKING WITH THE REBBE

to write to the Rebbe of their problems and as a result many merited great mofsim. Many times the Rebbe would send letters and give horaos designated for other people, through him.

He also spoke to the Rebbe regularly by telephone. These conversations took place every Erev Rosh Chodesh before the Rebbe left for the Ohel and very often, on Motzaei Shabbos as well. They would usually last about fifteen minutes to a half hour, and sometimes stretched on for longer, and no one knew what they spoke about. He almost never revealed to anybody what the Rebbe ever told him; he was modest and quiet in all things concerning his relationship with the Rebbe.

#### BOUNDLESS LOVE

The Rebbe once said of him, "I have thousands of chassidim, but only one good friend." R' Yankels' love for the Rebbe knew no bounds or limitations. His simplicity and *kabolas ol* was expressed in everything he did and his *hiskashrus* to the Rebbe was no exception. He never asked questions or stopped to calculate if he had or didn't have enough; he knew that if the Rebbe re-

quested or demanded - it can and must be accomplished. After the *histalkus* of the Rebbetzin on Chof Beis Shvat 5788, he came to visit the Rebbe who was sitting shiva at the house on President St. Very few words were exchanged between R' Yankel and the Rebbe but everyone present was able to feel the deep love and emotion.

His greatest pleasure was to see the Rebbe and to be near him and so, although he didn't live in New York, he was often seen in 770 on an ordinary weekday davening or by Sunday dollars. The Rebbe's face would always light up with joy upon seeing R' Yankel. Being a kohen, many times upon seeing the Rebbe, he would recite *birchas kohanim* in a very loud voice. In general, the Rebbe encouraged him to *bentch* people, always stressing the importance of giving *yidden brachos*. In his later years it was common to see him to stop a person and *bentch* him.

After retiring from his business, R' Yankels' greatest wish was to move to New York and live near 770. Being that he and his wife were already quite old and not very

B"H, Wednesday, 10 Menachem Av, 5703

Greetings and blessings,

With thanks, we would like to acknowledge receipt of your check for \$112.50 to cover the expenses of printing the *sichos* of my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe shlita, from the holiday of Pesach ה'תש"ג. We have also received a check for a similar amount from R. Shlomo Palmer and hence are sending the texts to print. As soon as they will be published, we will send you as many copies as you request.

In addition to the thanks, I would like to add the blessing of *mazel tov* for your merit in taking part in such an important achievement and enabling the many to merit, with G-d's help, illuminating their souls with the light of the words of my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe shlita. This will arouse them to Torah, Divine service, and deeds of kindness...

With the blessing לאלתר לתשובה לאלתר לגאולה.

B"H, 13 Tishrei, 5704

Greetings and blessings,

Today, the printing of the *sichos* of Pesach ה'תש"ג were

completed; I am enclosing one copy with this letter. I have also requested that several other copies be sent to you under special cover. Please notify me with regard to any additional copies that you wish sent.

The printing was delayed until the present time for several reasons. One reason is that my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe shlita, made many both qualitative and quantitative additions to the text, beyond what was originally expected. Also, [the delay was caused] by our desire to print the *sichah* in the most attractive manner possible, together with an index, references, and other additions.

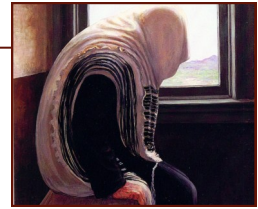
We can now recite a blessing [of thanks] at the completion [of the task]. I again express my gratitude on behalf of all those who will read and study this *sichah*, because thanks to you and the honorable R. [Shlomo] Palmer, it was possible to publish this booklet...

B"H, 25 Tishrei, 5708

Greetings and blessings,

I had thought that we would meet during Sukkos (for it has become customary for you to visit my revered





healthy, his wife wanted to move to Silver Springs, Maryland where their daughter lived with her family. R' Yankel only agreed after the Rebbe told him, "you will go as my personal shliach to bentch all the yidden there".

Even the hardest of situations couldn't prevent him from travelling to 770 to see and be near his Rebbe. Once, approximately two years before he passed away he had an unbelievable urge to see the Rebbe. A little while earlier he had suffered a stroke and it was very unsafe for him to travel alone. His children tried to deter him but R' Yankel was adamant; he must travel to see the Rebbe! After a few days his caretaker noticed that R' Yankel was missing and immediately notified his daughter of her fathers' disappearance. She right away understood that her father must have travelled to 770, so she called all the police stations in the Crown Heights area to locate him. In the meantime Rabbi Shmuel Kaplan, head shliach of Maryland, telephoned the mazkir, Rabbi Binyomin Klein and told him that if he sees R' Yankel in 770 he should call immediately and notify him. A few

hours later Rabbi Klein called back and confirmed that R' Yankel arrived in 770. Upon being approached R' Yankel exclaimed, "What is the big deal? I only wanted to see the Rebbe so I took some money, called a taxi and went to the train station. I took the train to Manhattan and from Manhattan, to Crown Heights and Boruch Hashem I'm here....."

Whoever was in 770 then remembers that after Mincha, when the Rebbe was on his way out of the shul, R' Yankel stood by the path and when the Rebbe reached him, he began reciting birchas kohanim. The Rebbe stopped in front of him with a big smile and waited for him to finish his brachah.

The last time R' Yankel merited to visit the Rebbe for yom tov was in tishrei 5753. he passed away only days later on rosh chodesh cheshvan and is buried right next to the ohel. On his tombstone he is described simply as "a supporting pillar in the chabad institutions especially in *beis chayeinu* and yeshivas tomchei temimim. [He] merited to receive special attention from the Friediker Rebbe and יבִּלְחֵט"א the Rebbe." ■

father-in-law, the Rebbe *Shlita*, during these days) and wish each other a good *kvitel* for a good and happy year. Unfortunately, you were [unable] to come this year. I hope you and your family are all in good health.

One of the positive qualities possessed by priests, which is perpetuated even after the destruction of the *Beis HaMikdash*, is blessing the people at the time of prayer. For synagogues are called "a sanctuary in microcosm." One of the qualities that the ascent to the *Beis HaMikdash* brought about is, as *Chassidus* explains, that it would [motivate] the Jews to bow down.

This was not merely an external activity, carried out with their bodies [alone], but it also involved their souls. They would nullify all the powers of their souls -- their will, their intellect, and their emotions -- to G-d. It is thus understandable that a synagogue where the inner [dimension of] bowing down is expressed in the most complete manner is more of "a sanctuary in microcosm," closer to the positive quality of the *Beis HaMikdash*.

A chassid experiences this when he prays in the house of study of his Rebbe. Every chassid is to a certain extent

*botul* to his Rebbe. And when a chassid who is a priest blesses the people in his Rebbe's house of study, when compared to blessing them in an ordinary house of study, he is closer to blessing the people in the *Beis HaMikdash* (which was inordinately greater than blessing them outside the *Beis HaMikdash*; see the *mishnah*, *Sotah* 37b)...

B"H, 4 Teves, 5711

Greetings and Blessings,

...I mentioned you on Yud Tes Kislev and Erev Rosh Chodesh teves by the tziyon of my father-in-law the Rebbe זצ"ל.

In accordance with our conversation when you were here last, you will be a soldier of my father-in-law the Rebbe and automatically the Rebbe will take upon himself to provide for everything you and your family may possibly need. You need only to prepare the necessary vessels with which to receive these blessings in their entirety. My hope is that very soon you will be able to report the fulfillment of these blessings...